

VOL. 1

PLEASURE

AND

Dress

AJ MERLIN

PLEASURE & PREY

VOLUME 1

A J MERLIN

Pleasure & Prey vol. 1

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DEPRAVED

“I have a lifetime to ruin you. And you’ve just given me permission.”

Do I know any good scary stories?

I stare at the fire in front of me, drawing one leg up in the wide seat of the camp chair poised on one side of the flames. Gravel crunches under my other foot as I slide it back and forth, eyes still fixed on the flames of the campfire as I consider the question.

“Do you?” Harriet’s son, Oliver, is just as impatient as his mother, though not nearly as charming. He squirms in his chair across from the crackling fire, and when his father, Benjamin, hears the noise from the deck they’ve built onto their impressive camper, he glances up from cleaning the grill to check that everything is fine.

At my side, the large, mostly black German Shepherd thumps his tail on the ground as if to reassure Benjamin everything is fine. My other Shepherd, who is tanner and fluffier than his counterpart, sits between the two children across the fire, letting them pet his furry head while his tongue lolls and his eyes remain on me.

I can still task, Mom, his eyes seem to say. The moment you need me, I’ll jump this fire and be in your lap in an instant.

Not that my chubbier, lazier Shepherd is going to be jumping fires anytime soon.

“I...” I trail off thoughtfully, biting my lower lip and sawing my teeth against it. “Do horror movies count?” I ask

finally, letting out a soft, apologetic laugh to accompany the words.

“Mom and Dad won’t let us watch horror movies,” Emily informs me matter-of-factly. “She says we aren’t old enough.”

“You probably aren’t,” I tell them, nodding sagely. I’m not sure how old they are, exactly. They’ve been camping in Oak Crest longer than I’ve been working or living here myself.

“They count, then,” Oliver encourages, dropping his legs over the front of his too-big chair as Argus pants and flicks an ear back, utterly relaxed but still aware of the situation around us. My fluffy Shepherd is amazing with kids, though I guess I shouldn’t be surprised. His trainer made sure that he was good with anything and everything, and kids were high on the list of things to get him used to.

I’m also pretty sure Argus *loves* children.

As opposed to my non-service dog, Vulcan, who sighs and shifts on the ground beside me. The mostly black dog barely looks nothing like Argus, with shorter fur and a more muscular, lean build. His personality is just as dissimilar as the rest of him. Vulcan is more of a guard dog than anything, even if one of his favorite hobbies is snoring on the end of my bed while sleeping like a cockroach.

“Your parents will *kill* me if I describe horror movies in any kind of detail to you,” I snort, unable to help imagining the two kids petrified in their camper while their parents are trying to sleep.

“And neither of you will be able to sleep for weeks if she does.” Harriet’s footsteps crunch on the gravel as she walks towards the fire, s’mores fixings in hand. “Are you staying for s’mores, Sloane?” she asks, casting a warm smile in my direction.

I hesitate, considering, but I’ve known for a few minutes that I need to go back to my cabin. I’m *tired*, for one. More tired than I should be, but after having a massive panic attack this morning that Argus had to help pull me out of but still

almost keep me in bed, I really just want to vegetate in my cabin and fall asleep to whatever Hulu has first on my lineup.

“Nah,” I say, pushing myself to my feet with a sigh. Beside me, Vulcan is on his paws instantly as well, staring up at me with the same level of attachment, though with more intensity than Argus usually shows. While Vulcan will never task for me—alert me to any kind of episode I’m about to have, or do any of the things Argus is trained for in a bad situation—I love him all the same. And he’s just as much an integral part of *Team Sloane* as Argus is. Without him, I wouldn’t feel as safe as I do, rolling up on drunk campers or investigating big-animal-like sounds in the woods.

Okay, I still don’t investigate scary sounds for the most part. Normally I chicken out and call the Oak Crest owners, who live *literally* over the hill from the campground and are on call 24-7, just like I am.

I’m just the first line of defense, seeing as I stay *in* the campground and all.

Argus is at my side only a second later, tail wagging, as I absently reach down to stroke his soft, fluffy ears. His tongue still lolls, and he’s warm from the campfire.

“We’ll be up at the house tomorrow to talk to Pat and Sam about the additions we’re looking to do,” Benjamin adds, toweling off his hands before giving me a quick wave. “And make sure you’re back here on Thursday. We’re moving up BBQ night so that Carter can show up.”

“Carter, huh?” I stretch my arms over my head, my ponytail pulling slightly and causing my scalp to ache. “Did you have to *bribe* him to get him to show up?” The middle-aged man is just as old as the owners and has been coming here for as long as they’ve owned it, I’m sure. He’s also notoriously anti-social and turns down most invitations from the regulars to show up for dinner.

Benjamin beams. “Something like that,” he chuckles, hands in his pockets. “Have a good night.”

“G’night, Sloane,” Harriet calls when I set my foot on the pavement of the road that loops around to all the campsites in one way or another.

“Good night!” I shout back, not bothering to call either dog to me or worry about a leash. They’ve been living here with me for the year and a half that I’ve worked on-site for Oak Crest. They know their way around better than me, and neither of them has ever shown any interest in leaving my side when we walk.

My only complaint tonight is how far I am from home. The campground is a pretty good size, probably a mile and a half or so from the lake to the farthest campsite or cabin. Most of it sits close to Colidale Lake, and there are two different boat launches for the busy season.

Currently, it is *not* prime-time. Even in mid-April, though, we’re still surprisingly full of campers who’ve stampeded down from Akron, Ohio, which is only about thirty miles northeast, or locals from Arkala, Ohio, nearby. Woe betide anyone to tell them the lake is fucking *freezing* right now, or that the wind blowing off it can get cold. Sure, you might get lucky and get a seventy-five-degree day and fifty-five-degree night. But it’s more likely that our weather will sock you in the face with rain, bad temperatures, and water so choppy it looks like it could eat you.

I shiver in my light hoodie, shoving my hands in my pockets as I turn the corner and walk up the slight incline that leads away from the House—which is what we call the office and camp store—and toward the more-wooded rear area of the campground. Back here, trees obscure more and more of the area and stand at attention behind the campsites; behind them is the utter blackness of the forest we’re located within.

I like it...most of the time.

But there’s no denying that it’s a little *eerie* back here. And could turn into a scary situation real quick in the winter, when there’s almost no one here and everything is snowed in.

Luckily, in the winter, I still have power here. And the campground is never truly empty. There are a few people, like

Carter, who live here year-round, as I do.

Crickets sound off, along with the other insects and small animals that call the trees around here home. I sigh as I walk, legs straining as the ground slants upward once more. It's not the hilliest hill on the campground; the one leading to the lakeside cabins is *much* worse. But the slow, increasing gradient is a workout all on its own, especially since I do this almost every night when I head back to my cabin.

On my left, in the radius of one of the street lamps that line the asphalt, I pass the big, sculpted tree that's carved to look like a rearing bear. Once upon a time, it must've truly been a *massive* tree. But the trunk that's left behind now is about eight feet tall, and it would take five of me to link arms around the circumference of the bear that stands with its mouth open and one paw raised as if to strike.

I've seen it a thousand times before. I've touched it and stood on my tiptoes to poke the fur of its chest. Tonight I barely glance at it as I walk by.

To my surprise, Vulcan slows to a stop at my side, head tilted quizzically as his ears rotate like satellites toward the tree.

I slow as well, and at my side Argus gazes at me with rapt attention. He couldn't care less about whatever has caught Vulcan's attention, though I stop in the road to let my guard dog figure out what's so interesting about the tree.

"It's the bear tree, Vulc," I remind him when he doesn't move. He doesn't look at me, instead tilts his head to the other side before finally walking away from the spot and further up the hill, as if there was never anything there at all.

But I look at it again anyway, eyes following the curves of fur and legs until I get to the face that snarls silently towards the road.

It's just the bear tree.

There are no sounds in the night around me out of the ordinary. Nothing that would tip me off to something *else* being here or anyone off in the woods later than they really

should be. There are snakes in the woods. Not to mention ticks, spiders, and the occasional predator. I don't know why anyone would want to be out there without a light.

Suddenly Argus nudges my hand hard, and I rest it on his ears again as my heart picks up just a little in my chest. There's nothing out there, I repeat in my head, barely noticing him nudge my hand once more.

It's just the bear tree.

But for some reason tonight, that doesn't make my heart slow. It doesn't stop the sudden, unwelcome rush of memories that have *nothing* to do with the campground or the tree. It doesn't stop my mouth from almost moving to shape the word that I screamed so hard and so often when I was eleven.

Help.

Help me.

Help—

Without warning, Argus rears up and presses his paws against my chest, tongue finding my face as he frantically washes my cheek and nose. He holds himself up for the most part, though my hands find his elbows to support him as he wags his tail and continues to wash my face.

“Okay, okay. *Break,*” I tell him, giving him his command so that he'll stop actively tasking for me.

Instantly, Argus drops to my side and sits, caramel eyes still watching my face. *I'll do it again;* he seems to say, *if you start that again.*

It's not my intention to start anything again.

I take off at a quicker pace, forcing my stiff legs into an almost-jog as I go up the hill, around the two campsites that are taken for the first time this year, and back to the farthest part of the campground, to my cabin in the woods.

It's got its own little driveway, and here the incline gets a bit steeper as the road narrows to one-car-only. My car sits in front of the porch, parked diagonally across the pavement because I *can*, and I walk past it to stand on the porch in the

light of the lamp above the door, where moths flutter and flip around the bulb.

I'm home. The wooden rails around the long porch are comforting, as is the familiarity of my little cabin.

The dogs must think so as well. Vulcan stalks off to my left, going behind the cabin to where the fire pit, grill, and picnic table sit. I don't often use the grill. I had never learned exactly the dos and don'ts of using one, and the propane tank under it makes me slightly nervous, even though I'm twenty-seven and can use an oven just fine.

It's just not the same, though.

I *do* use the fire pit at least three times a week. I love campfires, and not just in the s'mores way. Fires are great. Plus, in the summer, they're a great way to keep the mosquitos away while I'm hanging out at the cabin.

"Go on," I tell Argus, stepping back onto the pavement and walking toward the backside of the cabin. I flick on a switch on the side of the building as I go, and a string of fairy lights that hang on the porch come on instantly, their warm glow illuminating the area just a bit further than my porch light. "You gotta pee before we go in. I don't want to get up in three hours." He doesn't actually need to go out in the middle of the night, normally. He's good at holding it. But I don't want him to have to if I can help it.

Vulcan, on the other hand, would probably break the door down himself, or leap out a window like some police dog, if I didn't get up fast enough to let him out. The darker German Shepherd prowls around the edge of the lot, nose to the ground just over the ditch that lines the woods on either side of me.

This place used to be rented out, like the other cabins that sit closer to the lake across the campground. It was popular because of how isolated it is. But that's part of the problem. After a few unsavory campers made a mess of the place and did a lot of shit they weren't supposed to back here, the owners decided it wasn't worth it to offer up such an isolated spot.

It's only forty feet from the nearest campsite, though even that one isn't requested too often. So outside of the really popular times of summer, I'm normally pretty alone back here.

Not that I mind. It's quite nice, honestly.

Argus follows Vulcan around the perimeter, though my service dog looks more like a bouncing teddy bear than anything that'll rip someone's face off as Vulcan does. Neither of them is particularly vicious. Nor have they ever bit anyone for any reason at all.

The worst that Vulcan does is bark to scare off coyotes, and normally Argus will chime in with his own brand of German Shepherd Intimidation.

"C'mon boys," I say, whistling to get their attention. Argus pulls away, walking to the door and putting his nose against it to tell me he's *more* than ready to get back to our air-conditioned home. He's not a creature that's made for the outdoors. Or strife. Or hiking.

Or any adversity, really.

Vulcan, however, stares off at the woods behind the cabin. His tail is stiff behind him, and he tilts his head to the side once more, like there's something back there that's caught his interest.

I suck in a breath, fighting the urge to let my imagination wander. That's one thing I've had to work on since moving here. It's easy to see shapes in the dark and hear noises that aren't really there when there's no light to illuminate the woods around me. Especially for someone like me, who already struggles with a real issue of panicking and paranoia.

"What's wrong, Vulcan?" I snort, going to the side of the porch and leaning over the rail. There's no movement past the fire pit or the back of the house, just trees, trees, and more trees. Without any wind, it's completely still and uninteresting.

And I *refuse* to see anything that isn't there. Sucking in a breath, I turn to look at my dog, who's looking at me now instead of the trees.

“Come *on*,” I urge, going to the door and opening it. “There’s nothing there.”

Vulcan wags his tail slightly, uncertainly even, before following me into the cabin where I close and lock the door behind both dogs and myself before letting out a breath I didn’t know I’d been holding.

There’s nothing out there.

I hate that I have to repeat that to myself. I *despise* that this morning’s episode has me so on edge. Not to mention the bit of panic by the bear tree that Argus pushed me to recognize only a few minutes ago.

Instinctively, I flip on the lights, illuminating the main room of the cabin. To my left sits an open door to the bedroom that used to hold two full beds. Now my room is there, decorated much more to *my* taste than the rustic-camping theme it used to have.

In front of me, the bathroom door is open, and from inside, I hear the heater kick on. I don’t have a tub. Only a large shower, but frankly, the bathroom is perfect for me. To my right sits a large, plush sofa, and across from it, a television on top of a glass stand. I still have no idea how nothing has ever happened to the TV, especially with two giant dogs living here. But it’s still kicking, and I’m pretty sure I’ve found the sweet spot for it. Therefore, I’m never going to move it or anything else in the room. Not when it’s so *perfectly perfect* in terms of stability. I hope.

Finally, around the corner from that is the itty bitty kitchen of the cabin. Only a few feet from the sofa, in front of a window, sits a two-person table where I usually eat and the few appliances that I have. Given that I suck at cooking and eat way more frozen or pre-prepared food than any person should, it’s fine for me. I’m not cooking anything gourmet or anything that requires more than one small countertop, the stove, the oven, or the microwave.

Honestly, I mostly just use the oven and the microwave. Or the fire outside, when I’m grilling hotdogs or sandwiches over it as I prefer.

Some people might call it *lazy*. I just like to think I'm simple and easy to please. And way too addicted to campfire food.

Absently, I pick up the dogs' water bowl from the mat, dump it out, and refill it in the kitchen sink. It's the only sound in the cabin, apart from the air conditioner, and I glance out the window that faces the woods as I lean against the sink.

The trees are still just *trees*.

And I'm still a jumpy, anxious woman who probably needs a new therapist. In the window, I catch sight of my reflection and give a one-sided frown. I look tired, even though I can't clearly see my heterochromatic blue and brown eyes. My auburn hair is still high in its ponytail, with wisps that have escaped and hang around my pale face. When I'd first moved to the campground, I'd been *sure* I'd lose weight. I'd even told my mom that in a year, I'd probably drop at least a size and fit back into my few pairs of size-fourteen jeans. Instead of the sixteens and eighteens, I wear now.

Somehow, that hasn't happened. I'm not hung up about it, and when Mom asks if I have slimmed down enough to fit into them, I sigh and tell her I'm clearly building too much muscle by walking around the campground all day or by helping out with all the things that go into the upkeep of Oak Crest.

I don't tell her about all the marshmallows, hot dogs, and slushies I get from the House. Better that she believes that I'm just too *muscular* rather than me admitting that I have a bit of an addiction to a few rather unhealthy foods.

Oh well. What she doesn't know won't hurt her and certainly won't hurt me, since I have no problem with the way I look. With my luck, if I did lose weight, I'd lose it from my tits or my ass instead of from my stomach or upper arms. Shrinkage of my d-cup girls would be an absolute *tragedy* I'm not willing to risk.

Blinking, I realize that the water is running over the sides of the dog bowl, and I turn with a huff to grab the bowl and set it back on the floor. Argus sniffs it, gives a few licks, and then turns and walks off into the bedroom after Vulcan. I'm sure

that my fierce, terrifying guard dog is already stretched out over my queen-size bed, and I know that I'm going to have to fight both of them for the *privilege* of sleeping in *my* own bed unless I fall asleep out here on the sofa, instead.

“Love you guys,” I mutter, sinking onto the sofa and grabbing the remote for the TV. In a few button-presses, I'm looking at the Hulu startup screen, and I drag a spare comforter over myself as I settle back against the plush sofa, glad that I can keep a pillow and blanket out here without being judged.

Not like I have any visitors, after all. Nor anyone who might judge me for falling asleep on the sofa instead of on my bed like I probably should.

The nose nudging my face while its owner *breathes* against my ear is absolutely unwelcome in every single way imaginable.

The only light in the cabin as I crack my eyes open comes from the television, which currently displays a screen asking me if I'm still watching *whatever* I'd been watching in the first place.

"I'm up, Vulcan," I mutter, barely believing that he needs to go out again tonight. Hadn't he peed when we'd gotten back to the cabin a few hours ago?

A quick glance at my phone shows that it's nearly four in the morning, and I stumble to my feet, clothing askew, before going to the door and pulling it open. I flick the porch light on as Vulcan strides out the door, but instead of following him, I walk to my bedroom, where Argus stares at me from his spot on my canopied bed like I've just interrupted his sleep without reason.

I hadn't meant to fall asleep in my hoodie and leggings, and it's not exactly comfy now. Quickly, while I give Vulcan the chance to do what he needs to do, I strip out of my clothes until finally, I'm just in my bra and panties before I go to the window that faces the trees behind the cabin. If my cabin was anywhere else in the campground, I'd never stand in front of an open window while I take my bra off. But there's never anyone back here other than me. And if there were, I'd see some kind of light.

As it is, I try to catch sight of Vulcan from the light streaming out of the window from my room while I pull off my bra and chuck it towards the closet without really caring where it lands. Absently, I reach up to massage the base of my throat, fingers playing over the scar there before I turn and strip off my underwear as well. At least him waking me up means I get to spend the rest of the night in my comfortable pj shorts and a loose tee.

My hair, free from its ponytail even though I don't actually remember taking it down, falls over my shoulders and around my face as I bend down to grab my shorts, and as I stand, I pull them on, my eyes going back to the woods outside the window.

Immediately, I freeze.

Was that something in the trees?

I swear I'd seen something, just for a moment. Like the reflection of light off something shiny or...something?

I walk to the window, belatedly remembering to jerk my t-shirt on over my head and scan the trees outside for *anything*.

But...there's nothing there. Nothing at all. No movement. No light reflecting.

Had it just been an animal, maybe? My light had caught the eyes of a stray raccoon or opossum before. It wouldn't be insane to think the same thing had just happened.

Besides, Vulcan isn't making any kind of noise.

Unless something had dragged him off into the woods.

The thought is irrational and unwelcome. I bolt to the front door and open it, glad no one is around to see me barefoot, with my hair wild around my shoulders and dressed in shorts that barely cover my ass.

“Vulcan?”

He's not barking, but he doesn't come to me immediately, either. I walk to the side of the porch and peer around, and I think I can just see his tail somewhere around the back, toward the woods.

“Vulcan?” I call again, leaning further around the porch.

The tail turns out to be a stick, and my heart picks up in my chest as I step onto the asphalt, gritting my teeth against the sharp rock fragments that dig into the bottoms of my feet. The crickets still sing around me, though they seem so loud right now as I go around the side of the cabin, trying to dodge around the gravel of the firepit area until I can look behind the house.

He’s not there.

“Vulcan!” I call, more loudly this time as my heart trips and stutters in my chest. I shouldn’t have let him go out without me. I shouldn’t have closed the door or gone back in. Sure, I’ve done it a thousand times before, and Vulcan has never gone anywhere. But this time—

Underbrush breaks and rustles to my right, and I whirl around just in time to see Vulcan come trotting out of the woods, tail wagging behind him as he licks his mouth like he’s just gotten the last slice of pizza.

He’s fine. He doesn’t even look upset and stares up at me with a tail that continues to wag like he’s just had the time of his life in the woods, like always.

“Please tell me you didn’t just eat a rabbit or something,” I mutter, clenching my hands on either side of me, feet braced on the ground just outside of the circle of light from the porch. I glance up, heart still pounding, and let my eyes scan the trees that are just out of reach. The woods get impossibly thick very quickly here, and it wouldn’t take more than a dozen steps to get lost.

They’re also eerie tonight. Though I’m sure it’s because of my own racing heart and fear instead of anything *real*.

“You’d tell me if there was anything out here, right, Vulc?” I murmur, running my hand over his ears. His tail wags again. He comes closer to stand beside me, pressing against my thigh comfortingly, as if he can sense my unease.

I almost want to call out. I want to ask if anyone’s there or even find a light to shine into the woods.

As stupid as that is, anyway. And if I let myself do it once, then I'm really in trouble.

I've worked hard to get myself to be less paranoid, less anxious, and less on edge all the time. I'm not going to let myself take six steps back *now* just because the woods aren't silent, and Vulcan had gone for a little jaunt at four a.m.

"C'mon," I murmur, turning and carefully making my way back to the porch. It's hard to avoid the gravel, and I'm much more aware of the rocks when I find them this time, wincing every time I feel the poke of one in the bottom of my foot. "I can't believe you tried to go on a woods field trip in the freakin' dark," I say as Vulcan walks beside me until he reaches the door and waits, his tail waving like a flag behind him. "But you just really had to scare me like that, huh?" I open the door, having to wait for Argus to move so that I can walk inside. My service dog immediately sniffs my hands, tail wagging once, but I give him the *break* command before he can alert me.

I need to turn things off, and I *know* that I'm freaking out a little. It'll just make me feel worse if he *does* alert me to it.

I quickly lock the door and flip the television off, then go to my bedroom where the light is still on. Vulcan hops up onto my bed and turns in a few circles, pawing at the blankets so he can get them to his liking.

"Uh, I don't think so. You lost solo-bed privileges when you woke me up," I tell him, turning the light off and flipping my phone light on instead.

I locked the door, right?

The thought stops me in my tracks. I shouldn't need to check it. Because I *did lock it*. I always lock it.

But my brain starts whispering that maybe, just maybe, I didn't lock it this time, and I should go *check*.

Just this once, I relent silently and walk back to the front door to turn the knob once, twice. Then a third time, just to be sure.

The door is locked, but I stand there and stare at it, anyway.

Just to be sure.

As if it's going to *unlock itself* right in front of me.

As if I've hallucinated locking it this whole time, and I'll blink to see that it's sitting open if I stand here long enough.

Again I suck in a breath and tear myself away from the door, hating how aware I am of my feet aching from running around barefoot and how tired I am. My mind feels like it's fraying at the edges, and I go to my bed, shooing Argus out of my spot, and face planting the mattress with a groan.

Frankly, I could probably go to sleep right there. I don't really need to drag myself completely onto the bed. Though, I do. And I barely need a comforter over me with two *radiators* next to the mattress beside me. Vulcan's panting shakes the bed, and fervently I hope that he'll stop sometime before dawn so that the mattress stops making its best impression of one of the vibrating beds from bad old movies that were supposedly once commonly found in motels across America.

Magic Fingers, right? That's what they'd been called.

It doesn't feel very *magic* right now. But it doesn't impede me from falling asleep, one arm over Argus's stomach and front leg as he moves to lie in a line against me, his snores filling the room with a lullaby just as soothing as Vulcan's bed-shaking pants.

3

Pushing the cabin door open as I pocket my phone, I glance up at the pieces of sky that I can see between the leafy branches of the surrounding trees and squint.

It looks a bit like rain. Or like the promise of a storm that's slowly rolling in. I'm surprised that we haven't had more of them lately, with us being on the lake and it being April and all. The saying 'April showers bring May flowers' seems to be especially true here in Arkala, but then again, we get quite a few storms in May as well.

I guess June doesn't rhyme well enough to be used in place of *May*.

Argus and Vulcan roam around the driveway, sniffing at the car and then going to the grass between the trees to do their morning business. While I have a leash on me, just in case, I have no intention of using it. It's been a *long* time since I've used one on either dog while we're at the campground. Both of them, of course, have identifying tags hanging from their collars, and Argus has an extra silver tag that clinks against his name tag and, in black letters over a red medical cross, says, SERVICE DOG.

"C'mon," I tell both of them after a minute, locking the cabin door and shoving my keys in the opposite pocket of my denim shorts than my phone. It's warmer than I thought it would be when I was getting dressed, and I'm glad that I put on a light hoodie for the day instead of something heavier. This one zips up to my neck, and the material is clingy, almost spandex in nature. The best part, however, are the thumbholes

that I make use of, so the edges of the sleeves go almost to my fingers instead of stopping at my wrist. My beat-up Converse sneakers complete the outfit, if you can call it that, when all I did was reach into my closet and yank out the first things I could find.

At only eight in the morning, most of the campers in Oak Crest seem to be still asleep. Or at least still in their campers. The spots are mainly for temporary residents, and only a few tent-ready areas remain nearer to the entrance to the campground, but even those are normally filled with truck-mounted campers and RVs instead. As I walk, the smell of campfires, a permanent fixture here, trickles into my nostrils, as does the scent of breakfast cooking that wafts from the few places I can see movement.

It's mostly only the people who love to fish that are awake right now, given that early-morning fishing is generally considered superior for those who want to catch something good, like largemouth bass.

I pass the bear tree and barely give it a glance, instead veering to the right to follow the road that takes me past a row of campers that are so close to one another that I could stand between them and touch one on each side if I stuck my arms out. These have been here forever, it seems. They're older models, and the decks built onto them look almost like a part of nature themselves.

The door of the third one opens, and Benjamin waves at me as he steps out and closes the door behind him, causing the lights hanging on the awning to jiggle.

"Good morning," he greets, going to the grill and flipping it up. I've never seen someone more in love with grilling than him, and I have to wonder if this is the only chance he gets to use one.

"Good morning, Ben," I reply, waving a hand at him. Neither dog approaches him, though I know they don't dislike the man. Vulcan just isn't that social, and Argus is normally stuck to me like glue.

“I’ll be down to the House in an hour or so,” he says as I pass, and I nod at his words. *I* certainly don’t care when he gets there. Even though I work at the House, or the camp store, in the morning most days, he’ll be doing business with Pat and Sam instead of me, I’m sure. They normally handle the long-time regulars like Ben’s family and Carter.

The House itself is in sight, and from this side, its nickname is rather appropriate. The building looks like it could be a house with its arched roof and windows. It’s only the latticework fence and two bathroom entrances on this side that give it away as something else. A backdoor sits behind the bathrooms as well, and a large white box outside of it holds fishing crickets that I know must be chirping up a storm this early.

I don’t take the backdoor, however. I go around the side, the scent of chlorine from the pool down the hill to my left hitting me hard in the face. It’ll be open by nine when the lifeguard gets here, though for now, the gate of the chain-link fence is padlocked to prevent anyone who doesn’t want to try too hard from getting in.

The front of the House is just as homey as the sides. Large windows show the shelves of supplies inside, and the area with the door is the one thing that, in my opinion, is out of place. The whole thing is thick glass, door included, and arches up with the roof. The other side goes back to the cream vinyl siding that matches the brown roof, and another cheery window sits on that wall as well.

I open the door and whistle, drawing Vulcan away from the deck sitting across the front of the store. He comes instantly, walking inside along with Argus as I follow and let the heavy door *whoosh* close behind me.

The fact that the owners are so open to me having both dogs here means that I’ll probably never, *ever* leave this place. They’d practically insisted I have them and seemed more than a little reassured when I brought Vulc and Argus to the interview.

Well, if you could call it an interview. They'd hired me on the spot and had shown me the cabin that I'd moved into not much later.

As the door closes behind me, Sam looks up from the counter where the register sits, her worn face brightening into a wide smile. "Good morning, Sloane," she greets, voice gentle and containing an underlying musical note. I always wonder if she did sing in a past life or if she's just that thrilled with life all the time.

"Good morning," I greet, watching as Vulcan walks straight over and plants himself down beside his second-favorite person in the world.

Sam sets down the mail she'd been going through and turns her full attention on my dog, kneeling down in front of him so she can tell him what a good boy he is and give him all the attention he *clearly* never gets from me.

"I'm going to have to leave you alone for an hour or so," she tells me, standing once again with a grunt of pain. Her knees aren't great, I know, and I'm glad that Pat got her a new, tricked out golf cart to ride around the campground at the end of last year. It's done wonders for her arthritis, and she has a fun, musical horn to beep at everyone she comes across.

"That's fine." I snag a bottle of water and walk to the counter to go behind it as well. Argus comes with me as Vulcan goes to find the bed that's been put back here for both of the dogs to sleep on while I'm working. "Is something going on?"

"Oh, no. Nothing bad. But you know, two-fourteen had that storm damage last year," she reminds me, naming one of the permanently installed campers closer to the lake that had been hit when we'd had what I liked to call a typhoon at the end of last year's season. "They're finally having someone come out and finish fixing it. I'd like to go down there to make sure everything's all right, and they don't need any help."

Sam is absolutely the nicest person I've ever met. She tries to help as many people as she can, whenever she can, to the point that she should charge for her assistance, in my opinion.

Her husband, Pat, is a lot like her. He's quieter, though. And that makes him come off as not quite so nice. Couple that with a heavy southern accent from his upbringing in Appalachia, and it means that a lot of people don't know how to read the taciturn older man.

"Oh, right. Right." I search my brain, trying to remember just what kind of damage had been done to two-fourteen, but honestly, I can't remember. Roof damage, maybe? That was pretty common in storms. Or maybe a wrecked deck? "Is anyone checking in that I should expect?"

"Maybe." She frowns thoughtfully. "I got a call right before closing last night about a guy wanting to rent that last available cabin on the ridge." She gestures towards the lake and the cabins beyond the boat launch that sits at the end of our little cove. "But I don't know if he was serious."

"Okay. Well, it's still open. So I'll just let it go first come, first serve?" I ask, and Sam nods her agreement and goes out from behind the counter, grabbing her light jacket from the hanger behind it.

"Once I'm back, we'll figure out lunch," Sam adds, going to the door. "Since Raven will be here too by then." Raven, the lifeguard, doesn't live near here but enjoys working at the campground too much to quit. The woman, who's in her late thirties, had taken it upon herself to make sure I had self-saving skills when it came to swimming. Even though actually being *in* the water isn't my favorite thing. I'm grateful, sure, but I'm not sure how necessary it was, given that I do not plan on plunging into the middle of the lake to save anyone anytime soon. Or getting stranded out there myself without a boat, paddle, or floaties.

Then again, I guess you never know.

The door closes behind her, and I set the mail to the side before checking the register and eyeing the store itself. We're due for another shipment of things. Specifically *s'mores things*, but we're still pretty well stocked, given how busy we are out of the high season.

Minutes later, the door opens, prompting me to glance up to see someone I don't recognize. The woman smiles apologetically, as if she's somehow bothering me, and comes to the counter to place her hands on it gingerly. "Could you tell me how to get to the Colidale Marina?" she asks softly, voice barely above a whisper.

I blink and give her my best customer service smile as I rest my hands on the counter and splay my fingers. "Oh, sure. That's no problem. So you're going to leave the normal way." I gesture to the hill that dips down just outside the House and then goes back up across from us, the narrow road winding up towards the highway. "Then take a right. Once you hit Arkala's small excuse for a downtown, about five miles or so from here, you'll start seeing signs for it. You make a right at the first light, follow that road, and it's about four miles that way, then you'll take another right."

"Okay. Do you know if they have anything available today?" She pulls her hands back and looks around, eyes landing on the t-shirts hanging on the wall that each feature OAK CREST CAMPGROUND in big letters somewhere on the fabric.

"I don't, unfortunately," I say. "We're not affiliated with them at all. But uh..." I lean forward and twist to look at the rack of pamphlets that sits on the counter, just behind the magnets that *also* say the name of the campground. "Here you go. Their number is on here, and directions, in case I wasn't great at being clear." I was, and it's not difficult to get there, but I've learned not to underestimate how easily people will fuck up when they're driving somewhere.

The blonde woman takes the pamphlet with a smile and covers her mouth as she yawns. "Okay. Thank you. I really appreciate it." Without buying anything, she goes back to the door, exiting without another word.

"You're welcome," I tell the empty air, ducking down to grab the almost-empty bowl of water from behind the counter. With it in hand, I go to the back room, where the small break area is, and rinse it out before letting the water run into it to refill the bowl.

The door opens as I do, naturally, and I call above the water, “Just a second!” So that they know the shop is not, in fact, abandoned and that I’m coming back in a second.

Moments later, I flip the water off and pick up the nearly-full bowl as I walk back into the main area of the shop. “Sorry about that,” I say, catching a glimpse of a man gazing up at the wall of pictures featuring people who caught something impressive in the lake and had come back here to get their photos taken. Some of the photos are old and worn at this point, and I’m internally cringing as I wait for the day someone touches one, and it instantly turns to dust.

I go behind the counter and pause, my eyes on the dog bed where only Argus lays, tail thumping on the ground.

Where the heck is Vulcan?

Setting the bowl down, I turn to look behind me, my eyes instantly finding and zeroing in on my ferocious, anti-social guard dog.

Who, currently is sitting next to the man and bathing his hand with licks as his other hand rubs at his ears.

“Umm.” I stare at them, my brain taking a minute to process that. It’s cute...in a really weird way, like something out of a rom-com that I’d fall asleep twenty minutes into.

Then the man looks up, and he looks like something straight out of a dark romance-slash-erotica movie that I’d only be able to find online or behind a paywall.

“Is it okay if I pet him?” he asks, his voice soft and a bit higher than I’m expecting. He looks like someone who could *growl* with ease, as weird as that sounds, so to hear him sound melodic and friendly seems...off.

Then again, who am I to say? I’ve never met him before, obviously. And all I can do is stand here and stare at his dark, curly hair that’s cut longer on top than on the sides and wonder how in the world this man has better lashes than most women I’ve met.

“Uh. Sure?” I say, shrugging one shoulder. “He’s normally not so friendly. I’m surprised, I guess, that he’s all over you

like that.”

His smile widens. “Maybe he’s just a really excellent judge of people, and he likes me?” He chuckles, hazel eyes glittering with amusement.

“Sure.” Frankly, Vulcan doesn’t like people most of the time unless they’ve fed him. And only then when they’ve given him something *really* tasty, like chicken. Sam, as sweet as she is, had to win him over that way as well, back when I’d first started.

So for him to just walk up to this guy is a surprise.

“I called last night.” The man straightens and walks to the counter, accompanied by Vulcan, who moves to sit on his foot when he stops across on the other side of the raised, flat surface. He glances down again, smiles, and gives Vulcan back his hand so the German Shepherd can mouth it affectionately.

How fucking weird. If I didn’t know better, I’d say he’d met my dog before. But I’ve certainly never seen this guy in my life.

“And I absolutely should’ve booked the cabin the owners said was available, but I wasn’t sure,” he admits with a small, almost apologetic shrug. “I just wasn’t sure it was what I wanted.”

“But you’re sure today?” I ask, wondering what could’ve changed overnight.

He nods once, his eyes finding and holding mine. “I’m absolutely sure,” he promises. “This is like the hidden gem of Colidale Lake, you know?”

“It’s a pretty nice campground,” I agree. “And you’re in luck since no one has come in to rent that cabin yet.”

“Probably the luckiest I’ve been in a month,” the man chuckles. “I have my boat with me as well. Is a dock slip extra?”

“No, it’s included,” I tell him, fighting the urge to crane my neck to see what kind of boat he has. Sometimes I’m

surprised by what people bring here, though not that often. Most of the time, it's just fishing boats, speedboats, jet skis, and the odd pontoon here and there, which would require a bigger spot. "What kind of boat?"

"Speedboat. A normal spot will do," he tells me like he's had this conversation a thousand times before. And maybe he has.

"Perfect." On the computer I bring up the rental page for the last cabin and reach behind me to grab the little rubber keychain that's attached to a key for the dock. "So you're going to be in cabin six. It's the furthest one over there." I point out the glass of the front wall and glance up to see he's staring at *me* instead of looking where I'm pointing.

A soft, teasing smile flits across his lips, and I narrow my eyes in confusion and bemusement. "It's that way," I tell him again, in case he's confused.

"Your eyes are two different colors." The words come out as delighted. Like this is some added bonus he hadn't expected.

"Uh, yeah," I reply, blinking at him in mild surprise. It's generally something people comment on, but they don't normally look so excited, like it does something personally for them. "It's called—"

"Heterochromia," he breaks in, then frowns. "Sorry. I shouldn't have interrupted you. It's really pretty."

"Normally, people think it's weird since this eye is so much lighter," I admit, tapping just under my blue eye.

"It's not weird," he assures me, still looking thrilled. "Anyway, I'm sorry. Go on telling me about the cabin, please?"

"It's at the end of that row over there." This time, he obediently looks to where I'm pointing. "Watch out for the hill that comes around. I *know* it's steep as heck. It's technically a family cabin, so there's a kitchen and living area on the first floor, along with two bedrooms and a bathroom. Up top is a loft with two twin beds."

“Then I’ll clearly have to sleep somewhere new every night,” the man chuckles and turns back to look at me again. “To see which bed is the best.”

It’s not the answer I’m expecting and draws a soft huff of laughter from me as my mouth turns up into a half-smile. “How long are you staying?”

“Oh, hmm.” He rocks back on his heels, hands coming to rest on the counter, and when I look down, I’m surprised to see that the knuckles of his left hand are tattooed, along with the back of his hand, and it continues under the sleeve of his jacket.

I wonder how far up it goes.

“Let’s do...ten days? My friends are telling me I *really* need a vacation, so I guess I’m going to trust them this time.”

“Okay.” It doesn’t affect me either way, and I put that on the page I have pulled up. I certainly won’t mind looking at him for ten whole days. “What’s your name?”

“Virgil Olsen,” he tells me smoothly. “What’s yours?”

Is he flirting with me? I can’t help but glance at him, and his eyes on mine, coupled with his soft smile, make my stomach twist with something like anticipation.

Down girl, I tell myself. *He’s just being a tease. You don’t even know him. He could be weird or something. Well, weirder than you.*

“It’s Sloane,” I reply. “Payment method?”

Out of his wallet, he produces a credit card that lands on the counter with a flourish. I type in the numbers, occasionally glancing at him as he stares out the window at what he can see of the campground.

“How old are you?” I ask, keeping my voice businesslike. I don’t *need* to ask or anything. We rent to anyone over twenty-one, and he’s got to be older than that by a couple of years, at least. Though his sharply handsome face and full mouth are throwing me off.

His eyes find mine and narrow slightly, like he's about to call me out on my question and why I'm asking.

"I just turned thirty," Virgil replies after a moment's consideration. "Why? If I tell you my birthday is today, do I get a discount? Will you jump up on this counter and sing to me?"

"No," I snort. "I absolutely will not." I type on the keyboard again like I did need to know his age for something, then slide his card back to him.

Before I can move my hand, his tattooed, tanned fingers come down over mine, holding me there for a second.

"Thanks, Sloane," he says, his voice just a little bit deeper and a little bit darker when he says it.

He's fucking with me.

It's obvious that he is, and I look up at him with my lips pressed together to assess his expression.

Though what I find is only a polite, friendly smile and an almost-blank expression. Like he's just some pleasant, empty-headed animatronic running through the motions.

If anything, it's kind of creepy.

I extract my hand from his and grab the key from under the counter, making sure it's the right one as I lay it on the counter as well. "Is one key okay?" I ask, glancing up at him once more.

"Sure," he says. "It's just me, anyway. Do you need anything else?"

I shake my head and push the dock key towards him again as well. "The cabin should be fully stocked with essentials, but if not, you can come back down or call," I offer. "And one of us can bring stuff up to you. Vulcan?" At his name, the dog leaves Virgil's foot and comes back around to slip behind the counter, leaning on my leg and panting up at me.

"Your dogs are adorable," he tells me and pockets his card. "See you later, Sloane." It's weird how he says my name, like he *enjoys* saying it. Or like he knows me.

I don't get it.

“Have a nice stay. And uh, I hope you like the cabin,” I reply, watching him until he's out of the building entirely.

When he's gone, I turn and scowl at Vulcan, hand going to my hip. “What the hell?” I ask him, cupping his muzzle playfully. “Why do you like him so much, huh?”

Of course, the mostly black Shepherd doesn't answer, but he does turn his head so he can put my hand in his mouth and get his slobber all over it.

By the time Raven's checked in and then gone back to the pool, still with no sign of Sam coming back, I'm bored. Working in the House is probably my least favorite part of the job, and there's not much I can do to make it more interesting except scroll through my newsfeed on my phone or look through the relationship-advice side of social media so I can cringe at people's lousy life situations that I don't envy at all.

I'm also starting to wonder if Sam has encountered some kind of issue at two-fourteen. Pat hasn't come in, meaning he might be there as well, and I sit back on my stool as I glance for the fortieth time out the window, my eyes drifting to cabin six that still looks *exactly* the same as it had a while ago.

The first thing Virgil did was get his boat in the water. A process I'd headed outside to watch, telling myself it was only to look at what kind of boat he'd brought to the lake. And he hadn't surprised me...entirely. The speedboat was shiny and sparkled red in the dim light, its white interior spotless and the silver rails around the edges gleaming. With the ease of long practice, he'd backed it off the trailer, something I'd seen go wrong *many* times before and had guided it over to his spot before walking back out and going to his truck to take the trailer to where the others were stored.

For some reason, he'd looked back up at the front of the House, and when he'd seen me there, he'd grinned and waved, making me grit my teeth and wave back, my insides squirming with the humiliation of being caught.

He'd gone to the cabin, presumably, but that meant I couldn't see him anymore. The only door to it was facing my side of the cove, technically, but it was more than a hundred yards away. There was every chance that he'd gone in with his stuff, come back out, and taken off. Or that he was wandering the campground or on his boat.

And I'm sure as hell not about to start stalking him to find out.

The phone rings, and I pick it up to answer easily, "Oak Crest Campground, how can I help you?"

Only to get faced with no reply. I blink, gaze up at the ceiling, and wait a few seconds for the line to clear in case the person is driving anywhere nearby. The service here *sucks*, and this kind of thing is common, especially if someone is driving in and needs to get a hold of us. "Hello?" I try again after a few moments.

But there's still no response.

"I think we have a bad connection," I go on, leaning my hip against the counter and looking at the wall with one arm folded across my stomach. "Maybe you can try calling me back—"

A soft exhale meets my ears, almost too soft for me to hear. Something shifts in the background, and I freeze.

What in the world?

"Hello?" I try again, my words less friendly this time and colder. A glance at the screen of the phone shows an *unknown number*, but that's not uncommon when people call from a private line. "Can you hear me—" The line goes dead while I'm speaking, and I pull it away again to stare at the phone in absolute confusion. "Okay," I mutter, crossing my ankles. "That was really fucking weird, huh guys?" The two dogs look up from the bed where they're dozing, and Argus thumps his tail in response to my words.

The phone rings again, making me jump a little as the screen lights up above my fingers. I check again, and when I

see the *unknown caller* flashing across the screen, I genuinely consider not answering it.

But I'm clearly a sucker for punishment, so I sigh and hit the green button before bringing it to my ear with a slightly grumpy, "Hello? Thanks for calling Oak Crest Campground. How can I help you?"

I'm fully expecting another lack of response.

I'm *not* expecting the gravelly male smoker's voice that says, with some surprise, "*Sloane?*"

My hand tightens around the phone until the plastic creaks. I *know* this unknown caller, and I hate that fact with every fiber of my being.

"How did you get this number?" I ask through numb lips.

"*Sloane, I've been trying to call you for weeks. Kate says you have my number blocked just like your mom does, so I had to figure out how to get ahold of you this way, instead. Couldn't believe you're working at a campground.*" The man chuckles ruefully. "*You never exactly liked the outdoors much —*"

"*Aunt Kate* told you where I'm working?" It takes a moment to realize that my mom probably told her ex-sister-in-law in passing, and when my stepfather had gotten out of prison last month, my aunt had probably run to tell her brother whatever he'd asked when he came calling.

What a *bitch*.

"*Of course she did. We're family, and I've been trying to talk to you—*"

"I don't want to talk to *you*." The anger in my voice surprises me, as does the cold hate that creeps up my fingers and snakes through my veins. Argus is off the bed in an instant, a paw on my leg as he whines and pushes his nose under my hand that's balled in my hoodie.

"*I get that you're upset. But please, I really want to talk. Things are different now. The doctors at the prison—*"

“No,” I say the word as forcefully as I can without yelling. “I don’t want to talk to *you*.” The scar above my sternum seems to burn, even though it’s long healed. “Don’t you ever call this number again. And don’t try to contact me *ever* again. Mom and I are done with you, *Anthony*.” While I’d once referred to him as Dad a very long time ago, those days were long gone. They’d *been* gone ever since he’d gotten high, kidnapped me, and almost killed me.

So why the hell did they let him out of prison? Mom knew, obviously. She’d told me they’d let him out on some kind of parole and had given me his number to block after he’d called her. But that was supposed to be the end of it. He didn’t know me anymore. He didn’t know where I work, or anything like that. Hell, for all he supposedly knew, I was still in Columbus.

But apparently, his sister just couldn’t let things die.

I suck in a breath and hang up suddenly, just as he starts talking once more. I don’t care what he has to say. Whether it’s an apology, a promise, or a threat. They’re all the same to me, and I don’t have time for it or the mental capacity to deal with it.

Not when just his voice has my heart racing and my brain trying to set me back about ten steps. As I lay the phone down, Argus jumps up to press against my chest, licking my face as he whines and tries to distract me.

“Thank you, Argus,” I breathe, setting the phone back in its cradle much more gently than I want to. I suck in a breath, then another, my head spinning and feeling like I can’t get enough oxygen.

I need to go outside.

Moving out from behind the counter, I whistle to get Vulcan’s attention and stride for the glass door, barely slowing down as I open it and keep walking with the dogs onto the porch near me. I can’t leave the House while I’m the only one working, but I can walk a little.

At least to the deck on the other side of the wide pavement drive that perches over the path that leads to the lake.

My steps on the wood make it creak, and I go straight to the edge and get on my knees on the bench that encircles the whole deck and place my hands on the flat wood railing. I suck in a much longer breath, feeling slightly better now that I'm outside, and rest my head on my arms as I focus just on breathing and nothing else.

I'm fine. I'm mostly, probably fine. I just need to chill out because freaking out isn't conducive to getting through the day.

But I also need to call Mom.

Beside me, I can still feel Argus as attentive as ever, and I know that if I turn over and sit on the bench properly, he'll be in my lap and across my legs to try to ground me. But I'm not going to freak out. I'm going to suck in a few more deep breaths and *not*—

“Are you okay?” The warm, honeyed voice makes me whirl around, and I nearly lose my balance on the deck.

Behind me, Virgil stands against the far rail, hands in the pockets of his black jeans as he watches me with narrowed eyes under heavy, long lashes.

Of *course*, he's here to watch me nearly fall apart.

“What?” I ask as if I hadn't heard him. I had, and that's the problem. I'm not sure how to answer just yet.

“You nearly hit me with the door when you came out,” he says, offering me a soft smile. “I was worried you were having some kind of emergency.” Vulcan sits at his side, wagging his tail, and absently Virgil reaches out to stroke his ears again.

I can't help but, again, wonder why my dog has taken to him like a long-lost owner, but I push it from my mind and attempt to smile.

Though I promptly fail, and I don't try again.

“I just...yeah. I'm good.” I clear my throat and busy myself by taking my hair down from its ponytail to let it fall around my shoulders. Combing it out with my fingers, I take a

breath, wondering if I can make as much noise as possible and he'll just go away.

Obviously, I don't want company right now. Doesn't he see that?

"You sure?"

"Yeah, I'm absolutely sure." I flash him a false, bright smile and wind my auburn hair back up into a bun. I love having it long, but there's no way in hell I could work here and let it fall all the way to the middle of my back during the day. I'd die of heatstroke, for one. "Sorry for umm. Almost hitting you with the door?" I ask to make sure I heard him right. I hadn't seen him when I'd come out of the House, but that's not saying much, since I'm pretty upset.

"It's okay. I might've caught it if my face was really in danger. My friends all say that I care about my face too much and that I develop superhuman reflexes when it's in danger." His teasing lilt gives me pause, and I look at him with a question on my face.

"Really?" I can't help but ask. "That seems...dramatic?"

"*I'm* dramatic if you haven't noticed," he assures me, putting a hand on his chest. For the first time, I notice he looks a little...ruffled. Like he did something strenuous or rolled around in a bed before he got back here...though I choose to cut that thought off *right there* instead of letting it go any further. "What do you need, anyway?"

"S'mores stuff," he says, shoving his hands in his pockets and giving me a boyish grin. "Look, I'm kind of addicted, and I'm a sugar fiend. Was this vacation an elaborate excuse to make s'mores? Maybe. And you'll break my heart if you tell me you're out in the store."

"I don't think we're out," I assure him, walking past him and going back towards the front door. He shifts subtly, giving me *just* enough room to walk, but I don't say a word as I brush his arm accidentally.

How far do those tattoos go? I can't help but wonder again. "You coming?" I ask when he doesn't move, and I've

nearly reached the door.

Virgil turns to watch me, his eyes narrowed, and when he opens his mouth to say something, he closes it before replying, “Yeah, sorry. Your dog just doesn’t want me to go anywhere.” It’s true, and it takes him a moment to get Vulcan to move so that he *can* follow me back into the store for his marshmallows, graham crackers, and chocolate that he buys the last of.

“I’ll be back for more,” he tells me, brandishing the plastic bag as he turns to leave. “So make sure you get some back in stock, okay?”

“You could just go to the store,” I point out with a snort as he heads towards the door. “You know, the *real* store?”

He doesn’t reply verbally but shakes his head and pushes out of the building again, plastic bag swinging at his side.

That night, I again fall asleep on the sofa, the TV on to help me forget the day. It's easier this way when I can keep the TV on and just loud enough to distract me from my former stepdad's call. I haven't gotten around to calling Mom yet, though I want to. I need to, but I don't know what to say. I don't want to drag *her* back into this either, and I know she'll insist on coming up from Columbus or having me move back home with her.

But I don't want to move home. I've had enough of living there, being treated like I'm fragile, and feeling like I can barely take care of myself. Maybe living in a campground isn't amazing or the epitome of what I *should* be doing at twenty-seven, but it works for me.

And I like it here.

God, I just hope my stepfather doesn't try to take that away. Or worse, succeed in doing so.

It feels like I've just drifted off when a cold nose pushes against my hand. I moan in my sleep, barely conscious, and flip over on the sofa to face the other way.

This time, Vulcan finds my shoulder. He whines softly, and finally I sit up to glare at my dark Shepherd that stands next to the sofa with his tail wagging hopefully.

"Are you joking?" I mumble quietly, hearing Argus snoring from the other room. "Like, you have to be joking, right?"

Unfortunately, he does not seem to be joking. I stumble to my feet and stare at the television, trying to get my bearings and wake up before going outside. Yet again, I would rather be *asleep*. But also, I'm glad to get the chance to change out of my denim shorts and into my softer sleep shorts.

"Please don't go off into the woods," I beg, going to the door and opening it. I flip on the light with my other hand, squinting and trying not to look at the porch lamp that, even in its dim state, is too much for my sleep-addled brain.

Predictably, Vulcan walks behind the cabin, going toward the firepit and the picnic table beyond. This time, however, my shoes are by the door, and I put them on, just in case he doesn't come back in about twenty seconds. There's no way he has to do more than *pee* at...I grab my phone off the end table near the door where I'd chucked it and sigh. *Three thirty-two in the morning*. I'm going to be up in four hours, and while I would rather be awake now than thirty minutes before I need to get up, I'd still rather be asleep.

It takes me a few more seconds to realize Vulcan isn't back, and I can't hear him.

"God, I'm going to have to put you on a leash," I mutter to myself, wondering if I still have the long, thirty-foot leash that I used to train him. He's never done this to me before. Normally he's in and out when he has to go at night, and it hasn't been multiple nights in a row in a *long* time.

Why is he being so weird now?

"Vulc?" I call, hoping that he'll come running back around the cabin.

He doesn't.

A small amount of fear climbs through my body, digging icy claws into my insides as I step out onto the porch and flip on the fairy lights. "Vulcan!" I call louder this time, and walk around towards the firepit.

He's not there. Nor is he in the surrounding trees that I can see. It's not like him to run off. He's taciturn, unfriendly, and doesn't have enough of a prey drive that I've ever actually

worried about him running off. Not since he was a lot younger, anyway.

My shoes scuff on the gravel, and I take a moment to be glad that I kept my shoes by the door *just in case*. I had hoped that Vulcan wouldn't want to go outside again, but I'd obviously been wrong.

When I get to the edge of the woods, I stop, gazing into the absolute pitch black of the trees that the light from the cabin barely illuminates. A few feet in, everything goes pitch black, and I can barely see more than the first few rows of trees clearly.

I can't help it. My hands clench at my sides, and my heart pounds a few warning beats in my throat as the sound of crickets and frogs becomes oppressive in the air around me.

I'm afraid of the dark. Not always, but right now, standing here alone, I can't help the swell of fear in my chest or the way the blackness bends and creeps around me.

"Vulcan!" I call, trying to keep my voice steady. "Come here!"

I'm grateful when I hear the sound of paws crashing through the brush, and within moments I see my dog, all happy tail wagging and pricked ears, coming towards me unharmed.

"You've got to stop going so far," I tell him, power-walking back towards the cabin.

He looks up at the sound of my voice, mouth moving like he's chewing something. *Again.*

"Did you get into something?" I pause, now safely back in the light from the porch, and kneel in front of him, his muzzle in my hand. It takes a few seconds to pry it open, and I'm half-convinced I'm going to find the remains of a squirrel or some other small animal.

But instead, there's nothing. Except, when Vulcan heavily exhales a puff of warm air, the smell of *peanut butter* hits my nose, and I frown.

“What the fuck?” I mumble, getting to my feet. “How did you get into peanut butter?” I suppose it’s not *impossible* that someone lost a jar, and it ended up all the way back here. Storms and the wind are a bitch, after all. But it’s still just so... weird, I guess.

Back inside, Vulcan goes right back to my room and hops onto my bed, twisting in a circle a couple of times before he flops to the mattress and lets out a huge doggy sigh.

“Well, sorry, your majesty,” I tell him, grabbing my pj’s from the end of the bed. I strip quickly and take a moment to stretch when I’m fully nude.

This time, when my eyes catch the window and the trees beyond, however, I pause and frown.

Why do I keep seeing something in the trees? The question is an unwelcome one, and I pull my t-shirt on before going to stand at the window. Even if there was someone out there, the window is at hip-level for me, so I’m covered enough to look around at the black woods beyond my cabin.

There’s really...nothing there. If anything, it’s probably the glare from my bedroom light, and being jumpy from my stepdad calling is just making things worse.

But you weren’t jumpy last night, my brain supplies unhelpfully before I silence that train of thought. I pull on my shorts and go to the light, turning it off before falling into bed with the dogs.

Thankfully, there are neither snores nor pants tonight. Yet.

“Can we stop doing this, Vulc?” I moan, dragging the sheet up over me. “I’m getting tired of running after you in the dark, okay?”

In answer, the German Shepherd throws himself across my feet and sighs with the force of a tornado.

When the storm rumbles through around noon, I know that it’s going to be a problem. Thankfully, I’m up in the House, not wandering the campground, and I get to watch from the windowed lounge beside the store itself as Raven closes up the pool and jogs into the House as well.

“Holy *shit*,” she whistles, coming to sit on the sofa beside me. “That’s some storm we’ve got rolling in.”

“Hell yeah,” I agree, patting the sofa beside me so that Argus jumps up to lounge across my lap. “There’s going to be some damage, I bet. The wind is insane.”

“Probably two-fourteen again. They *just* got that roof on yesterday.” The lifeguard sighs, leaning against the sofa back.

“It’s *always* two-fourteen,” I grump, knowing that it’s unfair to call out one of the oldest units on the site. My eyes flick back to the windows, and I watch as campers scurry around, trying to secure their awnings, tents, or other outdoor belongings. The front door opens, but neither of us move. Sam is in the store, and both of us *are* technically on break. If it’s someone who needs something and isn’t just looking for a quick bit of shelter from the rain, they can go to her.

Sure enough, low voices sound from the counter, and I recognize Carter’s stilted speech as he says something, and Sam laughs her reply.

“I’m going to go outside and listen,” I say, getting to my feet as the rain starts to pound against the glass. “If you need me, I guess...don’t?” I give Raven a quick grin as she flips me off, rolling her eyes as she fights her own smile.

“Whatever,” the lifeguard says. “You want to do dinner tonight?”

“I guess. Huckleberry is open today,” I say, naming one of the few cafés in the area with an amazing reputation but terribly sporadic hours. “If you want some pancakes.”

“I *really* want some pancakes,” Raven assures me, pulling her long red hair into a ponytail that’s lower and messier than mine. “I’m off at six.”

“I’m never off.” We trade a last quick grin, and Raven snorts out a laugh as I walk back into the main part of the store, where Carter stands at the counter as Sam counts out change.

“Hey Carter,” I greet, lifting my hand to greet the older fisherman. He barely turns, and when he does, he gives me a

quick, disapproving once over.

Carter has never really seemed to like me, though I'm not quite sure why. Because I exist? Because I wear mostly black? Maybe I breathe too loudly in his presence.

"Pretty bad storm, huh?" he grunts after a few moments. He reaches his hands out for the dogs, and I let Argus know he's free to go before the Shepherd will approach Carter, sniffing hands that have more than once given him strips of fresh fish.

"I bet two-fourteen takes a hit," I say in agreement.

"Shhh," Sam frowns and shakes her head, though there's amusement in her gray eyes. "From your mouth to God's ears, Sloane. I don't want to have to patch that roof *again* while they wait for insurance."

"They need a new camper entirely," Carter grumbles, taking the change and his slushie. He's the only person, other than me that I know of, who partakes of the blue slushies we sell for some unfathomable reason in the camp store.

"*Thank* you," I agree, going to the slushie machine and pouring myself one as well. "Are you heading out in this, Carter?"

"I'm parked right there," he mutters, jerking his chin towards the front of the building. I glance around and see his old green truck parked there, along with a large, sleek black truck behind it.

I do a double-take and then glance around the store. There's no one here other than Raven and us, and none of us drives a truck like that.

Weird. The front of the building isn't exactly for long-term parking, though I'm sure Sam and Pat will forgive someone for waiting out the rain here.

"I'm going out back with the crickets," I say, whistling for both dogs to show them where we're going.

"Hey, Sloane?" Pat's voice from the office stops me in my tracks, and I poke my head in before I leave the building

entirely. Thunder rumbles, shaking the House, and as I watch, he lays some papers to the side. “Why don’t you do a big walkthrough tomorrow after all this shit blows through?” His accent is thick and makes his words hard to understand. It sounds like he’s chewing on them, the same way he chews the tobacco that sits against his lower lip. “It’s supposed to storm all night, and I’d like to know about any damage early. Is that all right?”

“Yeah, no problem,” I assure him. “Want me to check Highland and Lake Place, too?” While the two residential streets that border one side of the campground aren’t *ours*, we face issues when they do. It’s better to know when they’re going to need work done, in case we need to *not* book out the places closest to there.

Weird how campers don’t enjoy the sound of construction equipment repairing roads or roofs at four a.m.

“If you please,” Pat grunts, adjusting his glasses. “Thanks again.”

“No problem.” I give him a half-salute that he pointedly ignores and turn to leave, going out the back door while still remaining in the safety of the covered outdoor hallway with the crickets and the entrance to the ladies’ bathroom.

The storm has picked up by the time I let the door close behind me, and when I peek out from under the awning where rain runs in rivers from the gutters, the sky is nearly black with the storm.

“You aren’t going out in this, are you?” a familiar, honeyed voice hums from my right. I jump, a small sound leaving me that I will not admit to being a squeak, and turn to see that *Virgil* is sitting against the stone wall beside the large container that holds the crickets. His knees are pulled up, showing off his long legs, and he wears the same black jacket he’d worn yesterday.

Again, my eyes are drawn to the tattoos on his knuckles, and when my eyes reach his face, I find his gaze already on mine. As if he’d been waiting for me to look at him.

Vulcan wanders over instantly and sits down beside him, bathing his hands in affectionate licks.

“What? No. *God*, no,” I assure him. “I’m just here to watch the storm.” It’s weird that he’s out here too, but I drag over a plastic chair close enough to the edge of the overhang that I can see part of the sky, but not close enough to get more than occasionally sprinkled with water.

Argus lays at my feet, having no urge to join his friend in showing affection to the camper.

Absently, Virgil’s hand goes to Vulcan’s ears, and I marvel again at how Vulcan’s affection for the man seems to have doubled overnight.

Maybe he’s just a dog person? Since animals can supposedly sense that kind of thing, I suppose I shouldn’t be surprised.

“I like storms,” he admits. “Sometimes. But not when I’d planned on going out on the lake.” He gives me a quick, wry smile that doesn’t reach his eyes as I watch him.

“Why are you back here?” I ask finally. “Is that your truck out front?” I’ve seen his truck before, sure. But jumping to conclusions seems rude.

“That’s my truck,” he assures me. “And I’m back *here* because I don’t feel like going out in the rain.”

“But if you get in your truck, that’s like twenty steps *max* in the rain,” I point out.

“The *torrential downpour*, you mean.”

“Sure, yeah. Anyway... Twenty steps, then maybe five more when you get to the cabin before you’re covered by the roof of the deck. And you could be back in your cabin in minutes. And you’d only spend what? Twenty-five steps in the rain?” I raise my brows, still not understanding why he’s *here*, of all places.

“You seem really sure of that number,” Virgil replies after a minute or so. “Want to go with me to see if you’re right? My

legs are longer than yours, so it may only take me twenty-one.”

“What makes you think I haven’t already counted?”

“Oh? To *my* cabin? Have you been there often?”

“I work here, don’t I?” I hold his gaze with my own mismatched eyes until he looks away, a grin curling over his full lips.

“Adorable,” he says at last, and I’m glad he’s not looking at me because I can feel myself heat up, and I’m sure I’m turning red.

“So, why are you here?” I prompt, reminding him of my other question.

“Maybe I really needed crickets.”

“Maybe you don’t look anything like a fisherman who *does*.” While he had me a little tongue-tied yesterday, that’s worn off enough that I don’t mind speaking my mind to him. It’s not like he’s more than a stranger to me, anyway. And in nine days, he’ll pack up, leave, and I’ll never see him again. There’s no point or need in acting like something I’m not, even to get his attention.

“You’re so *harsh*, Sloane.” He looks up at me again, and when he does, there’s something in his gaze that goads and dares me to go on. “Are you like this with all the boys who sit next to the crickets?”

The way he says it catches me off guard enough that I have to work to hide my grin, but when his eyes shine with triumph, I know that I’ve failed.

“Most of the boys around here *don’t* sit with the crickets. And the ones that do never want to talk to me,” I point out finally.

“Their loss. You’re more charming than all the crickets in all the buckets in all the world.” It’s such a stupid, strange thing to say, and I don’t know how to take it.

“You don’t look like someone who goes camping a lot,” I say finally, dragging a foot up to rest my heel on the plastic of

the chair under me. “No offense.”

“Some taken,” he admits. “Why don’t I look like a camper?”

I gesture at him, but he only stares at me and says, “Use your words for me, won’t you, Sloane?”

A tremor goes down my spine when he says my name, because it really shouldn’t be that hot to hear it on his lips. It’s unfair, quite frankly. And I’d like a refund.

“You’re too *fancy* to go camping. You look like you paid too much for those jeans to get them dirty here. And your boat is way nicer than most people who come here.”

“Well, I’m not exactly tent camping,” he points out.

“Right, but you look like someone who owns a huge-ass house around here, not someone who comes here with his dad-vest and fishing gear, okay?” I don’t know how to explain it better than that, and I frown at him. “You get what I mean?”

“I guess. But I’m a little offended by it. I *like* camping. One of my best friends is really attached to this campground north of Akron, actually. Camp Crystal Pond. He’s even *named* after it, so we used to go there all the time.” Virgil chuckles. “I probably have a lot more camping experience than you think I do. Even of the tent-variety.”

“Uh-huh.” It isn’t that I don’t believe him, and I’m absolutely going to look up Camp Crystal Pond later if I remember. Just to see if it exists.

He looks at me again from under his long lashes. “Careful with all that derision,” he warns, his grin still friendly. “You might hurt my feelings.”

“I’ll try to spare them,” I assure him.

“Good. If not, I’d have to put you in one of my articles, and I might not paint you in a very flattering light.”

That catches me off guard, and I take a moment before asking, “What?”

“I’m a reporter.” He leans his head back against the stone. “A crime reporter, normally. The *murder* kind.”

“That’s incredibly morbid.”

“You have a problem with morbid?”

“No, no. Not at all. I like the *Hostel* movies just as much as the next gore-enthusiast,” I assure him with complete honesty.

His smile seems to take him off guard, and he reaches up a hand to cover it until he can get control of himself again. “Which is your favorite?”

“Two, obviously. There’s literally no other right answer.”

“Fair. But I only like it because of the modern Lady Bathory scene.”

It takes me a moment to remember, and I curl my nose in disgust. “Oh yeah? Are you taking notes on how to bathe in the blood of virgins to maintain your silky smooth skin?”

“I’m taking notes on how to build a bathtub big enough to do so,” Virgil corrects. “Why do you like it?”

“Because the girl becomes the killer without much hesitation,” I say quickly, not having to think about my answer. I find his gaze as I continue, the rain pounding on the roof above us with no sign of stopping. “When she’s faced with dying or having to join them, she doesn’t even try to be the better person. I really like that in someone who’s trying to get out of a bad situation. Moral high ground is for the privileged, you know?”

“Does that mean you’d cut off a guy’s junk and toss it to a dog if you needed to survive?” Virgil asks, eyes dancing.

“Well, obviously,” I snort. “Why do you think I have two German Shepherds with me all the time?” It’s a joke, but the way he looks at me makes me think that he takes it as something more, and I don’t know how to respond except to chuckle at my own words like they were basically an empty promise anyway.

6

“I am *not* letting you out at three a.m. tonight,” I say, staring into Vulcan’s dark eyes as the dog pants happily. Both he and Argus are on the couch for once, and I don’t plan on letting them into the bedroom for at least a little while. Not when they’ll be all over the bed, and I want to use the bed for more than just sleeping.

Thunder rolls in the distance, signaling the arrival of another spring storm. It probably won’t be as bad as the one earlier today, but it’s not like I mind or anything.

“You’ve both gone out. You’re fine. If you try me *one more time* this week, I’m pulling out your leash,” I assure him. Behind him, on the other end of the couch, Argus thumps his tail like it’s him I’m talking to instead of Vulcan.

Finally, I stand, knowing that my dogs have no idea what I’m talking about, and give them both a quick scratch on their noses. Argus goes to move, but I murmur a quick ‘stay’ and go into my room, shutting the door behind me.

Somehow, instead of watching some stupid drama, or even a bloody, gross gore movie like I’d thought I would, I ended up sitting on my bed, laptop open and navigating back to one of my favorite porn videos. I hadn’t *meant* to. Really, it just happened. But it’s not like anyone else is here, and when I spent the last part of my night reading reverse harem by the fire outside, I guess I can’t be too surprised that I want to do something other than *sleep*.

With all the lights off except for the one between my bed and the open window where only a screen separates me from the approaching storm, I fall back onto the bed with a sigh, my laptop beside me as I click play to finish the last of the video.

Again, I'm oh-so-grateful that my cabin is in the middle of nowhere, and I don't need to worry about not making any kind of noise. I shimmy out of my shorts and reach into the drawer beside the bed, stomach clenching as I tap the end of the small vibrator a few times to make sure it's charged.

I've learned the hard way that toys can and *will* die at the absolute worst time if you try to play fast and loose with them, so I avoid that whenever possible. There's nothing worse in the world than a vibrator dying *right* before an orgasm; I've come to learn. Literally *nothing worse*.

As the video ends, I close my laptop and shove it away, drawing my small vibrator down my body to tease at my clit. With my shorts off, I feel incredibly exposed, even though it's just me in my bedroom, and I shiver as I let my thighs fall to either side with a soft sigh.

Unfortunately, I'm not good at teasing myself. Within a few seconds, my vibrator is against my clit, and I circle it lightly, loving the almost-too-intense feeling of the vibration there. A soft sound leaves me, and I reach my other hand up to palm my breast, fingers teasing at my nipple.

This is when I wish I had a partner. At least a little bit. While I love my toys, and I know my own body extremely well, it's hard to keep doing more than one thing like I want to when it's just me here.

But I manage. My eyes slide closed as I run my vibrator up and down my slit, dipping it just inside my body and causing my stomach to twist in excitement before dragging it up to my clit again. I have a bigger toy, which I reach out and grab from the drawer, then place it under my pillow so that it's easier to reach, but I'm definitely going to take a few more minutes with just this one. Otherwise, this will be over way sooner than I want it to be, since I don't know how to deny chasing my

release as quickly as I can. Another thing I miss about having a partner.

Then I lift my t-shirt, exposing my breasts to the cool air of the cabin while the sounds from the woods fill my ears instead of the sound of what I've been watching. I *like* feeling vulnerable and exposed. I enjoy the way the air prickles my skin and how it feels almost dangerous to lie here with my legs spread, like I'm inviting someone to join in.

Don't you dare, I tell my brain when it starts to conjure up Virgil's gorgeous face and what he might look like without his jacket. Is the idea of him pressing my thighs apart and kneeling between them, cock hard as he promises to fuck me a *very* enticing picture? Yeah. But I'm not sure it's what I want right now. At least not until he's checked out, and I don't have to see him during the day and talk to him.

"Fuck," I whisper, half-heartedly against my pillow as I circle my clit with my vibrator again. I open my eyes to look out the window, and this time I refuse to let my gaze find any sign of movement that'll ruin this for me.

Though, my phone ringing from the other room does just as good of a job.

I turn off the vibrator and groan loudly, not wanting to move from the bed. Surely this is a joke. My phone isn't *really* ringing. It's past midnight, so there's no way it's anything work-related.

Though it could be stepdad-related.

In the end, I decide to just not answer it. I can say I was asleep if it's something important, though I'm sure it's just spam.

The ringing stops, and I sigh, ready to go back to what I was doing.

Until it starts ringing *again*.

Sneering a few choice, four-letter words to myself, I yank my t-shirt back down over my breasts and get up, my vibrator joining the one under my pillow as I go to the door and pull it

open. Both dogs are on the sofa still, and I can hear Argus's light snores while my phone continues to ring on the end table.

I shouldn't have left it in here. I hadn't meant to, either. But it sits on the end table across from the TV, the screen lighting up continuously as if to insult me.

In three strides, I'm across the room and answering the phone with an aggressively unhappy, "*What?*" Whether it's spam or my stepdad, this greeting is appropriate.

Instead, I get nothing. The only noises are the fan that I've had going for a few days now and the sound of thunder from outside. There's nothing, and when I look at the screen, I find it says *Blocked Caller*.

"Anthony, is that you?" I snap, using my stepdad's name. "I swear to *fucking God*, if that's you, I'm going to flip out."

There's a sound like a whisper; then the phone goes dead.

Is that a confirmation that it was my stepdad? In my mind, it absolutely is. I feel vindicated and irritated, and when I look down, I find both dogs have their eyes on me, though Vulcan's ears are pricked like he's listening for something.

"You're not going out," I tell him. "At least not now." My happy feelings aren't *completely* ruined, and I'm going to salvage what I can of this, even if the end result is less than satisfying.

Quickly, I stomp back to my room, this time depositing my phone on the dresser by the door. My alarm is set for seven, and if it's there, then at least I'll have to physically get up to grab it. Plus, I'll still have to get up to let the dogs in, so if I need to, I'll grab it then. While I'm up, I move the laptop from the bed to the dresser closest to the door, and then I'm home-free. I fall onto the bed again and groan, eyes closed as I flex my fingers and try to shake the irritation out of my brain.

I'm going to make the best of this, damn it. I lift my hand, reaching for the vibrators that I'd put under my pillow. They're right where I'd left them, and I sigh as I grab my bullet once more, eyes closing as I turn it on and let my thighs fall open again. My free hand rucks up my t-shirt, and I roll

my nipple between my fingers while I tease myself, absently looking towards the window.

Something's not quite right. The thought isn't enough to distract me. It's not enough to make me stop, but the longer I stare at the trees beyond the screen, the more I see that something's different.

The trees are clearer. They should be blurry behind the screen, but instead, they're *clear*, like the screen has completely vanished.

But that doesn't make any sense.

Suddenly something curls around my ankle, startling me, but when I jerk, I find I can't move. I look down, my stomach clenching, and as I watch, a white mask comes into view as the person who'd been *under my bed* stands up, still holding onto my calf.

I drop the bullet instantly and try to pull away, a shriek leaving me. The rain picks that moment to pick up until it's splattering the roof and drowning out the noises of the crickets and frogs.

"You can go on and scream if you want, princess," the person says, resting one knee between my thighs on the bed. "I don't think anyone is going to hear you." I start to move, but he lunges forward, quick as a snake, until he can grip my throat and pin me in place with one leather-gloved hand. It gives me the unfortunate opportunity to see that the man is dressed all in black, with straps around the thighs of his black pants and a cowl over his shoulders and head that ends with a white mask, its slanted eyes large and almost comical staring me down.

"Oh my god," I gasp and look at the closed door again. The dogs can't get in here. And my phone is over there as well. "Oh, my god... Please—" I don't know what to do or say. I feel frozen and *trapped*. I feel stupid and terrified all at once; because of all the ways I've pictured myself going out, a *masked campground serial killer* has never come into play.

“Not quite,” the man purrs, his tone husky and smooth. In any other circumstance, I would *die* just to hear more of that voice. But tonight, I’d rather be anywhere but here. “Are you sure you don’t want to scream?”

“Are you going to kill me?” I gasp, hands flying up to try to pry his fingers off my throat in a belated move for survival. He isn’t pressing or choking. He’s just holding me here when he could be doing much worse.

Though frankly, it’s not that comforting.

The masked man tilts his head to the side, and I wonder if he’s smiling behind the white visage. “No,” he says after a moment, the word a soft growl. “I *was*,” he goes on. And when I whimper, he brings his other hand up to cup my jaw. “*Shhh*. I *was*, I think. But I’m not going to kill you. I’m not going to hurt you, either.”

“I don’t believe you.” I don’t mean to say it, but the words slip out, anyway. Since apparently, any sense of self-preservation I’ve ever had has gone out the window.

He chuckles softly in amusement and brushes his thumb over my lip. “I could’ve killed you a thousand times over,” he points out. “And not just tonight. Think about that.”

I don’t want to, so I just stare at him instead.

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he repeats. “But I *really* want what you’ve been offering me for the last couple of nights.”

“Offering...you?” I ask, completely unaware of what he means, no matter how much I scour my brain for the answer. Am I stupid? Have I been sending out pen pal letters in my sleep, offering something stupid to inmates or serial killers? Or maybe *he’s* just the crazy one. Yeah, that seems more likely.

“You’re such a tease,” he states, the hand on my face moving so he can skim his fingers down the front of my body. He catches the hem of my shirt and raises it, and suddenly I’m uncomfortably aware of his thigh pressed between mine. “I think you meant to be. What normal girl changes right in front of the window when she can’t see what’s outside?”

“It’s the woods,” I point out, unsure why I’m arguing with him. I catch his hand before he can lift my shirt over my breasts, and he lets me stop him. “There isn’t... There shouldn’t be anything in the woods.”

“I’ve been in the woods,” he points out. “Right outside your window. I thought you saw me that first night. But then you came in here and you got undressed right there.” He lets out a sigh and twists his hand until he can twine his fingers with mine. It’s surprisingly sweet and terrifying all at once.

“Tell me to stop,” he invites. “Tell me you don’t want me to give you what you want. I’m *not* going to hurt you, princess. I’ll leave, and you can pretend this was just a nightmare.”

“I...” With my heart pounding out a staccato rhythm in my chest that urges me on and fear making my fingers shake, I *absolutely* should tell him to leave. “Would you really leave? You’re not lying to me just so I trust you, and you can stab me?”

“I’ll really leave,” he promises. “But you’ll have to trust me on my word.”

“I have no reason *to* trust you,” I point out breathily, wishing I could sit up and think more clearly. “You broke into my cabin! I don’t even know who you are.”

“And you’re not going to,” the man continues. “My mask stays on. I want to play with you on my terms, princess. And my terms only. But I’m giving you a choice in that. Shall I stay, or shall I go?”

I need to tell him to leave. This is insane, like a dirty dream gone wrong, and the storm outside is making everything so much worse as thunder pounds in my brain like a drum.

He needs to leave.

If he really will.

“How do you know I’d even *consider* letting you stay?” I whisper when I should be screaming for him to leave. He’s right that no one will hear me, though. And that thought is terrifying enough on its own.

The stranger's head tilts to the side. He lets go of my shirt and splays his hand against my stomach, moving it down until it rests just above the apex of my thighs. "Do you really want me to answer that for you?" he asks in an amused, almost-snicker.

Well, no. Not really. My thighs are still shaking, but curiosity and some kind of sick desire is warring with the fear in my chest.

I need to make him leave.

"It's so *hard*, isn't it," he goads, his hand above my thighs pressing against my skin. "It's so difficult when you know you should make me leave. I'm a monster, you know." I shudder, and his hand tightens slightly around my throat. "That's right, princess. I'm a really bad guy. And you can't tell me to stay, because what would that make you? A monster's plaything?"

It would be great if he could stop talking. It's hard to make the decision I know I need to make with his voice in my ears.

"How about this, sweet girl?" His hand drifts between my thighs until I feel the leather of his glove against my slit. "I won't make you say out loud that you're interested in what this monster has to offer you. Not this time. I'll let you tell me when you want me to stop. That's all you have to say. Just one word, and I'll be right back out that window before you can take another breath."

"Do you promise?" I hate the softness of my voice. I hate the way I feel like I'm asking for his approval.

"I don't make promises," he tells me. "But just this once, just for you, I'll make an exception, my little princess."

I look into the black eyes of his mask, lips pressed together, and whatever he sees in my face must give them the permission he seeks. His fingers sink into me, the leather sliding smoothly into my pussy as he leans over me and puts the smallest hint of pressure on my throat.

"That's a good girl," he praises. "I wasn't going to break in tonight." He pulls his fingers free as he speaks, and all I can

think to do is stare at him. “But you had to play dirty, didn’t you? Like you knew I’d be unable to resist.”

I gasp, hips arching, as the bullet I’d dropped finds my clit. It’s still on its middle setting, and I arch my hips as he teases me with it, the hand on my throat leaving so that he can push my hips back to the bed.

“I didn’t know—”

“I think you knew,” he goes on, humming the words. “You *invited* me to come on in, you know? When you turned that light on and spread your thighs so that I could see. Then when you showed me these...” He lifts my shirt, and this time I let him until my breasts spill free. “Like you were *begging* me to come play with you. You were even so kind as to get yourself so wet for me. But I would’ve done that for you, princess.” He kneads my breast in his hand harder than I had, the leather of his gloves warm and smooth against my skin. “You didn’t need to do any of this work for me. You could’ve just opened the window and got on the bed, and I would’ve done it all for you. Take your shirt off for me.”

I lift up just enough so I can follow his instructions, and when I look up at him in the dim light, I can’t help but feel like he’s taking in the length of my body and all of my pale skin.

“Good girl,” he praises, making my stomach twist. My thighs clench, and I can’t help the way my hips jump just a little bit. “You like that, don’t you? I knew you would. I knew how much you’d love it when I praised you. Will you earn more from me? I won’t give it to you so easily now that I know you like it.”

“I’m absolutely sure I don’t know what you mean,” I breathe, my voice barely above a whisper.

“Oh, is that how we’re going to play this? Are you going to make *me* work for every little sound, every admittance from you? If you think I don’t have the time or the desire to absolutely take you apart, I can assure you that you’re gravely mistaken, princess.”

It's the sweetest kind of threat I've ever heard.

“Or maybe you think that if you act like a little brat, that I'll get so frustrated I'll have to fuck you. Is that it? You want this stranger to just come in here and fuck this slutty pussy of yours?” I start to answer, but he reaches up to press his thumb against my lips. “*Shh*. I wasn't really asking. And I'm *not* going to fuck you. Not tonight. I don't think you want it bad enough.”

When I make a soft sound of question, he chuckles. “You'll still enjoy everything I do to you, I promise. Though you don't get my cock tonight, princess. But that's okay. You've made sure I have *plenty* to work with.” Something smooth and cool slides against my entrance when the bullet leaves my clit, and it takes me a few seconds to realize he's grabbed one of my other, larger toys from the drawer beside me.

I don't have time to say anything. Not that I'm sure what I would say. He slides the large toy into me until it's as deep as it can go, prompting me to gasp and arch into his grip.

“Do you always get this wet so easily?” the stranger whispers. “Or is it just because you love it when I play with you so much?” His thumb encircles my clit again, and he teases me while letting the large toy just rest inside of me without even turning it on. “That's not rhetorical, princess,” he adds, his other hand pinching my nipple suddenly. “Which are you? A horny little slut, or do you just love having a masked stranger come in and play with your pussy that much?”

It doesn't feel like there's a right answer. I writhe, my hands going to his wrist as he switches to tease my other nipple. “I'm not a slut,” I say finally, but that's not a real answer.

He shoves me down when I start to sit up. “Hands over your head. You can grip the headboard, princess.” He waits until I do what he says. My fingers tangle in the pillowcase over my head as I watch him as well as I can. “If you're not a little slut, then that means you're the second one, right?” He uses both of his thighs to press mine apart, and when his hand

presses against my stomach, I'm effectively trapped. I can't do anything other than gasp and jerk my hips when he turns on the toy inside me as high as it'll go.

"That means you *love* this, princess. It means that I could've come in here whenever I wanted and done *everything* I've wanted to do these last few nights. You were never going to stop me, were you?" If he expects an answer, he doesn't give me time to do so. He pumps the toy in and out of me, pushing it as deep as it'll go before dragging it back out. "That's fine," he adds, and a few moments later, the bullet is teasing my clit again. He holds both toys in one hand as he fucks me, still managing to hit both my clit and the inside of my pussy perfectly, like he's practiced it. "That's more than fine, actually. Because I don't want you to be like this for just anyone." His movement picks up, and his hand on my stomach presses me down harder so that I really can't go anywhere. "You'd better be like this just for *me*. You got that, princess?"

I don't have much of anything, honestly, except for a brain and body full of pleasure as he fucks me better than I ever have with my toys. All I can focus on is not screaming right now and keeping my hands fisted in the blankets above me.

"*You got that?*" he snarls, face closer to mine than I expected it to be.

"Yes!" I gasp, opening my eyes that I hadn't known I'd closed.

"Then come for me. Right now. You can do it. Come for me, all over your toys and my hand. *Don't make me tell you again.*"

Before the last words leave his lips, I'm coming, my body arching off the bed as I finally *do* scream, though it's not with fear but mind-blowing pleasure. My toes curl, and I close my eyes again as he teases me through my orgasm, reducing me to a Sloane-shaped puddle on the mattress.

God, I need a minute, or an hour, just for my brain to process what's going on. I'm pretty sure I've never come so hard in my life, and I'm grateful when he turns off both toys,

though he keeps the larger one inside me and tosses the bullet onto the bed.

“Holy fuck,” I mutter, throwing my head back and taking a deep, shuddering breath. With my eyes closed, I find myself spacing out, and I could probably fall asleep right now if there wasn’t a masked psycho running his gloved hand up my body between my breasts.

“Don’t get too comfortable, princess,” he purrs, hand going to my throat again. “We’re not done yet.”

My eyes fly open, and I look into the black eyes of his mask, but when I try to sit up, he pushes me back down with the hand on my throat and straddles my waist. “*What?*” I demand like he’s going to pull a knife and murder me anyway.

The stranger chuckles as he keeps me on the bed with his weight and his hand on my throat. “Don’t look at me like that. You’ve spent the last three nights teasing me. I deserve at least another hour with your pretty body. Especially your sweet pussy. Don’t you think that’s fair?” When I start to answer, his other hand covers my mouth once more. “*That* was a rhetorical question,” he says. “The only things you’re allowed to say are yes, harder, please, and more.”

A part of me wants to believe that everything that happened during the night was a fever dream. That no one broke in through the now-replaced screen. That a masked man *didn't* give me the best orgasms of my life before slipping back out the way he'd come.

He'd never fucked me, though. I'm pretty sure I begged for it at some point, but the stranger had just chuckled and told me I didn't want it bad enough. *Which was super fucking rude, honestly.*

A dog whines and I let out a sigh as one of them paws at the closed door of the bedroom. Dang it. They've both been out in the main room of the cabin all night instead of in here with me like they usually are.

Slowly I stand, stretching, and when I glance at the window once more, I see that not only has the screen been replaced, the curtain has been drawn. I sure as hell didn't do that. Not to mention, I'm not even sure when my new friend left. Had I passed out by then?

It seems pretty likely.

Quickly, I pull on my clothes for the day, dressing in black leggings, a long pink tee, and my light zip-up hoodie with the thumb holes. With the storm yesterday, and the one last night, there's a good chance I'll be cleaning up debris. I'd rather not do that in shorts.

After I toe on my shoes, I go to the window and reach my hand up to grip the curtain, hesitating as I do.

But I'm really not going to let him dictate what I do with my window. I yank the curtain open and stare out into the woods, scanning the trees for any sign of his white mask or any kind of movement at all.

My eyes find nothing, however. Whether he's there and I just can't see him, or he has a life during the day, I don't see anyone in my woods waiting to see what I do with my curtain.

"What the actual fuck..." I mumble, not genuinely asking the question, but also, *what the fuck?* Part of me is absolutely willing to believe this was a fever dream because who does that? Better yet, who *has this happen to them?*

Outside of a movie, anyway. And most horror movies I've seen definitely don't go the same way my night did.

Opening the door, I'm not surprised when both dogs barrel inside, Vulcan's nose going to the ground while Argus launches himself up to my chest and pushes me back a step. He whines and licks my face, his tail wagging as he sniffs me for any damage or change.

"I'm okay," I promise him, kissing his nose loudly. "Argus, I'm okay, I promise." I almost wasn't okay, maybe? But what matters is that I'm fine now.

"Do you guys want a snick-snack?" I ask, baby-talking to my adult, fully grown, highly trained canines. Both of them look up at the word, and Argus drops down to stand in front of me, wiggling his butt at the implication of food.

"Let's go get a snick-snack." They follow me out into the kitchen, and I grab the bag of large chews off the counter. It's a new bag, thankfully, since the two of them can go through a bag in a week, and I give both dogs a large treat before going to the door and opening it into the overcast morning.

Rain drips audibly through the trees as I step outside, the dogs following and then wandering off to do their morning routine of sniff, pee, sniff.

I can't help but walk around to the back of the cabin, gazing at the screen and into my room, where I can clearly see my bed. I take a few steps back, only stopping when I'm at the

edge of the trees and then a few more until I'm just in the woods.

How close had the masked stranger been? How long had he stayed, looking in my window for the past few nights? It's unfathomable to me that someone could just *be* here like this, especially in the middle of nowhere, but I suppose that in itself makes the feat easier for him.

My phone goes off in my hoodie pocket, making me lurch in surprise and nearly trip over a root as I stumble back down to the flatter ground around the cabin. "Hello?" I ask the phone once I put it to my ear. I hadn't bothered to check who it was, so it really could be just about anyone, and here I am, just answering the phone without any kind of caution.

"Oh good, you're up." Sam lets out a long sigh. *"As we thought, two-fourteen got hit again. But we're going to take care of that. Can you go along the ridge and check out all the campers there? Most of 'em aren't here this week, and I worry. Then check the lodge back there too. The beach probably looks like shit, so just take a picture for me..."* she trails off, sounding worn out even though it's barely seven-thirty in the morning.

"Do you still want me to go up to Highland and the streets up there?" I ask, wondering if that plan has changed.

"Nah. But go up the hill behind the House. I know it's mostly temporaries for the week, but I'd like to make sure there's nothing blocking the road or anything. Okay?"

"No problem," I agree, whistling, so the dogs stop wandering and start following me down the incline towards the main area of the campground. "I'm just leaving the cabin, so I'll be just a few minutes before I get there."

Sam chuckles. *"When are you going to pick up the keys to one of the golf carts and just start driving those?"*

I shudder. "I don't think I'm the golf cart type," I tell her with a snicker in my voice. "Besides, can you see Vulcan *actually* riding in one of them?" Argus, of course, would have no issue laying wherever I put him, even if that were on a golf

cart, but I'd be lucky if Vulcan didn't climb up to the roof and bay his displeasure to the hills.

She snorts. "*All right. See you when I see you.*" She hangs up, and I shove the phone into my pocket, my strides lengthening so that I can feel the full privilege of being almost five-foot-nine.

Minutes pass, and I duck into the House for only a moment, just long enough to make sure Sam's niece is working at the counter. She glances up from her phone and shoots me a tired smile, waving as she does.

"Hey," I call, pouring myself a blue-raspberry slushie. "You okay?"

"I'm just tired," she croaks, sounding like she's been awake for the last ten years instead of, most likely, an hour. "How do you get up this early every day?"

"Long practice and having dogs who *want* to be up this early," I tell her, flashing her a quick smile on my way back out. "See you later."

"Later." She goes back to her phone before I'm even out the door. Not that Sam or Pat really care. They only have her work when it's dead, or they're not expecting people to check in or out. Given that it's Wednesday, I can absolutely see their reasoning for having her here today.

I round the side of the House on the opposite side from where I came from; the dogs are ranging around the area, when I see Vulcan suddenly turn, his ears perk and his tail wagging. He's not looking at me, however, and I follow his gaze to see *Virgil* walking up from the dock, dressed in jeans and a short-sleeved tee that shows off more of the black tattoos that climb his arm from his fingers.

When Vulcan meets him at the top of the sidewalk, he grins, one hand going out to scratch my dog's ears as his eyes unerringly find my face.

I don't say anything. Instead, I suck on the straw of the slushie, my cheeks half hollowed as I gaze at him and wait for him to speak.

But he takes a moment, appraising my expression, and looks back down at Vulcan before he *does* say something. “You’re a *good boy*,” he tells my dog like they’re old friends. “You make me miss my dog.”

“You have a dog?” I ask, surprised he hasn’t brought it with him.

“Nah, not anymore.” His eyes flick back to mine. “My friend has a couple of cats, but I don’t have any pets right now. You make me want to change that.”

Argus sits down beside me, and I reach down to give him the same flavor of attention that Vulcan is getting.

“Good morning, by the way,” he adds when I don’t say anything else.

“Good morning.” I look down at the dock and pinpoint his shiny red and white boat instantly. “Were you out fishing?”

“Just out on the lake,” he shrugs. “I like it better when it’s not so crowded in the morning. The storms are clearing up for the day, so I’m sure in a few hours, it’ll be packed out there.”

He’s not wrong, from my experience.

“Did you see any storm damage?” I keep my tone conversational, and I try to hide the way my eyes go back to the tattoos around his arm that are obscured just enough by him standing there that I can’t tell what they are. Especially the one on his hand that looks like it wraps around his wrist and ends somewhere near the base of his ring finger.

“It’s a snake,” he replies, most certainly not answering my question.

My eyes flick up to his, bemusement making me tilt my head. “What?”

“My tattoo that you’re staring at.” He approaches me, one hand out in front of him to show me the snake tattoo that wraps around his wrist. “See?”

Oh.

“Did it hurt?” I want to reach out and touch it, to trace the pattern of scales that end on his forearm.

“Not really. The ones on my chest did when the needle went across my collarbone. But other than that, they weren’t bad either.”

Unbidden, my eyes flick up to the dark gray of his tee, and I almost wish I could see through the fabric to see the tattoo underneath.

I also want to see what he’d do if I asked him to show me, but based on the unpredictability of our conversations, he really might.

But would that be such a bad thing?

“You look tired,” Virgil continues, dropping his hand to his side. “Long night? Did the storm keep you up?”

“Boring night,” I reply, not looking up at his face as I take another long drink of my slushie. “I couldn’t fall asleep, but nothing really happened.”

“Yeah?” he chuckles. “I like storms, but the one last night was something else. I was up in the loft all night wondering if my cabin was going to get blown away.”

I snort and look up at his face finally, surprised that we’re not more than four inches apart in height. He’s about six-foot, but just barely, and I’m close enough to eye level that I can easily see the gold flecks in his hazel eyes.

“I like them too,” I admit. “And you actually slept in the *loft*? Those beds are tiny.”

“They’re not so bad. Not like there’s anyone other than me.”

“You’re too tall for them.”

“I scrunched.”

The stupid response makes me snort out a laugh, and I cover my mouth to try to lessen the collateral damage of nearly spitting out my slushie. Forcibly I swallow, lessening the chance of coughing all over his shirt, but keep my mouth

covered for a few more seconds until I'm sure I can control myself.

Virgil grins at me, waiting for me to recover, and thankfully doesn't say anything about it. "Where are you going?" he asks, letting Vulcan push between us so that the man is forced to pay attention to him.

It distracts me from the question, and I look down at my dog in confusion. "I don't get it," I tell him. "Vulcan is weird about strangers. Obviously, he likes you, but this is next level. Did you sneak him some peanut butter while I wasn't looking or something?"

"Why peanut butter?" He scratches the dog's chin, making faces at him like Vulcan's a baby. Though I can't criticize when I'm just as guilty of babying the dogs.

"He loves peanut butter. I can't figure out why else he'd be so in love with you." I shrug my shoulders and take a few steps back, glancing toward the ridge that overlooks the lake and is lined with campers. "Anyway, I gotta go. I have to check for storm damage to the campers along the road."

"Can I come?" He asks it so smoothly and without any kind of hesitation that I'm caught off guard by the request.

"Sure?" I mean to tell him no. He does not need to go walking around the campground looking for damage with me, but instead, what comes out is "*sure*."

What the fuck, brain-to-mouth filter?

"Oh, wow. I thought you'd say no."

"Well, if you don't want to go—"

His smile is wicked, and he cuts me off with a chuckle. "I wouldn't have asked if I didn't, Sloane."

The way he says my name is always such a nice thing to hear. I blink up at him and shrug one shoulder, not wanting to look *too* enthused. "Hope you like picking up trees," I tell him and set off down the ridge.

"I don't," he says cheerfully. "But I kind of like you, so picking up the trees is worth suffering through."

I nearly trip over my own feet at that and turn to glance at him over my shoulder as he catches up to walk beside me. “You’re so weird,” I say, unable to think of anything else that doesn’t involve me staring at him and slurping my slushie like an awkward teenager.

“Oh, I *know*,” he agrees enthusiastically. “But as it turns out, I’m starting to think you *like it* a little bit, don’t you?”

8

By the time Virgil is back wherever the hell he goes when he's not spoiling Vulcan, and I'm done cleaning up the mess from the storm, it's late afternoon and I'm ready for food. And sleep, but mostly food.

When I do eat, it's at my cabin, with the campfire going, and the heat from it washes over my bare legs as I sit in a camp chair and stare up at the sky. Having cleaned up and changed a few hours ago, I'm glad I'm in my shorts and t-shirt while sitting this close to the fire. The storms have rolled past for now, and it'll be days before it storms again, according to the weatherman. For now, I can see the stars as the crickets and frogs sing in the woods, filling my ears along with the sounds of the crackling campfire.

I still haven't called my mom. During the day it's easy to forget about my stepfather calling me. It's easy to be only distantly upset, unsure, and to hold on to the idea that I need to call Mom, *eventually*. It's not like I can call her while I'm dragging limbs out of the road, after all. Or while I'm ankle-deep in the mud trying to move debris out of the path to the playground.

But right now, when it's just me and the campfire and my dogs, it's impossible to feel anything but guilty for not getting that one thing done. She deserves to know. Even though it raises panic in my chest to think about dealing with it or what will come of things, I *need* to call her and get it done.

At my side, Argus flops over with a sigh, staring up at me for a moment as if he can sense the invisible black clouds that

hang over me as I lose myself deeper and deeper in thought.

It didn't help that I'd come back to the cabin after work and promptly fell asleep. After last night and the work I'd done with Virgil at my side today, all I'd wanted to do was nap. And that nap turned into a five-hour sleep session that will probably keep me up all night. Even now, it's nearly midnight, and I couldn't be more wired than I am, though my slack pose is anything but.

Of course, it doesn't help that I'm hyper-aware of the woods around me. Is my masked stranger out there biding his time as he watches me sit by the fire? Maybe he'll kill me tonight, instead.

The thought makes me shudder with the barely repressed fear and anticipation that courses through my body, warring with the bad feelings my stepfather calling has left behind like a bitter aftertaste.

Or maybe the stranger is bored of me after last night, and he's gone to find some other girl to stalk. I can't imagine I'm *that* interesting to warrant a second visit. Though I'm still unsure what I did to merit the first.

"You guys were a big help last night," I murmur to the dogs, sitting up finally to stare into the fire that's died down considerably over the last hour. "Couldn't even tell me he was coming?"

In response, Vulcan gets up and heads behind the cabin, padding on steady paws into the woods .

Since I'm out here, I'm not worried. I'll hear him if he tries to take off after anything, and even though he's been going into the woods more, he still isn't trying to run *away*. As per usual, Argus couldn't care less. He lets out another groan, and I reach down to lightly toy with his ears, making them twitch a few times before he lifts a paw to rub them and chase my hand away.

"Sorry," I chuckle, getting to my feet and poking the fire to settle it. It's almost out, and it takes me only a few minutes of

work and a gallon of water to have the fire completely gone and cool enough that I don't mind getting up and leaving it.

"Vulc?" I call, still able to hear the dog behind the cabin, just at the edge of the woods. He comes back to me, tail wagging, and lets me give him a quick chin rub before he goes to the door and waits. It's an easily readable sign from him that he's ready to go in, and I guess I am too. I might as well be, anyway. I can at least binge some bad TV before I go to sleep, though I'm sure I'll end up falling asleep on the couch tonight instead of the bed.

Should I just get naked and go sprawl on the bed? Just in case?

Absolutely not, I reprimand my brain. *You are not asking for it like that.*

Though I'm not sure why not, since last night had been *literally* the best sex of my life, even though my masked stranger had never touched me skin-to-skin. *Or* actually fucked me.

Checking the fire once more, I walk to the door and push it open, allowing the dogs to spill inside and go immediately to the couch as if telling me that it's their bed for the night instead of mine.

"I could push you off," I remind them, closing the door behind me. I probably will push them off too, but at the moment, I smell too much like smoke to do anything other than change.

On instinct, when I walk into my room, I look at the window that faces the woods. The screen is still completely in place, making me sigh in relief.

Relief, and totally not disappointment.

I *will not* be disappointed over the absence of a murderer in my cabin who may or may not see through on his promise of not killing me if he shows up again.

Just to be safe, and because I'm absolutely asking for it at this point, I get on my knees and flip the comforter up from the floor, peering under it and using the light from the room to

make sure there's no one under there waiting to drag me under or loom over me when I go to bed.

It, too, is free of strangers. Masked or otherwise.

With a groan, I push myself to my feet and chuck my phone onto the dresser by the door. Since I *am* alone, there's no point in doing anything other than going right back to my couch and letting myself drift into a half-vegetative state for the rest of the night. Just because I'm not tired doesn't mean I won't be able to pass the night only vaguely conscious.

It takes only a few quick movements before I'm out of my clothes, and when I go to grab my pj's off the end of the bed, I stop.

They were totally there this morning. They're always there, and I'm not stupid enough to think that they got up and moved themselves.

"I checked under the bed," I say, glaring at the end of it. "And the window is closed. If I look up and you're stuck to the ceiling or swinging on the fan, I'm going to be *so* upset and probably a little bit impressed."

A chuckle behind me makes my stomach lurch, but I can't exactly say that I'm surprised.

Was he in my closet?

"Some girls are just so cocky after a night getting fucked by their own toys," the masked stranger purrs. I hear the shifting of clothes, and I don't need to look to know that he's right there. "Should I show you that it's not safe to be so confident around me?"

My insides twist, and I do turn to look at him, glad I'm still wearing my underwear as I cross my arms over my chest as if I suddenly care about him seeing me naked.

I should care. This is so fucked up, the danger of unaliving or not. He's a stranger, and I don't even know what his face looks like. He's probably a murderer, judging by what he's said. I should *not* be okay with him being here.

He must see the trepidation in my face because the stranger holds up his hands to show me they're empty. "Same rules apply, princess," he tells me in that low, husky voice that shoots heat to my core. "You tell me to stop or leave, and I will. All right?"

"You promise?" I ask again, unable to move until he *promises*. As if this is some binding magic that'll mean he can't hurt me when, in fact, he could break such a stupid promise at any time if he wanted to.

He steps out of the closet, black boots making only a slight, soft sound on the carpet, and reaches out to me with one gloved hand curled into a fist, pinky extended. "Would you like me to *pinky swear*?" he asks, only a small bit of amusement in his tone. "Will that make you feel better?"

I stare at his hand and snort softly, lifting my hand to curl my finger around his. I feel like a little kid when I do it, but I still do it all the same.

"Now go close your door," he encourages, tilting his masked face towards it to make his point. "I don't need your dogs coming after me when I make you scream."

"Are you afraid of them?" I don't know why I ask, but I walk to the door and close it, anyway. The two dogs gaze at me, Argus thumping his tail as the door closes like the *worst* kind of chaperone.

"Not in the least." There's amusement in his voice, and I keep the bed between us as I wait for him to keep going. "But things happen, and I don't feel like getting bit tonight. Are you going to get on the bed, or am I going to *make* you?"

The threat sends a shiver up my spine that I'm not convinced is fear. Because my brain is working in overdrive, putting pieces together as I stare at him. "Vulcan would've torn you apart if he scented you in here," I murmur, folding my arms over my chest again. "He doesn't like people that much. And it's not like he *knows* you."

The masked stranger just watches me.

“Why isn’t my dog trying to kill you? Why didn’t he try to kill you last night, either?” I ask finally, my words slow as I try to answer my own question.

A soft snicker is his only reply. “What makes you think I have any intention of answering your questions? Besides, what does it matter? I’m in here, aren’t I?” He tilts his head to look at my black comforter that’s only barely covering part of the bed, then back at me. “And the longer you stand there, the more I think you *want* me to play rough with you.”

My heart does a flip at the thought, and I slant my eyes to the side. I probably don’t want that.

Probably.

“Oh, *princess*,” he sneers, his voice utterly mocking. “That’s so fucked up. You don’t even know who I *am*.” As I watch, he moves slowly around the bed until he stands on the same side of it as I do. One hand snakes out, and he grips my throat lightly, the cool leather of his glove sliding against my skin. “Have you ever used a safeword while you play?”

“No,” I whisper, my eyes finding the black gaze of his mask. “I...I know the premise, though. And the concept doesn’t seem difficult to grasp.”

“In this case, I’m wondering if you’d want to use one with me to tell me to stop. Would you like that? We can *pretend* that you don’t like it. We’ll *pretend* that you don’t want to be on this bed while I wreck you tonight like I did last night. You can tell me to stop all you want, but I won’t. *If* you want to have a safeword instead.”

I suck in a breath, unsure of his words. It sounds like something I want to try, no doubt. Because the idea of him pinning me down and doing *anything* to me is quite appealing, and so is the idea of playing hard to get, for lack of a better term.

“What if I forget it? Or I say stop instead, and I *mean* stop?” I ask, second-guessing myself and my tenuous decision.

“We’ll use *red*. That’s pretty hard to forget, and I doubt you’ll be saying it in any other context. Other than that...” He shrugs and lifts his other hand to drag me forward, hand on my thigh. “I suppose you’d have to trust that I can see if you’ll really need to stop. I’m not going to do anything that’ll hurt you. Though if there’s something I need to know before we play, I guess this *would* be the time to tell me.”

“Trust you?” I repeat, unsure of how I feel about those words from him.

He dips his face in a nod.

“You won’t even show me your face.”

“Oh, I know. It’s just so unfair, isn’t it?”

“What if I took your mask off? Would you kill me?”

“You won’t.” There’s no question in his words. No possibility of anything other than me simply not doing it.

“I...won’t?”

The hand on my hip comes up to cup my jaw, and he yanks me forward so that we’re pressed together. “You won’t,” he assures me. “Even this close, you won’t. Do you know why?”

I’m sure I don’t, though my racing heart makes it hard to think of anything when he’s this close to me. I shake my head slightly, only barely managing to make it look like something other than a spasm.

“Because I told you not to. And at your core, you’re such a good fucking girl, aren’t you, princess?”

“I have a name.” I can’t help but say it. Does he not know? Would he use it if he did?

“I know. But I don’t need your name when I’d rather call you *princess*. Though maybe tonight you’ll be my little slut instead.” He moves to grip my jaw instead of my throat, and his other hand settles on my hip once more. “I’m tired of talking. Shall we continue with ‘stop,’ or would you like to use ‘red’ instead when you need me to stop?”

I shouldn't complicate things. I don't need to complicate things when this is already dangerous enough. Adding an aspect to our game just feels like a test. Like I might be throwing myself into the deep end when I really shouldn't.

"I want to use red," I say, my mouth betraying my common sense.

I get the feeling he's grinning in approval, though I can't see if he is. "That's my good girl," he says and then throws me back onto the bed, fingers hooking in my panties and jerking them off my legs before I can do more than gasp.

I sit up, surprised, only for him to catch me by the hair and jerk me off the bed and down to my knees harshly.

"Stay down there where you belong, princess. Being on your knees is a good look for you." He lets go of my hair and unzips his pants, the leather never catching on the zipper as he pulls his black jeans down just enough to free his already hard cock. "You're going to let me fuck your mouth, aren't you?" It doesn't feel like he's genuinely asking. Especially when he grips my hair and urges me forward. "You're going to let me use that pretty little mouth however I want, and then I'll fuck that pussy when I'm done. That's what you *want*, isn't it?" His grip tightens in my hair, and I realize that he wants an answer.

"Yes," I murmur, looking up at him through my lashes.

"That wasn't very convincing. If you want something, you ask me *nicely* with a please attached. Try again."

"Yes, *please*."

"Please *what*?"

My face burns, and I swallow, trying to formulate the words that feel humiliating to say out loud. "I want you to fuck my mouth—"

"And *what else*?"

"And my pussy. *Please*."

"There you go." The stranger's fingers loosen in my hair, and he gives me time to wrap my fingers around the base of his length, my tongue licking over his crown. He's bigger than

I expect him to be, and it's hard not to imagine how he'll feel when he's fucking me.

“Don't get lost in your little dream world now, princess. I want to feel those lips around my cock before I fill your pussy. Got that?”

I don't answer. Not verbally, anyway. My eyes flick up to his, and I take him in my mouth, letting him urge me further down until the weight of him rests on my tongue.

It's a damn good thing I don't have a gag reflex. Especially since he's big enough that I can feel him in my throat, and it's enough to make my eyes slightly water.

It's also more than enough to make my own body ache. Part of me considers reaching down to use my fingers, but that definitely seems like something he won't like.

“Good girl,” he praises, letting me draw away slightly. “I knew your mouth would feel good. You look like you were made to take my cock in all of your holes.” I shudder at that, and he chuckles. “Do you like the sound of that? Should I keep going after I fill your pussy? Should I fuck your ass as well? I bet no one else ever has.” He grips my hair with both hands and keeps me in place so that he can draw out and then slide back in.

“Stay right like that. Right there.” He thrusts as deep as he can and groans, fucking my throat while I try hard to suck in breaths through my nose.

It's not enough, though. I need more air than he's giving me, and my hand flies up to curl around his jean-clad thigh.

I'm going to need to breathe soon.

“I know, *I know*,” he assures me, not doing anything to give me relief. “But I'm not done. You hear me? You're going to stay right there *because I'm not fucking done with that mouth*.”

I whine around him, tears gathering in my eyes and cascading down my cheeks as black spots start to obscure my vision while he fucks my mouth. Finally, when I'm half sure I'm going to pass out, he lets go and steps back, my jaw falling

slack as my mouth is suddenly empty, and I'm able to *finally* breathe in deep gasps of air.

I don't expect him to pull me onto the bed, one hand on my jaw while the other holds my thigh. "Good girl," he purrs, masked face close to mine like he wants to kiss me. "You're so good for me, but I knew you would be. Ever since I first saw you, I *knew* you would be so good for me. Get on my lap; I want to fucking look at you." He tugs me over his thighs, forcing me to straddle him, and my breasts brush the front of his jacket as I do, my eyes at the level of the black eyes of his mask.

His fingers skim up my sides, making me writhe, and I whine softly in protest. "Tickling isn't sexy," I tell him, my voice just a little bit hoarse.

"You make everything sexy," he disagrees and does it again. As he does so, he shifts so that one of his thighs is pressed against me. "Why don't you use my thigh to get yourself a little more worked up for me, hmm? Don't use your hands. Put them around my shoulders." I do so, sliding them around his shoulders so I'm forced to be almost nose-to-nose with the white mask. "Right there. That's so good. Now just rock your hips. C'mon. You know what to do, don't you?"

It's awkward, in a way. But I can't deny how hot it is to ride his denim-clad leg with nothing between me and the rough fabric. Every time my clit slides over it just right, I shudder, and I'm sure that his jeans are going to be wet after this.

One of his hands lands on my thigh, urging me to keep going, while the other reaches to cup my jaw.

"I just can't help myself with you," he tells me quietly. I turn my face into his hand, mouth open as he presses his thumb to my lips, and open my eyes to see the band of tan skin between his jacket and his glove.

And the black ink there that curls around his wrist.

I blink, and as if he knows what I'm looking at, he pulls away with a rueful sigh.

“I want to watch you get off like this. I bet you could, couldn’t you? But I’m so fucking ready to bury myself in your pussy. Do you understand?” His hand moves to grip my hair, and he pulls me upright to look at his mask again. “Once I’m inside you, then you don’t get a say,” he purrs. “You’ll be all mine, then. Does that scare you?”

“Yes,” I say without hesitation.

“Oh, it should. It should *terrify* you, princess. You should never have let me stay. I have a lifetime to ruin you, and you’ve given me permission.” Before I can reply, he uses his grip on my hair to push me onto the bed, getting out from under me and shoving me hard onto my stomach, my face buried in my pillows.

I gasp and try to sit up, my head spinning, only for him to pin me there with a snarl.

“No, you stay *right there*. Face down, but get your hips up right now.” He grabs my thighs and forces me to my knees, though my face is still on the bed where he put me. “This is how you should’ve been waiting for me. Understand?” His leather-clad hand comes down hard on my upper thigh with a resounding *smack*.

I yelp and this time, I *do* sit up, only for him to grab me by my hair and snarl in my ear.

“I said *stay*,” he reminds me, his voice so close to a growl that I can’t help but shudder. “This isn’t you staying, is it? And it’s most certainly not how I put you.”

“I wasn’t expecting—”

“*I didn’t ask*,” he cuts me off with finality and presses me down onto the bed once more, albeit more gently than I’d expected. “Like I *said*...” He grabs my thighs and pulls them wider apart so that I can’t hold myself up with any kind of good balance. “This is how you should’ve been waiting for me tonight. Not with your clothes on. And you shouldn’t be making me wait.” His gloved hands run up my thighs, then back down. “How tight will you be if I take you right now without opening you up?”

“Please don’t,” I whisper, though my heart races with something that’s absolutely not fear.

“Please *don’t*?” He leans over me, and I can feel his cock slide against my folds, eliciting a whimper from me. His mask skims along my shoulder blade, and in a kinder voice, he murmurs, “You remember your safe word, right, Sloane?”

The use of my name almost shocks me out of the moment, and I have to take a second to pull myself together. More shockingly, he lets me. One hand rubs comfortingly over my hip, but he doesn’t rush me or move forward with anything while I get my bearings.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“What is it?” There’s something different in his voice. Something other than his mocking praise or growled threats.

“Red.”

“Do you need to use it?”

I swallow back the confusion and rush of surprise, balling my hands in my sheets. It’s...thoughtful. It’s almost sweet, though I’ll never say that out loud. “No,” I say after taking stock of my mental state. “I’m not using it.”

The mask brushes my skin again, and this time his murmured, “good girl,” is somehow different enough that I can feel the affection in his words. That, or I’m just hallucinating, which is certainly more likely.

“Oh, *princess*,” he continues, back to the voice I expect from him as he pulls back. “You don’t really want me to stop. You want me to fuck your pussy just like this, don’t you? Look how *wet* you are.” He spreads my folds with two fingers so he can look at me, and I whimper. “You’re fucking *begging* me to just wreck you.”

“I’m not. I’m—”

“You are. You want my cock right now? You want me to fuck you without doing anything to get you ready for me?”

“No. I don’t. I—” The words fall from my lips, and I don’t mean them because I know my limits enough to know how I

feel about this, but it's somehow frightening in the best way all the same. I swallow a whine when his cock rubs against my slit, and I can feel him lining himself up with me before he grips my hip once more.

"Yeah, you really fucking do." With those words, he thrusts into me, sliding slowly as he parts my folds with his cock, and I cry out, writhing under him with my face still in the pillow and my hands fisted in the sheets above it.

"You're so tight," he tells me, only coming to a halt when his body is pressed against mine, and I can feel him incredibly deep. "God, I'm not going to be able to last long when you're so tight and *hot*." He pulls back and thrusts in again, a little faster this time, and the stretch of him is almost too much.

Almost, but just perfectly on the edge of too much that it feels amazing.

"Is that too much, princess?" He moves again, but this time he doesn't stop when he's deep inside me, only continues to fuck me as his hips pick up their rhythm.

"Yes."

"No, I don't think it is. Your pussy is just *begging* me to be here. It's not too much at all." With a hand on my lower back, he holds me in place, using me as his thrusts become harder and the burn of him fades into hot pleasure.

He isn't the only one that isn't going to last long. He's impossibly hot, and it feels *so fucking good* to have him inside me that I wonder if this really might be a strangely lucid fever dream.

When the buzzing starts, I barely notice. It's when my bullet finds my clit that I come back to the moment with a shriek and try to bolt upright, only for him to keep me in place.

"Oh *fuck*, that feels good. That's right. You're so *tight* around me when I play with your clit. Are you going to come?" I am if he keeps doing that. "I asked you a *question*."

"I'm gonna come," I tell him, opening my mouth and finding that now I can't stop my rambling. "Fuck, I'm gonna come so fast. That's too much—"

“Not if I say it’s not.” He’s fucking into me harder now, and the force of his thrusts makes the vibrator slide over my clit deliciously as he hits so deep inside me that I feel like I’m seeing stars. “Come for me.” He slaps my thigh, the hot pain going right to my clit. “Come on. You shouldn’t need me to tell you more than once. I want to feel you come on my cock, princess. I don’t think that’s too much to ask.”

He’s not really asking, though. And when he repeats the words with the vibrator on my clit, I can’t help but tumble over the edge into my orgasm. I gasp, spine arching, and he fucks me through it, still playing with my clit even when it becomes too much as my body clenches around him.

“Stop,” I beg, writhing on the bed and trying to get my knees under me to jerk away from the intense sensations. My muscles still flutter as he drags out my orgasm, but God, it’s *too much*. “Please stop, just for a second—”

“No. Absolutely not.” His hand tightens on my hip as he fucks me. “You’re going to take everything I give you. You’re going to take everything I *tell you* to take, do you hear me? But beg me to stop. Maybe it’ll make a difference, princess. Fucking *beg me*.”

I do. Pleas and whines fall from my lips as he fucks me through another orgasm, this one stronger than the first, and when I have a third, smaller one, I find that I’m crying while my thighs shake and struggle to hold me up. It’s only his grip that keeps me in place, and finally, during my third orgasm, he drops the vibrator and grabs both my hips to slam into me, his pace becoming erratic as he growls his version of praise.

“I can’t believe how perfect you are for me,” the stranger tells me, on the cusp of his own orgasm and his voice tight. “I should’ve been fucking this pussy for days now. *God*, you never should’ve let me stay, you know that?” He thrusts once more, burying himself deep in my body as he comes. “I’m going to make you regret it,” he laughs, the sound grating and somewhat terrifying, as it feels like a promise. “God, you’re going to regret it so much when I wreck you over and over until you’re ruined for anyone other than me.”

I don't know what to say. With my eyes closed against my pillow and tears drying on my face from how much he's pushed my body, all I can do is replay his words over in my head and wonder if he's serious.

And if he is, how fucked that makes me.

“Sorry,” I tell the dogs, giving them a handful of treats in apology for them spending another night on the couch. It doesn’t seem like they mind, exactly. Not when I know they like the couch almost as much as snuggling up with me. “I’m sorry,” I say again, and I push the door open to let them out as they finish chowing down on their food. I probably owe them a pup cup as well, and since I’m going into town, it’ll be the best opportunity I have to grab one for each dog.

It’s a good thing that the only things I *have* to do today consist of going into town and picking up a few things for the House. We’re running low, and thanks to some issues with transportation in Arkala, sometimes I get to go pick up what we sell, like t-shirts, instead of us having them delivered. I don’t mind. I like driving, and I like an excuse to go into Arkala to get something from the bakery that also serves way better coffee than any franchise store ever could.

“Come on boys,” I say, fighting the urge to go check the woods behind the cabin again. Thoughts about my nighttime visitor swirl around in my brain, and while most of them are *good*, there are a few that make my insides clench.

Is he who I think he is? Do I really want the answer to that when it feels like maybe he’s trying to keep himself unknown so that I can’t get attached? And how in the world does he keep getting past Vulcan without the dog doing so much as growling or barking to let me know he’s here?

Vulcan only lets people pass who he likes. Which doesn’t say much about their character, but it *does* tell me that the man

can magically phase in and out of my cabin, is a hallucination, or somehow has earned Vulc's affection.

None of them are very likely when I certainly don't let my dog waltz up to just everyone. The only people he *does* like are campers, only the frequent visitors at that, and I have a hard time imagining that chubby, grill-obsessed Benjamin is behind that mask or old, hobbling Carter.

I close the back door of my silver Hyundai Elantra and slide into the front seat, plugging my phone into the jack before turning the key in the ignition. The nice part of not having to pay anything towards rent or a mortgage means that I've been able to afford a nicer car than I had before, and if I breathe really deeply and pretend a little, I like to think that I can still smell that new car scent, instead of just dog.

Smoothly I pull out of my parking area and onto the road, creeping along the rough asphalt until I get to the House where Sam and Pat are working today. Surreptitiously I check for Virgil's truck, though I don't see it here, and when I look for his boat on the dock, I see that it's sitting in its spot, right where it belongs.

Do I walk a loop around the cabins to see if he's still there? I don't know why he would've left early, and I really don't need him to think I'm stalking him.

As a compromise, I crane my head back, looking for any sign of the large, shiny black truck. And I spot it almost immediately, tucked against the back of cabin six, exactly where it belongs.

It seems Virgil is still here, and either he's walking the grounds without me this time, or he's still in his cabin.

Does he sleep in? I can't help but wonder, and I scour my brain for what we'd talked about yesterday.

Which amounts to almost nothing of importance. He'd asked *me* about a lot of things, from my favorite food to my favorite color, yet when I'd turned the questions back at him, it felt like he'd looked for ways not to answer him. Like he

wasn't interested in giving me the answer, even if I wanted to know.

"He'll be gone in a few days anyway," I mutter, hitting the gas to propel myself up the steep hill that takes me to the highway. I'll never see him again, which is fine because despite what he said, he doesn't look like someone who does a lot of camping.

Not to mention he's a reporter. With the way he dresses and with how new his truck is, I'm sure he has a nice job up in Akron that keeps him busy.

And a girlfriend? The thought is an unwelcome one, and I shove it away as quickly as I can as I pull out onto the not-so-busy highway at the top of the hill. It's rarely busy here, given that we're in the middle of nowhere by the lake and Arkala is such a small town. I barely meet any cars on the highway, and the only thing of interest is the place that offers trail rides not too far from the campground.

I've never ridden a horse, though it's definitely on my bucket list. I have stopped by a few times to pick up pamphlets for the House, and while I've been there, the owner has let me pet and feed the horses a few treats while offering me a discount on trail rides.

"If you help me out sometimes, I'll let you ride for free," the older woman had informed me, her accent just as thick as Pat's. "I could use an extra hand 'round here. Dogs are welcome too, so long as they don't chase the horses."

"Oh, I really would," I assured her. "If I knew anything about horses or had ever been on one." That had been the end of it, mostly, though she had told me that I was welcome to come by and learn if I fancied doing so.

Maybe, eventually, I'd take her up on that.

Puffing out my cheeks, I glance in the mirror as I turn onto the road that will take me into the small town of Arkala. The best thing going for it is the big box store that doubles as a place to get groceries, though I avoid it and drive into the parking lot of a small strip mall instead. The *Arkala Mall* is

old and run down, and I've seen stores come and go in the past year and a half. I've been here so often that sometimes it feels like I have whiplash.

Only a few places are constants, including the bakery, a clothing store, and a furniture store that somehow manages to stay in business in a town that's best known for being near a campground and so close to the lake. I've only been in there once, and today I don't bother.

I'd much rather obtain coffee and pastries.

The owner and baker, a guy around my mother's age who wears a little gold nameplate that says *Adam*, beams at me as I walk inside with Argus on a leash and vested at my side. He's never given me an issue, and I doubt he ever will, but I'm always ready to paper cut someone with a small business card full of ADA regulations that I keep in a pouch on Argus's vest, just in case.

You never can be too certain how people will react to a service dog, after all. And I've been caught off guard often enough that maybe I've started to over-prepare for the day someone gets past my *resting bitch face* to do it again.

"Good morning, Sloane," he greets, going to pluck a large plastic cup off a stack. "Do you want your regular coffee order?"

"I'd love that," I assure him, thrilled that he's not going to remark on how my coffee is probably about half cream. "And umm...can I get some bagels?" Gazing into the glass cases, I jab my finger at the jalapeño-cheddar bagels that look as fresh as they can be. "A dozen." I can freeze them, and that'll be my breakfast for the next week and a half easily, after I pick off the jalapeños, of course. I like a bit of residual spice from them having been on the bagel, but if I bite into one, I'll probably throw up.

"Sure, no problem." He moves to box up the bagels as I prowl around, still eyeing the rest of the food hungrily. If I could, I'd bring *all* of this back to my cabin. One of each thing so I could partake in a three-day feast and never leave except to lay next to the fire and digest.

But my wallet definitely can't handle all of that, so I point to the almond croissants on the end and add, "Four of these, please?" Inwardly I tell myself that I'll freeze them, but I know that I'll probably eat two today and finish the other two off tomorrow.

"That it?" At my nod, Adam rings me up and hands me the boxes, my coffee coming right after.

"Oh. Crap." I hesitate. "Could I get two pup-cups? Vulcan and Argus do such hard work, you know. I'd feel bad if they didn't get their sugar fix too."

That causes the brunet baker to snort, but he deftly fills two small espresso cups with whipped cream and sets them on top of the boxes that are in my arms. "Give them a big scratch for me, okay?" he says and comes around to push the door open for me as I go back out.

I consider dropping Argus's leash. He won't go anywhere, I know, and it's been a long time since someone has made any kind of remark about him. But in the end, I keep it over my wrist as I walk to the car and only take it off when he jumps up into the back seat with Vulcan.

Of course, the two of them devour the pup-cups. The dreamy looks in their eyes remind me of a trance state, yet instead of being amusing, it makes me feel...strange. Trepidation churns in my stomach as I watch Vulcan, my lips pressed flat.

I know how he acts once someone has fed him. How could I not know when I've had him just as long as I've had Argus?

"Okay boys," I whisper when they're done, and I chuck the cups to the floor of the passenger side before reversing out of the parking lot. "Time to work, I guess. Then we have three days off, and we're going to earn sleeping in for all of them."

It's not until I'm back at the campground with my trunk unloaded of boxes that things go south.

My phone rings, and when I gaze at the number, I'm not surprised to see that it's a blocked caller.

Is it my stranger? I'm starting to wonder if he was the one who called me that first night so that he could sneak in, and that number had come up the exact same way as this.

But then, why would he be calling me during the day?

I sigh and hit the button to answer, the phone going to my ear a second later. "Hello?" I ask, ready for the sound of *nothing* yet again.

"*Could you unblock my number?*" My stepfather's voice is apologetic and sheepish. "*I hate having to use a different phone to call you. It's pretty shitty when all I want to do is apologize.*"

I don't say anything. My stomach twists violently, and I wonder if I'm going to throw up as I lean back against my car and stare out over the lake. How did he get my number?

I don't say anything because there's absolutely nothing to say to him. There never will be. I'm not interested in his apologies or whatever else he's trying to sell me.

"*Sloane?*" he prods. "*Hellooo? Did you hang up on me?*"

"Go to hell," I tell him simply, and before I can think to do any different, I hang up the phone and block the number. There's no other course of action to take. There's nothing else I want to do except scream as my pulse pounds in my veins and at my temples.

Why won't he just leave me alone?

I can't help the way my hands shake or the way I have to fight to not chuck my phone through the glass window of the House. I need to go home. I'm going to start a fire and shred some cardboard and eat all four croissants—

"I see my buddy has been relegated to the back seat." The rolling, soft chuckle catches me off guard, and I flinch, turning to stare at the speaker with open-mouthed surprise and, I'm sure, a stricken look in my mismatched eyes.

Whatever Virgil is going to say dies on his lips when he sees my face, and a strange range of emotions crosses his face before he settles on a concerned frown. "You look like

someone just ran over your cat,” he informs me, stepping close enough that I can smell the sharp tinge of his cologne.

I don’t take a step back, but I look down at his shoes instead of holding his gaze.

“It’s not like that,” I say, willing myself not to cry. My eyes find his hand that’s shoved into the pocket of his jeans, and I focus on the snake tattoo that crosses his wrist.

My suspicions rear up again in my head, though they’re pressed back by the gloom and dread my stepdad’s call has cast on me. I want to say something. I want to confront Virgil and lay out why I think what I do.

But I don’t have it in me.

“Then what’s it like?” He doesn’t move closer. He doesn’t touch me, but I don’t expect him to, and he doesn’t do anything other than just stand there.

“Do you ever just wish someone would leave you alone? *Permanently*? Even if that means something really bad would happen to them?” The words slip out before I can stop them, and I reach up to press my palms to my eyes and sigh long and loud. “Sorry. That wasn’t an appropriate question, huh?”

“I’ve wished that about a lot of people,” Virgil chuckles, the sound full of amusement and wry humor. “Often, and with *feeling*. There’s nothing wrong with hoping for someone to break their leg or their neck. It’s only questionable if you help them along.”

I’d help my stepdad along off a cliff.

I glance up at him, my eyes wide and rueful, and whatever he sees there makes his smile fade just a little. “Well, I’d never tell if you *did* do something like that.”

“Do you promise?”

I shouldn’t have said it. I should’ve kept my mouth shut or said *anything* else. And I shouldn’t be standing here, staring him down, waiting for an answer that I don’t know if I want.

Because if I’m right, if he is the man that’s been paying me visits at night, then I’m not sure how to justify that in my brain

or in the daylight.

Everything is always so different in the daylight.

Not to mention, if I let on that I think I know who he is, I'm not sure if his promise that he won't hurt me will hold when the sun is up.

It takes him a few seconds, but he grins and breaks the silence with a snort. "Yeah, Sloane," he says, taking a few steps away and heading back to the path down to the lake. "If it makes you feel better, I absolutely promise you that I won't tell anyone should you help someone have an unfortunate accident. So long as it's not me."

Before I can think of anything to say, he's gone, disappearing towards the dock and leaving me with more unhealthy suspicions that I don't want to give myself the answers to.

When he doesn't show up by two a.m., it's pretty clear to me he's not coming.

Is it a coincidence? Maybe he tripped and fell into a wildcat and got eaten in the woods.

Or maybe it's because of what I said by my car. If I'm right, this is a pretty good indication of it. The fact that he's not here speaks volumes...maybe.

Or maybe he's just done with me.

That thought shouldn't bother me as much as it does. It shouldn't twist my heart and wring it like a soaked towel to think that the probable *murderer* doesn't want to come fuck me again.

I should be glad. I should be *thrilled* that he's left me alone and the only memory I have of him is a good one.

But I'm not. With a sigh, I get up and go to the kitchen, snagging a bottle of water before I head back. The dogs are on the couch again, *just in case*, but I've promised them that this is the last night I'll do this to them.

And the way things are going, it really feels like it will be.

God, that shouldn't be so disappointing. It shouldn't feel like someone is breaking up with me when I've only seen them twice.

Or, at least, only known them for a few days.

I untwist the cap of the water bottle as I sink back down in my bed, and it's not until I've tipped it back to take a long drink that I realize the screen on my window is gone again,

The realization makes me choke.

"Breathe, princess." My stranger pulls himself from the shadows of the far corner, having been able to hide there in his mostly dark clothing with my lights all off. Since I'm not expecting him this late, I hadn't kept the light on, but now that feels like it might have been a mistake.

He walks over to stand beside me, takes the water bottle from my hand, and sets it down on the bedside table as I gaze up at him with my lips slightly parted.

"I didn't think you were coming," I say, clearing my throat, so I don't cough. I try to keep the words casual, as if I don't really care, but I don't think I succeed that well.

"Oh? Is that why you've been eagle eyeing your window all night?" The amusement is thick in his tone, and he reaches out to stroke his fingers over my hair until he can cup my chin and lift my face to his. "You *hoped* I'd come."

"Maybe I was scared you would, not hopeful?" I offer the words casually, but it's clear that I'm not being entirely truthful. His fingers thread into my hair, the feel of his leather gloves strange against my scalp, and grips hard enough that I gasp in surprise at the slight burn.

"Liar," the stranger purrs. "You're not good at it. Why even *try* when I can read you like a book?" He pushes me down onto the bed and then sits beside me. But instead of ripping off my pj's or demanding I strip, he instead catches my face once more. "Lie down on your back."

The way he says the words is...strange. Like he's not quite sure I'll do what he says this time.

"I won't hurt you," he reminds me. "Didn't I tell you that already?"

I shouldn't say anything. I should nod and either tell him to leave or lie down. But my traitor mouth doesn't know when

to shut up, so instead, I look at the black eyes of his mask and ask, with barely any hesitation, “Do you promise?”

I swear he holds my gaze, though I can't see his eyes. But I don't look away, and finally, he scoffs and turns his head away. “Play with me for one more night, Sloane. You're trying to end this game so fast that I'm starting to think you don't like me.”

It's as close as he can come to admitting I'm right without *actually* admitting I'm right.

“Maybe that's not my intention at all.” I flop back onto the bed, bouncing a little from the force of it, and watch as he straddles my hips, still fully clothed. As always, he has the upper hand, and none of his skin is exposed, though my eyes linger at the sleeve of his jacket that obscures his wrist.

If I reach up and push it back, will I find the snake tattoo I'm sure is there?

“Then what *is* your intention, princess?” I wonder if calling me by my name was a mistake. A slip-up since he's only called me that once, and it was a pretty serious thing before. He reaches one hand out and drags it up my body, pushing my loose shirt up so he can palm my breasts unobstructed.

“Maybe I just want to see your face from here on out.”

He chuckles darkly. “Do you? Are you sure? Have you stopped to think that if I give you that much of myself that it'll mean I won't walk away? And do you really think you can handle *all* of me, princess?”

I don't know how to answer that. Especially when he reaches behind him and draws a long, wickedly sharp knife that gleams dully in what little light comes through the window.

I gasp, my muscles clenching, and my heart nearly stops at the sight of it.

“You fucking *promised*—”

“And I’m not about to break that promise. But if you want *all* of me. If you want me to stay for longer than I’d thought, then you can’t just take me in small, measured doses. You’d better be prepared for every bit of me that I want you to take.” His voice is low and husky, like the sight of the knife does more for him than it ever could for me. “You can say red, or you can say stop, and I’ll leave. I promise.”

I’m sure that it’s problematic that his words uncurl something in me, putting me more at ease than I should be, given that I’m staring at the length of the *blade* between his fingers. But it does, and I nod my understanding as he lowers the blade to rest the tip between my breasts.

“If you must know...” He drags it downward lightly, the blade never once parting my flesh as I lay perfectly still under him. “I never intended to let things get this far. You’re so difficult, especially with the dogs. Do you know how many extra steps I’ve taken to make sure they won’t interrupt us?”

I don’t move or answer. I can’t when it feels like my voice is frozen in my throat.

“Close your eyes.” I glance up at his mask again, not sure I can do that. “Close your eyes for me,” he repeats, and I force myself to do what he asks, though my fingers twist in the sheets on either side of me and my body hums with tension and fear.

“I was just going to watch you. Or maybe kill you, though that idea went out the window *so* quickly. Once I saw you here, standing at your window and looking straight at me. Well...” I shiver as the tip of the blade circles my nipple, then moves to do the same to the other. “I thought for sure I’d frighten you enough to tell me to leave the first night. Princess, you really should’ve told me to leave. Look where you are now, hmm?” I love the tone of his voice and how it goads me as he trails the blade across my chest. “You’re lying on your bed, practically naked, with a serial killer tracing shapes on your body with his knife. Does that seem very rational to you?”

Serial killer? My blood seems to cool in my veins, moving sluggishly as I try to process that. My lips part. I want to ask him something, but quick as a flash, the flat of his blade is against my lips, and he shushes me before I can even formulate a real question.

“Not tonight,” he reprimands, dragging the blade down my face to stop at the base of my throat, where the point digs in just enough to make me feel it. “I’m going to let you sleep tonight,” he goes on, sounding rueful at the confession. “I’ve kept you up for two nights in a row, and I can’t expect for you to have any kind of real conversation if you’re falling asleep on your feet. You’re off for a few days, right? So you’ll just be up here, making a fire or walking around the campground?”

I’m not sure how he knows my schedule. And while I guess he’s just grasping at straws about my daily habits, he’s pretty spot on.

Is he watching me during the day as well?

“But we’ll have to talk, so it’s unavoidable.” The knife disappears, and I open one eye to see that his head is tilted to the side as he watches me. A soft scoff leaves him, and he cups my jaw in his hand, thumb running over my lips. “You can open your eyes,” he informs me, and I open both of them to gaze up at the mask.

“Do I get to *speak* too?” I ask in an exaggerated stage whisper.

“Not with an attitude like that.” He presses his thumb between my lips, apparently meaning what he says, and keeps my head back against the pillow as he sits up to loom over me, the mask garish in the darkness. “I’m going to leave,” he reminds me. “Do you want to come before I go, or would you rather just go to sleep?”

His thumb leaves my mouth, resting on my lower lip. “Of course I want to come,” I whisper, my voice quieter than his.

“Don’t look so excited. I’m not going to fuck you tonight, princess. Not when you need to sleep.”

“Why?” He shoves his thumb back into my mouth as he reaches over me to rummage around in my drawer, and it takes me only a second to realize what he’s looking for.

Sure enough, when he leans back and moves to sit between my thighs instead, he’s holding my small bullet and the larger vibrator he’d fucked me with the first night.

“Because I fucking *said so*, princess. Don’t get mouthy, or I’ll tie you up and leave you here until morning with a vibrator in your pussy,” he threatens, and there’s nothing but serious promise in his voice.

The stranger shoves my legs apart, one hand on my thigh to keep it in place, while he uses the other hand to push my shorts to the side.

I’m expecting the buzz of a vibrator.

Not the feel of his fingers, ungloved, teasing my folds. I gasp at the new sensation, not sitting up or moving except to stare at the ceiling. The leather on my skin had been a deliciously new experience, but I want to feel *him*. Not just his cock, but his hands and his mouth.

I want to see the expressions he makes under that mask of his.

“Are you surprised?” It doesn’t sound like a real question, and I don’t think he wants an answer as he pushes two fingers into me and curls them, thumb on my clit. “You have to know how much I’ve wanted to touch you without the gloves.”

“No, I... You’re not exactly *easy* to read,” I murmur, throwing an arm over my eyes.

“But you are.” He continues to work me open on his fingers languidly, his touch causing heat to pool between my thighs. “And you shouldn’t be reacting like this so *easily*, princess. It makes me think you’re obsessed with my touch.”

I might very well be.

“But you’d rather have my cock, wouldn’t you?” He’s not wrong. “*Wouldn’t you?*”

“I want anything you give me.”

He doesn't speak, as if my words have surprised him, and seconds later, my bullet replaces his thumb and hums to life on my clit. I buck my hips into him, unable to help myself, and I'm not surprised when he shoves me back to the bed before continuing.

"Don't run from me," the stranger purrs. "Otherwise, I might not fuck you with your other toy."

"Don't," I say and lick my lips before moving my arm to peer down at him. "I'd rather you use your fingers."

He pauses before letting out a sigh. "Careful," he warns, his voice dangerously soft. "You need to be very careful with your words. I'm going to think you mean them."

"I do."

"I'll make you regret them." Then he's silent as he teases me but doesn't exchange his fingers for the other vibrator as he works my body up and into a much *nicer* orgasm than the ones from the other two nights he's visited me.

I still cry out, however, and just barely manage not to whisper the name that I'm sure is his.

What if I *am* wrong? I don't think I am, but I don't want to ruin his game, even if I'm not.

He pulls his fingers away swiftly and crawls over me to tap them against my lower lip. "Clean off my fingers, princess," he purrs, leaning close enough that I can smell his cologne when I suck in a breath.

For me, it's the proverbial nail in the coffin.

But so is the snake tattoo on his hand that curls over the back of his palm. I stare up at the mask and open my mouth, allowing him to slide his fingers against my tongue as I clean my release off them while he watches.

He's not bothering to hide now.

And I know without a doubt who he is well enough that I want to reach up and pull the mask off his face.

But I don't.

Because he wants to continue this game for tonight, and I'm maybe, possibly, a little afraid that he'll be angry with me and not come back if I end it early.

At last, he pulls his fingers free and leans back, pulling the glove back over his hand before he stands up and walks towards the window.

"You could just use the front door," I point out, feeling drowsy all of a sudden. "Since you didn't get a chance to pet Vulcan today."

Virgil stops with his hand on the windowsill to look at me again, but I meet what I hope is his eyes as I drag my pillow under my cheek.

"*Careful,*" he says again, then adds. "I'll see you in the morning, Sloane." And without another word, he's out of my window and blending in with the trees, as if he was never here at all.

And finally, I can let out the breath I was holding, the fear of him and the blade whooshing out of me all at once and soaking into the mattress below me.

I'm still not sure I should've let him stay and less sure that I should've invited him back for more, but whenever he's here, I just can't do the right thing and use my *brain*, no matter how much I'm sure I should.

The eight a.m. knock on my door isn't the most welcome thing I've ever had happen to me this early. Even though my heart leaps in my chest and my insides twist, I can't help but wish he'd waited for another couple of hours until I'm properly awake.

Doesn't he know that business hours around here don't start until at least nine? Not in my cabin, anyway.

Vulcan barks from the couch and gets to his feet and is at the door before I can get there with his tail wagging uncertainly. He barks again, but I take my time, walking barefoot on the cold tile with my bagel half in one hand and the other free so I can pull open the door.

Maybe I shouldn't do this.

The thought rushes out the door faster than it formed, and my eyes land on Virgil.

But this Virgil is different from the one that I met at the House. Different from the one who asked me if I was all right on the deck and the one who asked me nonstop questions while we walked around picking up debris.

The Virgil in front of me stands almost perfectly still, his gold-flecked hazel eyes finding mine instantly. He stands with his hands in his pockets, hair perfectly just so, and he doesn't smile at me or move to make me more comfortable with a funny quip or a joke like I'm expecting.

He does, however, reach out and pet Vulcan as I take another bite of the bagel I'm holding.

“It’s early,” I observe, sure that I still sound like I only woke up recently.

“I could’ve woken you up,” he points out. “But I let you fix breakfast first because I’m just that nice.”

Oh. I take a moment to just look at him and chew on my slightly spicy and very cheesy bagel that’s slathered in plain cream cheese.

“You could’ve just come in, and I don’t know, watched TV?” I gesture to the television. “Not like Vulcan’s going to chase you out, obviously.” Before he can go on, I ask, because it’s killing me not knowing, “What did you give him?”

Virgil doesn’t answer at first. He grins, but the look isn’t as friendly as it has been, and runs his hand over Vulcan’s ears one more time. “Are you worried I was poisoning your dog?”

“No...” I feel a small lurch in my gut because that had never occurred to me until right now. “*Should I be?*” I’ll kill him if he hurt Vulcan, psycho serial killer, or not.

“Of course not. I was giving him dog-safe peanut butter. I guess I’m just lucky that I picked it, even before you so helpfully told me what his favorite food is.” He lets out a huff of air and stares at me, scrutinizing my features, or maybe my expression. “Are you going to keep me outside all morning? I know you’re pretty isolated, but people *are* walking along the road down there.”

The knot uncurls slightly in my stomach, and I step back, gesturing for him to come inside. “Want a bagel too?” I ask as he looks around the small cabin appraisingly as if it’s the first time he’s seen it.

“This is *tiny*,” he says, his gaze finding the couch where Argus lies watching him.

“It’s just me,” I point out, refusing to let myself feel self-conscious about my abode. “And the dogs. Sorry, I wasn’t expecting someone else. I would’ve cleaned up—”

He whirls around as I close the door with my elbow and steps towards me, one finger coming up to press against my

lips. It's a good thing I don't have any half-chewed bagel in my mouth. I might've reflexively spat it at him.

"Stop," Virgil states, his voice carefully neutral. "You're scared of me, though I told you that I'm not going to hurt you. I *meant it*. You don't need to act so careless or prove a point."

As he speaks, Argus hops off the couch and calmly walks between us, using his bulk to push Virgil away a few steps.

The dark-haired man looks down, expression quizzical, and I pull away slightly to speak around the finger on my lips.

"He's tasking. He wants you to move."

"Why?" There's no frustration or malice in his voice, and he takes a step back and stops touching me when I say it, prompting Argus to sit between us and wag his tail as he stares up at me.

"Because I have a few problems, and people being in my space is one of them. I don't mind *now*, but he's trained to come between us if I don't let him know otherwise." I'm grateful to my dog, and I say the words quickly, in a perfunctory manner, like I'd explain them to a shopper in the grocery store.

Which I've had to do many, many times.

I expect Virgil to react like the majority of people I meet. Questions about my PTSD are common, along with comments of, *well, you look fine*. Though most people just want to know if they can pet Argus.

But he just looks down at my service dog, then back up at me, and says, "Anything else I should know? I won't pet him unless you tell me I can. And if there's anything else—"

"No," I promise, cutting him off without meaning to. I don't expect him to be so *nice* about it. "You can pet him too. *Safe*, Argus." When I say the word, he turns away from me and gets to his feet, stretching as if he's showing off for the man who stands on the other side of him. "He'll task anyway if I need him. I should've realized he wouldn't like it if you—"

“Can I touch you now?” It’s Virgil’s turn to interrupt, though I can’t help but catch the thread of amusement in his tone.

“Yeah.”

He moves as soon as the word is out of my mouth and crowds me up against the door again, face only inches from mine. He’s so close that I can feel the warmth of his breath on my parted lips, and his hand around the base of my throat might be the only thing keeping me upright.

“I *almost* kissed you last night,” he purrs in that husky, sultry tone that I’ve grown addicted to in such a short amount of time. He presses his thigh between both of mine, trapping me in place. I nearly drop the bagel in my hand but manage to keep a hold of it as he lets out a soft exhale against my lips again. “Especially when you said you’d rather me use my fingers, princess. But you’re so good at that, aren’t you? Always knowing exactly what to say to me.”

“I don’t mean to,” I whisper, because I can’t help it. “I don’t set out to like—”

“I don’t care if you mean to or not. It’s a compliment. So don’t change. I—”

Pounding on the door makes both of us jump, and my eyes widen as I stare up at Virgil. I have no idea who it could be since Pat and Sam make it a rule to not bother me here, as it’s supposed to be *my* place. And it’s not like anyone else comes up here, for the most part, except my mom once in a while.

But I’m pretty sure the person banging on the door and sending reverberations through my spine is not my mother.

“Who’s that?” Virgil asks, pale eyes flicking up to the green door above us.

“Fuck if I know.”

He rolls his eyes and steps back, snagging the bagel half before it can go flying, and I whirl around to open the door, waiting for him to back into the kitchen so that he can’t be seen from the door.

The person knocks again, and I yank the door open, half-expecting to see a Mormon or someone looking to sell me something I don't want, even though I'm in a campground. In reality, it's probably just a camper that, for some reason, has come to me for *something*.

It's not.

Of course, it's fucking none of those.

Anthony Murphy, stepdad of the year circa 2006 when he decided to kidnap me from school, throw me in the car, and almost *kill* me in a drunken fit after my mom filed for divorce, stands on my porch like he has any right in the world to be there.

He looks much worse than the last time I saw him, with bags under his eyes and hollow cheeks like he hasn't been eating enough. He's still tall enough to tower over me, and probably Virgil as well, and his skin is just as pasty-pale as it had been when I was a child. The biggest change is his hair, which has gone salt-and-pepper instead of remaining the shiny black that I remember.

My hand tightens on the door, and my heart rams into my ribs. I suddenly feel like I'm eleven again, and nothing other than him and I exist as I stand there and stare up at him.

He terrifies me.

There's no way around it. His smile that's probably meant to be disarming does nothing except make my stomach roll like I might throw up, and the kind look in his eyes looks as genuine as a scorpion's promise.

For a long moment, I feel like I'm eleven again, when I realized for the first time that he had no intention of letting me go back home to my mom alive.

His smile widens as he stares at me, not noticing my expression or the way I want my heart to stop so I can stop being here.

"I figure it's harder to get rid of me when you can't just hang up the phone." He chuckles in his light baritone. "I just want to talk, Sloane. Though I admit, I wanted to come to see

how you were doing as well. I've seen pictures from Kate, but they don't do you justice."

Vulcan takes that moment to bark, his hackles up as he appears beside me to warn the man off like he would a coyote or small wildcat.

It surprises Anthony enough that he stumbles back a few steps, thankfully giving me the space that I need to suck in a breath that barely makes it to my constricted lungs.

Am I going to pass out? I try to breathe in again, but my chest hurts too much for me to do more than gasp for air.

Vulcan continues to bark, his teeth visible in his black muzzle, while Argus sits on the sofa and watches instead of joining in.

"Tell him to stop, Sloane," my stepfather snaps, clearly too afraid to come back on the porch. "This is ridiculous—" He takes a step forward, only for Vulcan to do the same, still putting on a good show of aggression that I doubt he'll follow up with a bite.

"*Leave,*" I whisper, wishing I could do more than barely breathe out the word. "It's not a good time, it's..." I lick my dry lips. "It's *never* a good time, Anthony." With a grip on Vulcan's collar, I drag my dog back inside and slam the heavy door, locking it for good measure.

Resting my head against the cool wood, I wait, listening to his curses before I hear him get back into his car, the engine turning over a second later before it rolls down the driveway and back onto the main road.

My lungs burn, and I hope that with him gone, I can do more than gasp in oxygen. But when I try to take a deeper breath, my body rebels, and again I can barely get anything into my strangled lungs.

It doesn't occur to me that I've forgotten Virgil is in my house until I turn, only for him to push me against the door again with a careful emptiness on his face. "Who was that?" he demands. His strong hand once again at the base of my throat but without pressing.

I open my mouth, eyes wide, and try to answer, but nothing comes from my mouth other than a soft, breathy sound courtesy of my twisted-up vocal cords.

“I don’t *share* what’s—” It takes him that long to realize my profound issue and for him to see that Argus is trying to push past him to get to me. His eyes go down, then back to my face, and he transfers his grip to cup my cheek and lets Argus lick my hand fervently, as if I don’t know that I’m in the middle of a panic attack. “Tell me what you need,” he orders, though any tightness or suspicion in his voice has been replaced with something that sounds remarkably like concern.

I, for one, want to cry. The fear of my stepfather being right outside burns, along with the humiliation of Virgil getting a front-row seat to my panic right now of all times. If I were him, I’d open the door and zip on out instead of standing here and dealing with me. I expect him to, and I won’t fight him on it.

“I need—” I breathe in a sharper, shuddering breath, trying to remember how to appropriately get the oxygen I require. “I need to breathe. I can’t breathe, I—” My shaking, clammy hands find his, and I try to communicate through that touch what I can’t seem to do with my words.

“Okay.” He nods like I’ve managed to answer the question and pulls me away from the door so that he can take me to my bedroom, which right now feels very small with both of us in it.

That or the walls are closing in as I all but hyperventilate in his arms.

It’s not a request as he forces me to sit down on the bed, and his hand pushes me gently back until I’m lying down and staring up at him above me as he watches me with something that can’t be the worry it appears to be.

The bed dips, heralding the arrival of Argus, who lays across my body and licks my face, managing to avoid Virgil as my dog does what he was trained to do and grounds me as best as he’s able.

It works, though staring up at the man who I wanted to kiss about five minutes ago only serves to push further embarrassment through my body.

“You must think I’m so weird,” I pant when I’m finally able to speak, and my lungs aren’t constricted any longer.

“You don’t know what I think, and you’re not very good at reading me,” Virgil points out with a small smile twisting the edge of his mouth upward. “Do you need anything?”

“A curtain of shame—”

“Hey.” He touches my face with the back of his tattooed knuckles. “Stop, princess.”

It’s not fair when he calls me that, because all I can focus on is him. I suck in a few breaths, both of us quiet before he speaks again.

“I *meant* it. You don’t know what I think, and in this particular case, the only thing I am is *concerned*, all right? I want to make sure you’re okay.”

“It’s not a one-off,” I point out, in case it isn’t clear.

“I figured that out, actually.” He taps his temple and grins. “Once in a while, I’m able to put context clues together and see that you *probably* have a service dog for a reason.”

“God, what does it say about you that *you* are more understanding than most people I meet?” I command Argus to *break*, and the dog gets up, though he goes to lie beside the bed and not far from me, just in case.

“I think you should worry for *them* more than me.” He chuckles, watching as I pull my legs up under me to sit cross-legged in front of him. “And I hate to do this, but...” He lets out a breath.

My heart sinks. “But you’re going to leave, check out early, and I’m never going to see you again?”

His gaze finds mine, brows rising. “*But*, I’m going to hold you to your word that we have a little talk. I’ll be gentle with you. Well...” He shrugs his shoulders. “As gentle as I know

how to be, which isn't saying much if you ask any of my friends."

"Do your friends know about your uh...hobbies?"

"My friends partake in their own hobbies that are just as bad but different flavored." He watches me as he says it, but I don't have it in me to be surprised or clutch my pearls.

"I'm happy that you have people to share your interests with," I say, barely thinking about the words before they leave my mouth. "Even if those interests are, uh—"

"Killing people?"

"I kind of like using the term *unaliving*, but that works too." If I keep things flippant and chill, it's not so bad. Plus, it helps my panic ebb away, though I know this will leave me shaky and tired for the rest of the day.

And I need to call my mom; there's no more putting it off. I need to tell her he's probably broken a restraining order that *has* to be in place against this.

"We're going to be adults and say that I *kill* people." He shifts on the bed until he's sitting directly in front of me and mirroring my pose, his knees brushing mine. "And like I said before, you really should've told me to leave that first night."

I do a long, slow blink and try for a smirk. "You've told me that."

"I'm telling you again. Because maybe it wasn't clear enough the first time."

I digest the words, but they don't scare me. Nor do they particularly bother me. If anything, they're like a dare. A challenge, or maybe it's just him gloating. "What if I asked you to leave now?" I ask, wanting to know the answer. "I don't want you to, just to be clear. But what if I did?"

"Oh, *princess*." He reaches out to cup my jaw sweetly, urging me to lean towards him so he can reach up and swipe the pad of his other thumb over my lip. "Didn't I just tell you? That train has left the station. It's so far gone that neither of us

could ever catch it. I guess I'd try. But I know myself. There is no *leaving* anymore."

My stomach does a little pirouette, and I part my lips just as he runs his thumb over them. "Does that scare you?" he adds in a soft voice.

"Should it?" I nip at his thumb, but he isn't wrong, exactly. Flickers of fear are present inside me, and I can't help the apprehension that isn't all due to the panic attack that hasn't completely left my body.

"It should terrify you. You should be running away from me right now and going for help. You should find a camper, you should call the police. Tell them what I am. Tell them what I've done to you. Tell them what I *will* do to you if you don't."

I can't help but feel like it's a promise. The way my heart beats so loudly, I wonder if he can feel it in his fingers that are near my throat.

"What are you going to do to me?" I ask, wondering if I *should* ask or if I really want to know the answer.

It's the right question, or maybe the wrong one. His small, teasing grin goes wide, showing off white teeth and a predatory smile. "I'm going to wreck you. I'm going to *ruin* you. And the thing that you should be most afraid of?" He leans in until our lips are almost touching once more, and my breath hitches in my chest. "I'm going to keep you."

“*W*hat do you mean, he showed up at your cabin?” My mother’s voice has climbed a couple of octaves or so since we started talking, and I’m half-worried that she’s going to pack up and show up here before it’s even midnight.

Which would be impressive since it’s nearly ten at night and it would take her at least two hours to get here.

I sit back against the cloth camp chair and stare at the fire that I’ve built. Both dogs are on the other side of it, collapsed next to their food bowls with stuffed bellies that are full of food and the peanut butter that Virgil had snuck them before leaving.

“We’ll talk later,” he’d told me, standing up off the bed. “I need you in a good frame of mind.” Then he’d just...left. Just breezed out the front door as I’d watched and mourned the kiss that hadn’t happened.

If anyone deserved to be killed today, it was my stepfather.

“He called me a couple of days ago,” I explain, cringing when she makes a few choice comments about me not calling her earlier. “I know, I know. I’m sorry. He said Kate gave him my number.” Her only response to that is a sharp intake of breath, and I can practically see her seething at my words.

“*He can’t be there, Sloane,*” my mom promises me. “*If he shows up again, call the cops.*”

“Err...” I look off into the trees instinctively, as if Virgil is just going to appear.

If only it worked that way.

Sullenly, I shift in my chair, my shorts riding up my hips as I fold my legs up under me and lean back. It doesn't seem like a good idea to call the cops with Virgil here. “I don't know, Mom. I don't want to make a scene.”

“*You're not the one making a scene!*” She's irritated, but I know it's not with me. “*Are you off this week?*”

“I'm off tomorrow.”

“*Can I come down to take you to lunch? I want to make sure you're okay. And discuss Anthony. He can't do that.*” She repeats the words like that'll make him just not show up again. “*I want to go over the rules of his release with you. And I'm going to have words with Kate in the morning.*”

I doubt those words will be ‘have a blessed week.’

“Okay...yeah. If you want to?” Twigs snap behind me, prompting Vulcan to look up, his ears pricked, to stare off into the woods. Either it's nothing, or it's someone he knows.

And I'm sure there's only one person he likes that might be creeping up on me tonight.

“*Noon okay with you? Or will you still be asleep? I'm also bringing gifts for my grand-puppies.*” Her words make me snort, though half of my attention is fixed somewhere else entirely.

Like on who might be creeping up behind me. Prickles of anxiety run down my spine. I'd taken a long nap this afternoon, so I definitely feel better, but I don't feel one hundred percent just yet.

Not when I'm still afraid of my stepfather coming back to try to apologize, or whatever, again. I'm not sure how long the threat of Vulcan's fangs will last, but I hope that it's at least a week.

Or more, preferably.

“You spoil them so much.” I snicker, closing my eyes as the breeze changes and more of the fire’s warmth curls around my body. “Yeah, that’s fine. If you have time and want to come down—”

“*I do,*” Mom promises me firmly. “*No ifs, ands, or buts about it.*” I can’t help but smile at the old saying.

“Okay. I’ll see you at noon. Drive safe, Mom.”

“*Sleep well.*” She hangs up without another word, and I rest the phone on my thigh for a second before I start to get up, wanting to turn and see if Virgil really is behind me somewhere.

But I don’t get the chance. Leather gloves cup my face, holding me in place as their owner presses his nose to the top of my head and sighs.

“Don’t get up. Not until I tell you to,” Virgil purrs, running his hands down the side of my neck until he’s gripping my shoulders. “I’ve been behind you for a few minutes now. I guess you knew since Vulcan was watching me.”

“He’s never going to let you sneak up on me again,” I say, eliciting a chuckle from the man behind me.

“Is that a challenge, Sloan? Are you *daring* me to find a way to get to you without letting him know? And if I succeed, what exactly is my *prize*? Is it you?” One hand moves to cup my jaw, his thumb tracing my lips. “There are so many things I could do to you out here. And I bet you’d let me partake of every single one.”

“Like what?” I can’t help but whisper, tilting my head back to gaze up at him in the dark.

God, he looks so different in the firelight. In the daytime, even when he’s not pretending to be someone he isn’t, he still seems almost friendly. Approachable, attractive, and like someone that might help you if your car is broken down on the side of the road.

But at night, it’s like he changes. His eyes are a darker gold, and nothing in them is polite or kind. He’s playful and *dangerous*. He looks like he wants something that I’ll be too

afraid to give him or that he's daring me to try to get away from him.

A chuckle leaves him, reverberating in his chest. "I'm not going to sit here and tell you *all* of my plans for you. But one day, I'm going to make you *run*."

"My cardio sucks," I point out, keeping my tone light even as my stomach does a somersault.

"Oh, you're so funny, aren't you?" His grin grows like he's sharing my amusement. "You'd better hope your cardio is better than you think. I'm *nice*. I'll give you a few seconds, but wherever I catch you, you're getting thrown down and fucked like you deserve."

"What if I run that way?" I point to where the other campsites are, half-joking to see some measure of bewilderment on his face.

But I only get that fucking smirk.

"Then I'll assume it's because you want everyone who's here to *watch* me fuck you until you can't see or walk straight."

Oh. Well... That's not what I expected. He doesn't laugh or tell me that he's joking. Instead, he stands up and stretches.

It's only then that I realize he's in the black outfit from the nights he's come to see me, and the white mask is clipped to his belt.

The knife is there as well, in a holster on his thigh.

My insides twist, and I catch my breath as I watch him work the knots loose from his neck before I dare to ask softly, "Were you doing something, umm...bad?"

His eyes open and find mine as the last few sticks in the fire that had been holding strong fall into a heap and release a puff of embers as their last attempt at life. "Nothing so bad that I can't trace your skin with this knife tonight," he promises, reaching out a hand to pull me to my feet.

I let him, snagging the jug of water that I use to dump over the remains of the fire. Then I walk over to put out the flames

completely, mixing the water around with a stick so that I've found and snuffed any hint of an ember.

"Are you leaving?" I ask, setting the gallon of water on the ground. "For the night?"

"Do you want me to?"

"No." He follows me to the cabin, the dogs trailing after him, and I suck in a breath of air-conditioned, clean air before shivering in the colder room.

The door closes behind me, and he runs his fingers up my back before I turn to look at him over my shoulder.

"You...do that a lot," I say, immediately wishing I hadn't.

He quirks a brow and lays the mask on the table by the door. "Do what?"

"Touch me."

"Of course I do. Haven't you figured out why?" Two fingers become his splayed hand at the base of my spine, and a moment later, he hooks his fingers in the top of my denim shorts and pulls me back so that we're almost flush.

I shake my head at the question once I've discarded a few answers.

"To remind us both that you're mine."

Helpfully, that brings me to the crux of one of my concerns.

"Yeah, okay. So I'd like to talk about that, actually? If that's okay."

"You can talk to me about anything, Sloane." He uses his grip on my shorts to drag me into my room, but lets go so that I can sit on the bed, kick my flip-flops off, and pull my legs up under me again.

"You don't know me," I point out, sitting back and resting my weight on my hands. He doesn't immediately sit down but instead flips on the bedside light and turns off the larger one before placing his boots by the door and coming to sit on the bed as well. "You say that you won't leave. That I'm stuck

with you, but how can you mean that when you don't know the first thing about me?"

He meets my eyes, tilts his head to the side, and says simply, "I know everything about you that I need to know. I've known since the first time I came in here a few nights ago that either you would make me leave or that I *never* would."

"You don't even know my favorite food. Or my mom's name. Or where I went to school. Or if we're compatible. Are we dating? Is that what this is?" It feels like something other than dating, but I don't know what to call it.

"We could call it dating." Virgil shrugs. "Is the problem that you don't know that stuff about me? You can ask me anything, and I'll answer."

I stop short, surprised by that. "*Anything?*" I repeat, calling him out on it.

He smiles slyly. "Anything."

He doesn't mean it.

"Have you really killed people?"

"Yeah, I have."

"How old were you when you first killed someone?"

"I was sixteen. My friend helped because he was kind of in love with me."

"Who was it?"

His smile never wavers. "My girlfriend's mom. She slept with my dad and broke up my parents' marriage."

Oh. Wow. That's certainly not what I was expecting, and I stare at him, surprised.

"How did you kill her?" I don't know why I'm asking because I *don't need to know*.

"I stabbed her." He taps the knife on his thigh. "It's my preference to get up close and personal. I like to make a mess of things, and I like it when I can watch the life fade from

someone's eyes." He pauses, eyes fixed on mine, and asks, "Does that bother you?"

Unfortunately for my sanity, my moral high ground, and my plausible deniability...it does not. "No. I don't think so? Do you still kill people?"

"I still kill people," he assures me. "But it's not so..." He tilts his head, thinking of the word he wants to use. "Indiscriminate as it was back then. I try to keep it to the people that maybe, probably deserve it. I don't want to go to jail because I'm predictable, after all. You would've been the exception to that, of course, if I killed you."

I don't think about the last part of his words. I'm obviously pretty grateful he did *not* kill me. "Are you worried about that? About going to jail?"

"Not at all. I've been doing this for a long time. I've never even come close to being caught. Well..." He grimaces like he's thought of something unpleasant. "I'm *here* because I was a little...overzealous in reporting on the last crime that was all mine. It's hard not to get excited when you look at your own handiwork."

I don't know what to say to that, so I tuck it away for later. Or never. "What if it did bother me? What if I decide right now that you unalive people—"

"Killing people, princess. We're not twelve."

"*Killing people*, then. What if I decide it bothers me? Would you leave?"

"No."

"Would you still kill people?"

His exhale is his answer, and he eyes me with lazy speculation. "Hmm, I don't know," he admits. "I love to kill. I love how it feels to take someone else's life. But to stop you from trying to leave?" He rolls his shoulders in a shrug. "Maybe."

"But you've only known me for three days!" My voice rises, climbing in pitch, and I throw my hands up in the air

reflexively. “Don’t you see how *crazy* it is for you to say you’d try to give something up for *me*? Doesn’t that seem *insane* to you?”

“Well, yeah.” It doesn’t seem to bother him very much, and that pulls me up short. “Of course, it’s fucked up. *I’m* fucked up. I’ve been coming into your cabin every night to do fucked up things with you, and I have a literal list a mile long of all the things I’m *going* to do to you.”

“You’ll get bored after a while. I’m not that interesting, and I don’t think I’ll be joining you on your murder sprees,” I point out lamely as my heart races at his words.

“I won’t get bored of you.”

“But how can you be *sure*?”

He reaches out and grabs the front of my shirt, dragging me to him until I’m half on his lap and straddling his knees. “I don’t know, exactly. But the fact is, I *am* sure. I know myself well enough to know that much. I will *never* get bored of you or let you go. Those aren’t just empty words.”

He’s going to kiss me. The fact dawns on me as I right myself as best I can on his lap, my hands on his shoulders as he loops his free arm around my waist. He’s going to kiss me right here when we’ve been talking about him killing people and the fact that he’s never going to let me go.

“I’m going to kiss you,” he says, echoing my thoughts. “So take that time to decide how you want me to fuck you, princess. Because as soon as I’m done with your mouth, you have about four seconds before I rip off all of your clothes.”

“It’ll take me longer than four seconds to undress,” I gasp as his mouth descends on mine, lips curving into a cruel smile.

“I know,” he coos sweetly, mockingly. “I just want an excuse to be rough with you.”

I can’t say anything else. Not when his lips find mine for the first time, and he urges my lips open with his own. I give in instantly, allowing his tongue to invade my mouth and explore it like he’s been waiting for this all day.

And maybe he has. Maybe I have, as well.

But it's not long before exploration turns to devouring. He pulls me more firmly against him, a fist in my hair, and his tongue recedes so that he can nip at my bottom lip until it stings.

Still, he doesn't pull away. He tugs and teases in earnest, teeth sinking into swollen flesh with a growl and my answering yelp. My body jerks at the sharp pain, but his tongue follows it as he hums praise against my lip and licks the small wound he's made, drawing my blood into his mouth before finally pulling away.

"Four seconds," Virgil reminds me. "And I've always had a bad habit of counting too fast."

Closing the cabin door behind me, I pause and inhale. My eyes fall onto Vulcan, who trots around the edge of the cabin with purpose and then I glance down at Argus.

It smells like I have a fire going, and the idea of one going in the fire pit *all night* makes my stomach clench uncomfortably.

That wouldn't have been possible, Sloane, I point out to myself silently. A fire would not have run all night on the memory of twigs, and the only way it could have happened is if the forest had caught fire. And as the trees still sway in the breeze above me, leaves rustling, I'm pretty sure that's off the table as well.

I don't wait to speculate further, there's no point. So I trudge toward the railing that blocks my cabin from the little campfire area and stop when I'm close enough to see what sits beyond.

A fire. In the fire pit.

But, perhaps more shocking, is Virgil. He sits on top of the picnic table, eyes fixed on his phone, and beside him in a flattened plastic grocery bag are s'mores ingredients and two shiny new long roasting sticks for them.

It's a good thing he's distracted because I just stand there like an idiot while Vulcan sniffs his shoes and try to get my brain to process what I'm seeing. My gaze flicks to the fire, and I note absently that it's well made, not just a pile of sticks and twigs thrown into the fire ring like he just dumped them

there with abandon. There are even a few pre-cut logs in there I don't remember buying, meaning he really did come prepared, even though it's only eight-thirty in the morning.

When I look back at Virgil, I see that his eyes are fixed directly on my face, and I can't help but jump.

"Good morning sleepyhead," he teases, crooking a finger towards me.

"Good morning?" I can't help phrasing it like a question. I hadn't expected him to be here, first of all. Second, this is just all so...

Domestic, I suppose is the word that I'm looking for. *Domestic* like we're dating, and he knows me well enough to be aware that this is definitely something I'd enjoy and appreciate from him.

Hell, maybe stalking me has gleaned him more information than what I would've thought possible. If so, good for him, and congratulations on the dedication to his craft he's so clearly shown.

Or maybe he's just a really good guesser.

"You like s'mores, and you like fires." Neither is a question, and he beckons me over again until I'm sitting on the bench of the picnic table instead of up top like him. Almost immediately, he moves, sliding across the rough wood until he can bracket me with his legs and his knees are at shoulder level for me. I look up into his face questioningly, but Virgil just grins and doesn't give me any kind of answer.

"Yeah," I agree. "But do *you* like them?"

"I didn't really do this for *me*."

I stare at him, wanting an honest answer instead of the evasion that he's so good at giving me. Finally, Virgil sighs and lays his phone down, his hands coming forward so that he can stroke his fingers through my loose hair. "I like campfires," he admits. "I don't like s'mores that much. Though I'm sure if you put a marshmallow in your mouth right now, I'd be happy to fight you for it."

I snort and glance at the bag beside his thigh. “Pretty sure there’s enough that we don’t have to go at it gladiator style,” I inform him dryly, leaning against the wood and the V of his legs. “I’m just...surprised. I would’ve thought you had better things to do than wait until I wake up with a fire and s’mores all ready to go.”

“I don’t have anything better to do.”

“Yeah. I...I got that.” It’s so strange to be sitting here like we’ve been *dating*. Like he knows me and everything about me, and that we’re closer than near-strangers.

Though it doesn’t quite feel like we’ve only known each other for a few days. Not with how comfortably I melt against him.

Which is definitely problematic, given he’s a *serial killer*, and I don’t see myself unaliving anyone anytime soon.

Then again, all things are possible through good sex and kink, as the saying maybe goes. So who am I to say what I will and won’t do in the future if he keeps coming into my cabin and railing me at night?

“Tell me something about you?” It bothers me slightly that he knows more about me than I do about him, and if this is going to be a *thing*, I want to rectify it.

“Like what, princess?” I love the way he says the nickname and the way it feels slightly inappropriate during the daylight.

“Like...” I search my brain for something and scramble not to come up blank. “What’s your favorite color?”

“Magenta.”

“Weirdly specific, but okay.” I suck in a breath. “Favorite animal?”

“Dogs.”

“Favorite food?”

“Chili dogs.”

“Really?”

His grin widens, and he ruffles my hair. “Yes, *really*. Why is that so surprising when I’m pretty sure *your* favorite food is marshmallows?”

He’s not wrong.

“I don’t know. Chili dog is just so random. I would’ve thought you were very new-age Hannibal Lector and enjoy only the finest steak and red wine to remind you of...you know.” I trail off, my words becoming a whisper.

“Of the blood of my many victims that I’ve killed in oh-so creative ways?”

“Yeah. I just didn’t want to say that out loud.” His nails scratch my scalp, and I sigh, unable to stop myself from shivering just a little.

“Why? There’s no one up here to hear us. Unless the dogs are going to tell.” His words prompt me to look up, and I see that both dogs are sniffing around the edge of the woods, looking appropriately entertained. “You can ask me about it if you want. About *anything*. I won’t hide anything from you.”

“What if you scare me away?”

“Oh, Sloane. I’ve *tried* to scare you away.” He tugs on my hair. “I’ve tried the best I know how. Outside of actually hurting you, I suppose. At this point, I’m going to assume you’re not afraid of anything.”

That’s absolutely a lie. My own PTSD puts the lie to his words, and I frown up at him ruefully. “That’s totally not true and you know it,” I remark quietly. “I’m *terrified* of my stepdad.”

“The guy who was here yesterday?” Virgil’s eyes darken. “Why?”

“I thought this was when *you* tell me shit about yourself?”

He sighs and slides his hands down my shoulders, leaning over me until his body forms a very comforting, very restrictive cage around me. His arms wrap around my shoulders, then he pulls back to sit up once more. “I’ll tell you

whatever you want to know. But *I* want to know what he did to you.”

I’m not sure how I feel about the growly, possessive tone.

“It was a long time before I met you,” I point out, trying to quiet my racing heart.

“Obviously, or he’d be dead right now.” I don’t know how to process the empty, blunt words, so I don’t bother trying.

“He kidnapped me,” I say finally, letting out a breath I hadn’t known I was holding.

Virgil sits up and picks up the s’mores ingredients, pulling things open and setting them onto plates as I talk.

“When I was eleven, my mom decided she’d had enough of him. He was emotionally and verbally abusive toward both of us. More her than me, since he said I was the daughter he’d always wanted and normally treated me like it.” I reach my hand up for one of the sticks, but Virgil keeps it out of my reach as he moves to sit down on the bench beside me, his thigh and shoulder pressed to mine. I watch as he sticks the marshmallow over the fire, not quite in it, and patiently just waits.

When he catches my eyes on him, he smirks. “Did you think I was going to just stick it in the flames?”

“Absolutely,” I admit without pause.

“I told you, one of my best friends *loves* camping. His mom owned a campground, and there were summer camps there every year at the lake. He went every year, and he’s insane about how we’re supposed to toast marshmallows.”

“Even now?”

“*Especially* now.” His smile is teasing, and he leans over to kiss my cheek. “I’ll toast your marshmallow.”

“That sounds kind of kinky.”

“But *you* need to tell me what happened.” His tone turns firm as he says it, and I can’t help scrunching my nose at his words.

“*Thanks,*” I mutter and let out a breath through my nose. “Yeah, so I’m not going to drag it out. He picked me up from school when Mom said she was divorcing him and told me he was going to take me home early. Instead, he drove me out of state and went crazy. He was drinking, too. And told me that Mom would have to take him back since he had me. Then said I’d be better off dead so that I wouldn’t feel the same kind of heartbreak he felt.” I say it quickly, perfunctorily, as though it happened to some other chubby eleven-year-old with wild auburn curls instead of the one sitting beside Virgil.

“So Mom got the police involved, obviously. It took them the better part of a day to track him down to this old motel his friend owned. He had a knife and threatened to kill me. He’d almost done it before having a bit of a *fit*.” I grip the neckline of my tee and yank it down, showing him the small scar between my collarbones. “And now I have PTSD and a dog trained to sock me in the face if I don’t listen to him and sit down when I’m starting to freak out.”

Virgil doesn’t reply for a few seconds. He removes the properly toasted marshmallow from the fire and sets it onto the graham cracker and chocolate, puts the other cracker down on top of it, and then turns to wrap me in a hug and bury his face against my hair.

“So don’t take this the wrong way, but I could kill him for you,” he murmurs, pulling me against him more thoroughly. “You could watch, I could video it, or you can help. *Or* we can just not talk about it.”

I snort against his t-shirt. “You can’t kill my stepdad.”

“Why?”

“Because that’s...” I let out a breath and turn to press my mouth against the side of his neck to distract him. I can’t really think of a reason that he *shouldn’t* kill Anthony, frankly, which should probably be troubling.

He chuckles, his arm going lower around my waist as I kiss from his neck to his jaw. “Are you trying to distract me?” he teases, turning so he can kiss me fully when my lips are close to his.

“No, never,” I lie. “I was just struck by an *urge*.”

“I know that urge,” he replies with fake enthusiasm. “It’s the same *urge* I get when I look at you and can’t help thinking how good you look on your knees, waiting for my cock.”

“It’s eight-thirty in the morning.”

“And I haven’t fucked you yet. I *know*; it’s been forever. But I did make you a s’more?” He holds it up in front of my face, prompting a laugh to escape my lips.

“You did,” I say, nodding sagely and plucking it from his fingers. “You *so* did. How will I ever repay you?” I take a bite and chew, swallowing it moments before Virgil’s lips find mine again.

“Maybe by letting me have a taste,” he purrs, his tongue sweeping over my bottom lip before he puts his free hand in my hair and holds me in place just so he can explore my mouth and lick up every hint of sweetness there.

When he pulls away, I feel hotter than I should, and I suck in a breath to compose myself. “Good enough for you?”

He hums thoughtfully. “No. Not enough chocolate. Take another bite, let me taste it again.”

“You could just eat it yourself.”

“But *Sloane*,” he gazes at me, all puppy-dog eyes and earnestness. “Don’t you know that it tastes so much better when it’s from your mouth?”

The second time my mom knocks on the door, calling out my name, I open it just as I’ve pulled my shirt on and beam at her, hoping my hair doesn’t look as bad as I think it does. I definitely hadn’t expected her a half-hour early, and I’m amazed that she doesn’t remark on how I look or how red my face probably is.

God, I hope she hadn’t heard my shriek when she’d gotten out of the car. Hopefully, she’d still been safely behind the wheel when Virgil had bit down on my still-throbbing shoulder and come inside of me.

It's hard not to glance behind me toward my bedroom, where he's currently getting dressed.

"Hey Mom," I say, smiling and stepping forward to throw my arms around her shoulders. She's just as tall as I am, with the same build, but her hair is straight and long, and her eyes are both blue instead of my heterochromia.

"Sloane," she murmurs and squeezes me in a tighter embrace than is strictly necessary. "Are you okay? I was scared you'd be a wreck after that asshole came to see you. Fuck him, by the way. I'm in touch with our lawyer and he's reporting this to the courts and his parole officer. It's *not* okay for him...to...."

She trails off, her eyes narrowing in confusion. I don't need to turn around. My hearing is fine, and I know that Virgil has come out of my bedroom and gone into the kitchen like he lives here, too.

He'd better have a shirt on since my mother is here.

"Who is that?" she asks, craning around me to get a better look.

"That...is my boyfriend," I say impulsively, cringing internally. I'm not sure *he'd* want me to use that word precisely. And I'm not sure we *are* dating. Is that even the proper word for what we're doing?

It definitely doesn't seem like it.

"His name's Virgil."

"Boyfriend?" She looks at me again. "You haven't told me about a *boyfriend*."

Well, Mom, I don't say, that's because I've only known him for a little less than a week, ever since he started stalking me and decided I'm too great to kill. So wonderful job in raising me!

She'd have a heart attack if I tried to tell her even half of that.

A sigh behind me lets me know that Virgil is back, and from over my shoulder, I can see him slightly wave to my

mother in greeting. “Hello.” His voice is higher and more amicable than usual. With a shock, I realize it was the voice he used when he checked in to the campground.

And he doesn’t use it around me anymore.

“You didn’t tell her about me?” Virgil puts a hand over his thankfully clothed chest, just above his heart, like he’s offended. “Are we not *serious*, Sloane?” He’s overtly teasing enough that my Mom knows he’s joking as well, and I scoff wryly at him.

“You just haven’t come up,” I tell him, pushing at his hand. “Mom, I have a boyfriend. Maybe it’s a little late, and I should’ve told you sooner. But.” I gesture theatrically to him with both hands. “He’s cool, and this is him.”

My mom looks him over appraisingly as if she’s a bloodhound and can smell my lies. “How do my grand puppies feel about him?” she asks finally, switching her gaze back to me.

“Oh, Vulcan *loves* him,” I assure her, leaving out that it’s because he sat in the woods with peanut butter to win him over before breaking into my room and fucking me until I lay boneless on the bed.

She probably doesn’t need to know that, after all.

“Really?” She glances back at Virgil, still skeptical. “What do you do for a living?”

“You are not about to play twenty questions with—”

“I’m a reporter,” Virgil answers smoothly.

“Do you own a house?”

“I have a condo in Akron.”

“How serious are you about Sloane?”

Virgil looks at me, his gaze softening the perfect amount. He’s *practiced* at this, I realize. He knows exactly what to show my mother to make her believe we’re together.

How terrifying.

“I’m *very* serious about your daughter. I was here when your ex-husband showed up, and I wish I’d done more to preserve Sloane’s peace of mind. In the future, I hope to be better. I’m...still learning how to react when Argus is tasking and what I need to do for her in those cases when she’s struggling.”

Damn, he’s good. It’s uncanny, and I make a mental note to ask him about it later.

His words appease my mother, and her metaphorical hackles go down. She sighs and looks him over, begrudging fondness already blooming on her face.

He’s so good it’s eerie.

“Then it’s nice to meet you. I’m Emma Walker.” She holds her hand out, and he shakes it respectfully.

“It’s nice to meet you too, Ms. Walker. Like your daughter said, I’m Virgil Olsen.” His voice remains pleasant and maybe a little *boyish*. “I have to go for a while...” He leans over and kisses my temple affectionately. “But have a good afternoon, ladies.” Quietly, he sidles out, bidding goodbye to both of us again before walking down the hill to where his truck is parked farther down.

How had I not noticed it there earlier? Had he parked it away from my driveway specifically to surprise me this morning?

“He’s sweet.” My mother watches him go, her tone still holding a hint of suspicion. “But that was unexpected. Is there something you aren’t telling me?” When I look at her, I find her gaze back on mine, and I smile wryly.

“Look, it’s just been...*intense* with him. We haven’t known each other terribly long.”

“But you’re serious about him?”

“Deadly.” I almost flinch when I say it, and I’m glad Virgil can’t hear how corny the confession is. I’m such an idiot.

“We’ll talk about it. But first”—she reaches a hand up to show me the pet boutique bag that dangles there—“let me in

so I can love on my grandpuppies. They *miss* me, you know.”

“Uh, they miss your luxury treats and all the other insane things you get them.” I laugh, stepping back so she can come inside.

The dogs, who had been crowding me while we spoke, swarm her with wagging tails and lolling tongues, thrilled to see their ‘grandma’ who’s come to them bearing gifts, as any proper grandparent should.

Hopefully, by the time she’s done, she’ll be too focused on wanting to talk about Anthony, to worry or ask anything further about Virgil.

Because I’m running out of things to tell her, and I won’t know where to go from there.

*T*here he is again.

It's good luck that I have a lot of different hiding places in the campground. And while I know my mother wants to know Anthony's every move, I've texted her four times today, telling her that he's hanging around, clearly looking for me.

Already he's been to the House, presumably to talk to Pat and Sam about my whereabouts since he most certainly did not find me back at the *locked* cabin. But they know not to tell him either.

Vulcan whines at my side, shifting as I sit on the swing and watch Anthony's SUV go by again. Through the trees and up a hill beside the more private campsites, I know there's very little chance he's going to find me up here, but the dogs are leashed anyway. I don't need them bounding down and giving away my position or ending up on the road to get hit.

Call me paranoid, but I don't want anything to happen to any of us. And I don't trust my stepfather to *not* run over my dogs out of spite.

Footsteps crunch on the gravel behind me, and I don't need to look up to know that it's Virgil that wraps his hands on the chains of the swing and pushes me forward slightly, my sneakers skimming the rock under me.

"Offer still stands," he tells me, his voice mild. Vulcan licks his hand, just visible at the corner of my eye, and pants at him with his eyes wide and begging. He wants Virgil's

attention almost as much as I do, though it's in a very different way that my dog craves my *boyfriend*.

What a strange thing to say. Or rather, think. He hasn't said anything about my use of the word, though I haven't gotten to talk to him much since my mom went home late last night, promising she'd be careful and reminding me that she loves to drive at night.

Which is definitely a trait I did not acquire from her.

"The offer to kill my stepdad?" I ask almost gloomily, using the swing's momentum to stop myself and lean against him. I gaze up at Virgil, who watches me with a carefully neutral expression, though when I quirk a brow at him, I can see a smile flicking at the corner of his lips.

"Yeah."

"That seems suspicious. I'm worried you'll get caught."

"Shouldn't you be telling me to stop? Reminding me of my humanity or my morality?" He's joking, clearly. Teasing me like I've forgotten what he is or who I've been letting into my cabin day and night.

"Uh, no. He's a piece of crap. But..." I let out a heavy sigh and lift my feet up so that the swing slants forward once more, and I'm able to skim the gravel with the toes of my shoes. "You can't just go around killing people for being kind of crappy."

"He's more than kind of crappy, and I assure you that I can." His arms move so he can drape them over my shoulders, and both of us watch him go along the main drive of the campground once more. "Have you not told your mom about him being here? I thought she'd been rather adamant about calling the cops if he returned."

My eyes narrow and I glance up at him. "That was a private conversation we had after you left," I point out, my voice mild. I'm not upset, obviously. Stalking is just part of his thing, and I'm too emotionally tired by the yo-yoing of Anthony in the campground to do more than point it out.

“I listened for a while,” Virgil shrugs. “Sue me. It’s a hobby, princess. If you have an issue with me listening, then I’m fine discussing—”

“I don’t mind,” I break in. “Not over this, anyway. If you want to listen to me bitch about my shitty stepdad, then who am I to stop you—” I break off when Anthony’s truck slows near the entrance of the road that leads up the hill toward our spot. If he starts to come up here, I’ll have to find somewhere to hide.

I can’t face him today. I can’t tell him to go away again.

“So, are we expecting the police to show up anytime soon?” Virgil prods, hands going to my shoulders.

“Guess not. Mom said she’s called, and they were going to send out a non-emergency vehicle or something.” I say the words as flippantly as I can, all the while pretending I haven’t been looking at the entrance of the campground and praying that someone would show up to get rid of him.

He goes by the road, and I let out a heavy sigh of relief.

“Sloane...” Virgil’s fingers stroke over my hair and comb through it softly. “He’s going to come up here eventually. What’s your plan for that? Do you have one?”

A wry smile curves on my lips. “Oh, I absolutely have one. A good one, too.”

“Care to share, princess?”

“I’m going to launch myself into the woods and hide.”

“I...” he trails off and sighs, fingers picking through sections of my auburn hair. “That’s not really a plan.”

“It’s the best one I have.”

He’s quiet for a few moments, and we watch Anthony’s truck circle the campground around the tents, where he slows like I might be hiding among them or behind a water fountain.

Will he get out a spotlight next and try to catch my eyes to paralyze me like a deer?

“I don’t get what he wants,” I hiss, my shoulders tight. “Like, I’ve made it clear that I don’t want him here. I’m not interested in him trying to make amends. *I don’t want to make amends.*” My voice rises until I sound almost hysterical. “Why is he still looking for me? How is he *allowed* to be here?” I hate the way I sound and the way my heart pounds in my throat.

“I can’t really answer that.” Virgil doesn’t seem too invested in trying, but that’s fair. He has no reason to know either. “But I *can* offer a different solution if you’ll let me.”

I huff, my shoulders falling, and shake my head. “You can’t kill him and throw his body in the lake. Someone will find him.”

“That’s amateur of you, Sloane.” he sounds a little reproachful when he says it. “If you’re going to start coming up with murder plans, we’ll have to talk about how well they’d work and what your chances of getting away with them are.”

“It was a joke.”

“Not when you think I’d really do it.” He cups my chin in his hand, thumb stroking over my bottom lip. “Stop being a brat with me for a minute and listen.” It isn’t a request. I’m not surprised. “I need to run back to my home in Akron,” he tells me, though it’s hard to focus on anything other than the weight of his thumb against the seam of my mouth. All I want is for him to push his thumb inside and tease my tongue.

He’s good at that, after all.

“So you’re leaving for a little while?” My stomach clenches when I say it, though I try to keep my voice casual, like it doesn’t bother me. I’m not sure how this is a suggestion, either.

“Let me take you with me,” he urges. “You and the dogs. Let me throw you over my shoulder and steal you away to my house. If it makes you feel better, I don’t mind pinning you down and restraining you. You’d like that.” He doesn’t ask, just assumes, but he’s probably right. “We’ll make it feel so real.”

“Who are you trying to convince? Your *willing* victim? I don’t think you need to sell me on that, Virgil. Besides, I can’t. I only have two more days off. I really can’t.”

“We’ll be back in two days,” Virgil assures me. “Or one. Whatever you want. I’ll make sure to get you back in time for work, Sloane.”

“That doesn’t sound very abductor-ish of you.”

“What can I say? I’m going soft.” He wraps his arms around my shoulders again and turns to kiss the side of my throat. “Don’t say no,” he breathes against my skin. “What’s the harm? I’ll take you on a few dates, we’ll camp out in my condo. We’ll have *fun*, and I’ll let you blast the AC like you do in your cabin.”

“I don’t blast the AC.”

“Yeah, you do. Sometimes I think you’re seeing when it’ll *snow* in there.” He nips my shoulder, and I sigh to cover up a whimper.

“You won’t kill me.” It’s not a question, but I still can’t help the touch of fear that snakes through my nerves.

“I won’t kill you,” he assures me, the question seeming to not bother him. Almost as if he expects me to ask, even though I’ve done so at least sixteen times before. “I will *never* kill you or harm you. And I’ll remind you of that anytime you need me to. But I will take you away from this when it becomes too much.”

“Even if I’m kicking and screaming?”

“That’s not the threat you think it is.” A small part of me wants to tell him to *make me* go. The idea thrills me and makes my breath catch in my throat as I imagine him being unnecessarily rough with me.

That is, until Anthony’s SUV drives by again, and again he slows down by the slope that leads up here.

“Okay,” I say, getting to my feet and handing Vulcan’s leash over to Virgil when he puts his hand out for it in question. “Don’t let him pull you down the hill. And what’s

the plan? I don't see us walking back to the cabin without him seeing us."

"It's a straight shot from over there, down the hill, to your back window." The explanation catches me off guard, and I glance sharply at the dark-haired, sinfully sexy man that stands behind me with one hand in his pocket and a completely at ease pose. His expression remains concerned and friendly, even as I scrutinize him with narrowed eyes.

"What?" I ask, finally. "How do you know that?"

"How do you *think*?" He crooks a finger at me, and I follow him, walking to the place he pointed out and following him off the road as the sound of a car gets steadily closer.

Thankfully, by the time Anthony is close enough that he would've seen me on the swing, we're deep in the woods and obscured by the trees enough that there's no way he'll know anyone's back here, let alone me.

The whole time I spend packing up my backpack with everything I'll need for a couple of days, I'm terrified. I'm sure that at any moment, Anthony is going to come back and that he'll realize I'm here. Not to mention that I'm here *alone* since Virgil had to go get his truck for us to escape in.

God, I hope he doesn't do anything violent to my stepfather.

Why not? My brain demands, the words echoing around in my head unbidden. *Why would it be such a bad thing if he killed Anthony?*

My hands slow, though I don't mean for them to. My packing crawls to a turtle's pace, and I bite my bottom lip hard enough for it to sting. It's wrong to ask Virgil to end my problems with a knife; worse still that the thought of him doing it doesn't elicit anything other than cold hope.

After all, I can't control my new boyfriend. If he does something, then what can I do other than make sure that neither of us pays for it?

Anthony's death would be a shame.

A tragedy of the least-epic proportions.

An engine outside grabs my attention, and Vulcan gives a short, loud bark to let me know that someone is definitely here.

It doesn't *sound* like Anthony.

But both of them drive big enough vehicles that I don't know if I could tell them apart with any kind of accuracy. Especially now, when I'm freaking out a little bit.

A door closes, and footsteps sound on the wood of my porch outside. Vulcan waits, whining, and I take that as a good sign as my blood rushes in my veins. *What if it's not Virgil?* My brain whispers treacherously. *Did you lock the door? Maybe you didn't. Maybe you should—*

The door pushes open, my heart nearly stopping, until I see Virgil stride in, his face calculating and expressionless.

"Time to go," he says, picking up the dogs' bag and my pillow, though he glances at the latter with confusion and a slowly rising brow.

"I always take a pillow," I shrug, a bit self-conscious.

"I *have* pillows, Sloane."

"Well, maybe I won't like any of them."

He opens his mouth, closes it, and grins. "Okay," he says, and without the argument I'm expecting, he takes the things to his truck and puts them in the back. "Can I load up Vulcan?" he calls back, *thrilling* me with the sheer fact that he's always willing to ask first instead of assuming.

"Yeah!" I zip up my backpack, wondering if what I've packed is good enough for what he wants to do or not do. "I'm ready." With a last, quick plea to whatever's out there that everything will work out, I follow him out the door and toss the backpack in his truck, then let Argus jump up as well.

"You have everything?" He closes the back door on his side and opens the driver's door to lean on the seat and look at me, where I rest my arms on the passenger side.

“I...” I suck in a breath, and I can hear the sound of another approaching car.

Our time might be up.

Virgil seems to have the same idea because he glances at the road behind him, then at me.

“Yeah,” I say and dart back to the door to lock it. I’m grateful I don’t drop the keys or bash my face on the door like I would if this was an actual scary movie.

In a flash, I’m at the truck and in the front seat, closing the door and dropping my keys in the console as Virgil puts the truck in drive and heads down the driveway.

Again, we’re *just* lucky enough. My stepfather’s SUV rounds the bend too late to see where we’ve come from, and I duck down under the window as best I can, hoping that he doesn’t see enough of me to know who I am.

Virgil, on the other hand, waves and smiles savagely at my stepfather, his expression not fading when he looks at me and says, with feeling, “God, you should really just let me kill him and get it over with.”

I t's been at least a year and a half since I've been in Akron, Ohio. Maybe a little while longer, since I'm pretty sure the last time I was here was when I'd had my appendix out and mom had offered for me to stay in the house, to be able to help me with everything.

It hasn't changed much, though I do like looking at the city from Virgil's condo on the seventh floor of his building. The railing is stable and sturdy, easy to lean on, and solid enough that I know the dogs aren't going to go through it.

Not that they're out here with me. Argus is sleeping on the sofa, tail tucked over his eyes, as he takes a much-deserved nap. He hadn't slept at all on the drive up here like Vulcan had, and I'm half-wondering if he'll sleep until noon tomorrow.

Vulcan, on the other hand, is busy trying to *eat* Virgil. Or, at least, that's kind of what it looks like if I turn away from the view to watch.

In reality, he and my stalker-boyfriend are playing tug-of-war with an old shirt that Virgil had produced, and I know for a fact Vulcan has dragged him across the floor at least once.

It's amazing how well he does with dogs—my dogs, to be exact. While Argus likes him in an acquaintance kind of way, Vulcan is *all over* him, like Virgil is the greatest thing since sliced bread.

Part of it, of course, is the peanut butter. But a big part of it is just *Virgil*

I'm not jealous, but I am surprised.

The door behind me slides open, and I don't turn around as Virgil wraps his arms around my waist and rests his chin on my shoulder. "Hi," he purrs sweetly into my ear, kissing my jaw a moment later.

I hum thoughtfully, my eyes finally slanting to the side so I can just barely see him. "You've kidnapped me back to your condo," I remind him, the statement only partially false. Consensually kidnapped, sure. "So what now?"

"Umm, now I tie you up, never let you leave, and sway you to the dark side?" he offers, brows raising when I turn to look at him fully. "That's really how these things work, Sloane. I thought you knew that by now."

My stomach does little summersaults, and I study his face. "I wouldn't know," I say finally. "My last experience with being kidnapped was a lot less enjoyable than this one."

"Yeah, maybe let's not compare the two," Virgil suggests with a snort. "Anyway. I thought you'd maybe want to go get dinner? I definitely don't have any food here in the condo, so we're either going out or calling—"

He breaks off when his phone rings in the back pocket of his jeans and waits.

I guess a normal person would actually reach into their pocket and either answer or just reject the call. But not Virgil. He just stands there like nothing's happening and watches my face with his gold-flecked hazel eyes.

Finally, it stops, and Virgil opens his mouth again, only for the phone to pick up its ringing once more.

This time Virgil sighs and reaches into his pocket, palming his phone and bringing it to his ear as he answers. "What?" He doesn't sound thrilled and maybe a little grumpy, but I'm pretty sure there's an undertone of amusement like the caller is someone he can't be mad at for long.

He waits, listening, his eyes still on mine as he does. "I'm busy," he says at last, a half-smile coming to his lips. "Yeah, with *Sloane*." He says my name like he's trying to get the

point across. Though I'm not sure what that point is. He frowns, lips flat, and blinks as he studies me. "I'm not sure," he sighs.

If only I could hear the other side of this conversation.

"Seriously, I'm not sure if—*Yes*, I could ask her, Wren. But maybe *I don't* want to see your face today."

Wren must be a person, I assume. One of his friends, maybe?

One of his homicidal, serial killer friends?

Virgil sighs through his nose and looks away, only to put the phone on speaker and hold it between us. "My *best friends* want to go out for dinner tonight," he says, loud enough to be obnoxious. "They apparently want to rub my face in something they think I've done, and they want to give you a good laugh."

I stare at him, nonplussed, my hands flexing on the railing. *Your friends know about me?* I want to ask the question that's right on my lips, but instead, I just wait for the question that I hope is coming.

What do they know about me? I can't help but wonder if they know that he'd once thought about killing me. Or about how he broke into my cabin, and I didn't have the good sense to kick him right back out.

Though in my defense, the sex is great and would be a real loss if I had told him to leave.

"*And we want to meet you,*" the tinny voice on the other end of the phone adds. "*He's leaving that out on purpose.*"

"*And we like dogs?*" A different, quieter voice says. "*We won't hurt your boyfriend.*"

They know about Argus?

"*Speak for yourself. You aren't the one getting ripped apart by Miss Maneater herself for his shit,*" the first is quick to say.

"Are you asking me if I want to go?" I look at Virgil, eyes a little wide, and he just stares flatly back at me. "It's probably

not *my* decision—”

“*Oh, it definitely is,*” one of his friends assures me. “*Don’t let him act like he can just boss you around. If you want to go somewhere, like out to dinner with us to the place with the best chicken wings you’ll ever have, just tell him. What’s he going to do? Break up with you?*”

They both snicker at the joke, but I don’t quite understand what’s so funny about it.

“Enough, Wren,” Virgil sighs. He puts the phone back to his ear, taking it off speaker. “I’ll see if she wants to go. *I’ll see.* But I’m not going to *make* her if she doesn’t want to.” I start to move away from the rail, wondering if he wants to argue with them in peace, but Virgil snags my shoulder and pulls me back into the circle of his arms, trapping me against the rail. “It’s just you two, right? No Jed, and no Kat?” He waits, sighs, and then adds, “I’ll *ask.* Bye.” He hangs up without another word and buries his face in my hair.

“What’s wrong with Jed and Kat?” I can’t help but ask, running my fingers over the bumps in the iron rail.

“Everything,” he grumps, then scoffs. “They’re just a *lot.* Jed is...” he trails off, looking for the right answer. “He takes a bit to get used to. Most of my friends do, but Wren and Cass are the easiest to stomach.”

“Apart from you?”

“Oh, no, I wouldn’t say that,” he chuckles. “And Kat is loud. She’s pissed off at me, and I don’t think you want to see her scream at me all night.”

“Scream at *you?*” I can’t really imagine someone doing that and getting away with it. Not with the way I’ve seen him look at people. “And you don’t *mind?*”

“I *mind,*” he assures me. “But they’re my best friends, and I’m sure I’ve lost my temper with them on and off. Do you want to go? They *do* want to meet you, and they’ll be on their best behavior. And I’ll meet whoever you want me to meet?”

My shoulders drop a little, and I look away from him, biting my lip. “You’ve met my mom,” I point out. “That’s

pretty much everyone really important to me. I mean, I'm friends with my bosses and the lifeguard at the campground. But...I don't really have *amazing friends* like that."

Virgil doesn't miss a beat. He closes his arms around me and pulls me back against his chest, nearly pulling me off balance. "That's okay," he says, not asking about it. "I'll give you a couple of my friends. You can have Wren, first of all. He loves camping probably as much as you do." Virgil makes a face. "Scratch that. He loves camping more than you or I ever could."

"*Oh*, so I get the camping friend? That's it?" I laugh and squirm in his grip, loving that he only tightens his hold on me absently.

"You can have the stalking friend too. Cass. But I like him, so we'll have to share custody."

"Stalking friend? Isn't that kind of like the pot calling the kettle black?" I can't help but ask.

He looks down at me, gaze flat. "*Not* like Cassian," he assures me. "You've never seen someone *stalk* until you've seen him do it. He's so patient. He doesn't even do it just because he wants to kill someone. I think if he liked a girl, he'd stalk her too."

"Oh wow, what's that like?"

"*Princess*, if you keep it up, then we *won't* be meeting my friends because you'll be on your back, on my bed, and probably unable to leave there for the night." There's a note of warning in his words, but it certainly doesn't frighten me.

Though I do feel relieved that we're on the top floor of his building, and there doesn't seem to be anyone around to hear us.

He waits, eyes holding mine as if inviting me to keep going. I don't. Half because I'm not sure what else *to* say, and also because I would like to meet his friends.

"Do you want to go see them? We really don't have to. They joke about it, but if I tell them no, then they'll respect it."

“I’d actually like to,” I admit. “I would say to let them know about Argus, but I guess they already know about that, huh?”

His smile turns almost *sheepish*, and he looks away. The look is so surprising that my heart nearly falls out of my chest, and I try to memorize it so that I can always remember the expression. “I’ve told them about you,” he says finally. “A little. Maybe more than a little.” He clears his throat. “Are you ready to go? Do you want to shower or anything before we leave?”

It’s the least subtle change of topic I’ve ever heard in my life, and I answer it with a snort.

My hand tightens on Argus's leash, and the German Shepherd glances up at me as I follow Virgil into the casual, great-smelling restaurant. It isn't loud, thank God, but I always get a little nervous whenever I'm in such a new situation.

Maybe his friends won't like me.

Maybe the restaurant will make a big deal out of Argus.

Maybe I'll fall and slam my face on the floor, and Virgil will have to take me to the ER with a bag of frozen peas held to my face.

There are so many things that can go wrong, and I surreptitiously look behind me as if to check the door but find Virgil's eyes instead.

He reaches out and touches my arm, not smiling, but the reassurance is palpable in the touch.

"You're fine," he tells me like it's a given that I *am* fine.

Really, if he knew me, he'd know I'm rarely anything resembling fine, and I'm more of a hot mess waiting to fall apart at the slightest problem.

I think about telling him that. The words to do so go through my head, rearranging themselves multiple times, so it's probably a good thing that the hostess shows up, beaming, and looks us over.

"I'm not going to ask to pet him," she assures me, arms curled around a couple of menus. "I know how rude that

would be. But he's adorable. And I just want you to know he is seriously the *cutest* Shepherd I've ever seen."

"Oh." It's not what I was expecting, but only because I've built this up to be much worse in my own mind. "Thank you! He's definitely the cutest. And spoiled," I add, making her giggle.

My cute, spoiled dog sits down on my foot and looks up, his tongue lolling, before I reach down and stroke my thumb along the center of his nose and up towards his ears.

"Cass and Wren are already here," she tells Virgil, beckoning us to follow her before taking off down the main aisle of the restaurant.

"You guys come here a lot?" I assume, glad that the hall is wide enough for all three of us to walk together easily.

"It's the only place we really go. She actually used to date Kat," Virgil explains, gesturing to the hostess who's seating us.

"Oh. *Oh?*" I can't help but say, surprise making my brows jump upward.

He snorts. "They're still good friends. They just didn't have the same life goals. And yes, she knows."

"If we break up, are you—"

"No," Virgil says, not letting me finish the question. I look at him, stunned, and he smiles before he continues. "Because we're not breaking up. Remember? We've *absolutely* discussed this, Sloane."

I know his words are troubling. Or they should be. He's possessive, obsessed, and *problematic* in every definition of the word.

But I don't see it that way. I love that he's confident we aren't breaking up. I love that he makes it clear how much he wants to be in my life. Sure, I'm still somewhat terrified of what he is, and I have no idea how to process a lot of what he tells me sometimes. But I'm working on it.

And if he's so fixated and obsessed with me, why can't I be that way with him? If he can do it, so can I, right? And if he really wants to be in my life like this, why *can't* I show him the unpleasant, panicking, not-so-confident side of me that I work to hide from most people I know other than my mom?

"*Finally.*" The wry voice sounds familiar, and I look up as we round a corner into a smaller, private room with a large round table taking up half of it. While it looks like it has room for a couple of other tables and the marks on the floor to prove it, tonight it's just this one, and currently, it's inhabited by three men who appear to be around the same age as Virgil.

"Your waitress will be here soon," the hostess assures us and gives me a quick smile before skirting the wall to leave the room.

Beside me, Virgil tenses and gives a quick, pointed look at a blond, blue-eyed man that sits near the corner, turning his fork over on his napkin and gazing out the window.

"He's leaving," the one who'd already spoken says, getting to his feet and coming around the table to hug Virgil. He turns and does the same to me, surprising me into silence, and again Virgil gives a little unhappy sniff at my side. "Sorry. Should I have asked permission?" He rolls his eyes and steps back. "I'm Wren," he introduces, sticking his hand out to me.

"Oh, I'm Sloane," I reply, giving him my hand. I'm surprised at how rough his palms are with callouses like he does manual labor for a living.

Does murder count as manual labor? I can't help but wonder.

The man in the corner stands, gives the other guy still sitting a quick smile, and starts to move, only for Virgil to stop him with a hand on his arm.

"Hey," he says, in a voice that's much nicer than the one he'd spoken to his friends on the phone with. "I missed you, Jed. We'll talk before you go, all right?"

Jed. His friend that he'd thought would be too much for me.

And now he's leaving because of me.

It doesn't sit right and makes my stomach twist. My hand tightens on Argus's leash, and I take a quick breath before saying, "Why not stay?" I speak as flippantly as I can, and both men turn to look at me. "Unless Argus bothers you?"

"Dogs don't bother me." The man's voice is surprisingly quiet, and I hear a heavy southern accent that I'm not expecting.

Virgil meets my eyes, and I hold his gaze, refusing to look away or break it. I'm not afraid of his friends. Well, maybe I am a little bit.

But I don't want his friends to have to tiptoe around me or be on edge.

"I'm Sloane," I say, moving to stand in front of him and using up my social confidence for the rest of the year as I do. I stick my hand out, trying to get him to see that *I don't want him to leave*, but it takes a moment for those baby blues to find mine.

"Jed," he says and clasps my hand with a palm that's just as calloused as the other man's. "You sure about me staying?" He looks from me to Virgil like he's asking us both.

"I literally don't mind at all. I've honestly wanted to meet his friends since I knew he *had* friends," I say it boldly, glancing up at Virgil when I do.

He snorts. "So *rude* to me when we're in public," he teases, then looks back at Jed. "Yeah, man. If she's cool with you staying, then stay."

Jed smiles almost sweetly at us and goes back to his seat in the corner.

Why am I supposed to be afraid of him, exactly? He's quiet and sweet and seems more unsure of the situation than I am. Is he really a killer?

"I'm not getting up to shake your hand," the third stranger drawls, tipping his chair back until it leans against the wall behind him. If I did that, I'd be on my ass on the floor with a

concussion. “Because I’d either have to jump the table or fight Virgil for the privilege, it feels like.”

Virgil *tsks* and gestures for me to sit.

“You can introduce yourselves,” Virgil hums, studying the menu like he’s never seen it before. “Appropriately.” His eyes fall on Wren’s and hold them, but his friend only grins.

“Wren Crystal,” the man beside me introduces promptly. “I like camping, long walks on the lakeshore, and—” he breaks off with a smile. “S’mores.”

“Cass Byers,” the man who hadn’t shaken my hand said. “I’m not about to give you my dating profile, like some people. Except I *don’t* like camping. Or s’mores.”

“Tragic,” I say flatly.

“Blasphemous,” agrees Wren from my left.

Jed just grins, and it’s Virgil that says, “That’s Jed. He *also* likes camping, but he’d prefer to be somewhere much warmer than here. He was raised in Texas.”

“Oh, that’s cool? Metaphorically.” I expect a smile, but Jed only watches me carefully, like *I’m* the dangerous one here. “Did you live in a city in Texas, or...?”

Cass glances at him as if judging if he’s going to speak, and when Jed does answer, he looks back at his menu, unbothered.

“My family owns a farm down in Williamson County,” he says, sitting back in his chair and looking up at me. He really *is* good looking, though I prefer Virgil. Jed seems much less confident. So much friendlier, sure, but I find that just means he’s harder to read.

But if he’s here, then he must be a killer, too.

“He’s an amazing cook,” Wren tells me, proving once more to be the most talkative of the three.

Cass shoots him a look, and even Jed looks at him in surprise, but it’s Virgil that adds, “Wren’s right. You don’t give yourself enough credit.”

Both Cass and Jed turn their glances to me, and I find myself a bit taken aback and confused, like I'm missing something.

But Virgil just shakes his head. "I'll explain it to her later. It's fine, you guys. You act like this is any different from when Meagan was dating Kat."

"We know it's not," Wren assures him. "And you know what you're doing. It's just..." When I turn to look at him, I find him studying my face like he's not sure what to say.

"It's just that no one ever thought *you'd* be the one to find someone that you're in love with like her," Jed supplies.

In love with?

Is that what's going on?

I turn my eyes on Virgil, who's again looking at me, waiting for my reaction.

But I'm not too sure what to do.

"What was he like when you guys were kids?" I ask, cutting off the topic before it has a chance to begin.

"The *worst*," Wren groans, running a hand through his curly black hair. Beside him, Cass nods his head in agreement, and I take that moment to look him over as I had Jed.

Again, he's gorgeous. He's very much the boy next door, with his light brown hair and the light amount of stubble on his face. Wren, with his darkly handsome looks and wickedly gleaming eyes, is the only one that seems dangerous, but just because he looks like a flirt and acts like one too.

They're so *normal*.

"He was so weird. And we were constantly having to yank the phone out of his hands so he'd stop calling up strangers and asking about their favorite movies."

Virgil groans and lets his elbows thud onto the table. "That was *years* ago," he points out.

"Well, kind of," I remind him, grinning wickedly when he turns to me. "You totally called my cell that night to get me

out of my room and *breathed* at me.”

“I was coming in your window.”

“You were *breathing* weird.”

“I was *climbing in through your window!* And you didn’t exactly have any complaints.”

I sniff and look back at Wren with a nod. “I have many complaints. So he called up people and asked about *movies? Why?*”

“Look, I’m going to be honest with you, Sloane. I have no fucking idea.”

“I knew I should never have agreed to this,” Virgil mumbles from my other side as the waitress comes in for our drink orders.

By the time everyone was done eating, I couldn’t be less afraid of my boyfriend if I tried. For his part, Virgil seems a bit mortified at the stories of him being weird as a kid that Cass and Wren are more than willing to tell me, and I wonder if *their* lives are safe after tonight.

“Can we leave?” Virgil grumps, getting to his feet. “Or were there any other things you wanted to tell her, so she’ll think I’m an idiot?”

“Hmmm.” Wren trades a look with Cass. “No? I don’t think so? I’d made a list earlier—”

“Of course you fucking did, you psycho,” Virgil mutters, but Wren ignores him.

“And I think we hit everything on that list. So., I guess you can leave.” He nods sagely like he’s doing Virgil a favor, and my boyfriend waits for me to get up before pushing both of our chairs back in.

“Then we’re *leaving*,” he says. “Goodbye.”

“Wait.” It’s Cass that speaks and gives Virgil an unimpressed look. “Since we didn’t talk about it before, we’re going to say it now. Kat is pissed about what happened before

you left. And she deserves to know if you're not coming back for a while."

"I'll call her," Virgil shrugs. "She's not *my* boss, Cass."

"But she has cleaned up enough of your messes," Jed points out. "She's not as mad as they say, though. I saw her before coming here."

"I'll call her *later*," Virgil says again. "Now, can we go?"

"Just remember to call her," Wren says cheerfully, waving at me. "See you soon, Sloane? Maybe I'll pack these two up, and we'll come camping with you guys."

"Oh." The idea is actually kind of a fun one. "Yeah? You'd all actually come down to the campground?"

"I won't," Cass assures me in his less-than-amused way. "But they will."

With a few more words exchanged between us, it takes a minute before we're back at Virgil's truck with Argus in the back seat.

I sit in mine and lean back, closing my eyes and taking a deep breath as Virgil buckles his own seatbelt.

"You okay?" he asks, hand grazing the back of mine that rests on the console between us.

"Always," I lie.

"You don't have to be. And...I'm really grateful for all of that. It means a lot to me that you made an effort to get to know my friends."

"Why did you think Jed would bother me?" I ask, my eyes still closed. "He's so *nice*."

"He's..." Virgil trails off with a sigh. "He *is* nice," my boyfriend agrees. "Under most circumstances. But he's a little bit different from the rest of us, though I suppose if anyone understands him at all, it's Wren."

"Why's that?"

“Because he was born into a family that’s way worse than us.”

“Meaning?”

“Meaning that the reason Jed is such a good cook is because they didn’t just throw their victims into the woods or to the pigs, Sloane.”

It takes a moment for that to settle in, and I half-wish I could go back a few seconds before I knew.

“Holy shit.”

“Yeah.”

“He’s a *cannibal*?”

“He’s not a cannibal *anymore*,” Virgil amends. “Now, do you wish I’d made him leave?”

I think about that, rolling the question around in my mind and going back to my conversations from the night. “No, I...I don’t think so.”

“Good.” He puts the truck into gear, and it rolls back a few feet before he rests his foot on the brake again. “Sloane?”

This time I open my eyes and turn to look at him, confused.

“They were right, you know?”

“About you being a weirdo with a phone fetish?” I ask, knowing that’s not what he means at all.

He searches my face, and whatever he sees there makes him grin. “Yeah,” he says finally and chuckles. “Yeah, precisely that.”

“I just don’t know, Sloane.” My mother sighs heavily, the sound quickly crossing to my side of the phone and relaying all of her irritation and frustration with me. “I’m working on getting something filed so that the police make sure he can’t come back. But this is just so difficult. It might be a few days, okay? How are you holding up?”

“I’m okay,” I supply quickly, not wanting her to hurry. “Actually, Virgil, umm. Asked if I wanted to visit him in Akron. So we’re here at his condo for a few days.”

I think the words will comfort her. She’ll feel better knowing that I’m away from Anthony and he doesn’t know where I am.

But she sucks in another breath and lets it out before replying, “Are you sure that’s such a good idea?”

“What do you mean?”

“Don’t you think you’re moving a little fast? You haven’t known him that long, right? Don’t you think the two of you might need some space?”

I gaze up at the ceiling above the sofa in Virgil’s condo, blinking.

“No, Mom. I don’t.”

“I do. Take some time, especially right now. I just think that you’re jumping into something that you might regret later.”

The sofa cushion under my legs dips with a new weight, and I flick my gaze lower as Virgil moves to straddle me, his hands on the arm of the sofa on either side of my face as he moves to trap me more effectively.

“I don’t think so.”

“*Would you consider it?*”

I meet Virgil’s gaze, my free hand coming up to rest along his jaw. He turns his face into it, kissing my palm, and I grin. “No, Mom. I’m fine. I promise I know what I’m doing.” Then I say my goodbyes and hang up, just for Virgil to tug the phone out of my hand and lay it on the table beside him before coming back to rest over me again.

“No, you don’t,” he promises me, moving to rest his weight on my hips. “You really don’t. I’m so bad for you, and even your mom sees it.” He moves one hand to trace up my body, sighing out in a long breath. “Too bad though, I guess.”

“I’m not *afraid* of you,” I tell him, just in case he needs to hear it. “You know that, right?”

“You’re *a little* afraid of me,” he shoots back without hesitation. “I see it in you, once in a while. Not like you were a week ago, sure. But we’ll get there.”

A week ago.

Has it really been just a week?

What’s wrong with me that I’m so comfortable, so *willing* to be here, under this man and in his condo, after only a week?!

“You can’t be in love with someone you’ve only known a week,” I murmur, hating the words as soon as they leave my mouth.

“Oh?” He leans in and kisses my cheek, then moves down my jaw. “Says who?”

“Says...everyone, probably,” I reply. “You barely know me.”

“I *think* we’ve had this conversation before, princess.”

“And maybe we should have it again.” I take a breath, then ask, “Why do your friends think you’re in love with me? Is it because you told them you are?”

He sits up, gazing down at me with scrutiny. “No,” he says finally. “I’ve never told them that.”

“But they said—”

“They said what they *see*, Sloane. They’ve been telling me for days that I must be in love with you and that they didn’t think I could act like this.”

“It’s been *a week*,” I say again, less certain this time.

“Yeah, it has. A whole week that I can’t stop thinking about you. I hold on to you and wonder how you’d feel if I were to tell you that anywhere I go, you’re coming with me because letting you out of my sight fucking sucks. Does that seem normal to you? Does it seem normal that I’m fully willing to do whatever it takes to keep you here with me?”

“I’m not leaving,” I reply breathily, not sure what else *to* say.

“I’d...let you,” he says finally, though he looks like he might *vomit* as he says it. “I don’t want you to think you don’t have a choice. That’s not exactly very healthy of us, is it? I’d hate it. But I would respect *your choice*, Sloane.”

“It’s...been a week,” I say once more, my words slow and maybe a little bit unsteady. “And I think maybe *I’m* the crazy one. Yeah, I’m a little terrified of you sometimes. But it’s not because of what I think you’ll do to *me*. Not anymore. Isn’t that fucked up, though?”

“Very,” Virgil assures me, rather unhelpfully, as he leans back down and nips at my lower lip.

“But I also have never, ever felt this way about anyone before.”

“Oh, yeah?” The seriousness evaporates from his tone, and he moves to sit up and lifts my shirt until he can trace my stomach with his nails. “Do you *love* me, princess?”

“I don’t know.”

“Do you *love* this serial killer who wants to ruin you every time he sees you?”

“There’s probably a time limit on the serial killer status. Have you even killed anyone in the past month—?” My words turn into a yelp as he digs his nails into my skin, causing me to arch into him.

“Careful with your words.” I love the way his voice gets—all growly and rough and a little bit terrifying.

It probably shouldn’t be as big of a turn on as it is.

“Or you’ll drag your nails along my stomach?” I ask, writhing under him as much as I can when he does just that.

“Maybe I’ll do something worse.” He does it again, though, his nails leaving red marks on my pale skin. “Was that your mom?”

I sigh through my nose, my hand gripping his wrist to make him pause so I can answer with any kind of clarity. “Yeah. She thinks I should slow down with you. That we’re moving incredibly fast, and maybe I’m not in the right frame of mind to make good relationship decisions.” I pause, thoughtful, and add. “Can I ask about your parents?”

“You can,” Virgil hums, moving his hand again when I let go. This time he moves his nails gently across my skin, making me shiver from the feather-light touch. “But my mom is dead, and I haven’t spoken to my father in a long, *long* time.” He punctuates the words by twisting around my hip bone, then skimming across to the other side of my body.

“Why?”

“Because he cheated on her, remember? With my girlfriend’s mom.”

“Who you...killed,” I repeat, making sure I have it right.

“Yeah, that one. Dad has a good suspicion of what I did. He doesn’t want to talk to me, and I don’t much feel like talking to him, either.”

“Are you afraid he’ll tell?”

Virgil shakes his head and moves when I gesture for him to, so that I can sit on the sofa, legs curled under me, and face him.

“Do you want to tell me about it?” I ask carefully, not sure how he’ll take the question.

Virgil’s gorgeous gaze flicks up to mine, scrutinizing my expression. “Do you *want* to hear about it?” he asks, maybe a bit perplexed.

“If you want to tell me.”

Carefully Virgil reaches out to run his thumb over my lip. “I killed her,” he repeats. “With a knife. I waited outside her house for hours that night. And before that, I’d watched her for weeks. There were the phone calls I made. Though back then, I wasn’t sure what I wanted to do on that front exactly. So they were a little sloppy.” He blinks a few times, then his eyes focus on me again. “It wasn’t that neat or that interesting. She was my first, remember? I wasn’t very good back then.”

He says it like he *is* good now. And I can’t repress a little shiver that creeps down my spine.

“So I stabbed her. She ran from me and nearly made it to the door, but I stabbed her until she couldn’t get up. She bled out, and I...just...watched.” He tilts his head to the side, reminding me of a puppy in his way. “Does it bother you?”

I don’t know.

It doesn’t bother me as much as it should, but I just don’t know.

Still, it’s not the hang-up it should be.

“Not enough to make me pack up the dogs and leave,” I say finally, scooting toward him on the sofa. “So you don’t have to worry about that.”

“I wasn’t worried,” Virgil assures me, resting his chin on his hand and just watching me. “If I was, I wouldn’t have told you.”

As I stare back at him, I wish I could tell if that was comforting or disconcerting.

With my cheek pressed to the glass of the passenger window of Virgil's truck, I stare up at the blackening sky and let out a long breath.

Two-fourteen doesn't stand a chance. If normal storms blow off its shingles and rip up some of the woodwork around the deck, *this* world-ending tempest is going to rip it right from its moorings.

And then I'll have to go around picking up the worst of it.

The sun hasn't set yet, but the campground around us as we go down the long drive towards the House is dark and shadowed. People are still out and doing their normal activities, but when I look closer, I see that it's intermingled with packing things away into campers or vehicles and casting furtive looks at the sky.

"Guess it's the storm of the century time, huh?" I murmur, twisting my hands in my lap. "I know the weatherman said that we'd have storms, but this really looks pretty severe."

"Are you afraid of storms?"

"No." I have never been, even though thunder makes me jump once in a while when I'm caught off guard or already feeling a little off. "Are you?"

He sighs. "Maybe once, when I was a lot younger. The others used to drag me out in them, telling me I'd never learn to like them if I didn't push myself."

"That seems a little harsh."

“Yeah, well, you’ve met Wren. You know how he is. He’s this weird outdoorsy creature that chops down branches with a damned machete. In *Ohio*.”

I blink, unsure if he’s joking, and look over my shoulder at him. “A machete? That’s a joke, right?”

Virgil grimaces. “It’s messy, is what it is.”

Oh.

Well then.

He turns onto the road leading to my cabin, and I can’t help but surreptitiously watch for Anthony, crossing my fingers in my lap as I do. If he’s still here, which I hope to God he’s not, I don’t know what I’m going to do.

As if sensing what I’m thinking, Virgil knocks my hands apart and laces his fingers with mine. “Stop,” he says simply. “There’s no way in hell he’s here.”

“You say that,” I mumble, but I don’t really have it in me to argue with him.

“Look up at the sky, princess.” God, I love it when he calls me that. And *how* he calls me that, more than anything.

Then again, he could make any word sound sexy. Pickle. Lightbulb. Moist.

Okay, probably not moist. Nothing can make that sound anything other than gross.

The truck stops outside of my cabin, and I get out, looking around again for any sign of, well...anything.

Unfortunately, that comes when my eyes land on the door, and I can’t help but bite my lip as I stride towards it and grab the white, folded paper off the outside of it that’s been taped there.

Naturally, it’s not from Pat or Sam. Why would it be when that would make things too easy?

I tried to find you, but I guess you aren’t here.

I’d really like to talk to you, Sloane.

We can get to a place of forgiveness, I'm sure. I miss you and your mom.

-Anthony

Every word turns my stomach a little more, like the twisting of a screw being dug through my insides.

Argus sniffs at my hand that rests at my side, and unconsciously I reach down to rub his nose, barely paying attention even when thunder shakes the trees and makes me grit my teeth.

Then, without warning, the paper is plucked from my fingers, and Virgil looks the note over, his eyes cold and unimpressed. “A place of forgiveness?” he asks with a disdainful sniff. “What a joke. *He* doesn’t get to decide if you forgive him.”

“Guess it might be better if I did,” I mutter, running my hands through my hair to hide my trembling. “Then maybe he’d leave me alone.” I glance up, surprised to find his hazel eyes on mine.

“Do you *want* to forgive him?” The question is so simple, and even before he’s done asking it, I shake my head in disagreement.

“Fuck no, Virgil. Of course, I don’t want to—” He leans down and presses his lips to mine, interrupting my diatribe against the idea of forgiving my stepdad.

“Then don’t,” he purrs, pulling away and cupping my cheek in his hand. “Don’t forgive him when you have absolutely no obligation or need to do so. Don’t *ever* forgive him, Sloane.” His smile turns savage. “Or you could let me kill him. I’d say you could kill him with me, but I don’t want there to be any chance of getting caught. It would be a lot of trouble to get my friends to murder an entire correctional facility just to get you out of prison and reinvent you under a new name.”

It’s...maybe the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard. Probably.

“You’d do that?” My lips quirk into a grin as he steps closer to me. “You’d *actually* do that?”

“Princess, I’d kill anyone for you. No questions asked. No hesitation.”

Okay, maybe *that’s* the most romantic thing I’ve ever heard.

I clear my throat and pull away slightly, trying not to swoon. “We should, umm. Get the dogs and go in. Are you staying here tonight—” I’m cut off when he grabs my arm, not letting me turn away, and pulls me towards him to wrap his arms around me and bury his face in my hair.

“Play with me,” he says, and it’s not quite a question or a request. “No one is out. It’s almost dark.” He’s right. The clouds and the storm have made everything almost pitch black, and the sun has all but set by now. Rain is starting to show up on the asphalt at our feet as well, so I know for a fact that most people will be tucked inside of their campers or their vehicles.

“Play what with you?”

His answering grin is nearly a complete response. Good enough, anyway, that I can surmise whatever he wants to do probably isn’t sweet and cuddly and romantic.

Or at least, not the kind of romantic most people would ask for. But to me? This is definitely the definition of the word. I love when he buries his face in my neck again, and I adore the growl that sounds against my skin.

Is it problematic of me that I can so easily look past what he and his friends do? That I don’t mind at all that he *kills people*? Sure, by his own admission, he tries to only kill those that deserve it anymore. And I appreciate the idea that he never would’ve actually killed me, probably.

And that should bother me, too.

But it doesn’t.

Instead I can only think of how happy I am that he followed me to my cabin and that I’m here, in the impending

storm, ready to let him pin me down and do whatever he wants to me.

“Maybe put the dogs inside so they don’t maul me?” Virgil suggests, letting me go at last. I nod and follow the suggestion, calling both dogs to go into the cabin. He is right, and I’d hate to see Vulcan trotting around with his severed arm because my sometimes-vicious guard dog thought that Virgil was literally hurting me.

When I close the door again, I find that Virgil is much closer than I expect, and his hand on my throat pushes me back against the door so he can lean in and kiss the side of my jaw. “Do you like to play hide and seek?” he purrs against my skin.

“Yes,” I reply. Even if I hadn’t before this moment, I’m pretty sure this would’ve changed my mind instantly. I reach up to cup his jaw in my hand, fingers stroking over day-old stubble. “How long should I give you to hide?”

His answering, rueful glare makes me snicker, and his thumb presses at the side of my neck long and hard enough that I feel light-headed.

“Maybe next time you can be the hunter, princess. But not tonight.” The rain is getting heavier, and starting to drum on the roof of the porch above us. “Go find a hiding place.”

“How long are you going to give yourself to find me? And what happens when you *don’t*?” I challenge, my other hand going up to wrap around his shoulder.

“Hmmm.” He rocks back on his heels slightly, thinking about the question. “Thirty minutes,” he says finally.

“Any rules?” My heart pounds in my chest and my breath catches in excitement.

God, I want to play this with him.

I *want* him to catch me, maybe more than my competitive streak desires to win. Either would be great, of course. Though, I’d love to see what happens if he can’t find me.

And I know this campground like the back of my damn hand.

“No. Except that when I find you—”

“If you find me—”

“*When* I find you, I get to do whatever I want with you.”

There’s no way he’ll find me that fast.

“Deal. But if you don’t find me, then what do *I* get, Virgil?”

The look in his eyes tells me that’s not a possibility, but I refuse to give in to that idea. I’m good at this game and on my own home turf. I have just as good a chance of winning as he does. I think.

“Whatever you want,” he murmurs finally. “However you want it.”

I want a lot of things from him.

“All right,” I breathe, pushing him back a few steps and moving to the edge of my porch. “How long are you giving me?”

His grin turns wicked. “I’d start hiding if I were you.”

“What?”

“Because I’ve already started counting.”

“But how long—”

“If you’re just going to stand here, then you might as well get on your knees.”

I meet his eyes in the darkness for another second before I take off, jogging out into the rain and behind the cabin so that I can climb the hill into the woods beyond.

I know this place better than him, and I turn almost immediately so that if he is following me into the trees, he won’t be able to just keep going straight.

Coming out of the trees by the bear tree, I can’t help but cast a look over my shoulder, making sure that I can’t see any trace of him in the rain. Past one of the playgrounds, I dart into

the trees on the other side, looking for the telltale signs of the path Pat uses when he wants to go nature watching in his tree platform.

I find it sooner than I think, jogging along it until I reach the stairs that go up to the ten-foot high platform that bridges between two thick oak trees. It's basically a treehouse, without much of the house part, though a gazebo top will keep most of the rain off of me and a rail means that I most likely won't go plummeting to my demise. Or break an ankle, more likely.

There's no furniture up here. Pat hasn't used it since last fall, and he took his foldable chairs the last time he did, but that's more than fine for my purposes tonight. I tuck myself into the darkest corner I can, relying on the darkness, the shadows, and the trees to keep me hidden in my dark clothes.

Belatedly, I put my hood up, hoping it'll cover any of my pale skin that might let Virgil know where I'm hiding, before settling back once more.

A minute passes. I count the seconds, timing them with my breathing as I look out into the pouring rain. This seems unfair to him. How would he have any chance of finding me when I'm in a part of the campground he has no knowledge of?

Another five minutes pass, and I relax, just a little. He's not going to find me.

After ten minutes, I start to fidget. I'm a little bit *bored*, and the rain isn't going anywhere, it seems. There's nothing out here other than the storm and the trees, as the thunder is a nice background of rumbling, booming noise.

I don't hate it, but I kind of wish I'd thought of a better idea than coming out here in the middle of the night, in the middle of a storm. I probably could've hidden somewhere closer to my cabin, then circled back around just to be waiting for him, triumphant, on his failed return.

God, that would've been such a good idea.

I turn onto my knees, hand on the wooden rail of the platform, and look out at the black forest beyond. It's too dark

to make out anything except when lightning flickers through the clearing, and I let out a sigh that's unheard over the rain.

Is the rain letting up? It feels like it, with the way the drumming on the roof above me has lightened—

My phone vibrates in my pocket, causing me to jump. I grab it before it can vibrate again, and squint my eyes to read the message on the screen.

What's your favorite scary movie?

What's my...what? I have no idea what the text means, and quickly I see that it's from Virgil.

Why are you texting me? I shoot back, firing off that message and another one after it. *Are you giving up trying to find me?*

He doesn't answer for a few moments and I sit back on my heels, confused. Does he want to end our game? It is a little cold, sure. But nothing that bad or unmanageable. Maybe he just got bored.

Princess, princess. I never lost you. It's not my fault you didn't try to hide faster.

My heart sinks, then races. I look up again, and when lightning flickers through the clearing I see a dark-clad shape leaning against a nearby tree.

Holy shit.

Sucking in a breath, I look down at my phone, debating on what to say, when another message comes through before I can decide.

But you still have a choice here. Do you want me to catch you here, or would you like to try for somewhere else? It's awfully cold out here, and I worry about ripping your clothes off in the rain.

I don't know how to answer. My mind blazes, races, and I look at the dark figure that's holding the phone, obviously intent on my answer, with indecision and anticipation warring in my chest.

And maybe just a healthy bit of fear as well.

When I don't answer, his phone blazes brighter again, and I know the message is coming right before it does.

Fine then. If you can't make a decision, I'll make it for you. But don't blame me when you end up bent over that rail you're holding onto.

He pockets his phone and starts walking toward me.

I don't think. I don't even know why I do what I do, either. But I jump to my feet and lunge down the stairs, sprinting back through the woods and going back in the direction of my cabin.

Do I win if I can beat him there and lock the door?

I certainly think so.

However, I don't count on how fast he is. I'm across the street, past the bear tree, and in the woods behind my cabin when all of a sudden his arm is around my neck and he pushes me against a tree, my front pushed up against the rough bark while his arm keeps my face from the same surface.

"I wasn't expecting you to run," he growls in my ear, just loud enough to be heard over the still-steady downpour. "*Fuck*, Sloane. I never thought you running from me would be such a fucking turn on." He presses his hips against mine, and I can feel just how much he liked the chase.

But I can't deny that I liked it too.

"I deserve a little extra for that," he continues to taunt, his other hand going around to the front of my denim shorts. He unbuttons them single-handedly and shoves them down, enough that he can realize I'm not wearing anything underneath. "What a little slut," he adds, though the tone of his voice is anything but disappointed. "I bet you liked it just as much as I did."

Without warning, he shoves two fingers into me, making me gasp and arch back against him. "It's raining," I hiss against his jaw, unable to do much more than that. "If you think you feel—"

“I *know* what I feel,” Virgil interrupts. “So don’t fuck with me.” He fingers me open effortlessly, as though he knows exactly what I like and how to get me to respond, even though we’ve only known each other for a week.

“You should be grateful,” Virgil goes on, the arm around my neck releasing me so that he can pull my hoodie up above my breasts. My bra gets the same treatment, and his cold hands palm my breasts roughly like he’s been waiting for this.

I sure as hell have.

“Why?” I ask, trying not to let my voice climb higher.

“Because you were going to run into the mud soon. And I would’ve felt a little bit bad about putting you on your hands and knees in the mud. I’ll feel a lot better doing it here instead. Oh, I know!” He whirls me around, voice amused, until I can see a large, mostly flat rock that rises from the ground at a gentle angle. “Doesn’t that look just perfect?”

“It looks like a rock.”

He nips my neck reprovably and walks me to the rock, pushing me down onto it on my hands and knees. It is smooth enough that my palms slide against it, and nothing digs into my knees painfully.

But I’m certainly not going to admit to being grateful.

I flinch when his teeth find the curve of my spine, nipping and mouthing against it as he works his way down my body. He tugs off my shorts until they hang on one ankle, and I shiver in anticipation as his hands on my ass spread me apart so he can see *everything*.

Then his fingers dig into my thighs, nails sharp, and he bites me hard just above my hip, causing me to shriek in surprise.

His laugh, barely audible over the rain, is the only response I get before he does it again, biting the other side of my body just as hard and long enough that he can suck a mark onto my skin.

“I hope you don’t mind,” he tells me, leaning over me so he can be heard. “But I realized that if I don’t mark you as mine, then people might not realize how off-limits you are. In fact, I’m sure you don’t mind.”

I don’t get to reply. He jerks my hoodie to the side and bites down hard on the junction of my neck and shoulder, his body caging mine and not letting me move as he takes his time in bringing a mark to my skin.

My body aches, the spots he’s bitten seeming to throb in time with my heart as his teeth sink into my skin.

“I want to run my knife over this pretty, pale skin again,” he tells me, and the rain is definitely dying off because it’s much easier to hear his husky tone. “I love the look of it against you. And I want to run the tip between your thighs... you’ll let me, right?” His fingers find my folds again and slip into me, fucking me languidly as he speaks. “It’s not a question. I know you’ll let me. You loved it so much last time...it’s not so different from the blade on your nipples. I think you’ll like it. Actually, you’ll fucking *love* it.” He thrusts another finger into me, spreading me open on all three as he fucks me deeply with them. “I won’t cut you. I would never cut you. I just want to tease you. You’re such a good girl, and such a horny girl for me that you’ll take anything I give you without question.”

His fingers in me move faster, twisting so that he can run his thumb over my clit. I jump forward in surprise, but he only chuckles and pulls me right back into place.

“Don’t you run from me, princess. We’re so far past you running from me anymore. It’s *so adorable*, and I will always love hunting you down, but I think you need to learn when you’re caught, and I’m so happy to be the one to teach you what it means to be my prey.”

His fingers leave my body, and I don’t hear what he does next, but when his shaft brushes my entrance, it’s pretty clear. I whimper, turning my face into his just in time for him to catch my mouth in a kiss.

“Good girl,” he says again, and bites down on my lower lip just as he sinks into me to the hilt.

I cry out against his mouth, unable to do anything as he teases my nipples and fucks me. It doesn't help my brain to come back online that he worries at my lip, biting and licking and purring his approval into my mouth.

In fact, I realize a short time later that I'm not far from coming. I shouldn't be this ready, or this turned on. But him chasing me down to catch me and fuck me like this does something to my body and my mind that will absolutely deserve a repeat so I can revisit this feeling. He sinks into me at a perfect angle, hitting deep in my body as he holds me in place, as if I really am just his prey.

Fuck, that shouldn't be as hot as it is.

“Come for me,” he murmurs, nipping at the shell of my ear so that I shudder. “God, you're so fucking perfect for me. On your knees like this, right where I want you, so I can breed that pussy of yours like you deserve. Come for me so I can *breed you* and we can go back home and do it again.”

I can't help but whimper, but his snicker overrides it. “Did you think this was it? That we'd go skipping back and *snuggle*, princess?” He shakes his head, and I find myself trying to hold my orgasm off, trying to balance at the edge of the metaphorical cliff he has me on.

“This is going to be all night for you. If you're good, maybe I'll put you on your back instead, so you can see my face as I fill you up, my hand curled around that pretty throat.”

As if to emphasize the words, the hand on my breasts comes up to curl around the base of my throat instead, thumb pressing just under my jaw and barely putting any pressure there.

“Don't try to wait me out,” he continues with a real laugh. “You won't get any prize for winning that game, I can promise you. And you can't tell me any of that sounds bad, does it?”

I shake my head, biting my sore lip. It sounds amazing, but I'm feeling stubborn. I want to make him work for it.

Unfortunately, he's so good with how he fucks me that it's quickly becoming a losing battle.

"I know how much you want to be my good girl, princess. I can feel how much you want to come. You can't lie to me when my cock is buried in your pussy." He gives a rougher thrust, as if to illustrate the point. "Maybe you're just trying to get me to be a little rougher with you?" He doesn't lessen his pace or the force of his movements. It's a jolt every time he thrusts into me, and his angle is just right that I feel like I'm seeing stars. "I don't mind, princess. I'm not going anywhere, remember? And I certainly don't have anything to do tomorrow. If you want to make me work for it, then I'm going to make sure that I've wrung every bit of satisfaction out of you that I can." I gasp softly, fingers clenching against the rock under me. It's a small movement and an even smaller sound. I'm so close, and I hope he hasn't noticed.

Too bad for me that he notices everything.

"You're going to come." It isn't a question, but I try to laugh, anyway.

"You think I am." My voice is tight. The words are a lie, and I don't know what I'm trying to prove.

"Oh, we're mouthy tonight, aren't we? You're really asking for it."

"Am I?"

God, I'm close. My thighs tense, and I know I can't keep doing this for much longer. Not even the cold rain on my skin is enough for me to not think about the burning need in my body and the way he's just so perfect.

"Tell me again you aren't. Say it to me one more time."

I open my mouth to say it, and his hand on my throat tightens. His other snakes around my body, and he presses it flat to my lower stomach so that there's no chance of me going anywhere other than where he wants me to be. One of his knees is braced on the rock next to mine, and I hadn't thought he could fuck me any more thoroughly than he is.

But I was definitely wrong.

“Come on,” he goads in my ear. “Tell me again. Tell me you aren’t about to come, princess.”

I can’t. I can’t say anything, because I’m holding on to this cliff with my fingernails at this point.

“Tell me, and I’ll agree. We’ll go back to your cabin and watch movies. I’ll comb your hair and we’ll cuddle.”

I’m going to come.

“But if you can’t tell me and you *do* come, then I’m going to take that as you *want* me to breed this pussy until morning. You *want* me inside you, making sure nothing escapes until morning. You want that, princess? Want me to keep you where you belong? Under me and full of my cum?”

I lose my grip and all but scream. The noise is ripped out of me just like my orgasm is, and I fall to my elbows under him on the rock. Only his quick movement catches me, pulling me back against him instead as his pace becomes erratic. As I come around him he lets out a groan of approval, finally slamming into me one more time and holding me there as he finds his release as well.

I barely notice. I’m too busy enjoying the aftershocks and tingles of my own orgasm to discern anything else until he pulls me to my feet and helps me pull up my shorts.

“Cabin’s over there,” he tells me, making sure I’m steady on my feet as he meets my eyes with a wolfish grin. “And if you’re not on your bed with your ass up and waiting for me in five minutes, I’ll just take you down and fuck you wherever you happen to be. Understand, princess?”

“You say that like it’s a threat,” I point out, unable to hide my grin.

He laughs softly and reaches out to run his thumb over my lower lip. “I’d prefer to think of it as a promise.”

I'm right, of course.

Two-fourteen never stood a chance.

I stand at the edge of the driveway and wish that I'd stayed in bed, called in sick, and curled up with Virgil and the dogs instead of coming out here to my job.

God, why can't I just be someone's trophy wife? Does Virgil make enough, I wonder, for me to stay at home, lounge, and look dramatic? It's what I'm made for, obviously. Not physical, manual labor.

Until then, however, I don't really have a reason *not* to help. Especially when it's clear that we're going to need more than me, the owners, and Raven to do much more than some damage control. Especially since the people who own two-fourteen, or what's left of it, aren't even here.

"We're really going to do their work for them?" I grump, glad for the first time that Vulcan is still with Virgil at the cabin. Argus is with me, of course, but I don't need to worry about him getting into anything. He'll stay where I put him unless he needs to do something for me. In that case, I'd prefer he let me know instead of letting me fall face-first into a pile of nails and splintered wood.

"You'd think they'd be here," Raven agrees, her arms folded over her chest. Both of us look like we'd rather be anywhere but here, and I don't know how to fix the look on my face that promises that fact.

“Right? It’s their camper. Their piece of junk that’s been an eyesore on the campground for *years*.” If Raven and I have one thing in common, one hobby really, it’s bitching. We’re good at it, and together we’re unstoppable.

We’re also going to have to start cleaning up. There’s no way around it, and I shrug my shoulders in defeat with a groan. “Come on. We can ask for a raise later.”

“We’re not getting a raise,” she mutters, but follows me down to what remains of the camper and the deck. The roof had just been fixed, which is a tragedy, and the whole thing looks like it was hit by a truck instead of just a pretty bad storm.

“So...” Raven works beside me, tossing rubble into a pile and making sure there’s nothing dangerous on the ground for when the surveyors come to look at everything. “I saw you leave the other day with that guy staying in cabin six.”

“Oh?” I ask mildly, my heart skipping a beat. “Help me with this?” One of the larger sections of the deck is still almost in one piece, though not where it needs to be, and Raven immediately grabs one end of rough, splintered wood to help me drag it closer to the other rubble.

“Yeah. Are you keeping secrets from me? I didn’t think you had a boyfriend. Or is this the summer dreams hookup of your life? You know, like from *Grease*?” Her tone is light and teasing. I know her, and if I asked her to knock it off, she would.

Instead, I frown and snort at her words. Virgil is no Danny Zuko, and I’m a *far* cry from Sandy. “It’s not like that,” I promise her. “He’s...” I suck in a breath as we drop another piece of floor. “He’s my boyfriend.”

“How long have you been with him?”

“Not that long.”

“What’s he like? Did he come down here just to see you?” She glances up at the cabins on the ridge above us, her gaze shrewd. “I notice his truck isn’t up there this morning.”

“You can’t even see the vehicles at the cabins from this side,” I point out, glaring at the rest of the trash we still have to pick up. “So, how do you know if he’s there or not?”

“I don’t need to,” she replies. “I *know*.”

“Stalker,” I tease.

She shrugs one shoulder, looking pleased with herself. “Maybe. But seriously, I’m *dying*. I need to live vicariously through you, Sloane. Just tell me one thing.” She stands straight, sucks in a breath, and looks me dead in the eye. “Is he kinky?”

I want to tell her no because it’s not really any of her business, but a smile cracks over my lips, and she nearly shrieks with delight at my silent, embarrassed answer.

“I fucking *knew it*. He *looks* like it, and I *knew*.”

“You can’t tell if someone’s kinky based on their looks.”

“Yeah, you definitely can. Maybe you’re just bad at it.”

It takes the better part of the day for us to go through everything. I never see Virgil and wonder if he’s spent the whole day lounging in the cabin or making campfires. It doesn’t seem like him to do that, but I also haven’t seen him.

Surely if he were around, I would’ve at least seen some trace of him, right?

With the storm damage and everyone cleaning up, Pat and Sam had decided to keep the House open an hour late, just in case anyone needed anything last minute. When they’d said they’d stay, I’d immediately volunteered, feeling bad when they’d spent most of their day cleaning up and also fighting with the people who owned some of the permanent sites down here.

“I’ll stay,” I had assured them, all but pushing them out the door. “I have to walk up the hill to go home, so it makes sense. And everything will be fine.”

Sam had smiled, patted my arm, and looked practically proud of me. “Of course it will be,” she’d agreed. “We have absolute faith in you.”

That meant a lot, and I'd work to make sure they'd keep that faith in me.

Not that I had anything difficult to do. No one came in for the last hour, and after a few experimental texts to Virgil, I'd discovered that he had gone into Arkala before coming back to wait for me.

I'm done.

I tell him, firing off the message quickly as I close up the register and lock the front door. With my key dangling around my wrist, I whistle for Argus and go towards the back door to leave that way, as well as lock it.

I'll be back in a few. I just need to walk back.

It takes him barely a minute to respond, and by then I'm locking the door behind me that I can only unlock from the inside. My phone vibrates in my pocket, drawing my attention as I walk past the crickets. A car drives by, going slow, and I don't bother looking up as I look for the message instead.

Want me to come get you?

A smile twitches at my lips.

No. I'm fine. It's a seven minute walk, at best.

He isn't my chauffeur, and I don't want him to think I *expect* him to come pick me up or anything.

Pocketing my phone, I look up, and for a moment, I'm confused at what I see.

The back door leads out into a narrow, covered hallway. On one side is the entrance to the women's bathroom and the huge thing of crickets we sell to fishers. On the other is a latticework wall hung with plants and a few signs from the seventies that proclaim the campground's name in beat-up, faded letters. The small hallway leads straight out to the road, which curves up and around towards my cabin.

Only this evening, the road is obstructed by a large silver car; the side beat up like it had at one point been in a minor accident, and my ex-stepfather leans against the passenger door, a lit cigarette between his lips.

Yet another reason I don't like him and never was comfortable being in his personal space. He fucking *reeks* of nicotine, worse than anyone I've ever met.

Even now, when I'm six feet away, I feel as if I can smell it. I feel like it's wrapping around me, trapping me in place, and my hands clench at my side.

Now I wish I had Vulcan with me.

"Can we talk, please?" he asks, words imploring. "I've been trying to find you for *days*, Sloane. I think—"

"I don't care what you think." My voice isn't as firm or steady as I'd like it to be, and I take a step back until my back is against the glass door. "Leave."

I'm trapped, my brain is oh so helpful to remind me. *This door only unlocks from the inside.*

At this point, I'm considering trying to break the glass.

Anthony Murphy pushes off of the car and takes three steps towards me, cutting out some of the precious space between us as Argus licks my hand and whines.

I don't need him to tell me I'm panicking. I've gone from zero to one hundred really quickly, and my heart feels like it's going to slam right out of my chest. My palms are clammy, thoughts are racing, and I know that soon I'm going to feel dizzy.

Is it hot out here? Or is it just me?

"I'm not leaving, Sloane." His voice is firm but patient, as if I'm still his eleven-year-old stepdaughter that he's explaining his decision to. Like *I've* done something wrong, instead of him. "I get why you're upset, but I've waited around long enough, don't you think? This is getting ridiculous. It's time to sit down and talk this out."

"There's nothing to talk out." I lick my dry lips and wish I'd asked Virgil to come get me. "There's nothing to *talk about*, Anthony. You..." I suck in a breath. "You tried to kill me. You were going to. I don't know how you got out—"

“I got out because the whole thing was a misunderstanding. Things have changed. *I’ve* changed. I just want the chance to show you and your mom—”

“My *mom?*” Anger floods my veins, mixing with the fear already there. I’m shaking now, and it’s not completely due to panic. “Don’t you *ever* talk to my mom again, you asshole. She deserves way better than you. And you don’t have the right—”

My brave words die in my throat as he walks forward again, close enough that he’s crowding my space, and I can smell more than the ghost of remembered nicotine.

As he did when I was a kid, he fucking *reeks* of it.

“I don’t know what’s gotten into you. You were never this disrespectful when you were a child—”

“It’s not disrespectful when it’s *you.*” Argus tries to get between us, doing what he was trained to do when I need personal space in a situation, and does so non-aggressively as he looks between us.

If Vulcan were here, there would be a solid chance that he’d bite. But Argus isn’t like that.

Anthony scoffs and looks down at Argus with frustration. “Get your dog—”

“He’s doing his *job!* He’s keeping you away from me, so *move.*”

He doesn’t move away. Instead, he picks up his leg and harshly kicks Argus in the chest, eliciting a surprised, pained whine from the dog that has his ears flat and him pulling away, confused.

“Don’t touch him!” I lunge forward and shove Anthony as hard as I can, my hands still shaking and my brain unable to focus on anything other than getting him away from me.

But Anthony barely moves. He catches my arm, his grip harsh, and looks at me as if he can’t believe what I’m saying.

“What is *wrong with you?* You’re acting like—”

“Let go!” My voice is loud and high, and I fight against him with everything I have. “Let go!” At my yells, Argus starts to bark, trying to come between us again.

“You’re acting like a child!” Anthony yells, his hand on my arm tight enough that it feels like he’s grinding the bone to dust. A small, rational part of my brain notes that prison apparently didn’t help his anger issues with the way he’s acting.

And this is precisely why Mom had left him.

“You can’t be here! You can’t be around me, or Mom, or —”

“Your mother made a mistake when she sent me those papers. It’s *not my fault* that she pushed me into doing what I did. I just need to talk to her, and to you, and get her to see—”

“None of us want anything to do with you!” I pull backward and, to my surprise, he lets go, causing me to stumble.

Right into the door.

My head smacks against the glass, somehow not cracking it, and I shriek as pain lances through my skull.

“Get up. You’re being overdramatic. You’re going to get in the car, and we’re going to go talk to your mom. Do you understand—”

“Sloane?” The voice is unmistakably Raven’s, and when I look up from my spot on the concrete, I see her round the corner, confusion evident on her features as she looks from me to Anthony.

She’s not alone, either. Another woman, one who looks enough like her for them to be related, is with her and looking at Anthony with just as much confusion while Argus continues to bark, the fur on his neck standing up.

“Who are you?” Raven demands, rounding on Anthony. “Liza, call the cops.”

“No, that’s...” Anthony puts his hands up in surrender as Liza pulls out her phone, ready to dial. “I’m leaving, all right?”

This got out of hand. It's *fine*." His eyes on mine tell me that it's not fine and that he's not done.

"Get lost," I whisper, drawing my knees up to my chest. "And don't come back."

"We're going to *talk*," he reiterates. "Once you have a chance to understand—"

"She told you to leave." Raven's voice is firm. Dangerous, even, as she plants herself between him and me. He towers over her and outweighs her by half, at least. But she stares him down like she's not afraid of anything he has to offer.

I wish I could do that.

Anthony puts his hands up again and gets back in his car, driving off just as a familiar black truck rounds the corner.

"Now what?" Raven mutters, coming to help me to my feet as Virgil slams to a stop.

"It's my boyfriend," I mumble, squeezing my eyes shut against the pain in my head and the tears. Vulcan jumps out of the truck, vaulting over to inspect me and then sniffing at Argus.

Moments later, Virgil is there, cupping my face in his hands and looking at me with confusion and something else.

Something like a *threat*.

"What happened?" he demands, his voice soft and seemingly calm. But he doesn't *look* calm. Not his eyes, anyway.

God, I just don't want to cry.

"Can you-can one of you look at Argus?" I ask, my voice trembling along with the rest of me. I feel dizzy, faint, and like I'm going to vomit. "He got kicked, he... I think he's all right, but—"

"My mom is a vet. Let me look?" Liza offers, going over to kneel in front of my service dog. She feels along his chest and legs, murmuring praise to him while Virgil just meets my eyes, face close to mine.

Finally, Liza pulls back with a sigh and rubs under Argus's chin. "He's fine," she assures me. "Not even bruised."

"Wonderful," I whisper. "Awesome." I turn my gaze back to Virgil's and grip his wrists. "Can we go home? Please?"

Beside me, Raven frowns. "Do you want us to call the cops? And you hit your head pretty hard, didn't you? Maybe going back isn't the best idea."

"No, I'm fine. I'm *fine*," I promise her, in a voice that's definitely not fine. "I just want to go home. It was...he used to be married to my mom. He's gone now, though." But not for long, and the look in Virgil's eyes shows me that he knows I'm lying for the girls' benefit. "I just want to go." I offer them both a shaky smile and after a few moments, Raven nods.

"If you really want," she says finally. "Just call me if you need anything?" She hugs me awkwardly since Virgil won't let go, and her friend gives me her own sympathetic grin that just makes me want to sob.

Once they're gone, I look back to Virgil, take a breath, and say, "I really might throw up. Or faint. Or both? Maybe both. Sorry if it's both."

I don't move from my spot on the sofa when three knocks sound on the door. They're light, undemanding even. I frown and look up, my hand curling more firmly into Argus's ruff as he pants on the sofa beside me.

God, if I open the door and it's Anthony, I'm never going to get over it. Already I feel weird about not calling Mom, as Virgil had asked me not to. But Mom needs to know, especially if my stepdad is paying her a visit soon, too.

I don't want him anywhere near my mom. Or me, for that matter. But Mom doesn't deserve that.

"It's just us," the muffled, familiar voice calls from the other side of the door. "Just your friendly neighborhood campers."

Is that *Wren*? By us, does he mean Virgil, who I haven't seen much today, or Cass?

Well, I suppose there's only one way to truly find out. I get to my feet and walk to the door, opening it as Vulcan gives a half-assed bark from the bedroom.

He runs out, collar jingling and tail wagging, to inspect Wren and Cass thoroughly while Argus just watches from the couch.

"Hello," Wren greets, looking at me for permission as his hand hovers over Vulcan's ears. I nod, and he kneels down, proceeding to instantly go into baby talk mode as Cass just watches him from a few feet behind.

“I did not know you were such a dog person,” I remark, leaning against the door frame and letting out a long breath of air. “Really, it’s...cute?” That doesn’t seem like the right word, exactly, but I’m going to go with it.

God, I’m so tired.

“How are you?” Cass moves straight to the point, drawing my gaze up to his, and I stare at him for a few seconds before shrugging off the question.

“I’m okay. I’ll live, anyway. What are you guys doing here?” They don’t make me uncomfortable or scare me. They just seem...*normal*. For the most part. Except, obviously, for a few key differences between them and most people that are negligible at best. Probably.

“I’m fine, I guess. I’m just trying to figure out why Virgil doesn’t want me calling Mom!” I raise my voice, expecting him to saunter out from behind the deck or a tree.

Instead, Wren straightens, and both of them look at me like I may have slightly lost it.

“He’s not here,” Cass says quietly, putting me out of my misery.

“Oh. *Oh?*” My eyebrows jump upward. “Where is he?”

“He is stalking your stepdad, making a note of where he’s staying and figuring out a good place to dump the body. I *think* he’s decided dismemberment will work best here, but I’m not sure yet. Cass?” Wren turns to look at his friend, black curls falling to frame his face.

Cass shrugs. “I thought we were still on the burning plan. That’s why he wanted us to get the trashcan, remember—”

“Sorry, *what?*” I can’t help but interrupt, and my voice is higher than I intend it to be. “What did you just...are you talking about *murder?*”

“Can we come in and talk about this?” Cass asks from behind his friend. “I don’t like being in the open as much as these two when we discuss things.”

“What? Oh umm. Sure?” I back up, calling Vulcan in as well, and the two of them walk inside and look around my small cabin.

“I would have *loved* to live somewhere like this when I was younger,” Wren says, going to the kitchen and pulling out one of the chairs at my tiny table. “Too bad it’s not closer to the lake.”

“Your mom owns a campground, right?” I ask, going back to the sofa and sitting next to Argus. “That’s what Virgil said?”

“She *does*. And she was always really strict with me as a kid.”

“Well, you did almost drown,” Cass points out and sits in the chair opposite him.

“Hey, *hey*.” Wren points a finger at his friend. “I’d rather almost *drown* than have to hear the jokes about stabbing my sister in the chest for the rest of my life, man.”

I’m learning to let those comments go. I let them wash over me like a wave and just...don’t think about them.

It’s the only way I can really get through this sane, I’ve decided.

“So, back up. But like really back up. I don’t want to hear about people you’ve killed,” I assure him. “You’re here...*why*, again?”

“To...kill your stepdad?” They look at each other as Wren speaks. “Were you not going to help?”

“I didn’t even *know*.”

“Virgil said he thought you knew. Or at least that he was planning this,” Cass points out.

I open my mouth to reply, but the door opens again, heralding the return of my boyfriend. He looks between us, and at my slight scowl, before holding his hands up in surrender.

“I can explain?” he offers, a lopsided smile going to his lips. “I can probably explain, princess.”

“*Ohhh.*” Wren draws out the word. “So you *didn't* tell her. Nice.”

“I thought we'd *ask* her. And if she says no, then you guys are going home without any trophies.” He looks between them, eyes steely, before turning to me. “So, we would like to kill your stepdad,” he says, sitting down in the scant room between Argus and me. Offended, the dog huffs and hops off the sofa, following Vulcan into the bedroom as I watch.

“That's umm... Huh.” I don't know what else to say. Obviously, I *should* say no. The same way I *should've* said no to Virgil staying in my room that first night.

But here I am.

And Anthony is still around here somewhere, looking for another chance to hurt me or going to 'talk' to my mom.

“Can we talk about it?” I ask, feeling a little bit flighty like there's a bird trapped in my chest. “I just...it's kind of a big deal. I'd really like to talk about it.”

“What's to talk about? We find him, we kill him, we clean up,” Wren shrugs. “We can make it terrifying for him if you want him to suffer. Or we can make it quick.” It's so strange that he talks about it like it's just business. Just a job to do that he's done a thousand times before. Well, maybe it is.

“Death just seems so final.” But even as I say it, I know that I wouldn't mind him being dead. Ever since he showed up the first time, I've fantasized about letting Virgil do what he's threatened.

And right here is my best shot.

I turn to face my boyfriend, my knee brushing his thigh. He splays his fingers on my leg, gazing at me, and I watch him with the same silence, the same scrutiny.

“What if you guys get caught?” I ask finally, voicing my deepest fear about the whole thing. “I don't want you going to prison. Especially because of me. And what if my stepdad has a weapon? He could *kill* you.”

“*Princess.*” He purrs the nickname, and distantly I hear Wren choke on his spit. Virgil leans forward, his hand tightening on my thigh, and runs his hand over the bruises from my stepdad’s fingers that had formed the night before. I flinch, the area sensitive, and he lightly covers them with his own hand as if he can will them away just like that. “We’re not going to get caught. We’re not going to get killed, either. If something did happen. Say Wren fucks up and gets blood everywhere, maybe.”

Cass snorts into his hand, prompting me to glance his way, but Virgil pulls me back with a guiding hand on my cheek so that I’m looking at him again.

“Things have happened before. Usually because of him.” He flicks his gaze towards a very affronted Wren. “And we’ve almost been caught. But we’ve been doing this for a very, very long time. And we have *very* good friends. We’re not going to jail. We’re not going to die. Not now, not ever, and certainly not for your disgusting *stain* of a stepfather. I promise.”

He says it so firmly and with so much assurance that it’s impossible not to believe him. It’s absolutely not even a possibility in my mind that he’s wrong when he’s looking at me like this.

I reach up and encircle his wrist with my fingers. “How are you going to do it?” I ask, the words falling from my lips like stones.

I shouldn’t want him to.

I shouldn’t say yes.

But I don’t want him near my mom and me again for another chance at us. Hasn’t he proved he’s dangerous? Hasn’t he proved that he hasn’t changed one *bit* from how he was when I was a child?

He has, and I’d be stupid to believe in anything else. He’s shown me who he is, what he is, and what he wants. I don’t need to be hit in the head with another door to get that he’s not a good person, and this won’t be a good situation for Mom or me in the long run.

Besides, he had his chance. He went to prison, for fuck's sake. If he was going to change, he would've done it and gone far from here when he got out. Not come straight to my home and tried to convince me to 'forgive' him by using intimidation and violence.

He's the same piece of shit he always has been, and the realization makes something just click inside my chest.

I *want* Virgil and his friends to kill my stepfather. I *want* to see him dead on the floor, bleeding out, and burning in a barrel after the deed is done.

Well, okay, I don't really need to see him burned to ash. That probably doesn't smell so great, and I might vomit.

"I'm going to cut him up. I'm going to bleed him for you so that you can see how red his blood is." He draws closer until his forehead is pressed against mine. "Wren has his machete. It's messy and a pain to clean up, but I'll let him chop him up for you. So you can watch him scream with that big blade sawing him in half."

I shudder, wondering how I'm ever going to come back from how sexy he's making this sound. His hand settles on my throat, but when I try to glance at the others, Virgil keeps me in place, face directed at his.

"And if you want, you can watch. I'll have him beg for whatever you want. I'll have him scream and cry out that you're the only mercy in the room he could ever have. But we both know you're not. You want to see him bleed more than any of us. You *deserve* it, you know."

"I do?"

"You absolutely do," Wren remarks, drawing a quick glance from Virgil.

"Just tell me that we can. Tell me we can kill him, Sloane." Virgil's lips brush mine, and it's so unfair that he's using every tool in his arsenal against me right now to get me to agree to murder.

But in reality, though I'll never admit it, I doubt it would've taken any of this.

“Okay,” I whisper and kiss him hard, not minding that the other two are right there and definitely watching.

Virgil pulls away first, thumb on my lower lip. “You’re telling me yes?” he clarifies. “You’ll let me kill him for you?”

“I *want* you to kill him,” I agree. “Because the world doesn’t need a leech like him.”

If my heart beats any harder, I worry that it'll escape my chest entirely.

Whether he just knows or it's obvious, Virgil reaches over to cover my hand as we sit in the truck, an easy smile on his features. "It's going to be fine," he promises. "For us. Not your stepfather."

"Wonderful," I murmur, and hope I'm not about to puke. I don't *love* him. Nor do I feel bad about Anthony's impending demise.

He deserves it. He wasn't a good guy before my mom, a detail we'd learned after he went to jail, and he isn't a good person now.

I suck in another breath, gulping air into my lungs like water. Hell, the oxygen even *feels* like water, with how heavy it sits in my lungs.

"Do you want us to go?" It's dark outside, and I can barely see Cass's profile as he leans forward to speak quietly. "We could take care of things. That way, you can stay with her."

Virgil holds my gaze, thinking.

"It's okay," I say, aware of how excited he's been to do this. I know he wants a piece of Anthony, and I'm sure he'd enjoy hunting him down to get it. "You can go—"

"Let's do that," Virgil agrees, unbuckling his seat belt and mine. "Why don't you two go in and secure everything, and we'll go in when you're done?"

Wren and Cass open their doors, the indoor lights of the truck staying off, and in the mirror, I can see the flash of the large machete Wren has as he takes it off the seat.

“It’s really okay,” I murmur, repeating my words. “I know you want to—”

“I want you,” he argues. “I want to sit here with you and wait until they’re done.” The truck doors close quietly, the lights going out again. “I promise, Sloane. There’s nowhere I’d rather be than right here.”

“But I thought you wanted to...you know. Go be *you* and grab him or something?” I know he does or did, at least.

But Virgil just shakes his head and leans forward to brush his lips to mine. “It’s *fine*,” he says. “You’re more important than anyone I want to kill.”

“How romantic?” I’m not sure if it *is* romantic, but I’m going to pretend it is all the same.

“It’s the most romantic I’ve ever been. Relax, princess.” He pushes me gently back against the seat, his fingers tickling over the back of my hand. “We just need to wait. Just for a little while.”

“How little of a while?”

In the dim glow of a faraway street lamp, I can just barely see him smile as he leans back against his own seat, his hand never leaving mine. He draws figure eights on my skin, then switches to inscrutable patterns as his deep breaths move slowly and even throughout the otherwise silent truck.

It can’t be more than ten minutes, maybe fifteen, when his phone vibrates in the console. He moves easily, lazily almost, and brings it up to his face to read the screen like he has all the time in the world.

“Do you want to come?” he asks, putting the phone in the jacket of his hoodie.

My lips form the word no. I don’t want to go. I want to stay right here and wait for his triumphant return.

But instead, I take a deep breath and say, for some crazy reason, “Yeah. I...I do. Can I?”

“Of course, you can.” He gets out, and I do the same, moving quickly to stand beside him as he closes the door and locks it. Still just as quickly, I follow directly behind him, like I’m attached to his shadow and trying to melt into it.

For Virgil’s part, he never once slows. He never looks anything but confident and appears to belong here with absolute certainty.

This is crazy, is all I can think of. It’s *crazy* because it’s not like we’ve done a full vetting investigation. We haven’t gathered reasons or evidence. We don’t have *real cause*.

But here I am, following my boyfriend in to kill my stepdad.

I must be fucking insane.

The front door of the small, rundown house opens, and we just stroll on through like we’re meant to be there. Like Anthony Murphy has invited us inside. My steps slow, and I look around, realizing that this must be a place he’s renting. There’s no way he’s bought all this furniture in such a short amount of time. No way that he decorated this place, either.

We turn the corner, and my heart nearly drops when I see my stepfather tied to a chair in the middle of a room, the furniture shoved to the sides.

Cass and Wren lean against opposite walls, their faces obscured by shadow as my stepfather looks up at the sound of my footsteps.

“*Sloane?*” he gasps, the words slurred a little through swollen lips and what might be a broken nose. “Sloane, is that you? Get me out of here. Tell them to *stop!*”

“No,” I whisper, without really meaning to. I move further into the room, gazing down at him as my stomach twists itself into what’s probably an origami swan. It feels that intricate, anyway. I feel like my insides might betray me, and I might really get sick, even though I haven’t yet.

But I don't feel bad for him. I feel nervous about the situation.

"I asked you to leave me alone," I say quietly, choosing my words with care. "I asked you so many times. But you want to go threaten *Mom* too?" I shake my head. "You never should've come to find me, Anthony. You should've gotten out of prison and just left us alone."

"You needed to see that it was all a mistake. I need to convince you so I can convince your mom... Sloane, the two of you were the best things that ever happened to me."

"Well, you were the worst thing that ever happened to us."

The silence rings between us as Virgil prowls around him, standing at his back as he draws a wickedly sharp knife from the holster at his back. His eyes are on mine as Anthony tries to look at him, and there's a question there that I don't know how to answer.

"Fine," Anthony whispers, licking his lips nervously. He jerks at the bonds securing him to the chair and tries to wriggle free, with no success. "I'll leave. I won't come back, all right? You've made your point."

"Liar." I'm surprised at the vehement frustration in the word. Surprised because I *mean it*, and I know he *doesn't*. "You'll always come back. You're like a pathetic, miserable cockroach. You just won't leave us alone." I clench my hands into fists at my sides to hide their shaking. "I want you to leave, but it doesn't seem to be happening the easy way."

Taking a deep, shuddering breath, I add. "I just want to know something. Please. Tell me the truth, and..." I know he has every reason to lie to save his own skin. I need to make the truth appetizing. I need to make it worthwhile.

"Tell me the truth, and I won't let them kill you."

"Do you promise?" he asks, and I nearly smirk at the similarity to what I'd asked Virgil so many times before.

I shrug, trying to look like I agree with him. "Yeah, Anthony. I don't want you to die. I'm not a killer. I *swear* that

if you tell me the truth about what I'm going to ask, I'll make them let you go."

None of the men do more than look up at me with interest.

They know I'm lying. It's obvious to them. Probably just as obvious as it is to me. There's no way anyone in this room could believe it since we're this far unless they have nothing else to grasp onto.

Like Anthony.

"Fine. Ask your question. I promise I'll tell you the truth."

"Why did you take me out of school that day?"

I'm sure that I know. After all these years, I've come to my own conclusion, sure. But I want to hear it from *him*.

Anthony takes a deep breath and looks between Wren and Cass warily. Both of them hold blades, though Cass's is much smaller than the literal machete in Wren's hand. Then he turns to look at me again, hair flopping over the baldness of his crown.

"Because I knew it would hurt your mom," he mumbles. "I *knew* it would hurt her, and I thought it would mean she'd have to tear up those divorce papers. I couldn't think straight, I was drunk, which you know, and everything was spinning. So, I thought that if I could just get you away from her *lies* and her *poison*, that you could see my side of things and talk her round."

His side of things? Like he hadn't spent weeks tearing her and me down verbally and somewhat physically before Mom had the strength to say *enough*?

What side of things was his, exactly? I'd lived it just as clearly as he had, and I definitely didn't need to be told that I was wrong. Not then, and not now.

"Why did you decide to kill me?" My voice trembles as I say it. I don't want to ask, but I need the answer. I *need* to know that I was right all those years ago.

He looks at the two men again. "*Swear* if I tell you that you won't let them kill me," he whines again, his voice high

and frightful.

I offer him the fakest, most reassuring smile I can muster. “I promise. They won’t do it. They just wanted to help me scare you. Just tell me the truth and—”

“To get back at your mother,” he spits, the words like acid in his mouth. “I didn’t care about *you*. Not when I decided that. Sorry, Sloane, but it’s the truth. I wanted to get back at her, and the only way I knew how was through you. I was drunk.” He uses it as an excuse when it only serves to fuel my anger. “But you were just some kid from an affair she had. I could’ve given her a real family.”

My blood runs cold. I’ve never hated someone as much as I do right now. And behind him, Virgil shifts with a sigh. “Are you done?” he asks, eyes locked on mine. “You don’t need to hear his bile. He’s nothing, Sloane.”

He’s nothing.

He really is *nothing*.

“Yeah,” I state, forcing my voice steady as my nails dig into my palms. “I’m done. You can do whatever you want.”

Anthony’s eyes go wide, his face falling open in fear. “You said—”

“I lied,” I say coldly. “It’s something I’m getting better at, actually. I fucking *lied*. And what are you going to do about it?” My mouth twists into a grin as Virgil stands at Anthony’s back, the knife coming to rest against his throat as he tangles one latex-gloved hand in Anthony’s hair. “Sue me?”

Anthony doesn’t get the chance to answer.

My stepfather only gets the chance to gasp, his mouth going wide in an ‘o’ shape as Virgil runs the blade cleanly along his throat, pulling his head back so that blood sprays upward and lands a few feet from my shoes.

I thought I’d be sick. I thought the sight of him gasping for air through a ruined throat would send me to my knees or have tears in my eyes. I thought I would *care*, at the very least.

But I don’t.

I don't care one damn bit, and I find that my eyes are glued to the spectacle in front of me, like a disaster I can't look away from.

Finally, when his gasps are done, and Wren hefts his body over one shoulder, Virgil sheathes the blade and walks forward to push stray hair from my face affectionately.

“Good girl,” he murmurs, hand on my cheek. “I always knew you had it in you.”

The door closes behind me, and I stare up at the mini chandelier of the foyer, a word I never thought I'd have a use for.

“Wow,” I say, only half paying attention to Vulcan, who's moved to the end of his leash to greet Virgil as he comes out of the kitchen. “How much did you pay for this? And also, being a reporter pays *this* well?”

The house isn't a mansion by any means. And I doubt real estate prices in Arkala are as cringe-worthy as somewhere like Akron or Cincinnati. But still. The house has to be three bedrooms, at least, and probably at least twenty-five hundred square feet.

It's a house for a family, not one person.

Even if that person is Virgil.

“Being a reporter pays...somewhat well,” Virgil admits, letting Vulcan off his leash. “Can I let Argus go?” he asks, hand hovering over the leash clip, as I turn to look at the room around me.

“Yeah, sure. So long as you don't mind them making a mess.” I doubt they're going to do that. They don't *make* a mess, and neither of them are dirty. But they are dogs, and this is a new house.

“I'm sure we'll make more of a mess than they *ever* will,” Virgil chuckles, unclipping Argus. I give him his release word, and the dog trots off to follow his friend, now that he doesn't have to worry about me for a few minutes.

“Getting tired of my cabin?” I snort. “Are you planning on hosting sleepovers here on the weekends?”

“Well, yeah.” He beckons me with a crook of his fingers, and I follow him through the house easily enough. It’s impressive. Like I’d thought before, not a mansion. But still a nice, one-story house with an open floor plan and three bedrooms. It’s furnished, so I wonder if he bought it that way, and when he opens the fridge, he gestures to it like it’s something of note.

“This is *real food*,” he tells me, pretending like he’s putting on a show. “Not frozen. Real, raw food.”

“I didn’t think you could cook,” I say, sliding onto one of the barstools. “And I’m more interested in your bedroom than your fridge.”

“Be interested in all of it.” He closes the fridge and goes to the pantry, repeating the process like an overdramatic thespian.

“I get it. You don’t like my frozen food consumption. *I get it*,” I tease as he beckons me again and leads me down the hallway, past a sunken dining room where dog bowls are set up along one wall and already filled with water.

It’s surprisingly thoughtful, and my steps slow as I look at the dining room properly, another mini chandelier catching my attention.

“You coming?” he hums, coming back to catch my hand in his. “Because we aren’t in the bedroom yet.”

From somewhere else in the house, Vulcan barks, and I wonder if he and Argus have found something to wrestle over.

Well, I did warn Virgil. If something gets broken or they eat one of his shirts, then that’s on him.

“Okay, okay,” I follow him, not having any other choice with his hand around my wrist until he pushes open the door into the large primary suite of the house.

The bed inside, and the attached closet with rows and rows of storage, are impressive. So is the bathroom that connects to the far wall that houses a shower and Jacuzzi.

“You must’ve paid a fortune for this. Are you broke now? Is this you telling me that you’re going to get a job as a sex worker?” It’s a joke, and he scoffs at the words.

“Yeah, princess. That’s absolutely what I’m telling you.” Before I can reply, he pulls me closer, only to push me down onto the large bed and crawl onto the mattress behind me. I roll onto my back once my head finds the pillows and manage to kick my shoes off so I don’t get them on his nice, clean sheets.

Virgil, who is still wearing his shoes like a heathen, crawls over me until he’s right above me, arms and thighs caging me in as he stares down at me with intensity.

My smile fades slightly as I watch him, my hands on the pillows above me. “What?” I murmur finally. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” he breathes, leaning down to kiss me. “You know how much I like you under me. In this case”—he looks around, then shrugs one shoulder—“I’ve been wanting to get you here for days, princess. Right into my house, in my bed where you belong.”

“I still can’t believe you *bought a house* in Arkala.”

“I was offered a job here,” he replies instantly, like he’s prepared the answer long before I got here. “Akron is a little problematic for me right now. So I need a place to wait things out for longer than my ten-day cabin stay.” He reaches up and cups my jaw, running his thumb over my lip. “Why don’t you stay here with me?”

“For tonight?” I nip at his thumb, my heart pounding in my chest. I have a feeling he doesn’t mean for just tonight.

I have a feeling he means for much, much longer than that.

“Tonight. Tomorrow. For as long as you want. It’s big enough, even if you wanted your own room. Hell, you could have *two* rooms. And it’s only a few miles from your work.”

My heart flutters like a little bird in my chest, and my lips part as I stare up at him, suddenly just as nervous as I had been the first time he’d broken in.

“You’re asking me to move in with you,” I state, though none of my words have the tone of a question.

“Yes,” he agrees without hesitation. He, too, looks a little unsure. Like he can’t tell what I’m going to say, for all he’s told me I’m easy to read.

But maybe I’m not as easy to read as he’d thought.

“I’ve known you for *two weeks*,” I remind him, looping my arms around his neck. “Two *weeks*, Virgil. And you want me to move in with you? Doesn’t that sound crazy to you?”

“A lot of things that should sound crazy to me normally don’t.” He turns to kiss my arm, lips warm against my skin. “This is definitely one of them.”

I’m not sure. The realization rings through my brain. It’s not that I don’t *want* to. I’m just nervous. I’m afraid.

I don’t know what that would mean for me if I did move in here with him.

“I’m...” I don’t want to disappoint him. My fluttering heart turns to lead, but before it can go much further, Virgil presses his thumb harder against my lip, and a soft smile curls his lips.

“Not right now. I don’t want to *force* you, princess. I’ll always be here. And if that means that you’re just here for sleepovers and living at the cabin still?” he shrugs one shoulder. “I don’t mind.”

“You really don’t?”

“Not at all. You were made for me, Sloane. And maybe that seems a little crazy for me to say, since we’ve only known each other for fourteen days.” He moves to lie down over me, hovering just above my body as his front brushes mine. Instinctively, I bring my thighs up around his hips, and he cradles my face in his hands.

“Sleepovers,” I say finally, grinning up at him. “I’m here for the sleepovers, at least. But I’m not learning to cook just because you don’t like my frozen food.”

“So we’ll let Jed move in?” Virgil offers, kissing me sweetly. “I’m telling you, he’s an amazing cook.”

“*Sleepovers*,” I repeat because I don’t want him to get the wrong idea that he can bribe me into moving in with him even with the promise of good food.

“Wake up, princess. We’re not fucking *done yet*.” His fingers plunge deeper into me and I open my eyes, only half aware I’d closed them. “How long does it take before it’s no longer a sleepover and you just live here?” Virgil’s voice sounds like a low purr as he continues, and while the question seems like a legitimate one, I know it’s not.

It can’t be since there’s a gag holding my lips open, and my teeth are sunk into it like a chew toy.

I moan when his fingers delve deeper into me, and the knife that had been tossed aside a few minutes ago suddenly trails across the skin of my inner thighs once more. My arms twist in the soft cuffs that keep me in place.

I can’t move, even if I want to.

“Because I have to tell you.” The tip of the knife digs into my sensitive skin just enough for it to be almost painful. Then it’s gone again, and his mouth is there instead, nipping and biting over my thigh. “You’ve been here for a while now, and it doesn’t seem like you’re leaving anytime soon.”

I *want* to remind him that he’s kept me here for the better part of the day, cuffed to his bed as he takes his fill of whatever he wants from me.

So far, that’s resulted in three rounds of him fucking me much too slowly and much too teasingly.

I hate it.

Except, I don’t.

I shudder as his fingers are replaced with his shaft, and he sinks into me with a groan and leans on his arms so we're nearly face to face.

My knees lift, one leg curling around his as I sigh and stare at him over the gag, my eyes wide.

"You always feel so good for me, princess," he purrs, one hand going to my hip as our bodies meet. "Like you really were made for me. You're fucking perfect. My perfect, sweet little slutty princess."

Another shudder goes through me at his words, and my eyes close as he starts to move once more. This time I can't help but whimper. I'm still so sensitive from everything else we've done today, and it's a combination of too much and so fucking good.

"Am I being mean to you?" he asks, his movements speeding up like the idea is an appealing one. "Am I being too rough with my princess?" I love when he calls me that. Why wouldn't I? *How* can I not, when his voice is just such a turn on?

But I nod anyway, opening my eyes to make sure he knows I'm answering him.

A slow smirk crawls over his lips, and he sits up enough that he can put one hand gently on my throat, being careful not to push down. "Well, that's too bad, isn't it? I can't help how sexy you look under me like this. Though I can't decide..." His movements pick up, and I whine as I try to move to relieve some of the overwhelming sensations. "Whether I like you more like this or more on your knees. What do you think?"

My answer is a long, high moan as my back arches off the bed.

It's so hard not to come when he's had me on edge *again* for the past few minutes.

"I know, *I know*," he coos sweetly, moving his hand to cup my cheek instead. "I'm really just the worst. Only, I don't think you mind so much. Are you going to come for me? Hmm? Are you going to come while I fuck your pussy for the

fourth time for me? You were made for this, weren't you? Made for me to play with. I must've done something really good in a past life to get rewarded with you, huh?" His chuckle is grating, and I know he's just as close as I am.

It's too bad I can't reply, but after the fourth smart-ass remark of the day to see how far I could push him, he'd decided it was time to break out the new ball gag. It's hotter than I'd expected, even if my jaw is aching.

When he shifts for a better angle and his thrusts become harder, I shudder and let my hips arch to meet his. My eyes close hard, and one of his hands finds my bound one.

"Come for me, princess," he murmurs, mouth close to my ear. "You know how much I love to feel you come around my cock." A nip to my ear and his fingers curling with mine is all it takes. I gasp around the gag as I come, my back arching as sharply as it can with me being tied down and him over me. My orgasm is weaker than my first and second, but just as sharp and pushes me a little further towards what is probably insanity at having come so many times in such a short period of time.

Virgil buries his face in my throat and growls, following me and emptying himself inside of me. It's apparently a kink of his I hadn't known existed to push my knees apart and finger me while I'm still full of his cum and practically dripping.

Especially now that he's fucked me for the fourth time.

This time, before sitting back, Virgil reaches up and gingerly undoes the gag from my mouth before tugging it away and tossing it to the bedside table. I breathe through my mouth, sucking in deep lungfuls of air, and I'm surprised to realize that tears run down my cheeks from overstimulation.

When had that happened?

His fingers unbuckle the cuffs deftly, and he massages my wrists before letting my arms fall again.

"You're okay?" he assures, leaning down to kiss me sweetly, a move that belies his earlier intensity and words.

“I’m okay,” I reply, shakily reaching up to pull him to me. He kisses me again as if he’s trying to devour my mouth and possibly suck my soul out while he’s at it. “By the way,” I add, now that I can speak. “I’m only here six days a week. It’s not living with you until it’s all seven.”

It’s only six because of my transitioning work schedule. Despite my prior words from a month ago about *sleepovers only*, I’ve been here a lot.

Because I just can’t stay away from him, no matter how much I try to tell myself to take things slow. At this point, I’m pretty past listening to my mother’s voice inside my head. Especially since my mom herself has decided he’s not so bad after all.

“I’ll gag you again,” Virgil threatens teasingly, hand going between us so that he can press two fingers into me.

I whimper, my fingers finding his hair. “I need a break,” I say, half-laughing. “You have got to let me take a nap, at least.”

“I’ll consider it.”

“It feels like you’re trying to make it so I’m too tired to leave tonight.” That had been my plan, but when his lips curl into a wicked smirk, I realize that had been his plan all along. “You asshole,” I say without heat and slap his shoulder reprovingly. “You can’t just fuck me into being so tired I stay the night *again*.”

“Why can’t I? It seems to be working very, very well.” He kisses me once more, like he can’t get enough.

And maybe I can’t either.

“I have enough toys here—and myself, of course—to keep you occupied for a month. You won’t *want* to leave my bed,” he assures me when he pulls away.

“You’re such a jerk.” I curl my arm around his shoulders, and he rolls onto his side, pulling me onto mine.

“I’m *your* jerk,” he points out, cupping my jaw and brushing his nose against mine. “All yours, and never anyone

else's."

I watch him, knowing he won't ask anything of me I'm not willing to give him, and finally lean in so my lips brush his ear before I whisper, just loud enough for him to hear, "I think I might love you."

"I know you do," he chuckles, sliding his hands around my hip and shoulder so he can keep me pressed to him. "I'm just waiting for you to realize it."

"Maybe I'll hold out then, just to make you wait longer."

"Oh, *princess*." He bites my shoulder teasingly. "I'll wait as long as you need me to. You should've told me to leave, and now that you didn't, there's no getting rid of me." It shouldn't be romantic, but it is. It shouldn't make me smile and hug him tighter.

But it does.

EPILOGUE

“Can I look now?” There’s no fear in my voice, though I have to stifle a yawn as I lean back against the reclined seat of Virgil’s truck. In the back seat, I can hear Vulcan panting, and a whining yawn from Argus is audible every few minutes.

I wonder if they recognize where we are.

“No”—Virgil’s smooth voice is a chuckle in my ears —“you most certainly cannot, princess.” As always, the nickname makes a shiver go down my spine, but I don’t let him know that. Instead, I recline my seat, the movement slow enough to make a point as I silently protest his unfair treatment.

“You can’t make me wear a blindfold forever,” I point out, when I’m lying back far enough that Argus’s breath blasts in my face, making me regret my decision. “Besides. If I don’t get to see your face soon, maybe I’ll go into withdrawal.”

“Will you?” Amusement touches his tone, and the truck slows as he flicks on his turn signal. “What will that entail, exactly?” As usual, his voice stays quiet. Serene. He never gets mad or raises his voice, unless the world is ending, and something about his usually calm demeanor has always made things better.

It’s always easier to breathe when he’s in the room.

And how fucked up is that?

In the dark, with only the sounds of his truck for company, it's impossible not to slip into thoughts about how I'd met my boyfriend almost a year ago. And all the warnings he'd given me back then not to let him stay.

Too bad I wouldn't know a red flag if it slapped me in the face with a mask and a bloody knife. But for everything he is, Virgil is also *mine*. Serial killer or not.

"You're quiet all of a sudden." I feel the swipe of his fingers on the exposed skin of my arm, and I shiver at the promise of something more. "What are you thinking about?"

"You," I admit without hesitation, a grin curving over my lips as I turn my face in his direction, even though I can't see his gorgeous, probably smirking, face. "Are you surprised?"

"No. What about me?" Curiosity tinges his voice as the truck slows again, and from the back seat, I hear Vulcan woof. "Don't spoil the surprise," Virgil murmurs, and I'm sure that he's reaching back to give his favorite dog some love. It's insane how well Vulcan has taken to him, when his track record with strangers isn't exactly full of love and affection. He's my standoffish guard dog, not the family pet that wants his belly rubbed at all times of the day.

Until Virgil, anyway.

But now, with Virgil bringing home organic treats weekly and constantly overfilling their toy supply, both dogs have realized what being spoiled is like. With that logic, it's no real surprise that Vulcan is devoted as hell to his morning running partner.

Oh, how things have changed in a year.

"I was thinking about how we met," I admit, when I realize I still haven't answered his question. "You know, when you were panting after me outside my window while I innocently made no mistakes or dumb decisions."

He can't stop the snort of laughter that leaves him, even as the truck slows to almost a crawl and heads up a sloping incline. "Sure, Sloane. That is completely what happened." I hear his amusement as he parks, and before I can say anything

else about the blindfold, he's tugged it gently from my face as I bolt up in my reclined seat, blinking away spots from being in the dark for so long.

What I see, though, makes me nearly stop breathing. I can't move for a few moments, and I feel tears burn in my eyes as I look out over the familiar location. "I can't believe you did this," I murmur, eyes flicking from the rails of my former cabin that's now gone back to being rented out to guests throughout the year, to the space on the other side of it, where the lights are still hung parallel with the roof and a fire snaps and crackles in the fire pit.

We're not the only ones here, either. From where I sit, I can see Hazel near the fire, poking at it with a stick and wearing her camp counselor shirt from this past summer. She rolls her eyes and says something to Wren, who lifts his hands in surrender and backs away, grinning. In a cloth chair, Cass sits with his legs stretched out in front of him, a bottle of water in one hand.

"Is Jed here?" I ask, running my eyes over the scene in front of me. Normally he's attached to Cass or Wren when we're all together, though for now, I can't see him around the fire.

"He's probably in the cabin getting the food ready," Virgil tells me, opening his door. But he hesitates, and pulls it closed again, turning to face me with a surprisingly vulnerable expression. "You like it? Really? I know you've been missing this place, and I wanted to do something special for your birthday."

"I love it," I promise him, eyes locking onto his. "I can't believe it, and I'm definitely still floored. But I *love it*, Virgil." There's no way for me to tell him how happy I am, how disbelieving I am that he's done something so perfect for my birthday. All I can think to do is unbuckle my seatbelt and lunge across the space between us to press my lips to his.

Virgil chuckles against my mouth, one hand coming up to steady me before I can go so far as to crawl into his lap. "Down, princess," he purrs against my lips, pulling back just

enough for me to catch sight of his dark, dancing gaze. “There will be so much time for that later, *after* your party.”

And if that doesn’t make my heart nearly stop, then nothing in the world ever could.

Vulcan nearly lunges past Virgil to get out of the car, his thick tail waving as he whines audibly with excitement. It’s enough to make me sit back in my seat, trying hard not to replay my boyfriend’s words in my head over and over.

Virgil moves, grinning at the dog and running a hand through his ears before he slides out of the truck, taking Vulcan and leaving me for a minute to compose myself.

This isn’t what I’d expected. Hell, we hadn’t even talked about my birthday, really. Not enough to make me think he was going to do something this unique for me. My hands grip my tee, and a small smile curls over my lips as I watch Virgil stride across the parking area, Vulcan ranging around him in a semicircle.

Then Argus whines, and I tilt my head back to look at my service dog. “Yeah, I know. I’m being sappy,” I snort, opening my own door. It always surprises me when Virgil is sweet and does things like this to show how well he knows me. But damn if it doesn’t make me that much more in love with him.

“Sloane!” Wren’s wide, wolfish grin shows off a flash of white teeth as he walks across the asphalt, his long strides eating up the distance. “You actually let him blindfold you the whole drive? I’d bet him you’d rebel about ten minutes in.”

The declaration makes me snort, and I give Argus his release command, reminding him he’s off duty for a little while so he can go greet his new favorite uncle. Or so Wren calls himself now when he gives the dogs treats or toys. He’s nearly as bad as Virgil at spoiling them.

“I think you overestimate how much I want to be in a car wreck,” I reply, already heading toward the campfire like it’s a magnet pulling me in. The moment I feel the warmth wash over my face, Hazel grins wryly up at me, displaying a fading mark on her throat that is definitely from Wren.

“I think he overestimates how much other people want to do half the shit that goes through his mind,” she tells me, sitting back from the fire and running her fingers through long, light blonde hair that I’ve always envied.

Before I can answer, the cabin door closes and Jed comes out, a tray of food in his hands. The blond grins sidelong at me, putting the hot dog platter on the picnic table beside a pile of long two-pronged forks that look like they’ve never been thrust into a fire in their short existence.

“Happy birthday, Sloane,” he murmurs, sliding down to sit at the end of the picnic table nearest the chair I’ve settled myself in. Argus wastes no time greeting him, licking his hands until Jed grins ruefully and scratches behind his ear.

“Thank you. *All* of you because this isn’t what I was expecting.” Some part of me is still numb with surprise, and it’s hard not to just grin like an idiot at my friends all existing in one of my favorite places on earth.

“What were you expecting?” Cass’s voice drifts toward us from closer to the woods, and I turn to look at him, watching him gaze off into the trees.

I can’t say what I really think. That I was expecting really good sex and a movie back at our house. “A cake, maybe? Honestly, I haven’t really celebrated my birthday since it’s been just me. So I wasn’t expecting much of anything.” It’s not an insult toward Virgil in the least. I just haven’t celebrated in *years*, so why would I expect differently this year?

Footsteps crunch on the gravel, crossing the space by the fire pit until Virgil can tilt my chin upward, my eyes automatically finding his when he does.

“Good thing I have forever to make up for uncelebrated birthdays then,” he states, before swooping down for a sweet, chaste kiss. “But also, there’s definitely a cake. Unless Wren’s eaten it all.”

Wren scoffs in indignation, a hand over his chest. “I only licked the icing off, Virgil,” he informs us, rolling his eyes theatrically. “Really, I did you a *favor*.”

“That’s you, huh?” Virgil agrees, a hand on my shoulder. “Always doing us favors. Well, do the birthday girl a favor and grab the drinks, would you? We’re hungry.”

When midnight rolls around, I can’t help but wonder if Virgil has decided to just chill at home for the night. It’s a thirty-minute drive, at best, but he’s been gone for hours, leaving me at the remodeled, upgraded cabin to hang out with my dogs while he cleaned up and went home to grab the duffel bag he’d forgotten.

His slew of apologies had been troubled and guilt-filled, even after I’d assured him that I didn’t mind, and that I’d go back with him if he wanted. But Virgil had refused, telling me to enjoy the cabin until he came back.

But frankly, I’d much rather be enjoying it *with* him, instead of by myself.

Not that I can deny how things slot into place while I’m here. My brain takes a moment to not be so overwhelmed, and I swear my skin prickles with anxiety less when I’m here instead of anywhere else. Not that I’d like to live here again anytime soon. I’m much happier back in civilization, with a living space bigger than six hundred square feet.

Though, being here also makes me realize I should visit more.

Vulcan woofs from the floor as he gets up, tail wagging softly back and forth as he looks up at me with a needy expression, a low whine sounding in his throat.

“Yeah, okay.” I yawn, getting to my feet as well. “Though if you wouldn’t gorge on water like a camel, then maybe you wouldn’t have to pee every hour. Ever thought of that?” Judging by the way he happily trots out the door with Argus following at a slower pace, he most certainly has not thought of that option.

I’m not afraid they’ll run away. They never have, and as they walk around the empty parking area and sniff toward the trees, they certainly don’t give any signs of wanting to break the proverbial leash to chase whatever’s out there tonight.

Instead, both of them just do their business, Argus coming back first with a yawn and flopping down in front of the table once more. Vulcan comes back at a lively prance, probably proud of himself for crushing a frog or crunching something that's going to make his breath stink for days. He pauses at the door, however, glancing back out and giving one small wag of his tail.

"Uh, no," I inform him, hooking one finger in his collar and pulling him the rest of the way inside. "No, my friend, you are not going back out." He comes in without protest, heading for my sofa and flopping onto my seat like I'd personally invited him up there.

"Wow," I mutter, turning instead to go into the bedroom of the cabin where my backpack is. Somehow Virgil had remembered to pack me a change of clothes and my pajamas, plus get them here, but had forgotten his own bag. But it's not like I don't appreciate the thoughtfulness, or that I'm mad.

Just, maybe, a little lonely.

The room is different from how I'd left it. There's still only one king sized bed in here, with a better, more rustic looking frame than when I lived here. I strip out of my jeans and tee, pulling on the shorts and ratty t-shirt combo that I prefer to sleep in, no matter the weather or season.

There's a long dresser that's the same, the mirror over it containing the same minute crack in one corner that I remember. The closet is different, though. It closes now, instead of just being an open alcove in the room. And of course on the wall, where the window—

I blink, shoving my hair up and over my shoulders as I look at the window. The *open* window. The sight of it floods me with déjà vu, and heat tingles up my spine as I remember when it had been open last summer, and I hadn't thought anything of it.

If this is him sneaking in a detail from how we met, it's adorable. However, if the housekeeper who cleaned this place left it open, that's a problem of raccoon inhabitant proportions.

There's a sound behind me, then the click of the door closing. When I turn around, heart jumping to my throat at the thought of a home invasion or one of the dogs somehow locking me in here, my eyes land on the figure in front of the door and I freeze.

But the familiarity of the mask doesn't make my heart *stop* its racing. No, if anything, my breath hitches and it doubles its pace as he strides over, one hand coming up to cup my jaw in his fingers.

"One day we're going to break you of your habit of changing in front of windows, Sloane," Virgil purrs from behind the mask, long fingers stroking my skin as my insides squirm.

"It's my birthday," I whisper breathlessly, gazing up at him with wide eyes. "Can't we make an exception?"

"I am the exception," Virgil replies, striding forward and backing me up until my knees hit the bed. But he doesn't stop. He pushes me, just hard enough that I fall back onto the new mattress, my hands curling in the blankets as I just stare at him.

After all, how can I not? I haven't seen him with the mask and serial killer attire since last year, and well...it's definitely doing it for me. The white mask is a stark contrast to his black jacket, jeans, and shoes. The long, contorted face obscures his features completely so he can just look at me, as he's doing, without me being able to see his expression.

"Did you miss me?" His tone is teasing, and he brings one hand forward to stroke his knuckles along my cheek sweetly. "You don't have to answer, princess. I know how much you missed me." I love the low growl of his voice, the way it shakes me to my core. Especially when he curls his fingers around my jaw, just tightly enough that I have to take notice.

"God, you just love this, don't you?" It's a good thing he loves to talk and taunt, because his voice makes heat pool in my stomach, as does the way he turns my face back and forth before letting go suddenly. "Lay on your back, Sloane. Let me

remind you why you shouldn't change in front of open windows for any serial killer to just see you."

I do as he says, words clustering together in my throat but none of them making it to my lips. I have no idea what he's going to do, even though my mind gives me a ton of helpful suggestions. Fear mixes with exhilaration as I do what he'd said, lying back on the bed until my head touches the pillow above me.

"Good girl." Virgil's voice is full of affectionate approval, but the hand he curls in the waistband of my shorts is anything but gentle. "Good *fucking* princess." He yanks them downward with the words, easily taking them all the way off of my legs and chucking them to the floor. "Take off your shirt or I rip it off. Your choice."

My fingers fumble at the material, eyes never leaving his. But before I have the chance to do literally more than grab it, Virgil is over me, straddling my hips and reaching down to grip my shirt in both hands.

"Wait—" I protest, not out of love for my shirt but to tell him I was working on it.

"No. Should've done it faster," he purrs, voice slightly muffled from the mask. "I like you better without clothes, anyway. And better still when you can't find any of yours so you have to come beg me for mine. Beg me now, Sloane. Beg me not to rip your shirt so you have something to cover yourself with once I'm done with you."

My thighs tense, muscles flexing under him when his words slam into me with their full effect. "I need my shirt," I whisper, my fingers scrabbling for his wrists. "Please, Virgil." I don't need it. He knows it as well as I do, and he loves hearing my begging just as much as it thrills and humiliates me to do it. "Please don't. I—"

"That's all? That's your begging?" He chuckles softly, grips the material of my shirt more tightly in his fingers and tears, the fabric parting with loud protest as he ignores my fingers digging into his wrists.

“Wait, wait, I need—”

“To learn how to *beg*,” he interrupts with a growl, yanking the shirt off of my arms when it’s torn completely apart. “But that’s okay, because I’ll give you plenty of opportunity to learn tonight, Sloane. I *promise*.” He leans forward again, on his hands and knees, and one hand disappears to reach behind him, to the back of his jeans.

The dull flash of metal demands my attention when his hand comes back in the dim light of the bedside lamp, but my breath catches as it shines on the blade of the knife Virgil holds.

“Oh, fuck,” I can’t help but whisper, eyes trained on it. “You’re not going to—”

“Tell me what your safe word is.” Virgil’s voice is soft, and he doesn’t bring the knife any closer as he waits for me to get a grip on myself. “Or you’re not going to get any of what I want to give you.”

“Pineapple.” I don’t play coy or put up a fight. “Definitely pineapple.”

“Good girl.” God, I love when he calls me that. My eyes stay fixed on the knife as he brings it closer, the flat of the blade caressing my face gently and delicately. “Now let’s talk about why you don’t leave your window open for anyone to see you out here, shall we?” He turns it, the tip pressing into my lower lip as my chest heaves with anticipation. I wish I could see him. I want to see his face, though the emptiness of the mask does more for me than I remember.

I can’t exactly answer his probably rhetorical question. Though I also know it’s not a suggestion, and he’s not asking me for my opinion or advice on what he wants to do to me. Not that I mind that at all, either. But I can’t help but writhe under him when he strokes the blade down my skin, over my throat, until he can tap the point at the divot near the base of my throat.

“You can’t tell me you didn’t notice when you walked in. Right?” He pauses, and it takes me a moment to realize that

this time, he is waiting for an answer.

I shake my head, then say to clarify, “I didn’t see it. I wasn’t looking.”

“Hopeless,” he sighs wistfully, sitting back to make himself comfortable on my hips. “Or maybe you just didn’t want to look. Maybe you just wanted...plausible deniability?” The tip of the knife circles my nipple and I raise my hands in an automatic response, aiming to grab his wrist as he presses the blade against one of the most sensitive places on my body.

But Virgil isn’t having it. Quick as a serpent, he grabs my wrists in his other hands, slamming them down to the bed just over my head. “No, no, princess,” he purrs, the mask tilting up to my face again. “That’s not how this works. You just lay back and let me hear those pretty little sounds, that terrified tremor in your voice. Does this feel good, Sloane?” He teases my nipple to hardness with just the tip of the knife, then switches to do the same to my other one. “Judging by how you’re reacting, you really just did this on purpose, right? You *wanted* me to see you and break in. Guess you’re in luck that I already knew what I wanted.”

“I thought you were still at home,” I remind him, curling my fingers against his grip. “I didn’t know—”

“So naïve to think I haven’t been waiting for a chance to play with you like this again. Tonight is the perfect opportunity. You really thought I’d pass it up?” He lets go of my hands, though, squeezes my wrists to warn me not to move them. With his now-free hand, Virgil strokes my lower lip, staring down at me as he touches me.

“So fucking gorgeous, and all mine,” he purrs, hand stroking down my body to touch every bit of me that he can reach. “Here.” He shifts, standing up instead of straddling my hips again. “Relax for me, Sloane.” The knife forgotten on the bed for the moment, he lifts my knees and pushes them apart, his grip tightening when I give him the slightest bit of resistance. But he doesn’t say anything about it, just lets his actions become that much less gentle as he shoves them open

how he wants them, then comes back to kneel between my thighs.

“The marks I left last time faded fast,” he remarks, his fingers toying over my hips, one hand splayed on my stomach.

“It’s a real tragedy,” I nod, curling my fingers in the pillowcase over my head. “We’ll mourn them.”

“Mourn them?” Virgil reaches up and yanks the mask off of his face, revealing dark eyes and a curling, predatory grin. “No, you misunderstand. This just means I can mark you up all over again.” To prove his point he dips downward, teeth closing over my pulse point as his hands grip my hips tightly enough to bruise.

His teeth are sharp, and he nips at my throat, worrying at my skin, until I’m squirming under him and one of my hands flies down to curl in his hair. “Sorry!” I gasp, pulling back like he’s on fire. I didn’t mean—”

But Virgil just chuckles and grips my fingers, pulling them back to his hair. “You can hold on to me. I like it when you do, since it makes you so much easier to read. And you never need to apologize to me, princess.” His words are just as much of a caress as his tongue as he laves it over my skin, making me squirm all over again.

He doesn’t stop at just one bite, however. Virgil teases me, taunting me with kisses against my skin, only to follow them up with punishing, aching bites that throb long after he’s moved somewhere else. By the time his tongue flicks at my nipple, one hand teasing the other, I’m shuddering and trying in vain to press my thighs together for some of the relief my body is begging for.

Even the knife blade that skims along my thigh isn’t enough to break through the overwhelming *need* in my body. Though it does bring a soft whimper to my lips as he drags the blade across my skin, the point sharp enough to burn like a line of fire even though he isn’t cutting me.

“You look so good like this.” The heat in his voice matches his gaze, and he switches his grip on the blade to drag it up

over my soft stomach, my breathing stopping as he brings it down to my hips to trace the marks he's left on my skin. "With my teeth marks bruising your skin and my hands all over you. Do you know what I think?"

"That I have an open window fetish?" I can't help but quip, earning me a twitch of his lips followed by a wry look.

"That the next time I come home after a kill, I'll let you get on your knees and lick the blood off of my fingers. Would you do that for me?" His free hand comes up, thumb on my lower lip. "Lick my fingers clean of someone else's blood?"

I dip a quick nod, unable to look away, and his next words are instant. "Then show me." His thumb slides between my lips, pressing against my tongue as two fingers slip under my chin to hold my mouth shut.

Without breaking eye contact, I do what he'd said, swirling my tongue around his thumb and pulling it deeper into my mouth. He gently leans my head back until my head is against the pillow and he can press down against my tongue.

The downside to this new position is that I can't see his other hand. Something that I realize was his intention all along when the knife blade brushes my nipple, then trails down to trace my hip bones.

Every touch of it makes me twitch, makes me squirm, but he just thrusts his thumb in and out of my mouth languidly, eyes on every part of me as he does whatever the hell he wants. "I wonder what it says about you that you're soaked right now," he remarks, the knife blade stroking down my thigh, then up the inside of it.

This time I nearly *scream* at the thrill of fear and the feeling of the blade only inches from where I need Virgil most, but he only chuckles and does it again, forcing another whimper from behind my lips.

"Oh, right, I know what it says about you..." Virgil leans in, his face close to my ear and murmurs, so softly I barely hear him over my own breathing. "That you're such a slut for me, aren't you princess?" The hand that had held the knife is

back, but instead of the blade, it's just his fingers as he strokes up my wet folds, finger circling my clit.

“Tell me you're my sweet, gorgeous little slut, Sloane,” he continues, kissing the side of my face. “Tell me you need me in that pussy so bad. Beg me to fuck your cunt and I'll give you everything you need.”

He removes his thumb from my mouth, rubbing it across my face as I pant, gaze finding his. “I think you really *want* to fuck me,” I point out teasingly, noting the narrowing of his dark eyes with some satisfaction. “You like seeing me change in front of the window like last year way more than you're going to admit, don't you?”

His grin is quick, barely there, and gone the same instant that his fingers wrap around my throat, slipping under my jaw and pressing until I gasp. “Aren't we bold on our birthday?” he teases, lips brushing mine. “You want to turn this on me and what I want? Want me to lose composure so *I'm* the one begging. We can play that game, Sloane.” Before I can reply, he's jerking me upward, just so he can force me to flip over onto my knees in front of him.

But he doesn't stop there. Virgil shoves my shoulders down into the bed, keeping my hips and ass high in the air with the other.

“This is how I want you, if we're doing it my way. Just like this, so I can play with your dripping pussy while you beg and moan for it like a needy little thing who's in heat. Will you yowl for me, princess? Beg me to breed this pretty cunt?” I hear the sound of his zipper, and feel the brush of his thighs against mine as he moves.

“Or maybe you don't need me to play with you. You don't need me to open you up with my fingers and tongue. Is that right, princess?”

I shudder at the threat, and his hand presses my shoulders down in warning. But instead of pulling away, he grips my hair tightly, fingers scraping my scalp. “What's your safe word for me, Sloane?” he asks, pausing and holding as still as he can.

It takes my brain a moment to realize I need to answer, and I blink against the pillow a few times before saying, in a breathy voice, “Pineapple.”

“Good girl,” Virgil compliments, and then thrusts into me, not giving me any warning or hesitation as he does.

I can’t help the yelp of surprise, or the way I nearly come off the bed at the mix of dull pain and absolute pleasure I feel as he spreads me open on his cock. It’s too much and perfect all at once, and my muscles tense as my body works to adjust to his size.

But he doesn’t seem too keen on giving me time to do that. He pulls back, then drives into me again, thoroughly enough that I feel every inch of him as I see stars. “Virgil, wait. *Wait* —” But he doesn’t wait. He does it again, and again, over and over until I’m a mess of moans and cries under him.

“Such a perfect thing. You were made to take me, weren’t you? And every time I look at you, you’re just begging me to ruin you all over again. Well, you get your wish, princess. We have the cabin for the next two days, and neither of us has anywhere to be.” His thrusts pick up as he speaks, still pinning me under him as he slams into me.

“I wonder how many times I can make you come. You’re turning twenty-four, so that seems like a damn good number.”

“You can’t make me come twenty-four times in just a couple of days,” I protest, turning my head but still gripping the pillow under my fingers.

“Not with that attitude, I can’t. But I’m an optimist, darling. I believe in you. And I believe that I know enough about all the things you like to make it happen. Maybe we’ll even find something new.” He releases his grip on my hip, only to return to slide something smooth against my clit.

“What are you—”

“If we’re getting in twenty-four for you, then we should probably start now, don’t you think?” His voice is too sweet when he says it, and with a soft sound the vibrator against my clit hums to life on its lowest setting.

But even that is too much right now, with how much he's worked me up with his touch, the knife, and now the way he fucks me. "Virgil!" I scream, writhing under him. "It's too much. Move it, please. Do something—" The *something* he does is to press the vibrator more tightly to my clit and press the button to amp up the strength of it.

I don't get to say anything else. Every muscle in my body tightens and I come with a long, sobbing scream that's muffled by the pillow under me. It feels rushed and raw. I prefer coming with him, and the shock of the vibrator quickly becomes too much, especially with how he still fucks me with long, thorough strokes.

But Virgil doesn't stop. He keeps up the same pace, leaning over me to grip my hair in a different way, mostly so he can turn my face out of the pillow and grin at my expression. "There's one," he says, rubbing the vibrator against my clit on the same setting, pulling a sob from me as my body protests this release being drawn out.

"It's too much—"

"No, it's not," Virgil promises. "And if you think it is, then you're not going to survive tonight. Just relax, princess. I'm not going to stop, but I promise I'll take care of you. Every inch of you." His pace picks up, becoming unsteady as he fucks me and holds me down when I squirm, body protesting the continued overstimulation.

"Virgil, *please*," I beg, when I'm sure I can't take it anymore. My thighs are shaking, and I can feel tears running down my face, only to soak into the pillow under me. "Please, you have to stop. Just give me a break, or—"

"You know me better than that. I'll let you take a break after you come again." I can hear the iron restraint in his voice, but also the way he's dying to let go of it. "Don't fight me, princess. You know I'll win in the end, anyway."

He's not wrong. But I can't help the way my body works to climb away from him, every brush of the vibrator against my sensitive clit is painful...but only just. It's tipping towards

pleasure again, and somehow my body is back to being close to the edge, even though I've just come.

"There you go, princess. Look at you, doing what I asked. So good for me, Sloane. Such a good girl." Praises drop from his mouth like rain, continuous and unwavering as he slams into me, making me feel like I'm going to hit the headboard soon. "One more time," he urges, hitting the button on the vibrator to take it to its highest setting. "Come for me again, Sloane."

"I can't."

"Yes, you can. You always say you can't, but you know how much you love it when I wreck you." He rubs the vibrator against me with shaking fingers, his other hand groping for a better grip in my hair. "*Fuck*. Princess, I need you to come for me right now."

My mouth opens, but my protests turn to whimpers as he changes his angle just enough that his next thrust really does make me see stars, I swear. My body gives in, shuddering into another release that has me sobbing and gripping the pillow under me with shaking fingers.

"*Fuck*." His murmured curse is a hiss in my ear, and as he buries himself in me one last time, Virgil leans over me, yanking me up off the bed so he can slam his lips to mine, the vibrator forgotten as he grips any part of me he can, yanking me up against him on my knees as he rides out his orgasm.

"Look at you," Virgil purrs in my ear as I rest my weight back against him, panting as my world spins and my body begs for a break from stimulation. "You take my cock so well, princess." His hand wanders to my stomach, fingers pressing hard where his cock is buried in my body.

"God, that feels strange," I whimper, unsure if I want more of it or to move away.

"I want to see if I can fill you with enough cum tonight to see a difference," Virgil admits, chuckling against my jaw. "What do you think?"

"I think you need a hobby."

“Oh, but Sloane,” his grin is almost sweet as he leans in to kiss my cheek. “You *are* my hobby. My favorite hobby, in fact. And finding new ways to wreck you is my favorite thing to fantasize about.”

“Sounds obsessive,” I point out, leaning against him as he sits back, slipping out of me and leaving me feeling way too empty.

“You mean perfect.” He cradles me in his arms, shifting so we’re not about to fall off the bed before he picks up the knife and taps my nose with it. “And if you’re as worn out as you say, you’d better take this time to actually *rest*, Sloane. Because I meant it. You’re going to come twenty-four times before I’m done with you. And we’re only on number two.”

His kiss is filthy and sweet in turns, and I swear he’s trying to taste every inch of me before his hand slips between my thighs and I whimper against his lips, only to be met with a purring chuckle.

“I thought you said I get a break,” I whine, gripping his wrist in sweat-slick fingers.

“Yeah,” Virgil replies, hand cupping my folds as he grins at me. “It’s a shame that I lied, huh? Happy birthday, princess. I promise you won’t forget this one.”

BRUTAL

AJ MERLIN

“Are you going to make me fight you for this too?”

“I’ll make you fight me for everything.”

If there's one thing I'll miss about Camp Clearwater, it's the way the trees are lit up with fairy lights that come on when the day ends.

I stretch out my arms on the picnic table, cheek pillowed on hard wood as I look at the twinkling lights in the trees above. I've spent all summer trying to find a place that sits perfectly under some of the better-lit areas, and this picnic table is it. Well, with a little help from me, anyway. I've been moving it this way and that when no one is around, and finally it's just *perfect*.

Not to mention the lack of children's voices and screaming makes it even better. After two months of hosting two-week camps at this place and being paid over minimum wage for every night of it, I'm finally able to sit here without the yells of children or the sound of my name being called to deal with something almost too ridiculous to believe.

Counselor Hazel, Adam is trying to drown Petra in the lake for fun!

Counselor Hazel, Kira glued herself to the craft bench and now she can't get to the bathroom...

Never in my life had I thought kids were capable of being so, uh, creative, but this summer has definitely proved me wrong.

And showed me just how little I ever want to have children.

Letting out a sigh, I close my eyes against the sound of footsteps in the rough grass, crunching on small sticks and fallen leaves as the person makes their way toward me. Maybe If I don't move, they'll think I'm dead and will just keep going. Other counselors are like bears, right? They don't see you if you don't move?

Besides that, I have a pretty good idea of what they want, and I've been avoiding it all evening.

The footsteps stop behind me, and I hear the disappointed parental sigh that my best friend and fellow counselor, Jenna, has been perfecting for all of her life. Even when we were children, she sounded more like a parent than my own parents did when she wanted to. And with the way she perches her hands on her hips and scowls, she's just so good at making me feel like I'm a disappointment to my family's honor.

I have a good feeling she's doing that now, but I'm not looking away from my trees to find out.

"You're missing the party," she points out, her voice dry with expected disappointment. "Remember? That thing we spent all afternoon setting up for? You were there."

"Yeah, cleaning up glue while trying not to sniff it," I joke, turning to bury my head in my hands. "I don't want to get drunk, Jenna. We're going home tomorrow and I don't want to be hungover."

She snorts. "Then don't drink. But you can't just sit out here for the whole night sulking."

I don't tell her that I'm not sulking. I'm staring at the fairy lights and wondering what I'm going to do when I go home. My dog walking job will be there for me, obviously. But it's not exactly enough to cover my rent. Will Ada, the florist at the end of my block, still have a part-time job for me? If so, I'm probably set for a while. If not, then I'll have to go to some temp agency and beg for another shot.

My stomach twists at the thought, and I tap my knuckles on the rough wood of the table.

“Maybe I’m too worried to go with you,” I say with a light, airy laugh. “Maybe I’m too afraid you’ll attract *the murderer*.” She knows what I’m talking about, and I hear her shift in the debris behind me.

“Why would a murderer be out here at a lakeside summer camp, Hazel?” Jenna asks witheringly. “What, do you think he gets off on killing camp counselors? Or that he’s here to defend his childhood memories from the likes of us?”

“Uh, yeah, obviously.” I sit up, just barely able to see the glitter of the water through the trees. “I’m on guard so that when he rises out of the water like a possessed, dead thing, I’ll be able to yell loud enough for all of you to get out. While sacrificing myself, of course.” I get to my feet anyway, stretching my arms high over my head. It’s finally cooling down here, now that we’re firmly into August in Ohio, and the breeze off the lake is pleasant rather than muggy and carrying a tide of mosquitos ready to suck our blood.

Jenna waits for me to face her before rolling her eyes. “Come on. I won’t be able to get wasted while worrying that you’re going to get swept up in an errant lake tide or something. Or wander off into the woods.”

“I’m not going to go into the lake,” I sigh, falling into step with her. “I barely even like swimming in the first place.” But I can’t exactly comment on the rest of her statement. Not when I’m good at just wandering off and getting lost in whatever I’m thinking about or dealing with.

I can’t help it sometimes. I like to be alone with my thoughts, and the woods are a great place to do it.

“The body of Kirsten White, age thirty-two, was found on Glendale Road, just south of Clearwater lake, while...” The words on the radio fizzle out in a bunch of static, and I frown, flicking the side of the camp radio that someone’s put on top of the counter just out of reach of the booze. Just like I’d told Jenna, I have no intention of getting drunk. For me, drinking didn’t mean a good time, and it never has. Not at nineteen when we were in college drinking on weekends, and not now, four years later, here at Camp Clearwater while the other

fifteen-odd counselors are slurping up every bit of alcohol in sight.

Though I would join them if I wasn't worried about puking all over the place and embarrassing myself. Not to mention it's incredibly likely for me to get a hangover if I even try to *smell* one of the drinks that are being passed around in plastic cups.

What's the saying again? Beer before liquor and you'll never be sicker? Something like that, at least, though it's never applied to me since *everything* makes me sick-as-fuck when it comes to alcohol.

Still, my brain does the calculations of what I've heard, and I press my palms to the counter as I frown. Glendale Road isn't that far from here. Maybe ten miles if we're lucky, and that makes me incredibly nervous.

My eyes flick up, gaze going from face to face of the crowd of counselors. Unlike other camps that hire teenagers, Camp Clearwater has always hired young adults for their summer camp, citing that we're 'more mature' when I'm pretty sure that's not the case at all. Most of the others are around twenty-two or twenty-three, like me, though there are a couple of outliers.

Like Brett. At twenty-seven, it definitely feels weird to me that he wants to work here with a bunch of people five or six years younger than him. And worse, he certainly doesn't act like he's older than any of us. If anything, it's the exact opposite.

At last, I find Jenna, just in time to see her shake her dark bangs out of her equally dark eyes as she looks up at one of the other counselors, a girl who goes by Em, with a look on her face that I've seen before.

Someone has a crush.

I hesitate, not wanting to bother her or ruin her night. But I *do* want to tell her what I've just heard, since I worry about us being out here, in the middle of nowhere, where it would take the cops at least thirty minutes to find us *after* we get a cell signal to even call them in the first place.

But I push off of the counter, intent on making my worries known, only for someone to grab my arm and pull me back around to face them.

Of course it's *Brett*. There's no one else in the world that could make me frown like this, nor make my heart sink. It's not only that he's twenty-seven and the owner's son. And not *just* that his personality sucks. No, those aren't the real problems.

The real problem is that he's been trying to get me alone for weeks and has been touching me whenever he thinks he can get away with it, though always apologizes right after like he hadn't done it intentionally. But that's a fucking lie, and both of us know it every time he does it.

"Are you okay?" he asks, and it catches me off guard. He sounds genuinely concerned, and his eyes flick to the radio before back at me. Had he heard it too? "Do you want to talk?"

I hesitate. Just because he's a creep probably doesn't mean Brett is the worst person to walk the earth. He isn't a *serial killer*, after all. "Yeah. I just want to talk to Jenna about what's happening on the news. Did you hear about where they found the body?"

"Yeah," Brett says, worry clear on his features. "But look, she's..." He frowns as he looks at Jenna, who's now giggling at Em and working herself closer to the taller girl. "Do you want to go talk outside?"

I look up at him, into a handsome and lean face that I should swoon over instead of sneer at. And maybe I would, except he isn't my type, and he's not very nice. But right now, he looks like the most sober person here, and I want to talk to someone about the possibility of us all being killed in our sleep.

This can't be a worse decision than any I've already made this summer.

"Yeah, umm. I guess." I nod a few times, still unsure. "Let's go outside."

When I'd said I'd go outside with Brett, I hadn't anticipated him taking me for a hike. I'd expected to just go right outside the doors of the dining cabin, where it's quieter and we can't hear the noise from the other intoxicated counselors.

I'm certainly not dressed for an almost-midnight hike, either. Not in denim shorts, sneakers, and a tank top under my light jogging hoodie. Especially since this hoodie that hugs my curves and makes them look more appealing than frumpy is one of my favorites. Honestly. I don't even know why I brought it with me.

Oh, right, because I only have two early-fall hoodies and this is one of them.

"Brett..." I nearly trip over a root in the darkness, and just barely keep my footing while nearly falling into the older counselor. "Hey, where are we going?"

"You wanted to talk outside, remember?" he asks, glancing at me over his shoulder. I can't see his expression in the darkness, but his words make me hesitate.

We have to be a good half-mile away from the others by now, and I'm pretty sure we're between two of the docks that the kids dive into the lake from or get little paddle boats from. Which goes to show my stupid brain that we're *way* further than I want to be.

"I didn't want to go on a hike, though." I stop, arms over my chest as I look at him in the light from the fairy lights above us. It's just enough that I can see him turn and see that

there's a *grin* on his stupid face. "I wanted to talk to you about what was on the radio."

"Yeah?" He takes a step to the side. "Tell me about it, then."

I don't like the way he says it, and I drop my hands to my sides to clench them, nails digging into my palms.

"Dude, there's a murderer out here," I point out slowly, like he might have trouble hearing. "Maybe you weren't listening, but on the radio, they said there was a body found this morning on Glendale Road. That's not far from here. Maybe ten miles?"

"Nine," Brett corrects. "I know where it is. So what, Hazel?"

"*So what?*" I repeat, floored. "What do you mean, *so what?* That's way too close for us to be up here. This person has killed three people in two weeks. Do you really want to be next?" Secretly, I don't think I'd mind Brett being next. But that's an inside thought and I can't let it show on my face.

It would be rude for him to know how little I think of him, or that I'm sure he's an absolute creep.

"So what do you want me to do about it? No one's going to come up *here*. This is Camp Clearwater, for Christ's sake." It takes me a moment to realize he's edging closer to me, and when I do, my heart jumps to my throat, nearly choking me. "The only ones up here are the drunk counselors and us. No one else."

The way he says it makes me nervous. Like it's a threat, not something that is intended to make me feel better about the situation.

"Maybe you have the wrong idea," I say slowly, my heel finding the same root I'd nearly tripped on when getting here. Again I stumble, but this time Brett's hand reaches out to steady me, though he doesn't let go when I'm able to stand on my own.

Not even when I try to shake him off. Instead, his grip tightens, and my stomach twists with nausea and fear.

“Let go,” I tell him. “You definitely have the wrong idea if you think I want you to touch me.”

“I don’t get what your deal is.” He pulls me closer, one painful inch at a time, until my shoes are literally sliding in the mud under us. “I’ve been nice to you all summer. When Jenna came and asked my mom to give you a job, I made sure you got one. What else do I need to do, Haze?”

“Don’t call me that,” I snap. I’ve never had anyone try to shorten Hazel, and he won’t be the one.

“Whatever. I’ll call you anything you want, just give me a chance. Stop being so cold. It’s the last night of summer camp, you know?” His other hand reaches out, gripping my opposite arm so I can’t hit him.

It’s a good thing for him he did, because my plan was, until now, to break his nose. Unfortunately, with his long Nosferatu fingers gripping me, that’s not going to happen.

I open my mouth to say something, then stop when I hear something near us, like footsteps or paw steps in the woods.

“Did you hear that?” I ask, interrupting what was probably a charming speech.

He stops, eyes narrowed. “No. There’s nothing out here except you and me.”

“I’d rather be here with a murderer,” I snap, my heart beating faster as I try to pull away from him, only for the taller man to yank me forward. “Let go of me, Brett. You’re such a fucking creep—”

“So what then?” He sneers the words, cutting me off. “You’ve been just fucking around with me all summer?”

From the corner of my eye, I see something move to my left, but Brett’s grip is too painful for me to really see what’s going on, or determine if it was just a shadow from a branch and me getting whiplash from how hard he’s jerking me around.

“What?” His words draw my attention fully back to him instead of our surroundings. “Fucking around... what are you

talking about?”

“You’ve never said anything the other times I’ve touched you, or when I’ve helped you.” I don’t think breathing down my neck during volleyball is helping me, but clearly Brett does. Maybe he wasn’t taught good manners as a child. “You’ve never once told me to stop, or that you didn’t like it. And you told me tonight you wanted to go outside with me. What’s your fucking deal, Hazel?”

My mind is blown. For a moment I let him pull me where he wants, and we end up deeper into the woods, where the strings of fairy lights in the trees are less clumped together and more distant.

“What’s my deal?” I all but whisper, my thoughts wiped of anything but him and the words still ringing in my ears. “My deal? Brett, I didn’t say anything because I wanted you to stop. I didn’t want to unintentionally encourage you. Every time you touched me, I pulled away.”

His grip on my arms tightens, making me wince. “I don’t want anything to do with you. And I definitely don’t want whatever this is. Let go of me, Brett. Just fucking *let go* and go away.”

“You’re acting like such a bitch.” Did he not hear me? His fingers are tight enough on me to bruise, and I grit my teeth in pain so that I don’t make any kind of noise to encourage him. I don’t want him to know how terrified I am, or how much I just want him to go away and that I’d give anything to make him do it.

God, I can’t believe I was so stupid to trust him and not listen to my gut and do something like this when I’ve been dealing with this all summer.

“You’re acting like—”

A tree branch snaps in the surrounding woods, loudly enough that it echoes in the darkness. He stops and I look up, eyes round as I look for any sign of movement.

“It’s fine,” Brett says after a moment, with no noise except for the grasshoppers and the other nightlife by the lake. “It’s

nothing, all right? Jesus, Hazel. You act like you've never been in nature before. It's just what it sounds like here at night." There's enough light from the moon that I can see the cocky smirk on his face, but when his grip tightens once more, I wince to prepare for what I know is most likely going to hurt and close my eyes hard against the motion.

But I'm not expecting his hands to loosen. I'm not expecting the intake of breath, or the soft, choked sound he makes. I look up just in time for blood to splatter my face and neck, and to catch sight of the man standing behind Brett, machete falling to his side as the older counselor's eyes go wide and his throat pours blood.

When I open my mouth to scream, however, the only thing that comes out is a soft, keening gasp and a very meaningful, "*Fuck.*"

3

Another spatter of hot blood catches the side of my face, soaking the front of my jacket as Brett's fingers loosen and finally slide away from my arms as he falls to the ground. He looks up, fear in his wide, bulging eyes as his knees buckle and he just... goes.

Ungracefully, his legs kick as one hand goes up to grip his throat like he can do something to alter the fact that he's dying. His eyes swivel in their sockets to meet mine, and a sound gurgles from his throat as he looks at me for help.

But what in the world am I supposed to do?

My gaze slides upward, fear chilling every inch of my body as the masked man, dressed in a loose, black coat over a T-shirt and relaxed black jeans, watches Brett die. It isn't his bloody outfit that keeps my attention, though. Nor is it the dirty mask smeared with blood that he wears on his face.

It's the machete in his hand. Long and stained with Brett's blood, it glimmers in the moonlight and reflects the twinkling fairy lights in the trees. The blood looks black on his blade and on Brett's skin, where it stains his tan complexion.

When I lift my shaking hands and see the blood on them, I see that it looks black there as well.

I'm too stupid to run, even when the man, *the murderer*, takes a step closer to me, crossing Brett's body like it's just another obstacle on the ground.

He reaches out, and my heart nearly stops in my chest as a soft sound leaves me... only for me to realize the hand that

cups my chin is the one that doesn't hold the blade.

"Please don't kill me," I whisper, unable to go anywhere. The leather of his glove slides against my cheek, and I can hear his soft breathing under the mask, though I can't see past the bright white of the plastic to know what his face looks like underneath. "Please don't—"

I break off, terrified. When he lets go, I'm sure he's going to swing the blade and chop my head off completely. Will it hurt? Brett, who's now silent, definitely made it seem like it *hurt*. And why shouldn't it?

I'm going to die here.

But he doesn't do any of the things I imagine. He just brushes past, the stiffness of his coat making me shiver as it touches the thin, clingy material of my jacket. I ball my hands into fists, still convinced he's going to do it and not wanting to see it, but all I hear are echoing footsteps as he walks away.

I'm safe. The relief that for some reason he didn't choose to kill me floods my body and I nearly collapse. I'm *safe* and he's leaving and going—

He's going straight for the camp itself.

"N-no," I say, whirling around. I fall to the ground, kneeling in the dirt as I scabble until my fingers close around two medium size rocks. This is stupid. This is incredibly dumb and I'm not about to throw a rock at a fucking serial killer so that he can't go for my best friend and the friends I've made this summer.

They're sitting ducks, though. They're completely helpless, drunk and stupid as they are, and I know he'll be able to kill them just as easily as he killed Brett.

"No!" I say again, and this time I think I see his head tilt to the side, like he's considering what I'm saying. I throw the bigger rock, my aim bad in my fright and in the dark, and it sails right over his shoulder.

But it still has the awful intended effect of getting him to stop.

“Shit,” I whisper, watching as the man turns to face me again. He looks down enough to draw my attention to dead-Brett between us, then looks back up at me.

“... Really?” I’m surprised that his voice isn’t just a mix of garbled creepiness and evil. He certainly doesn’t sound like the devil spat him up just to come murder me, or like a monster.

He sounds *normal*.

He sounds *amused*, even, like I’ve done something funny and now he wants to have a conversation about it. My heart pounds in my chest, and my fingers are cold as that stupid thought is chased away by my overwhelming fear.

“You killed Brett,” I whisper, eyes wide. “Can’t you just... go away?”

He snorts, and it reminds me again that he really is just so *human*. God, I really shouldn’t be doing this. I should try to beat him back to camp, and try to get all my friends out before he gets there.

But what’s to say he doesn’t kill me if I try? Then I’m left with my own death *and* the death of Jenna. I can’t handle that. Not when I could’ve done something, or at least tried.

“If you throw that, I’m going to make you regret it.” His tone is conversational, rather than threatening. Almost surprised, rather than... well, threatening. He has a lighter voice that doesn’t match the hockey mask, and on any other day, I would never pair this voice with a serial killer.

Today, unfortunately, I know that’s not true.

“Well...” I bite down hard on my lower lip. “If you could just walk in the other direction?” My words are slurred and obscured by my shaky breaths, and I hope to God he understood them. “Then I won’t hit you with it.”

“Were you trying to hit me with the first one? Because if you actually *hit* me with that, then I’m *really* going to make you regret it.”

Fuck, fuck, fuck. There aren't enough fucks in the world to describe how terrified I am, and I want to cry. He's going to kill me.

But if he doesn't kill me, then he's going to kill everyone else. Logically, it's an easy decision. Unfortunately, it's my life on the line, and I don't want to die.

"My friends are that way. I can't let you kill my friends," I add, getting to my feet. If I'm going to throw this rock, then I really don't want to still be on the ground when I do it. Thankfully, Brett's body is between us and I can only hope it gives me an extra second to get away from him when I throw it.

God, I really am going to do it. The knowledge terrifies me and slides something into place that feels like cold acceptance.

I'm going to die here tonight.

He moves, turning his face like he's considering my words. His hand on the machete tightens, and he rolls his shoulders. This time, he doesn't say anything in response to my words. Instead, he turns around to head in the direction of the camp, and I know what I have to do.

I throw the stupid rock. Part of me is hoping it misses, but it nails the man in the back of the head, hitting his hood and drawing a deep groan from him.

"Fine," I hear him murmur, and he turns back to face me again, machete glinting.

But that's all I see. I take off running, checking only once to make sure that he's behind me and wasn't bluffing while still heading for the other counselors.

Please let me outrun him. I trip over roots and branches, though I don't let them slow me down. Not even when they cut my bare legs or tear at my hoodie. I just keep running, finally coming out beside the lake so that the moonlight helps me see.

Once there, I lengthen my stride, arms pumping at my sides. I was definitely never a track star in high school or college, but that doesn't matter right now. I run faster than I've

ever tried, my lungs absolutely burning with the effort. Fear is a great motivator that pushes me past my limits and helps me ignore the screaming of my body.

I don't want to die here. Over and over as I run, I beg any listening deity or fate to help me out. To help me outrun him far enough that I can call Jenna and get her to call the cops. Maybe I can loop around the lake, if I have to. It's not... that big. Not right now, when my fear and terror spur me onward. Not to mention the overwhelming threat of death.

God, I can't let him catch me.

Finally I slow, checking behind me again. I haven't seen him since I got to the side of the lake, and surely by now he's given up on me since he hasn't caught me yet. I would hear him, I think, or at least be able to see some trace of the man.

Panting, I focus on taking long, deliberate steps while trying to quiet myself as much as I can. My chest burns, the fear mixing with adrenaline as I fish my phone out of my pocket and hold it up to my face. The light illuminates the blood already smeared onto the glass, and I whimper softly, wanting to cry.

Had he given up on me? Had he changed his mind and gone back to the camp?

What if Jenna's already dead? My stomach twists so painfully at that, at the thought of her lying dead on the ground while I run from a killer who was never chasing me in the first place. I want to cry, the vision is so real, and my hand on the phone shakes.

Suddenly my phone rings, screaming out the song Jenna had picked for herself and nearly causing me to levitate in surprise. I clap a bloody hand over my mouth to keep from making much noise and swipe across the screen, leaving a bloody thumbprint across the glass that causes me to wince.

"Jenna?" I whisper, leaning against a tree as relief steals some of the fear that's kept me going. "Jenna please tell me ___"

“*Where are you?*” She’s panicking, and I can hear the hysteria in her voice. “*Hazel, where the hell are you right now? We just found Brett when we came looking for you. Hazel he’s fucking dead.*”

“I know,” I whimper. “Jenna, you have to—”

A sigh finds my ears moments before the phone is swatted out of my hands, disappearing in the undergrowth as I whirl around, already knowing what I’ll find.

Sure enough, the masked man stands behind me, his mask illuminated by moonlight.

“Shit,” I whisper, my body screaming at me that I’ve already run too much tonight. Cardio has never been my thing, but one look at his hand gripping that bloody machete is all the convincing I need.

I take off again, running through the trees and praying I don’t trip or fall over something in my haste to get away from him. It feels more difficult now, and every few steps I feel like my legs are going to give out and I won’t be able to run anymore. My breath comes in gasps, and I’m far enough from camp that I can’t see any of the lights or discerning landmarks from where I am.

Still, being lost is better than dead.

At least, until I *do* end up tripping, a shriek escaping my throat as I hit the ground on my hands and knees and roll onto my side. My knees sting from the impact, and the rest of me isn’t too thrilled, either. But at least I’m still alive.

I just need to get up.

Dragging myself up to my arms as I pant and stare at the dark ground under me. I tell myself again that I have to get up. I *need* to move, or I’m going to die on the ground with a machete in my face. And while I’m sure there are worse ways to die, currently I can’t think of any.

I have to *get up*.

Footsteps draw closer and my arms shake as I pant. My fingers curl in the dirt as the steps halt, but I don’t have to look

up to know that he's close.

“Poor little thing.” The man's voice can only be described as a purr, and I can't help but shudder. It's not what I'm expecting, and my shoulders tense as I wait for the pain that I know is coming. “You've run so hard, haven't you? Like a frightened little rabbit trying to get away from the big bad wolf.”

He steps closer, and when I open my eyes, I can just see the edge of his jeans and the black of his hiking boots. My lips part as I look up at him, and I'm dying to say something that will belie the fear that makes me want to vomit.

But I don't. I can't. My stomach twists itself into knots as I stare up at him, and a gloved hand reaches out to tilt my chin back a little more, until it's uncomfortable, and I realize it's so he can look me in the eye.

He's going to kill me.

“Aren't you going to beg me not to kill you?” he asks, sounding curious more than anything. “You watched me kill that boy. Surely you know what comes next, right?”

I shudder and grip dirt between my fingers, then shake my head. “Fuck you,” I whisper, blinking hard to try to push the tears away. If he's going to kill me, he's not going to have me begging, too.

“No, that's not how this works.” His grip on my chin shifts until his thumb presses against my lower lip. The leather of his glove is harsh as he slides it into my mouth, and I jerk back when I taste blood. *Brett's blood*. “I caught you, little bunny. Little *prey*.” He kneels down beside me, my jaw still in his grip, and I'm so surprised that I don't even try to jerk away when I come face to face with that cold, bloody mask he wears.

This close, he smells like blood, old and new. Like the leather of his jacket and gloves, a hint of old metal.

It shouldn't smell good, and I definitely shouldn't be trying to chase the hint of spice under all that. But I'm about to die,

so I probably get a pass for my brain being stupid and shutting down.

Shakily, I reach up one hand and grip his wrist as I jerk my face out of his grip. “I’m not going to beg you not to kill me again,” I tell him in a voice that quivers. “I won’t give you that.”

“No? You were more than willing to beg me not to kill your friends.” He’s so conversational that it unsettles me. Like we’re not here, at the lake, and the police aren’t coming to arrest him or shoot him dead.

“If you’re going to kill me now—” I turn, trying to keep his hand holding the blade in sight, though with him so close to me, it’s incredibly difficult. “Why save me from Brett? Why stop him from hurting me?”

“Save you?” His head cocks slightly, slowly, to one side and the mask just stares at me with cold brutality. “Who said anything about saving you?”

“But you—”

“Maybe I was just jealous that someone else was touching the gorgeous girl I’d been coming out here to watch all summer.”

My blood runs cold at the statement and I jerk my face up to his, mouth open to reply, only for him to suddenly reach up and grip the base of my throat in one long-fingered hand. He shoves me backward to the ground, my shoulders hitting soft grass and my eyes finding the soft glimmer of fairy lights in the trees.

I’m going to die here, under the lights I loved to look at all summer. My heart pounds in my chest as he moves to straddle my hips, and I’m too worn out from running to do more than stare up at him and pray to God that it doesn’t hurt as much as it looked like it did when he killed Brett.

He moves his arm, the one holding the machete... but when it comes into my line of sight, he doesn’t hold the blade itself. Instead, he holds a strip of cloth, something that might have been torn from his shirt, and dangles it above my face.

“Close your eyes, little rabbit,” he purrs darkly, and I shudder.

“No. I’m not going to—”

“Beg me to let you live? We’ve covered that.” The humor in his voice is back, and I shudder at the words.

“I’m not going to let you do... whatever this is. If you’re going to stab me or slit my throat, then you have to deal with me seeing you do it.” I don’t know what kind of stand that makes, and I can feel myself crying now as I mentally search for any sign that this isn’t really happening.

Because it can’t be happening. I’m twenty-three, and I don’t deserve to die like this. Sure, I haven’t done anything great like get a real, full-time job or maintain therapy appointments with any consistency. I’ve never even kept a plant alive.

But I still don’t deserve to *die*.

“Adorable,” he replies, and grabs my hands in his gloved fingers, forcing them down to my sides so he can pin them there with his knees while I thrash with renewed energy and try my best to buck him off.

“Stop it!” I scream, trying to kick him and failing miserably. I turn my face away from his hands, but it’s no use. Within seconds, the cloth is tied over my face, securely enough that it’s not going anywhere. I open my eyes behind it, unsurprised when I can’t see a damn thing. Everything is pitch black, and I shudder.

“There you go, little bunny,” he coaxes, running his fingers over my bottom lip. With a jolt, I realize he’s no longer wearing a glove, though I can’t figure out why. “Unlike some people, I’m not stupid enough to show my face so soon.”

“What?” I whisper, voice soft.

“Nothing. I’m just talking to myself.” Something clinks on a rock near my head, and when I turn, cringing at the expectation of pain and getting stabbed... nothing happens.

Instead, he splays his hand against my lower stomach, holding me in place. “Let’s talk about what’s going to happen, little prey,” the man growls, his voice no longer muffled. It clicks, that he’s taken off his mask, and that’s probably what’s beside me. “I’m not like Prince Charming back there. And I will not to hurt you like he would’ve.”

“Yeah, you’re just going to stab me,” I whisper, trying to prove I’m not afraid. “Totally not the same—” The knuckles of his other hand tap my cheek, causing me to flinch, though it doesn’t hurt in the least. In fact, if both of his hands are on me, then that means he isn’t holding the blade.

Is he going to strangle me instead?

“You got your wish, didn’t you? I came after you instead of your friends. That’s what you *wanted*. And you gave me such a fun chase. I didn’t actually think you’d last this long, if I’m being honest. And you look so good in the dirt, smeared with blood and so tired that you’re shaking.”

I want to say something, though I have no idea what. It feels like it’s almost a compliment, but my mind refuses to accept that. There’s no way a *serial killer* is telling *me* I did good or whatever this is. Clearly, he’s just fucking with me to give me hope before he ends my life.

“I just want one thing, then I’ll let you go.”

“No, you won’t,” I whisper, stupidly. But with my brain too focused on *death*, it’s hard for my filter to get in the way of all the stupid shit I want to say.

His knuckles find my cheek again, like a soft reprimand, though it’s not a strike. It’s a brush, if that. A tap, at the most.

“You’re going to let me kiss you, pretty little bunny, and then I’ll let you out of my snare.”

I know I heard him wrong. Somehow my brain has transformed the word *murder* into *kiss* to protect my subconscious. He's telling me how he's going to end my life, but my brain has turned on selective-hearing mode and now I'm only getting the things that won't make my soul immediately vacate my body.

"Did you hear me, bunny?" He touches my cheek once more, tone amused. "Or did I shock you into unconsciousness?"

"That one," I whisper. "Because I know I didn't just hear what I think I did."

"Which part? That I'm going to kiss you? That a murderer with more victims than years you've been alive wants to ravage that pretty little mouth before he sets you free? Or that I've been coming here every *week* for the entire summer, so I could imagine what I'd do to you if I had this exact opportunity? I was going to let you go, you know." He leans closer to me, and I jerk in his hold, though there's literally nothing I can do right now except turn my face away from him, my sightless eyes wide under the makeshift blindfold.

"Are you going to make me fight you for this too?" he chuckles, breath hot against my cheek.

"I'll make you fight me for everything," I reply, and I'm not prepared for the way he *growls* against my ear. *Fuck*.

"Careful, little prey," the murderer warns. "Or you're going to ask for more than you can handle with words like

that. You're not going to look at me?" I shake my head. "Not going to open your mouth for me so I can have what I want?"

I shake my head, still staring resolutely to the side.

"Good." *What?* "I prefer to take it, anyway." His free hand grips my jaw and he yanks my face up to his as he nips at my lower lip, biting sharply enough that I gasp instinctually.

"Good girl," he purrs, just before he kisses me in earnest, his tongue pressing against mine and sweeping around my mouth. Contrary to what I'd somehow expected, he doesn't taste like blood.

He tastes tempting. And amazing, and if this were anyone else, I would beg for the taste of him on my tongue.

But he's a fucking murderer, and I'm still his most likely next victim. A thrill shoots up my spine, and when he shifts and I'm able to yank my arms free, I think for sure I'm going to shove him off of me and onto the ground so I can run.

Yet somehow one ends up in his hair, nails scratching harshly against his scalp until he makes a satisfied noise into my mouth. This time there's a jolt in the opposite direction that starts at my mouth and ends between my thighs.

It's fucking adrenaline, I scream at myself, gripping his coarse hair hard. You don't really want this. It's literally adrenaline.

But it doesn't feel like adrenaline when he kisses me. In fact, it feels like I'm *really* into this, and that I don't want him to go anywhere. Still, that's the wrong response for my body to have, and while I've known for a while I'm kind of fucked up, I can't be *that* fucked up.

Right?

I just watched this man *murder* someone, and I'm probably going to be next.

Another nip on my lower lip drags me back to the present, and I gasp a soft swear at the sharp pain.

"You're going to need to let go of my hair. Or at least hold it more lightly, little bunny," he murmurs against my throat.

“Otherwise, I’m going to think you want something more than a kiss.”

Even though his words sear me like flames, it takes me a second before I can pry my fingers free from his coarse hair. I don’t stop to analyze that, but instead drop my hand awkwardly beside my head, breathing quickly against his lips.

“Good little rabbit,” he murmurs, like I’ve done something actually praiseworthy. I don’t feel like I have, though, and I wish I could see something other than the blackness of the blindfold he has on me.

“Are you going to let me go now?” I whisper, wishing I’d kept the words inside the moment they escape. I’ve probably reminded him to get a move on, and now I’m going to end up with a machete in my chest.

He sighs and brushes his thumb over my bottom lip, dragging it down until his hand is curled around my throat. “I guess. Since you want me to, and all.” There’s a playful edge in his rough voice that I definitely don’t understand, and when his hand tightens very slightly on my throat, I shiver and close my eyes hard.

“What? Do you think I’m going to strangle you?” he asks, chuckling sweetly at the end of the words. “I could. You’re making it rather easy for me...but I’m not into killing like that. I want to see you gasping for breath, but not because I’m about to kill you.”

There’s definitely no other reason *to* be gasping for breath, but I don’t say that. I don’t say anything, hoping he’ll just get up and walk away so I can run back to the campground screaming.

And if I kick a little dirt over Brett’s body on the way, who’s going to know or say anything to anyone?

“Here.” Something is pressed into my hand, and as my fingers curl around it, I suck in a surprised breath.

“Is that my phone?” I’m sure it is. I can feel the case in my fingers, and my thumb slides over the camera lens as my heart

takes it as an invitation to speed up again. “You’re giving me my phone back?”

“Sure am, gorgeous,” the man assures me. “Took me a minute to find it when I was chasing you, but I figured it would have been rude for me to leave it in the dirt.” His words don’t make sense, and I have a feeling I’ve floated away in a fantasy while he stabs me to death on the lakeside.

“You’re giving it to me,” I repeat, still not believing it. “Just... giving it to me?”

“Yep.” He moves, and I feel him get to his knees above me, his lips no longer just above mine.

“What if I took a picture of you?”

When he sits back on my hips and sighs, I know I’ve fucked up. Even as I said the words I knew, and now it’s only icing on the cake of confirmation that I really should learn to just not talk.

Oh, well. Maybe in the next life.

“What if you took a picture of me?” His hand touches my hip, causing me to flinch. “What are you going to do, little bunny? Rip that blindfold off your face, knock me to the ground, and take pictures of me to show the cops? Hmm?” His fingers skim my bare skin, drawing small circles against my hip. “While you’re at it, maybe you’ll tie me to a tree with rope you’ve woven from grass and lead the cops to me by scent?”

He’s making fun of me. He’s treating this like it’s a joke, and like I couldn’t do what I’ve said. Though, to be honest, I’m really not sure that I can. He probably has every right to make fun of me, and I’d rather him do that than murder me.

“Excuse me for *breathing*,” I mutter, face turned to the side.

He laughs. “No, little bunny, don’t be that way. Tell you what. You’re more than welcome to try. I’m not going to kill *you*.”

I don’t believe him.

“I’m going to get up and walk away; then maybe you’ll never see me again. The cops will never catch me, either.” That’s cocky of him. “And that’s your last chance to be a helpful citizen. You take my picture and the police will know who I am. I’ll get arrested and rot in jail. Is that what you want?”

I’m not sure if it is or not. He killed *Brett*. And he hasn’t killed me.

But he’s killed other people! My brain reminds me, screaming. *Maybe he played games like this with them, too! He’s probably lying about coming back to watch you all summer.*

“You’ve been watching me all summer?” It’s not really any of my business to know why a crazy serial killer is doing that, but part of me still doesn’t believe him.

“Once a week at least,” he assures me almost sweetly. “It can be difficult to get away sometimes, but I’m so glad we got to meet before you go home tomorrow. It’s a bit like a sweet summer teen romance, don’t you think?”

No, I don’t think that at all.

“I don’t believe you.” God, I’ve really got to get control of my mouth. “I’ve never seen you. *Someone* would’ve seen you.”

“You’ve never seen me because the only thing you ever want your eyes full of is fairy lights,” he purrs.

My stomach drops through the ground, straight to the center of the earth, and tries hard not to come back up at his words. How would he know that unless he really *had* been watching me, for at least part of the summer?

Too stunned to speak, I lie there like an idiot without the sense to be a Final Girl in anyone’s movie.

“Do yourself a favor though, and don’t listen to me, little bunny. Like I said, you could totally rip off the blindfold and take a picture of my face... But then I’d have to make you regret it. And I’d have to get into your phone to delete the

pictures.” He gets to his feet, his warmth gone, and I find myself shivering in the cool night.

“I thought... you wouldn’t kill me,” I say, half to myself.

He chuckles, and I flinch when he picks up whatever he’d laid down beside me. “I won’t. But there are plenty of ways I can make you regret doing something stupid that don’t involve permanent injury, maiming, or death. I’m creative like that. I would say tell all your friends I say hi... but I wouldn’t mean it. You’re the only one who matters here, anyway.”

I don’t respond. I don’t even get a chance to as he walks away into the woods, footsteps disappearing within a minute until I’m left only with the crickets and the smell of the lake in my nose chasing his scent away.

*H*e's gone.

Relief fills me just as quickly as the sounds of the woods, and I pull the blindfold off completely. There's a breeze in the branches above me, one that moves the small lights attached to the trees even this far from camp. From what I've heard, the lights go for a couple miles in either direction of the camp, though they become more and more sparse as they go on.

In theory, can't I just look for the lights and follow them back?

Suddenly disappointment sinks through my bones, and I struggle to my feet with my phone in my hand. I can't get his words out of my head, though I'm not sure why.

I could follow him. He might not notice, and I could at least figure out where he's going for the police. That would be good, right? He's killed people. Not just Brett, who I can't exactly force myself into feeling sorry for. But other, better people.

He needs to be in jail, not waltzing around the woods with a damn machete.

On the other hand, he could have been bluffing. He could absolutely kill me if I put myself in his path again. A rock is one thing. Figuring out something to help the police is another.

My eyes find the trees at the side of the lake and I see the winking of light in three of them. I'm sure I could just head

toward those and eventually make it back to camp, but that isn't the way the killer went.

But then again, *I* shouldn't go the way the killer went... right?

I take a breath... and turn away from the lit trees.

Instead, I follow the small game trail in the woods, pretty sure this is where he went. I'm honestly good at keeping silent, and I watch my step so that I stay on the grass instead of on branches or anything else that's going to make noise.

I don't need a picture of his face, like he teased. If I could just figure out where he went, that would work just as well for me. Well enough, anyway, since I'm too afraid to do more than this.

Even just walking the same way he did terrifies me. I'm asking for it, though some part of me, a really sick part with no survival instinct, wonders what he'd do if he caught me.

Would I get to see his face? That's definitely crazy, since in the movies, killers only show their faces to the people they're about to kill. I don't want to die.

But I don't think I want anyone else to die, either.

My slow steps take me into a darker part of the woods, though I can still hear the waves lapping at the shore somewhere to my left. Then the trail shifts, turning back toward the lake itself, and finally, I come out of the thickest trees and to a clearer spot on the shore.

Is this a camping spot? That's the only thing I can fathom, at least. The ground is clear of some debris, and there's a small dock that leads out to what looks like a deeper part of the lake, rather than the gentle shore the camp uses for swimming that I'm familiar with.

There's even a picnic table, and on it?

My heart almost stops.

On top of the picnic table is the bloody machete. I swallow back bile, wishing I'd stayed in the thicker part of the woods

instead of coming out here. I chance a look around, trying to stare into the darkness of the surrounding trees.

But there's nothing there. No movement. No white shine of a mask. In fact, the only thing that's vaguely person shaped is the thing at the edge of the dock.

Except, they aren't moving. *Are they dead?* It feels like maybe there's a victim out there, in a chair at the end of the short dock.

That, or the killer decided to take a nap.

But... What if they *aren't* dead? It's probably not a Brett situation, and if someone there was stabbed and isn't dead, then they deserve my help. I know I'd want to be helped if the situation was reversed.

Yet, my eyes fall on the machete, its blade still stained with blood. He can't have just left this. Meaning that he's *here* somewhere.

Or he's gone, and this person just really needs help.

I need to decide fast, and with my blood pounding in my ears, I'm terrified that it's going to be the wrong one and that I'm going to end up dead.

Change of plan, I tell myself. *We check to see if that person's okay, then we run.* That feels less bad. If whoever's out on the dock is dead, then I'm home free, anyway. If they aren't, then I call the cops, or dive into the lake and swim for help.

And if the killer shows up, then I definitely dive into the lake and swim for help. I'm a damn good swimmer, and if I have to cross the lake to get to safety, I will. With his heavy jacket, mask, and machete, I can't honestly sit here and think that he's going to dive in after me. Especially if I haven't seen his face.

Besides... hadn't he said he wouldn't kill me?

Am I stupid enough to believe him?

Instead of running away like the frightened rabbit he'd compared me to, I take off at a quick walk toward the dock.

My foot finds the first bit of wood and I pause as it creaks, then continue on more carefully. He's not around, or I would've heard him.

Right?

I just need to make sure someone's not hurt.

God, this is the first time in my life I've hoped someone is dead. Does that make me a shit person? My entire body shakes as I reach what I see is a chair, and as I get closer, I realize that this was a mistake.

Though, it's not until I come face to face with the chair, with a leather jacket thrown over its back and the mask sitting in the seat, that I realize how much of a mistake this was.

It feels like a trap.

Slowly, I turn, mouth pressed to a thin line as I walk carefully back up the dock. I don't care how much the wood creaks and moans under me. I don't care that it might be dry-rotted and drop me into the lake.

I just need to get out of here.

At the end of the dock, I glance up, intent on doing another check of the clearing before I escape. But my body slams to a complete and utter halt.

The picnic table isn't empty anymore.

Instead, a large shape sits there, feet resting on the bench so he can drape his arms across his knees. My mouth falls open, my breaths raspy and terrified as I look at the killer, who sits unmasked on the table.

This was a bad idea.

"Did you think I was sitting out there?" His voice is teasing, calm, and oh so fucking dangerous. "Or did you think I'd found another unfortunate victim in the woods?" With his hood up, I can't see his features, and I don't want to.

"I haven't seen anything," I whisper. "I'm sorry, I... I didn't mean to—"

“Well, that’s a lie, isn’t it?” He shifts to pick up the machete, gloved fingers testing the edge. I shudder at the motion, edging toward the thicker trees again. “No offense, little rabbit...” He doesn’t look up at me, but he does place the machete down on the table again. “But you’re not fast enough to outrun me. Especially since I have a feeling you’re just as tired as you were when I caught you last time.”

“I’ll jump in the lake,” I threaten, shifting back toward the dock.

“And I’ll come drag you out. I’ll give you mouth to mouth, if that’s what it takes. Can’t have you dying to get away from me, bunny.” A part of me wants to tell him my name, so he stops calling me rabbit, bunny, and *prey*.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask, my hands clenching at my sides.

He doesn’t answer.

“Why did you come out here?” he asks instead, a few seconds later. “After I let you go? Shouldn’t you have hopped on back to your campground?” Again with the rabbit jokes.

“I got lost,” I lie easily, slowly working my way to the tree line. “I was trying to go back, but I didn’t know which way to go, and I didn’t know this is where you went—”

“You’re not a very good liar. And you’ll have to do much better if you want to lie to *me*,” he points out mildly, still not looking up from his hands.

“Why would you think I’m lying?”

“Call it intuition.” Slowly he reaches out, his fingers curled. “Come here.”

“Not on my life.” Instead, I take another step toward the trees, ready to run.

“I’ll tell you one more time. Come here, or I’ll make you.”

I hesitate, though I really should run. But he’s right about something incredibly unfortunate. I’m exhausted. My muscles burn and my legs still feel like jelly. I need another minute, or ten, to be able to run anywhere, and I’m scared we both know

it. “Why? What do you want from me? You said you wouldn’t kill me, remember?” I throw at him, like a serial killer ever sticks to his word.

“I also told you there are a lot of ways to make you regret something outside of killing or seriously harming you,” he reminds me, not moving. His hand is still held up between us and I look at it, then at his shadowed face that I can’t see.

“You’ll hurt me.”

“Maybe. But I think you should take your chances by doing what I say, instead of running.”

His words cause my lungs to close, and I choke on the air I was breathing. *He’ll hurt me.* He’ll fucking kill me, more likely. And I’m so afraid of him that I feel frozen.

Then, without another word and praying some miracle will happen, I bolt into the trees.

Or, I try to.

The serial killer lunges off of the picnic table, and in only a few strides catches me around the waist. I scream and yell, kicking out at him. I lash out with my feet and hands, trying to hit him and make him let go, but he doesn’t even seem to notice. Instead, he drags me back with him, until he’s able to sit me up on the picnic table with one hand suddenly around my face, covering my eyes.

“Poor little rabbit,” he taunts, grip tight as I reach up to try to make him let go. “You just couldn’t leave well enough alone, could you? Close your eyes.”

“N-no.”

He chuckles. “My friends tell me I’m nicer without the mask, but you don’t get to see my face either way. Either close them so I can blindfold you, or I go put it on and you won’t like me as much.”

I feel myself shaking under his near-bruising grip, and slowly I nod, unable to think of a way out of this without doing as he says. “You won’t... hurt me?” I ask, as his hand

falls away from my face and I ache to open my eyes to see his face.

“You trust a serial killer?”

Bile rises in my throat as he wraps a length of cloth around my face, obscuring my vision like he had before. But before I can reply, he leans forward, lips brushing my ear. “That’s okay. You can trust this one. Just this once. I won’t hurt you, little bunny of mine. Not like you’re thinking.”

“I don’t understand what you mean.” My voice is small and terrified, and my breath comes in desperate pants as he moves. Unthinkingly I seize his arm, afraid of what will happen once I can’t feel him anymore, and he lets me keep my grip. “I’m sorry. I’ll go. Please. I’ll leave, and it’s not like I can tell anyone anything. I don’t know anything—”

“Yes, I’m fully aware of that. What? Did you think that I’d let you follow me here if there was ever a chance of you seeing something that could get me into trouble? Did you consider for a *second* that I didn’t know what my little prey was going to do once I let her up?” His voice is a low, teasing rumble and it makes me shiver with a feeling that’s only partly fear.

“I’m sorry,” I say again, letting him use my grip on his arm to pull me wherever he wants me. I can’t figure out where or what that is, exactly. Not when I can’t see. Though when he gives a sudden tug and his other hand forces me over his lap, with my elbows on the picnic table, my heart sinks again.

“What are you doing?” I demand, trying to fight against his hold. I push up against the rough wood of the table, my feet kicking uselessly at the bench.

“Is it not obvious, or were you never spanked as a child?” the serial killer teases. “Maybe if you had been, you wouldn’t be so keen to follow me out into the woods at night.”

“You’re *not* going to—”

“I am, in fact,” he assures me. “I suppose by your definition, I am hurting you a little. But I think we both know I could do worse.” Before I can reply, his bare hand slides up

my thigh, and my breath catches in my throat as I regret just how little these shorts cover. Not that I expected to be over someone's lap tonight.

“Please don't.”

“I could ask you to count for me...” He lifts his hand and a second later it's back, hard enough that the blow stings against my skin. I gasp, rising on my tiptoes, trying to get away from him or the stinging pain or *something*. “But I won't be that mean to you. All you have to do is stay there and take it. That's all, bunny. Is that too much to ask for?”

“Yes.”

“Well...” He hums lightly and his hand descends again, this time against my other thigh. I yelp and turn to bury my face against the arm that holds me in his lap. “I guess if you can't take the punishment, you shouldn't have committed the crime, huh?” When he lifts his hand again, I flinch, expecting him to hit me once more. But instead, he runs a hand over the already inflamed skin of my thighs, making me shudder.

Oh fuck, I think to myself, as something other than fear and relief floods my body. My thighs clench as he slides his palm over the abused flesh of my upper thighs, and I whimper when he hits me again, in the same spot, only causing it to get worse. Twice more he spanks me, and then his hand comes down to stroke over my tender thighs again.

This part is the worst, and not because it hurts. I attempt to muffle any noise against his bare forearm, my legs giving out and causing me to sink down until I'm flush against his lap instead of holding myself away from him to maintain distance. He murmurs something I can't hear, and I'm too focused on trying to keep myself under control to really figure it out.

“Are you ready to go again?” he croons, his fingers digging into my soft thighs. I shake my head, nose against his arm. “Yes, you are, sweet little bunny. You're doing so well for me. Such a good little girl for me.” That's not helping, and I wish he'd stop talking. His voice is like soft, smooth velvet that slides against my body, making this so much worse. “You

can do it for me one more time. Two more on each side, okay? That's all."

"That's too much," I disagree, barely able to talk with my face pressed against him.

"It's not." He slides his palm down my thigh and then lifts it once more. I tense, unable to help myself, and whimper when he spans me again, this time just under the hem of my shorts, at the swell of my ass. My thighs clench when he does it again, and before I know what I'm doing, I'm grinding against his lap, my teeth against his forearm.

He pauses, his hand resting against my lower back as I try to get a hold of myself. Am I crying? I definitely feel like I'm crying, and judging by the wet feel of the blindfold, it's a very well-educated guess.

"Oh," he murmurs and chuckles softly. "That's not why I thought you didn't want me to do this, little rabbit."

I say nothing. I don't know what there is to say, frankly, especially when he hits me twice more and I feel like I'm on fire from the burning sting of his hits and the way it all seems to go to the same place in my body.

His hand comes back to my thighs, stroking up one, then the other. His skin feels cool against my abused flesh, and I whine against his arm as I squirm in his lap, trying not to grin against him.

"You know, if you need to..." His hand grips my hip, and he coaxes me to move until I really *am* grinding on his thigh, my legs slipping to either side of his in order to do so with ease. "But I think this earns you more, don't you?" He doesn't wait for me to answer, and his blows are lighter, more teasing this time. But it doesn't matter.

They still feel like licks of flame to me, and I grip his knee and what I can reach of his arm as he rests his hand on my thigh again. I'm shivering, and I can't decide if I want him to keep going or to stumble away from him and run.

"Stop, please. Just... *stop*," I plead, barely able to pay attention to him. My head is spinning with delight that I try to

force away, and I only vaguely hear his soft laugh.

“Stop what, rabbit? You’re shaking yourself to pieces and all I’ve done is keep my hand on your thigh for the past thirty seconds. Unless you’re begging yourself to stop, maybe...?” He strokes along the reddened skin of my thighs, making it harder for me to think. “I suppose that’s fair. Is my little bunny a masochist?”

I shake my head.

“Are you sure? Because I’m pretty sure we could both find out pretty easily, couldn’t we?” His hand comes to rest on my hip again, and he urges me to sit up so that I’m straddling his lap, knees pressing against the rough wood of the table as I try to pull myself together, just as unsuccessfully as before.

“Good girl,” he praises, voice low and tight. “You were so good for me... you took more than I asked you to.”

“W-will you let me go, then?” I whisper, my hands on his shoulders as I stare blindly at what might be his face.

“Yeah, of course, I will.” He starts to loosen his grip, only to hold me tighter, keeping me in place. “Unless you’d rather I give you a reward.”

Of course I don't want that.

I sit still in his lap, knees holding my weight so I don't sink down onto my sore thighs. Not that he cares that I'm trying not to hurt myself, obviously. Especially when one of his hands leaves my arm, and he moves it to sink his fingers into my thigh, the grip so deliciously painful against my much abused flesh.

Fuck, maybe I *am* a masochist.

"That hurts," I breathe, leaning forward as I try to pull away from his hand. I end up with my face against his shoulder, still unable to see a damn thing about the situation. I wish I could see his face, and with a shock I realize it's not because I want to be able to describe him to a police sketch artist.

"I know, bunny," he coos, sliding his nails up my thigh. "But that's only a complaint from someone who *doesn't* like it. Are you ticklish?" At the change in subject, I hesitate, then shake my head harshly.

It's a lie, but I'm *definitely* not in the mood to be tickled by a serial killer.

"Oh yeah? You're not?" I only vaguely realize that he's no longer holding my arms, especially when his fingers skim along my sides, then leave. A second later I feel him tug at the zipper of my jacket, and with a few simple motions he tugs it off of me, tossing it somewhere that I have a feeling is the damn lake or the nearest ditch.

Then he hesitates, hand on my bare upper arm. “Where’s your phone?” he asks, and the rough words make me tense all over again.

“I’m not letting you have it,” I tell him, with more confidence than I’m feeling or ever could in this situation.

“You’re not letting me have it. You’re not letting me touch you. You didn’t let me spank you... and you didn’t follow me into the woods,” he teases, turning so his lips brush my ear. “So many things you’ve promised you won’t let me do... but here you are, in my lap. And I’m not even holding you here.”

His words flood me with the truth. That I’m *not* bound here by him.

“You wouldn’t let me leave if I wanted to,” I argue, feeling almost... defensive? My thighs still tremble and ache, and I doubt I could do much running anyway. There’s no way I could get away from him.

“Of course, I would. I wouldn’t keep you here if you were fighting me. I don’t *need* to force anyone, much less you.”

“You’re lying—”

His hand finds my mouth suddenly, arm resting against my shoulders as he covers my lips. “Stop that. I haven’t lied to you once tonight, now have I?” He doesn’t wait for an answer, and it’s not like I could do more than make noise, anyway. “If you want to leave, you can leave. Even when I have you pinned to this picnic table and you’re about to come, you can ask me to stop and I *will*.”

What... did he just say?

“Do you understand me, Hazel?”

It’s probably his use of my name that shocks me more than anything, and the fact that he releases my mouth in the same breath.

“You know my name?” I can’t help but ask, my face turned toward his.

“Of course I do. I’ve been stalking you, haven’t I?” He rests his hands on my hips. “Aren’t your thighs getting tired,

little bunny? Don't you want to sit in my lap?"

I shake my head, still hesitating. But when he moves to push me down, I don't hesitate, and only rearrange my legs so that it's more comfortable to sit on his. That he's just as turned on by spanking me as I am isn't lost on me one bit, either. It would be pretty hard to miss, though. Especially with my thighs around his waist and my weight on him.

"I can't tell you yes," I argue, half with myself as I look down. Not that it makes a difference. "You're a serial killer. You killed Brett—"

"You're not very upset about that—"

"You were going to kill my *friends*."

"...Debatable," he answers, fingers trailing up my spine under my t-shirt. "But go on."

I'm not sure what that means. Was he... *not* going to kill my friends? Surely this wasn't just some weirdly elaborate plan to chase *me* away from the campground. I'm not that important to anyone, let alone a serial killer.

"Go on," he urges again, hand slipping under my shirt. "You're thinking too hard, little bunny. Keep telling me how you can't let the big bad serial killer touch you like this, or keep you on his lap." He reaches around to my back pocket and unerringly finds my phone, which he takes. As if he knew it was there all along.

"I can't," I agree, shivering under his touch.

"I bet you can't let me find where you're ticklish, either, hmm?" His nails scratch lightly over the sides of my belly, making me squirm, and I nearly jerk off of his lap when he does the same to the skin above my ribs. I'm not deaf to the chuckle I hear close to my face, but at least he stops.

"I'm not going to let you keep doing this. I'm not going to stay, or let you do whatever you think I want," I argue, but it's a losing battle, no matter how firm my voice is.

"Oh, I see. That's okay, then. You don't have to *tell* me yes." Is he... going to let me go? Will he drop me on the

ground and walk away, whistling, into the woods? “But if I go too far or do something that you don’t like, you *will* say ‘red.’ And that’s non-negotiable. Got that, little rabbit?” he orders, voice suddenly stern enough that I turn my face up to his.

I get what he’s telling me. It’s not difficult to understand, really. And in some ways, it takes the burden off of *me* saying ‘yes, Mr. Serial Killer, I *do* want you to fuck me into the picnic table until *dawn* after killing someone who was intent on hurting me and nearly going after my friends.’

“Wait.” I press a hand against his chest and feel him take a breath. In his unzipped hoodie, he’s warm under my hand, and it takes me a minute to remember what I’m going to say. “Can I take the blindfold off?”

He laughs. “Of course you cannot. What are you thinking, little rabbit? That the big bad wolf is going to go all sweet for you? Take it off and this ends, and you *really* won’t like me after that.”

“Why? Would you kidnap me and take me back to your weird cabin with the rocking chair in front and old rickety bed in the back?” I all but sneer, finding that some of my fear has abandoned me.

“No, because you’d like that so much. Why am I waiting, bunny?”

“Because I want to know if you were really going to kill my friends... or not.”

“I killed your *boyfriend*, didn’t I?” he murmurs dangerously, pulling my hand from his chest and bringing it up to his lips so he can nip gently at my fingertips.

“He wasn’t my boyfriend, and you know that.”

The man sighs, releasing my hand. “I’m not your boyfriend, either. And I’m not going to get on one knee and promise you I’d never even dream of killing my obsession’s friends. Keep asking, and this is going nowhere. Is that what you want?”

It isn’t. But I don’t know what to do. I’m sure as hell not about to launch myself at him.

“No,” I murmur. “It’s not.”

“That’s what I thought.” There’s a smugness in his voice that I don’t expect, and he suddenly lifts my shirt with both hands and digs his nails lightly into my skin, scratching lines against the places that I’m ticklish.

I nearly screech, instead I pitch forward to wrap my arms around his shoulders. “*Stop!* That hurts,” I wail, when in fact it’s a very good kind of pain. He moves his leg so that one thigh sits higher, pressing against me so I can’t close my legs.

“Does it? Poor *thing*,” he teases, doing it again. “Clutch me tighter, won’t you? Maybe I’ll stop. Maybe I’ll take pity on my little prey.” I do, leaning against him and gripping his hoodie with one hand while my other hand snakes up to tangle in his hair.

My serial killer fucking *groans*. The sound is sexy as hell as he presses his lips against my throat, and in reply, I scrape my nails against his scalp while he scratches my skin.

“Fuck it,” he growls, getting to his feet so quickly that I’m afraid I’ll fall. But I don’t, and moments later my back is against the picnic table, my legs dangling off the edge until he urges them around his hips and leans over me to slam his hands against the wood on either side of my face. “I knew I picked the *best* prey,” he breathes just inches from my lips. “The best ones are the ones who know how to fight back. You want to grab my hair again? Want to scratch me up just like I scratched you?”

“Does it hurt?” I ask, voice quiet. “When I do?”

“Not one fucking bit.” He lunges forward to crush his lips to mine, drinking in my noise of surprise as he forces my mouth open and tries to suck my soul out from between my teeth. I reach up as he does, my hands running up his arms until I can find his face. His jaw is rough with stubble, cheekbones sharp under my fingers. I wonder what he looks like, especially when his long lashes brush my palms as he pulls away just slightly to allow me a breath.

“Do you wish you could see me? Maybe I’m not your type,” he taunts. “Maybe I’m covered in blood and now it’s getting all over your pretty, pale skin.”

I don’t reply right away. Instead, I grip his hair again, wrenching his face down against mine and reveling in the sound he makes against me.

It only lasts a few seconds, however, until he grips the base of my throat and pulls himself free from my grip.

“Hands on the table,” he tells me, voice low.

“Why? Did I pull too hard?” I ask, tilting my head to the side. I can’t tell if I’m disappointed or proud, but when I don’t do what he says, he roughly pushes my hands against the table.

“No. Because I fucking told you to. And shouldn’t you do what I say, my sweet, *exhausted* little prey? Who knows what I might do to you, if you don’t.”

A jolt of fear goes through my chest, and I feel myself tense. My mouth opens, but before I can speak, he adds, “If you don’t, I might have to rethink my stance of throwing you over my shoulder and bringing you home with me. I don’t live in a cabin in the woods like you mentioned earlier, but I think I can keep you entertained for a while, anyway.”

Entertained?

“I like touching you,” I respond, though I don’t know whether it’s because I want to argue, or just because I want him to know.

“I know. Doesn’t change what I told you to do.” He waits, utterly patient, until I drop my arms to the table uncomfortably over my head, stretching them up toward the end of the table to grip the rough wood.

“Hazel.” When he uses my name, I find myself listening with more intent. “I’m not going to hurt you. All right?”

“Okay?” I ask, confused. That is, until I feel the kiss of cold, bloodstained steel against my throat.

I gasp, my legs dropping from his waist to scabble at the table. My lips are forming the word *red* when the blade

disappears and his hand presses against my abdomen, just above my navel, to keep me down.

“I’m *not* going to hurt you,” he repeats. “I haven’t hurt you so far, even though I’ve had every opportunity to.”

“Then why the fucking *machete* against my throat?” I argue, my hands lifting from the table, only to be pressed back down by his other hand as he leans over me to kiss and nip at my throat.

“Because I’m going to cut off your clothes so I can fuck you like you clearly deserve,” he purrs against my ear, and I shudder.

“But I can just take them off—”

“No. You can’t.”

“*Why?*”

“Because I said so, little rabbit. Hands there. Don’t move. It won’t hurt—”

“I have to walk back to the campground!” I protest, my legs no longer wrapped around his thighs and instead my knees up, shoes pressing against the table. “You can’t cut them off. What am I supposed to—”

I don’t get to finish. He grabs my shirt and lifts it away from my body hard enough that my back comes off the table. There’s pressure, and a tearing sound, then I fall back down against the rough wood, the cold air suddenly brushing my skin where cloth once covered me.

“You were saying?” he asks sweetly, the cold edge of the machete teasing the swell of my breasts, just over my bra.

“Please don’t,” I breathe, gripping the end of the table again. “Please don’t cut it.”

“Why, baby?” he asks, catching the front clasp of my bra with the blade. “Don’t I deserve to look at you? Don’t I deserve to play with you when there’s nothing in the way?” He waits for my answer, unmoving.

“No,” I say simply, and he laughs darkly.

“I disagree,” he tells me and cuts through the thin material holding my bra together. It falls open immediately, and the only thing I can focus on is the flat of his blade against my chest. “But I’m really nice. I’ll let you keep your shorts. *If* you do one thing for me...” The machete blade skims up to my throat, causing my breath to catch in my chest as I wonder, again, if he’s going to end my life.

“Aren’t you going to ask me what it is?” he adds, as the blade trails further upward to rest just under my lip. I shudder at the cold steel and try not to wonder if any of the still-wet blood is getting on my skin.

“What is it?” I ask, mouth barely moving.

“Beg.”

“*What?*”

“Beg me to take them off instead of cut them off of you. Beg me to give you something so you can keep your dignity when you *stumble* back to camp barely able to walk and trying to hide that you’re full of my cum.”

It’s hard to beg when my brain is full of the mental image of his words. But I jolt into reality when he sighs, and the blade trails down my body.

“Okay, okay wait! Please, *please*. Don’t cut them off. Please, let me keep them. I don’t want everyone to see—please just pull them off instead.”

“What don’t you want everyone to see exactly, bunny?” he asks, the back, blunt edge of the blade pressed suddenly between my thighs. “Be more specific for me.”

“I don’t want everyone to see... me. Naked,” I reply, humiliation coloring my face.

“Why’s that?”

“I’d be embarrassed—”

“What would make you so embarrassed, little rabbit? Aside from your nudity?” It’s obvious what he wants, but fuck it’s hard to say.

“I don’t want everyone to know you fucked me.”

“There it is.” The blade disappears and his fingers curl in the material of my shorts. “You don’t want anyone to see that you got fucked by Ohio’s favorite serial killer.” He tugs hard until they’re at my knees along with my underwear. “*You* don’t want everyone to see how much you enjoyed it. But that’s okay. That’s more than okay.” He pulls them off and leans over me again, pressing between my bare thighs. “Because I think I’d rather keep you to myself. Spread your fucking legs as much as you can. Let me see all of you. Every inch of you that belongs to me right now. And don’t move those hands. Not an inch.”

I don’t move my hands, though I do let him push my legs wide until my thighs fall off the edges of the table. I shiver under his gaze and against the breeze, my aching thighs stinging against the rough wood as he just stands there.

“Are you... still...?” I trail off, not wanting to irritate him by moving but confused on if he’s seen something he doesn’t like.

“Yes, baby,” he promises. “I’m right here. I’m sorry, is this better?” He trails his hands along my thighs. “I’m just looking at you. That’s all. Looking at how pretty you are, and what a pretty pussy you have for me.”

Fuck. His words send shivers up my spine, and I grip the picnic table harder.

“You don’t mind when I look, do you?” You don’t mind that I want to touch all of you. I want to play with all of you... though we don’t have time, do we? No.” He sounds disappointed, but his hands move until he’s running his fingers over my slit, dipping into my entrance before dragging them up to my clit.

I squirm on the table, and he chuckles at the movement. “I know, I know. We’ve already taken too much time, haven’t we? I can’t tease you like I want. I can’t do all the things I want, but that’s all right.” He slides his fingers into me smoothly, stretching me quickly as his thumb finds my clit. “You don’t need much, do you? Not when you’re so ready for

me. I know how much you want my cock. I know how much you want me to fill you up. Don't you?"

"Yes," I say, flexing my hands. "But I want to touch you."

"Say please."

"Please."

He pulls one of my arms down, guiding my hand until I can feel his chest and shoulder. I stroke my fingers over his shirt, wishing I could tug him closer to me.

"You're wet enough for me. You've been wet for me since I spanked you, though. So I don't know why I even bothered to wait." I hear him unzipping his jeans, and I immediately tense.

Am I really going to let him do this? Am I going to let myself get fucked by a serial killer in the woods? This is fucking insane. I'm insane at this point.

"No, no. Shhh. Don't do that." His length slides against my body, and he purrs encouragements. "Don't tense up. I won't hurt my bunny. I won't hurt you, Hazel. Don't worry." The sudden movement of him sliding into me as deep as he can, until my body is flush with his, puts a little bit of a lie to his words. I hadn't expected it, and I cry out in surprise as he leans forward to seal his lips against mine.

He groans against my mouth as he moves, pulling out just enough to slam back into me and make me see stars. "Good little bunny," he murmurs against my lips. "So fucking warm and tight for me. Were you waiting for me? I bet you were. Maybe you knew I was watching you, hmm?"

"I didn't," I plead, turning toward the sound of his voice to chase his lips as he fucks me. My legs go around his waist again and I move to grip his hair once more, and this time dig my fingers into his scalp. "I didn't want you to—"

I'm not expecting the response to my other hand finding his hair. He growls and *slams* his hand against the table by my face, making me flinch, as he leans over to catch my lower lip in his teeth. He continues to fuck me, and I'd be moving up the table if my legs weren't around his.

But he's also knocked my blindfold loose, and when I tense and wait for him to realize, it hits me that he doesn't know.

"Wait," I say, one hand flying down to his chest. "*Wait.*"

His movements slow, and I can feel the confusion in his body. "Feel." I grab his rough, calloused hand, fingers longer than mine, and pull it up to the side of my face to brush his fingers against the loose fabric of the blindfold.

He doesn't move. He feels it; I know he does. Even touching the fabric in the darkness then he lets out a breath against my mouth.

"Close your eyes," he urges. "Are they closed for me, little rabbit?"

"Yes."

Suddenly the blindfold is gone so quickly I feel like I have whiplash. I still don't open them, though my heart stutters in shock.

"Then keep them closed. Don't look. Don't you *fucking* look. Understand? I'll punish you again if you look, and while you'll enjoy it, you won't make it back to your friends tonight, tomorrow, or this fucking *month* if you open your damn eyes. Nod yes for me if you understand, bunny."

I nod vigorously, heart hammering in my chest as I reach up to wrap my arms around his neck again.

"Good girl. So, *so* good, aren't you? Poor little thing doesn't want another punishment from me so soon, do you?" I shake my head as he starts to move again, whining at the delicious feeling of him sliding so deep.

"I know, I know, *shh*," he shushes me, his lips pressed to my cheek. "You take me so well, don't you? I bet you were waiting for me, even though you say you weren't."

I shake my head. "I didn't know—"

"I bet you did. Don't lie to me. I can smell the lies on you." He twists suddenly to bite my throat, working a bruise into my skin. "You just wanted to end up under me where you

belong. But little bunny... all you had to do was ask, and I'd be so happy to teach you your place." He kisses me again before I can reply, then leans back suddenly, one hand against my stomach.

"You're going to come for me, aren't you? Let me feel you tighten around me. Bet you feel so good." His thumb finds my clit, and he isn't gentle as he strokes it, hips still thrusting in and out of me. He's so much bigger than the two other guys I've fucked in my life, and he makes me see stars behind my eyelids. "Come for me. Right now. I don't have all night, and I want you to come so I can fill you up."

I shake my head, out of some lost or misplaced sense of pride.

"Don't fight me. Don't fight how fucking much you want to." I open my mouth to reply, but he's right. My hands clench against the wood as he reaches up, fingers brushing over my nipple as I come. My legs press tighter against him and I throw my head back, nearly opening my eyes without meaning to before closing them hard again to the low murmur of his praise.

Seconds later, he groans out a curse, and his hands move so he can grip my hips tight and bury himself into me one last time before he comes to a halt. His grip trembles, and I breathe hard, coming down from my own release as I lay there, bewildered, as he makes good on his promise to fill me up.

Finally, when I register how cool the breeze is that's now brushing my entire body, my serial killer takes a step back and chuckles. I close my thighs, feeling my face burn again as I sit up and curl my arm around my body.

"No, don't do that. Don't hide from me, little rabbit. You were so perfect. You're so gorgeous. Don't hide now." He steps forward, thigh pushing mine apart, and reaches out to cup my face as he turns it up for the sweetest kiss I've ever felt. "Listen to me closely, okay?" I nod and he brushes a kiss against my nose. "If you're looking at the lake, you're going to go left. There's a trail near the water that will take you back to your campground. You'll be fine. I'm the only dangerous thing

out here, and I won't hurt you. You'll be back within a half hour, okay?" He presses my phone into my hand, holding it until my fingers curl around the cool material of my case.

"Okay," I breathe, leaning up as if I'm looking at him. "Thank you."

"Don't thank me," he dismisses. "I only set you up to fall into my snare." He kisses my nose, then my forehead, and steps back. "Have a good life, my unfortunate prey." He doesn't wait for me to say anything. I hear him collect his things, and his footsteps on the dock, before his steps fade into the forest at my back.

And not once do I open my eyes, no matter how much I want to see the face of my serial killer.

He's right, and it takes me a little more than thirty minutes to get back to the campground with its flashing police lights and the lights of an ambulance as paramedics take away Brett's body.

Poor fucked up Brett. A tragedy, if there ever was one.

Jenna sees me first, and lets out a strangled sound of surprise, hitting me hard with a hug and nearly knocking me off my feet.

"You're alive," she sobs, pulling me down to the ground to sit beside her. A police officer strolls over, and already I see paramedics making their way toward us as the officer asks, without preamble.

"Did you see him? His face? Is there anything you can tell us about the man that did this?" she asks kindly, a hand on my shoulder and her eyes intense.

Staring up at her with wide eyes, I say without a touch of regret or dishonesty in my voice, "I never saw him; so I can't tell you a thing. I'm sorry."

I t's insane when a week goes by and I find myself back at my part-time florist job. More insane when another speeds on past, and I ring up someone's flower order that Miss Jenkins had made for them. The man smiles, says something about wanting to surprise his wife, and leaves. I hold my smile, though it doesn't feel genuine until he's out the door and I'm alone in the shop with only the cooler humming in the background.

Finally I sit, my arms stretched across the counter as I lay my cheek against the cool surface. Something is wrong with me, though I know I'm not *sick*. If I ask my therapist, she'll tell me it's because I went a few days without taking my medicine, and that my Celexa is trying to enact its revenge in my brain. Though she'll say it with more exasperation and less flair. So I won't tell her, but I do wish I didn't feel so... off.

Things haven't been the same since the last night of being a camp counselor at Lake Clearwater. My mind flashes back unhelpfully to the feel of my serial killer's hair in my grip, and to the feel of his breath against my lips.

I already think of what he'd felt like when he was inside me almost every night. I don't need that to bleed over into daylight hours if I can help it. Though at this rate, I'm not sure I can help it.

What the hell is wrong with me that I *want* him to come back? I sure as hell don't miss him... do I? Because while my common sense and survival instincts aren't always on point, that feels downright Darwin Award-worthy if I'm silently

wishing for him to come find me in the middle of Akron, Ohio.

The door opens and I get to my feet, tapping the toe of my sneaker on the floor as I look up at two men who walk in, one nearly slamming the door in the other's face as he grins wolfishly at his companion.

The second to come in, a black-haired, tanned guy easily six feet or more, rolls his eyes and glares at his lighter-haired, paler companion. He says something, not even looking at me, and I watch as the two of them browse the more romantic side of the sample bouquets and stuffed animals with very little interest.

They don't exactly look like Miss Jenkins' normal customers, after all. My fingers tap on the table as they pick up a couple of stuffed animals and set them down again. They can't be here to pick up an order. There's nothing left in the cooler or on any of the shelves, and the shop is only open for another twenty minutes or so.

I want to tell them that, but I bite my lip as I watch as they continue to browse. After I'm done locking up I'm going home to collapse in my bed, probably pissing off my cats when I do, and I'll be damned if I hang out here past closing time for two men who look like they've never stepped foot into a flower shop before.

Blinking, I realize that they've abandoned their browsing, and the two of them approach the counter. The lighter-haired, blue-eyed man's smile is sweet, but the black-haired man *grins* with wolfish glee.

"We're here to place an order," he tells me, leaning onto the counter on his elbows so he's looking up at me. His voice is light and pleasant, and if I didn't have other things on my mind, I'd probably enjoy listening to it more than I do right now.

I return his friendly look and set the catalog down in front of him, scooting it towards his forearms. "You can order anything in here with minor substitutions," I explain, flipping it open and showing him what I mean. "If you want to—"

“Why don’t you show him what you like out of here?” the light-brunette interrupts, his voice soft. When I look up at him, he adds with a wider smile, “He’s pretty bad at deciding things like this on his own. I’m surprised he can even fix dinner for himself, truth be told.”

The black-haired man, who might be thirty at most, glances up at him and rolls his eyes. “Sorry,” he says, turning back to face me. He’s closer than he has any right to be, he is inside my personal space bubble, for sure. But I only shrug and sit back on the stool I have behind the counter.

“Don’t be. I like orchids, personally.” I flip the page and tap the bouquet that I’ve always loved to watch Miss Jenkins make. “But they don’t scream romance, I guess. If that’s what you’re going for.”

“It is,” the black-haired man says. “I’m getting flowers for my girlfriend.”

“Oh?” A real shame that he’s taken. Not that I was about to throw myself at a stranger like this. He feels cold, somehow. Distant, even though he hasn’t stopped smiling once. “And you don’t know what she wants?”

He shrugs. “I’ve never really done the flowers thing before, if I’m being honest with you. So this is kind of new to me, and I admit I haven’t paid enough attention to know what she wants.” His words are precise and clear, and the polite tone in his voice is just as obvious.

“Okay. Umm...” I turn back to the roses. “If you want to do something really, uh, unique, you could get her the preserved roses?” I tap the black box and he doesn’t even flinch at the price.

“I don’t think so. That’s not very her,” he denies. I nod and show him three other popular arrangements, but he shakes his head at all of them.

“Why don’t you show me the orchids again? I don’t think my girlfriend is the *rose* type, actually.” The lighter-haired brunette glances at him and goes back to playing with the displays on the side counter, gazing into the glass case of

picture frames and wedding favors as he does. Miss Jenkins does weddings as well and always has out on display what she can offer for the party.

I flip back to the orchids and show him the price options for ten or twenty stems, and the options for a vase.

He picks the most expensive of each, never blinking an eye, and even upgrades the vase to a prettier, blue-tinted glass with a band of gold along the top. When I ring him up, I hand him one of the small cards that can go in the flower arrangement, glancing at his credit card to read his name.

Wren Crystal.

Did he pick it himself? It seems too... different for his parents to have picked out, but it's also none of my business, so I don't say a damn thing while he and his friend talk.

"What do people normally say on these things?" he chuckles, marker in hand as he looks down at the card.

"Hmm. I've kind of seen everything," I admit, handing his card back and writing his order date and number on the pad for my boss. He won't be back until tomorrow to pick it up, which I know she'll be fine with, but I might shoot her a text after they're gone and I've closed the shop just in case she needs to bring something in with her tomorrow to complete the order. Not likely, though. The back of the shop is piled high with vases, ribbons, balloons, and just about every other thing one could imagine in a flower arrangement. "Sorry for getting you fired.' Umm. 'Love you.'" I try to think of some of the better, less boring ones. "Oh, once I saw a guy write out really, *really* explicit instructions for his boyfriend. That was awkward."

He chuckles, already writing a message, and hands it back to me.

Haven't stopped thinking of you one bit.

His handwriting is messy and inexact, and he doesn't sign it, but that's not uncommon. "Do you need anything else?" Wren asks as I close the catalog and stash it back behind the register.

I just shake my head and smile, putting the card behind the register as well. “Not unless you want to add anything else to your order.”

“Not today, I don’t think.” He finally stands straight, grimacing as he stretches the kinks from his spine. “Thank you. And I’m sorry we’re keeping you past closing.”

“Oh.” I glance up at the clock, then back at him while trying to still smile. “I didn’t even notice, actually.”

“You didn’t?” he keeps his dark eyes on mine, head tilting to the side. “You didn’t know it’s ten minutes after you close for the day?”

“No,” I lie. “And it really isn’t a big deal. It’s not like I have anything better to do.” Except be anywhere but here.

A smirk curls on his lips, and he steps back. “If you say so. Anyway, I’ll be back for that tomorrow afternoon. It’s Friday, so I definitely won’t keep you past closing.” He waves a hand at me, chuckling like he’s made some kind of joke, and his friend follows him out the door before they start speaking again, careful to close it behind them.

It’s only by chance that I glance up a few seconds later to see his friend looking at me, an expression of confusion on his face before they turn the corner and end up out of sight on the street, leaving me confused as well.

It’s not like I know them, or I’ve done anything to upset them. In fact, I was pretty damn nice considering I’m now late for a date with my cats and my favorite teriyaki chicken in the city.

Really damn nice indeed.

8

I miss the return of the polite, attractive man and his friend. But that's probably for the better, because by Friday I'm dragging, and my hair is up in a ponytail even though I hate the way my face looks rounder with it's pulled back. But it can't be helped. I'd barely had the energy to get out of bed today without remembering every sad thing that's ever happened or thinking of all the ways my day could go to shit.

Frankly, after finding my last clean tee and denim shorts, brushing the tangles out of my hair had felt impossible. I know what my therapist will say. That I should *make* myself stick to a routine so it doesn't feel so insurmountable to get myself together when the worst of my depression hits. But she's not here, and I don't have to tell her everything that goes on during the week. If I did, I'd have to keep it all in a journal that I'd fill up weekly.

I run my tongue over my teeth as I close up the shop, my mind barely focusing on the easy, mundane tasks. At least I'd brushed my teeth at four am when I hadn't been able to go back to sleep. And when I shower after work today, I'll dump a bottle of conditioner in my hair and not worry whether it's properly washed out while I comb the knots loose. No matter how agonizing that'll be, I'm sure.

Letting out a breath, I rock back on my heels as I look around. Miss Jenkins stands at the register, her thick glasses perched on her nose as she counts cash and carefully puts it under the drawer for now. I know she takes the money to the bank on Saturdays, and that's my day off, thankfully.

Well, from here. Saturday and Sunday are when I normally pick up a few dog walking jobs, and during the week, if my account is low, I do the same. It's obviously my fate that I'll be scraping by for the rest of my life, with no chance of ever saving up money at this rate.

After all, it's not like my college degree is going to complete itself. *Eight* credits more and I'd have my anthropology degree. Eight more and I'd be done and be able to call my parents with some news that won't disappoint them.

But now, without the scholarship that had gotten me through the first credits, I don't have the money or the will to go back. So those eight, empty credits are just going to sit there, unfulfilled, while my degree waves at me from on high.

It brings tears to my eyes, almost. Though I know it's mostly because of how bad I already feel today.

"Do you need me for anything extra today?" I ask, seeing Miss Jenkins glance up at my words. She turns to look at me, a kind smile curving over her lips. I have no idea what she thinks of me, or my eight missing credits, and I'm never going to ask.

"No, not that I can think of." She always looks so kind that I have to wonder if it's pity... but I shove that to the side and watch her for a few seconds, in case she *does* think of something.

"Okay," I breathe at last, untying my green apron and hanging it on the hook. "Have a good weekend, then. And I'll see you on Monday."

"You as well. Do something exciting for me, won't you?" She winks, delivering the same request as always as I let out a small, forced laugh.

"You've got it, Miss Jenkins." If exciting means eating takeout, watching reality tv, and snuggling cats, then I've got this in the bag.

Somehow, however, I don't think it does.

My apartment is cool, just as I've left it, and I'm glad that even in this older building in Akron, the air conditioner works

well enough that I don't have any reason to complain. Without thinking, I walk through the kitchen, berated by angry meows, as I dip the cats' food bowl into the bag and set it down for them in front of the sink on the designated mat. Next is their water fountain, and I fill it up just as automatically before setting it back down and re-plugging it in once more.

"You're welcome, you heathens." I yawn, scratching Shadow behind his ears. The all black cat glares up at me, yellow eyes bright, and I lift my hands in mock surrender. "Well, excuse me for thinking you might want a bit of love, sir finicky," I tease, giving my female tabby, Morticia, the same attention before getting to my feet. At least she's more grateful for it, and moves to rub against my legs, purring.

"Love you too," I tell her, smiling as I step around them and head for the bathroom, only to stop, biting my lip lightly.

Am I forgetting something? I feel strange, like the hair on the back of my neck is standing at attention, and I shift my weight from foot to foot as I stand at the edge of my small kitchen. What's wrong with me?

Slowly, hesitantly, I go to the door and relock it, just to make sure it's secure. It was already locked, so I don't know why I feel like I need to do it again, and I discover it doesn't really give me any peace of mind.

But I've done it, and there's nothing else I really *can* do right now, is there? Well, not anything I can think of, at least. Shrugging, I walk to my bathroom, stripping off my clothes and dumping them on the floor before turning the knob and starting up my shower. In my cool apartment, my skin immediately feels chilled, and I shiver before stepping into the shower, leaving the bathroom door open so that it doesn't fog up in here.

I *despise* when I get out of the shower only to feel like I've stepped into a sauna, and it's not like anyone else lives in my small, one-bedroom apartment anyway. I sigh as the water cascades over me, warming me almost instantly as I let my long, blonde hair get soaked. While I'd just showered

yesterday, I hadn't had the mental energy to work on my hair, and it's led to a mess I *really* don't want to deal with today.

But I've left it before, and I know if I go another day or two without dealing with it, then I'll really be in for it. My hands come up as I massage shampoo into it, though I quickly wash that out and replace it with the deep conditioner I practically buy in bulk. My fingers run through my hair and I sigh, trying not to tug on the tangles and one unfortunate knot that I'll need to work on while I sit on the couch and zone out. Carefully, I coat as much of my thick hair as I can, hoping that I can make this not *quite* as bad as it could've been otherwise.

Last, I grab my detangling oil and dump that in my hair as well, doing the same to work it into the spots that need it the most with a scowl on my features. My brush is out in the living room, as it normally is, so I simply comb my fingers through the untangled parts of my hair to make sure they get just as much conditioner as the back of my head.

When I've deemed myself done and I feel like I'm choking on the hot water, I dip my head under the spray and work out as much of the conditioner as I can. I'm as thorough as I need to be, though I know the detangling oil has an unfortunate side effect of causing parts of my hair to feel oily until I wash it out again.

Not that it matters, since it's Friday and the dogs I walk have never expressed an actual care for what my hair looks or feels like. At last I step out of the shower, the air of my apartment cold on my skin. I could've circumvented that, obviously, if I'd just closed the door, but I'll take the cold over the wet steam room-heat any day.

Maybe I'll take a nap once I've finished brushing my hair.

I dry off quickly, not looking at the fogged up mirror until I've changed into my pj shorts and a loose, short tee that just barely skims the top of my shorts. My towel goes to my hair, and I squeeze it dry as I walk out of the bathroom, eyes searching for my brush on the living room table.

At first, I barely notice the flowers. Then I stop, blink, and look back to my coffee table where the blue-tinged crystal

vase full of orchids sits.

What? Is this some kind of mistake? Had someone gotten the wrong address for delivery or... something?

But more than that, how in the world did anyone get *in* my locked apartment to put these here? I know for a fact they weren't here before my shower, so that means someone was in here while I was naked, in the bathroom, with the door open.

Slowly, I edge toward the coffee table, wondering if I should run. I drop the towel to the floor, my wet hair falling to dampen my shirt. Not that it matters, for all that it's not very comfortable. I'm much more fixated on my bare feet stepping closer to the coffee table, and the little card that I see peeking out from the flowers.

My hand goes up and out, fingers outstretched, so I can pluck it from its stand and pull the card up to my face.

But I already know what it says, because I'd read the message yesterday at the flower shop, though back then it hadn't made my heart nearly pound out of my chest with fear.

Haven't stopped thinking of you one bit.

Fuck. Oh, *fuck*, this definitely means someone has broken in and I don't know how or who, or if it's the serial killer from the lake who I've been wishing for all week, but *that was just a fantasy, so—*

"There you go thinking too hard again, little bunny," a soft, un-muffled voice says from over my shoulder, near the kitchen.

I don't move. My heart pounds in my chest, cutting off my air supply, but I can't fucking move.

"Well? Aren't you going to say thank you?"

I open my mouth just enough to lick my lips, still too afraid to move. Sure, he hadn't killed me in the woods. But these aren't the woods, and with him in my apartment, I'm petrified.

"Thank you," I whisper finally, not turning around. I can't. I'm too afraid I'll see the machete from before, or some smaller weapon he's been concealing before now. With my eyes on the card in my hand, it's easy enough to see my fingers trembling as I hear the sound of his footsteps prowling toward me across the apartment.

"Aren't you going to look at me?" He sounds amused, and I shake my head at his words, leaning away from him slightly as his hand finds my shoulder. His other hand is obviously holding a weapon, and he's going to kill me.

He's going to fucking kill me.

I drop the card from numb fingers, my heart pounding a desperate rhythm between my ribs. I don't know what to do other than just stay here, frozen, because he's right behind me and I don't have any form of escape.

When his other hand reaches up to cup the front of my throat, I sigh and close my eyes, wondering if strangulation is really the way I'm going to go out of this world.

"You can't really think I'm going to kill you, little rabbit," he remarks dryly, and I pause.

"Aren't you?"

“No. Why would I get you flowers if I were going to murder you?” He makes an indignant sound in his throat, like I’ve offended him, and moves away from me seconds before I hear the sofa protest as he sits down on it. “Are you just going to stand there and stare at nothing all night?”

“You know, I really might,” I reply, more lightly than I feel like I should be able to. “I mean, you *did* break into my apartment while I was showering to put flowers on my coffee table. And I’m pretty sure you aren’t wearing your mask, are you?” I ask, half-terrified and half-suspicious.

“I’m not,” he agrees with a chuckle and leans forward enough that he can skim his fingers up my bare leg. “You think I’m going to kill you because my mask is off?”

“That’s how it works in the movies.”

“Well, it’s not always how it works in real life. Don’t you want to see my face?” he goads, his nails teasing my thigh.

I bite my lip and say, finally, “I’ve already seen it, haven’t I?” If I have to guess, this is the dark-haired, dark-eyed man from the flower shop. The one who’d leaned in and been so familiar with me that I’d thought, at that moment, I’d like to be the center of his attention.

I guess I got my wish.

“Yeah,” he sighs. “But when you act like that, it makes me think you don’t like it. Don’t be so scared of me, Hazel. If I were going to kill you, I would’ve done it in the woods.” He curls his fingers around my hips, dragging me back toward him and away from the spot I’ve been frozen in for the last couple of minutes. “I would’ve done it where it would’ve been so easy to throw you in the lake. No one would’ve found you for weeks. So don’t be like this now.”

Before I can say anything, I’m suddenly on his lap, facing him, and nearly nose to nose with my serial killer from the woods and the man from the flower shop. His hands are gripping my thighs firmly, so there’s nowhere I can go.

He’s so gorgeous. That’s the first thought that goes through my head as I inhale, his musky scent feeling my nose while

my eyes widen.

“Wow,” I breathe, unable to help it.

His smile grows. “Yeah? What is it, baby?”

“You’re certainly the prettiest serial killer I’ve ever seen. Is your name really Wren?”

“You remember.” He sounds delighted and reaches up to tuck my hair behind my ear. His face is easy and open, his mouth made for smiling. There are even smile lines at the sides of his eyes, and if I had to place his age, I’d say he’s thirty or so.

But I just can’t get over how gorgeous he is. Lightly muscled arms, coal black hair, and dark brown eyes I could drown in, hold my focus as I grip his arms that are at my sides, wishing that I didn’t feel like I’m about to die.

“That’s really my name. And with a statement like that, I have to wonder how many *other* serial killers you chase after in the woods,” Wren teases, his hands moving up my thighs, so he’s basically cupping my ass. I squirm, my heart beating in my throat, but he doesn’t let me go anywhere. “I wasn’t going to show you my face like this,” he adds, ignoring my wriggling on his lap like I want to get up. “But you deserve it. And I *want* you to see me.”

“Because you’re... not going to kill me?” I breathe, my throat blocked with fear.

“Because without the mask, it’s so much easier to see those cute little looks you give me. Like this one. Though, I kind of prefer how you looked when you were coming on that picnic table, with your thighs around my waist and—”

“I get the picture,” I interrupt, feeling more than a little bit awkward. I can *feel* the heat in my cheeks, and I don’t need to hear his stupid chuckle to know that I’m blushing. “What do you want?”

“Don’t you enjoy the pleasure of my company?”

I give him a look, a frown touching my lips. “Apart from the obvious... how would I know? I don’t know anything

about your company. I didn't even know your name until just now, and the only experience I have in your *company* is you forcing me into way too much cardio and then practicing the misuse of machetes on a picnic table," I explain sourly, lifting my hands to rest lightly on his shoulders. This position is so awkward, and I rearrange my legs to sit more comfortably on his lap, since it's obvious now that he's not letting me go anywhere.

"Misuse of machetes?" he repeats, his brows climbing toward his bangs. It only reminds me how much I loved his hair between my fingers, and the reactions I got by tugging on it before. Would it get me the same reaction now? I can't help but wonder, and my fingers itch to tug on his black hair roughly just to see.

"Yeah."

"Way too much cardio?"

"That's another way to say running." I hate the way the words leave my lips. Like I'm full of bravado and sarcasm and not one bit afraid of him, even though that isn't the case and this is apparently my new defense mechanism to avoid *crying*.

Which, quite frankly, is next. No matter what he says, I can't help but be terrified of this man. While he's more than slightly attractive and enticing, he's still terrifying.

He's still a serial killer.

"Sorry, then," he murmurs, leaning closer. "Not about the misuse of machetes, though. Just the cardio. I'd rather give you a workout in better ways than wear you out with running."

"Thanks."

When he leans back against the sofa, it gives me a chance to really study him. He looks tired, I find when I scrutinize his features as best I can. He looks... exhausted, actually. There are dark circles under his eyes, and his hair is tousled in a way that makes me think he's been running his hands through it in irritation or frustration.

"Why are you really here?" I ask, no longer trying to get off of his lap. His hands have taken to kneading my ass lightly,

nails dragging down my thighs once in a while before heading right back up. “This is... strange,” I add. “I’m not saying it’s bad—”

“Do you want me to go?”

“I don’t want to *die*.”

He opens his eyes, rolling them wearily. “I’ve never even *threatened* to kill you, little bunny. You’re not going to die.”

“Maybe you’re just saying that because you’re sleep deprived.”

He sighs and sits up straight, leaning close again. “What makes you think I’m sleep deprived, hmm?”

“Well, you made the mistake of picking the depressed girl who knows what long-term exhaustion does to a face,” I say, back on my train of sarcasm as I search his eyes for a reaction. “And it looks to me like you need a nap.”

“I need an alibi.” His response is a shock and I lean away, confused. He doesn’t let me go far, instead drags me closer to him until my inner thighs are pressed against him. “No, you aren’t going anywhere. Because I need you, so you’re going to help me.”

“I’m not a killer.”

“I don’t need you to be. No, you’re my girlfriend. And we’ve been dating for *months*, actually. You’re just the most perfect girl I’ve ever met... and I’ve been watching after your apartment all summer while you were up at that camp of yours. Haven’t I?”

I’m dumbfounded, and I can’t help the small note of disappointment I feel. He didn’t *really* miss me. He just wants someone gullible and afraid of him to help him not get arrested.

To be fair, I’d pick myself for that too.

“...Oh.” I can’t keep the disappointment out of my voice, and I sigh, then open my mouth to ask him something else.

But I can’t.

He interrupts me with a chuckle, one hand snaking up to grip the back of my neck. “Oh *no*, is that disappointment I hear? Did you think I came back because I missed you? Because I couldn’t stop thinking about you? Maybe because I can’t get enough of your little noises, your sarcasm, or the way you feel when I’m inside you?”

My blush is back in full force, but I don’t like it nearly as much this time. Not when he’s making fun of me like this.

“Stop. I don’t want—”

“Because all of that is perfectly true.” He leans forward and grabs something from the coffee table, pressed against me for a moment before he straightens. His hands come up, and a second later I feel the touch of my brush against the side of my head, delicately dragging through my wet hair. “The fact that you’re going to be my *perfect*, reliable girlfriend who can provide the cops with a location for me anytime I need you to? That’s just a fantastic bonus. Isn’t it?”

“What if I say no?”

He eyes me inscrutably, still brushing my hair. It’s... strange, distracting, and weirdly domestic of him. It also means I’m leaning forward against him, as he works the tangles free.

“What if you don’t?” he asks teasingly, voice soft. “What if you don’t say no, and I like you so much for it, hmm? It’s not much to ask, is it? Just a few weeks. A month at most. I’ll make it worth your while, my sweet little bunny.”

“How?” I don’t know why I ask, because it’s probably not that hard to figure out. He won’t kill me, first of all.

I’m unprepared for his slow, dark grin. I’m unprepared for the heat in his eyes when he drags me forward, his lips inches from mine when he says, “Oh, I think we can figure something out. So many things, actually. I bet there’s so much my little bunny likes that no one’s ever done to her... and I’ll help you find each and every single one of them.” I don’t get to reply. He kisses me harshly, like he’s devouring me, and the brush lies forgotten at my side when he tangles his fingers in my hair

to hold me in place while he takes his time showing me that he means every single word with his mouth alone.

“So will you help me?” he purrs finally, after pulling away so I can breathe. “Please, Hazel?” He doesn’t sound worried. Is it really so desperate, if he doesn’t sound the least bit concerned that I might say no?

And I’m absolutely going to say no.

“Yes,” I breathe against his mouth, eyes wide. “I... I’ll help you. I’ll be your alibi, okay?”

“You’ll be my girlfriend,” he corrects, closing the distance once more until his lips brush mine. “My perfect, gorgeous girlfriend who *craves* her big, bad serial killer to pin her down and hunt her just like she deserves.”

Even though I'm not properly awake, I can't tear my gaze away from the television. Not when the news is reporting a murder, and I have a terrifying suspicion of who did it. Though, I could always be wrong. And God, I really hope I'm wrong.

Morticia hops up to stand on my stomach, one paw on my boob as she rests, what feels like all of her weight, on that one paw. "Thank you so much," I wheeze, reaching up from under my fleece blanket to remove her gently. "Really, I so appreciate that. I bet I'm even going to have a bruise." Maybe not really, but damn, did it hurt.

My phone vibrates from the coffee table and I sit up, completely removing my cat from her new perch as I grab for it. Morticia, for her part, looks appropriately irritated and stalks off with her tail up. She likely won't forgive me for an hour or so, since I wouldn't let her use my boob as a cushion for her dainty foot.

For a terrifying moment, I worry that it's Wren. He'd put his number in my phone before he left and told me to call him, which I had, so now he has *my* number as well.

"For couples things," he'd told me sweetly on his way out the door. "All couples have each other's numbers. Why would we be any different?"

I shudder at the memory of his words and glance at the name, surprised to see that it's Jenna calling, instead of my serial killer.

Thank God.

“Hello?” I ask with a sigh, burrowing down on my sofa under the blankets again.

“*Hey,*” Jenna greets, sounding a little put out. “*How are you?*”

How am I?

“I’m okay,” I lie, switching from the news to a cooking show. Of my preferred binge worthy shows to go to sleep to or just zone out with, cooking competitions are at the top of the list. Today’s season that I’m marathoning doesn’t disappoint, and as Jenna goes on, my eyes are fixed on a small brunette girl who won’t stop screaming at her six-foot teammate.

Classic.

“*I’m... okay,*” she agrees. “*Hope you’re not busy? I just wanted to call and see how you were and everything. After umm. You know.*”

Yeah, I do know. “After seeing Brett get murdered and running from a serial killer?” I ask, mostly serious. That’s obviously not all that went down, but it’s all that Jenna needs to know happened. Thinking about it, though, sends a bolt of heat down my spine that I can’t ignore. My thighs clench as I force myself to focus on Jenna’s next words, though it’s difficult. Especially when I’d barely been able to hide my disappointment two nights ago, when Wren had just breezed out of here with only a few kisses and growled promises.

God, how fucked up am I that I wish this much for a *serial killer* to fuck me again?

“*I want to apologize.*” Her words take me by surprise, pushing out my other thoughts as my mind reels in confusion.

“You do?” I ask, unsure of what she could be apologizing for. “Why?”

“*For how I acted on the last day of camp. You were worried, and I thought you were just being... you. Sorry. But I know how much you dislike social stuff, and I shouldn’t have dragged you to the party. Especially since Brett had been such*

an ass to you all summer. It wasn't okay. And then I got so drunk." Her words get faster as she talks, and it's a good thing I'm fluent in flustered-Jenna speak.

"Hey, hey, whoa," I say firmly, closing my eyes. "There's literally nothing to be sorry for. You definitely didn't know there was a serial killer in the woods. And the uh, Brett thing worked itself out." The image of him getting stabbed and falling to the ground while spurting blood pops up in my mind, as does the feeling of his blood splattering my skin.

I should be grossed out about it, but I just... can't seem to find it in me. He was more than just a creep, and it's terrifying to think how far he might've pushed me if Wren hadn't come along and 'helped out.'

"That's an awful way of looking at it," Jenna remarks dryly. *"But I guess you're right. You're really not mad at me?"*

"No, I'm really not. Is that why you've been distant lately? Because you thought I was *mad*?"

"Yeah, Hazel. I thought you were furious and I've been figuring out how to apologize." The relief is evident in her voice and she lets out a sigh. *"God, I'm glad you aren't. By the way... have you seen the news today?"*

I roll my eyes back to the television, forgetting that I'd just changed it. "Just for a few minutes before you called. Is that what you're talking about?"

"Do you think it's him?" The question rings in my ears, and my heart sinks. Wren might've *killed* a man, and I've just agreed to be his alibi and fake girlfriend. I should go to the police. I should tell them about him, about what he's done.

I should do something other than just go along with it.

I tilt my head back against the arm of the sofa before lunging to my feet. "I don't know," I admit. "It's not like I know anything about him." That's true enough. I'm sure there's research to be done about Wren, but I'm not going to be the one to do it. "Anyway, I have to go," I lie, mostly just wanting time to sort out my frenzied, complicated thoughts. I'm so tired lately, though I don't want to acknowledge that it

could be because of certain factors like my body being adamantly against producing that delicious serotonin stuff that I hear so much about.

“What are you doing tonight? Do you want to go get dinner?” Jenna asks, her voice hopeful. I hate to crush her dreams, but being social isn’t on my list of things I’d like to do right now. At least, more social than walking down the block to the coffee shop and placing my order there.

“I would, but I have a really bad headache,” I lie again. Though, with the way my mood is going, a headache could be on the books for later; who knows? Quickly, I turn off the television and get to my feet to find my shoes and slide them on. “We can try later this week? If it’s okay?”

“Yeah,” she agrees, not sounding particularly offended or anything. *“Just let me know, okay?”*

“No problem. And remember, I’m really not mad, okay? No matter if you thought I was.”

“So long as you say so. But you’d tell me, right? If you were?”

“In a heartbeat,” I assure Jenna, and hang up a second after her goodbye. My conversation with her has made me want to move, and I shrug on a lightweight, oversized hoodie before making my way to the door and snatching my headphones and keys from the counter beside it. My steps are quick as I head down the stairs instead of the elevator, and it takes only a few seconds to shove in my earbuds and turn up my music loud enough that I wouldn’t hear a tsunami if it was two steps behind me.

While I’m not sure when I started walking with my music up to damaging levels to relax myself, I now do it every couple of days. I walk to the flower shop as well, unless I feel lazy or tired enough to take the bus, and I think this was the thing I missed the most while being a counselor at summer camp.

I *need* this time for myself. And even though I’m in and out of the coffee shop in less than twenty minutes, it still does

more for me than most other things do. My brain doesn't feel as clouded or as foggy, and by the time I'm back at my apartment with my iced oat milk macchiato half-empty, I feel much better than I have since before Wren came to my apartment yesterday.

Now, if I could just have the rest of the night to continue with this, I'll be fine. Dinner is easy, I think as my feet trudge up the stairs. It's a bad idea, and my knee that I shattered as a kid starts to protest about halfway through. Still, I set my teeth against it, hating that once in a while it reminds me that I'll always have some trouble with pain flaring up at the worst times.

I let out a sigh when I hit the landing on my floor, reaching down with my free hand to massage my knee through my leggings. I'm still oblivious to the world around me, though I do glance down the stairwell to see someone else walk onto the landing of the floor below me, their dark coat disappearing down the hallway where I can't see them anymore.

Well, that's embarrassing. Especially if they caught sight of me all but limping up the last set of stairs while breathing loudly to alleviate some of my frustration.

Oh well, I think, mentally shrugging as I make my way down the hall to my apartment at the end. The pain in my knee is fading, though I'm still careful not to put too much pressure on it. At this point, I'm glad it's hurting *now* instead of back at Camp Clearwater. Falling on my face after about twenty steps would've been really embarrassing.

With my hand on the door, it doesn't occur to me until after it's swinging open that it was unlocked. I have time for my lips to part and my heart clenches in fear before an arm wraps around my shoulders and forces me to walk inside and my earbuds are gently pulled free.

"Hazel." Wren's voice is patronizing and if I knew him better, I'd say he's disappointed. I whirl in his grip as he tosses the earbuds to the counter and frowns at me while looking me over. "I'm ashamed of you. Don't you know how dangerous it is to walk around like that when you can't hear anything?"

There was a murder on the other side of the city today, you know. You should be more careful.”

My heart pounds in my chest as I look at him, and I have to tip my head back slightly to see his face and the way his eyes glitter darkly.

“Was it you?” I whisper, gripping my keys and coffee tighter when he starts to take them for me.

His eyes flick up to mine, narrowing before he smiles. “I brought you dinner. Well, I brought *us* dinner. Wouldn’t you rather eat than ask me if I killed someone today?”

“No.”

He snorts and pulls away, finally holding out a hand instead of trying to pull my things from my hands. “Let me help you. Food’s getting cold since I had to go track you down. I thought you’d turn around, or see me, or *something*. I even called your name. But you never did.”

“I was listening to music,” I respond hotly, slapping my keys into his hand. If he’s not going to kill me, then I’m going to have to stop nearly fainting every time he shows up. “And how the hell did you get into my apartment?”

“I broke in again.”

“Well, *stop*.”

He looks at me for a moment, searching my face as he puts my keys with my earbuds. “Someone’s feeling brave today,” he murmurs, closing the distance between us so that his body brushes mine. My breath catches in my chest, but I refuse to let this false bravado go to waste.

“Why can’t you just ask me to come in, Wren? You could, I don’t know. Call me or text or something. Then you wouldn’t have to bitch about my music or my habits you don’t like.” Under his raised-brow look, my new confidence is fading, and I grip my coffee cup hard enough that the ice crunches under my grip.

He doesn’t miss it, of course. His eyes drop down to the cup, and when I shake my head, he only sighs. He’s not getting

my coffee. For all I know, he'll toss it out the window just to prove a point.

"I was just going to set it down for you while I get the food out," Wren tells me, stepping around to head toward the table. I turn to watch, absently massaging my knee and setting my teeth against the discomfort of it. "Besides, shouldn't you go sit? Maybe with an ice pack? I thought I was going to have to carry you up those last few stairs, little bunny," Wren goes on breezily, and my stomach sinks in embarrassment.

"Can you not?" I ask quietly, but he only leans forward to press his lips against my forehead. His lips are warm, and possibly a little chapped, but it's impossible not to step into him with his arm around my waist and my coffee nearly crushed between us as he lets out a soft breath.

In minutes I'm sitting at my small kitchen table, the cats watching from the hall as I take the lid off of my favorite teriyaki chicken and rice. It should shock me, because I've definitely never told this man what I like, but instead of asking about it, I pick up my chopsticks and stir the chicken and rice together.

There's an icepack on my knee that Wren had thrown my way as well, and I glance at him as he sits across from me, a takeout box of steak and brown rice in front of him. "I get why you like this place," he says, opening the container and picking up his own chopsticks. "But there's a place on the northside that I think is a little better. Not by much, but you'd probably like it. You have to actually eat there, though. Instead of doing takeout."

"They don't do takeout?" I ask, bemused by the fact I'm discussing chicken teriyaki with a serial killer. "That's weird."

"No, I just mean the restaurant is so nice that it would be a shame *not* to eat there."

"Oh. Sounds like it's out of my price range if it's that fancy," I remark, taking a bite.

Wren hums a neutral reply, taking a bite as well. I can't help but watch him eating slowly, though he seems completely

absorbed in his own meal.

Finally, however, he sets down his chopsticks and a grin curls over his lips. “Is there something else you want to ask me, little bunny?” he murmurs, looking up at me from across the table with shrewd, narrowed eyes. “Or are you just staring at me because I’m so pretty?”

“You’re, uh, certainly not modest, are you?” I joke lamely, wishing I could lighten the mood to the point where I don’t feel like the air inside my apartment is choking me.

“Not really.”

“Okay then.” I take a breath and lay my chopsticks by my food, meeting his gaze before I speak. “How did you know I like to eat here?”

He takes another bite and replies, without hesitating, “Because I’ve been following you.”

“Stalking me, you mean.”

“If that’s what you want to hear, then yes, Hazel. I’ve been stalking you for weeks now.” He’s just so... unbothered by the confession, and it throws me off guard when I realize I have no idea how to react to that. “Now, what else?”

“Do you have a job? You seem to spend an awful lot of time stalking me if you work full time.”

“I do. Actually, I have a really good job. I work with an environmental awareness organization here in the city. You might have heard of it, actually.”

I stop to think about that and then my brows shoot up. “You work for *GreenCo*? No way. What do you do?”

His grin is sly, and he tilts his head to the side ever so slightly. “You could just look me up,” he points out. “In fact, I’m not going to spoil it. Look it up, little bunny.” God, I hate when he acts like this.

“Did you kill that man on the news?” I don’t quite mean to ask it, but I can’t stop myself. I need to know, and already I’ve found myself stupidly searching his hands for blood or any

evidence that he did it. Even if he did, I know I won't find anything.

Wren doesn't answer immediately. He takes another bite of his steak and then gets to his feet, nearly towering over me while I'm sitting instead of standing. I consider getting up, but I don't have time to do more than push my chair back before he's in front of me, taking up the cleared space between my knees and the table as he leans against it, arms folded.

"Will it hurt your feelings if I tell you I did? Or will you be *disappointed* if I didn't?" he asks, his voice a low rumble. I want to reach out and hook my fingers in the belt loop of his snug jeans, if only to pull him down to my level.

"I won't care either way," I say quickly, feeling like the air has been stolen from my lungs as I do. "I'm just asking—"

"Do you know how he died?"

"... No," I say, remembering that I hadn't gotten that far on the news, if they'd ever said it at all. I twist my hands in my lap as I look up at his face, half-wishing I wouldn't have said a damn thing. "Do *you*?"

"Andrew Thomas, age forty-two, died in his apartment this morning at four-oh-seven," Wren recites, his eyes never leaving mine. "Officers say he was stabbed seven times with a blade, though one of those was actually two wounds instead of one like they think."

He totally did it.

"Police also say he was alive for a long time, as no vital organs were hit, right up until his throat was slit with a large blade that is yet to be identified. Though they think it may have been a sword. Isn't that stupid?" he scoffs, eyes glittering. "A fucking *sword*?"

"Yeah," I whisper. "How stupid of them. But can you blame them? I doubt any of them have ever had to bushwhack their way through a jungle with a machete."

His grin spreads suddenly, eyes lighting up at my response. "Maybe you're right," he concedes. "How do you think we can enlighten them on their error, little prey of mine?"

We? There is no *we* here.

“Maybe you should leave them a note,” I say, eyes never leaving his. “You could draw it, or take a picture? Or just write *machete* on it? You know. Whatever you’re feeling at the time.” I can’t believe I’m here having this conversation. He’s close enough for me to touch again, and I’m so, so tempted to do it.

“So I think that answers your question, doesn’t it?” He walks forward, legs bracketing my knees as he leans down to tilt my face up with his fingers under my chin. “But what do you think, Hazel? Do you think I killed Mr. Andrew Thomas, age forty-two, of Gloucester Drive in Akron, Ohio?”

He’s teasing me. He wants me to say it, and I can see the gleam of amusement in his eyes that sparks the urge in me to do what he *doesn’t* want. After all, it’s obvious what he expects. It’s obvious that he thinks I might break down crying and beg him, again, not to kill me.

Hell, at this point, I think he might get off on that.

Forcibly, I grip my fear and push it down as I swallow, my own eyes narrowing slightly. “No,” I say, and look away as much as I can with his fingers against my skin. “This feels like everything I could hear on a news channel, actually. Give me something better, or I’ll just have to think you’re taking credit for someone else’s work.”

Wren doesn’t speak for a moment. In fact, I expect him to get up, pack up, and *leave*. I’ve said something other than what he expects, and hasn’t he always been so interested in knowing what I’m going to do while luring me into his snare?

But this time, I’m not letting him, and it’s sure to piss him off.

Breaking my thoughts, Wren fucking *laughs*. He straightens and leans back on the table, giving a full-throated laugh, like I’ve just said the funniest thing in the world. “You’re right, aren’t you? You’re so fucking *right*. I haven’t given you anything at all. So why would you think I killed him? I bet I’ve offended you.”

Is he... joking? I blink up at him, trying not to let him see my concern and confusion. “What?”

“I need a shower,” he announces unexpectedly. “I won’t be long, Hazel, I *promise*. And when I’m done, I’ll tell you all about what I did.” There’s a terrifying, mad gleam in his eye that shouldn’t be as alluring as it is, but here I am.

“You don’t have to,” I assure him, but already he’s leaning down and crushing his lips to mine. Instinctively I melt into him, unable to stop loving how good of a kisser he is.

But it’s short, and he pulls away, an anticipatory grin on his face. “You sure?” he teases. “If you want, I’ll tell you all of it. I’ll show you exactly where I cut him...” His hand drifts down to press against my collarbone. “I stabbed him here—”

“Stop.”

Shockingly... he does. Wren stands there, brows raised, and watches me as my heart tries to pound its way out of my ribcage. “My bad,” he drawls, and it hits me that this is a game to him, and he’s just upped the ante. “I thought you wanted to hear all about it. But I’ll stop...”

I don’t want him to win.

“*Stop*, because you really do need a shower, and I want to finish eating,” I lie, not looking away. “You can tell me after I’m done.”

He stops and just looks at me. His gaze narrowed, his lips quirked into a half-grin. Finally, he chuckles and reaches out to tousle my hair teasingly before pushing away from me and walking past. “You’ve got it, little bunny,” he assures me, and disappears into my bathroom with a quick, playful salute.

He takes longer showers than *me*. By the time I'm done eating and I've been getting more and more nervous about what he wants to tell me about Mr. Andrew Thomas, age forty-two, he's still in my bathroom, the door cracked, and I can hear the shower on full blast.

I can't keep standing against my kitchen counter like I'm going to bolt when he gets back out here. That's not realistic at all, and I sigh as I force my shoulders to climb down from my neck to a more rested, comfortable position where they're supposed to be.

Letting out a careful breath, I grab my headphones and head to my bedroom, figuring that I'll hear him when he's out of the shower. Especially without my music being too loud. For a moment I even consider burrowing myself under my blankets like he's the boogeyman, but instead, I groan and flop onto the mattress, gazing up at my ceiling as I place the earbuds in my ears and hit play on one of them. My phone, which is now on my bedside table, lights up briefly as I turn down the volume, intent on hearing Wren come out of the bathroom when he's done, even though my eyes are closed.

Naturally, I'm not that lucky.

The bed dips on either side of me and my eyes snap open, gaze meeting Wren grins as he kneels on the bed above me with his knees on either side of my waist. "Hi," he purrs, and before I can move, he lunges down to grip both of my arms in one hand, throwing them over my head. "Tell me, is this intentional?"

“Is what intentional?” I demand hotly, writhing in his grip as I look up into his grin. God, is he *always* amused about something? It seems unreal that he can be, but he’s always fucking smiling or grinning or looks like he’s ready to laugh.

Like he’s crazy.

“This. You. *Here*. Little bunny, if you wanted me to fuck you again, all you had to do was ask. Is that what you want?” He leans down to nuzzle my throat, and I suck in a breath as I start to tell him *absolutely not*.

But is that really so true? Have I not been wishing he would come back ever since I came home from Camp Clearwater?

Haven’t I been dreaming about situations just like this?

“Maybe,” I say finally, trying to keep some aloofness to my voice. Not that it works, because he looks at me with those gorgeous, dark eyes that tell me he barely believes a word I say. “But if you wanted to, you would’ve done it by now. You’ve been here twice.”

“I’ve been here four times,” Wren corrects cheerfully. “Once while you were out, and once while you were asleep. Then you know the other two times.”

“Fuck,” I say frankly, because I don’t know what else there is other than that. “You’re taking this stalker thing way too seriously.”

“It’s a bit of a hobby of mine,” he admits, drawing back but still holding my hands. He gently pulls my earbuds free and frowns for the first time tonight. “Seriously, Hazel? Again? One day, it’s going to be someone other than me to sneak up on you, and then I’ll have to do something terrible.”

“Like you did to Brett?” I can’t help but ask, my voice soft.

He sits up on his knees, his weight coming to settle on my hips just enough that I can’t get up. “You’re still thinking about Prince Charming?” he asks, his hands no longer holding mine. Instead, he pushes up the hem of my tee, his hands splayed on my stomach as I suck in a breath.

“Jenna called me today. She’s my best friend and a counselor from Camp Clearwater. You know, one of the people you were going to massacre and all that.”

“Sure,” he agrees, digging his thumbs into my hips lightly. “I remember. Go on.”

“She brought up what happened, and Brett, and was sorry for letting me go out alone. She thought I was mad at her, actually.” I laugh ruefully. “And—”

“You should be,” Wren interrupts lightly, his words blunt. “You should be fucking *furious* with your ‘best friend.’”

“What?” I can’t believe I’ve heard him right, and when I try to sit up, he pushes me right back down, still holding me with his weight and his hands. “She’s my best friend. Of course I’m not mad—”

“I could’ve killed you. I could’ve cut you to bits in those woods if I’d wanted to. If it hadn’t been you, I would’ve killed them. You were the only one in that whole fucking camp I cared about living, Hazel. Haven’t you figured that out yet? Or is it just that you don’t believe me?”

“I don’t believe you,” I breathe, stunned. “Why me? I mean, Jenna’s so much prettier than me. Some of the other counselors were just better at—”

“Because they aren’t *you*.”

“But I’m nothing—”

“You’re mine, aren’t you? That means you’re not ‘nothing.’”

I don’t know how to reply to that. It does things to my insides that don’t make sense, and I lift my hand, fingers outstretched, wishing I could reach his shoulders or his hair. Instead, I settle for his shirt, and I grip it tightly in my fingers to tug him down to me. “That’s a really nice thing to say,” I murmur finally. “It’s kind of flattering, actually, and—”

“Little bunny...” Wren chuckles and lets me pull him down until he’s braced on his elbows on either side of me. “It’s not flattery. Or just sweet words to make you go along with

what I need you for. It's the truth. And if I'd gotten there a few minutes later, if your shitty prince charming had touched you... do you know what I would've done?" He kisses me again before rolling onto his side on the bed so he can be that much closer to my lips.

"Killed him?" I ask, half joking, since that's what he'd done already.

"Well, yes," Wren admits, his hand coming up to tickle my ribs. I squirm at the unexpected touch and then gasp when he suddenly pulls me up against him on my side so that my back is against his front. With his arm around my shoulders, I don't have many places to go unless I'm willing to all-out try to buck him off, but that barely crosses my mind as his other hand splays against my stomach.

"But I would've taken my time. I was so nice to him, don't you think? I gave him a relatively quick death when I could've made it last." He drags his nails up my stomach, causing me to squirm and kick back at him instinctively. "Don't be shy. Make some noises for me. I want to hear you when I do this." He does it again, his nails leaving a stinging line of fire across my skin as I open my mouth and gasp at the feeling. "I could've cut off his hands for touching you." He moves to slide his nails up my side, surprising a giggle mixed with some kind of yelp from my lips. "I could've broken them before I cut them off, because I *wanted* to. I could've chopped him up piece by piece... and I wouldn't have batted an eye. Would you have?"

I don't realize it's a real question until he grips my throat with the hand holding me against him, the pressure harsh enough that I gasp and take notice, but not enough to hurt. "What?" I ask, still focusing on the burning from his nails.

"Would you have minded if I took Prince Charming apart in front of you so you could watch? Would you have *objected* to me doing what he deserved for how he treated you? I saw him a few times when I was watching you. He wasn't very nice, was he Hazel?"

“N-no,” I agree, shivering under his nails. “And I wouldn’t have objected. I mean—” I scramble to backtrack, aware of how fucked up that sounds.

But he doesn’t give me the chance. Instead, his fingers press tighter on either side of my neck and his other hand trails downward until he can slip it under my denim shorts. “I know you wouldn’t have. Do you still want to hear about Andrew Thomas?” he asks teasingly, his fingers stroking my slit.

“You mean aged-forty-two who lived on Gloucester Drive?” I ask, unable to help the arrogant tone of my words.

He snickers. “Yeah, that Andrew Thomas.”

“I mean...” I swallow hard and turn as much as I can, my face close to his. “If you want to tell me?”

“I’d rather fuck you. And choke you. And watch you gasp as you come when I finally let you breathe,” Wren admits, catching me off guard and causing my stomach to twist in both fear and anticipation.

“You would?” I don’t know why the words make my voice falter. Nor do I know why I’m not expecting them. But he hasn’t fucked me properly since the woods, and I worry that it was a one off, like he didn’t like it as much as he’d said.

“You sound surprised.” His hand on my throat loosens. “Want to tell me why?”

“I just thought...” I clear my throat. “Well, since you hadn’t done it again since summer camp”—he snorts at the phrase—“maybe you didn’t want to.”

His hand on my stomach stills, and for a long, terrifying moment, I’m afraid I’ve said something wrong. In fact, I’m sure of it. Why else is he so still, so quiet, and doing his best impression of a statue at my back?

“Well, that’s just untrue,” he says, and in a movement that’s almost too fast for me to register, Wren is sitting up and flips me onto my stomach on the bed, his hand urging my hips up into the air for him. “I would love for you to explain to me what other signs I might’ve given you to reach that conclusion,

little bunny,” he adds wickedly, stuffing a pillow under my hips.

My breath catches in my throat, nerves on edge. “Umm. I mean, it’s just... that?” I admit, starting to move, but finding his hand splayed over my spine, pressing me down.

“Don’t get up,” he suggests sweetly, tugging off my shorts and tossing them somewhere. “We’re having a conversation, Hazel. Why would you get up and walk away?” He knows what he’s doing. It’s in the dangerous, velvety tone of voice that he uses as I hear him unzip his jeans. A shudder runs up my spine, under his fingers, and I wonder if he can feel it.

“I was just going to look at you so I’m not talking to a pillow,” I point out, unable to sound anything but nervous with him behind me, holding me in this position. “I was only—”

“You were only giving me more and more excuses. Hazel, you were *only* going to roll over and give me those sweet, sad eyes. You play the part of a bunny so well, it’s an apt name for you. Maybe I’ll get you a cute little tail to match.” His free hand comes to rest on the swell of my ass, causing me to shudder as I remember the last time he’d had his hand there like this.

“Are you remembering the night we met? The night I spanked you? You deserved it, you know. But I didn’t think you’d like it so much.” He’s enjoying this. That’s evident in his voice, especially when he digs his fingers into my flesh and kneads it harshly enough for me to hiss out a sound of not-quite-protest.

“Does that hurt?”

“Yes.”

“Poor *baby*. Poor little *thing*.” He does it again, pulling a gasp from me, then his hand leaves, only to come back down with force. It’s only his other hand on my back that keeps me from moving, and his chuckle is nearly lost in my yelp. Wren moves again, his hand on my back disappearing so he can drag his nails down my sides, once again targeting the places I’m

ticklish and drawing a surprised howl from me that has me nearly bolting upright.

Or I would, if his hand isn't back while my serial killer snickers with joy. "You like that, don't you, little rabbit?"

"It *hurts*," I hiss, still feeling the echoes of the burn.

"Yeah, and you fucking like it. You don't need to lie to me. I love that you like it. So good for me, so good that you take everything I want to give you. I bet you'd love it if I marked up that soft skin of yours with my teeth." His fingers slide between my thighs again, and for a moment I hope he won't comment on how wet I am just from his violence.

But then again, this is Wren.

He laughs darkly and presses two fingers into my body without a word. "If it hurt so bad, if you were so miserable, why the fuck are you dripping for me?"

"*Fuck*," is my empathetic, well thought out reply as he fingers me. My hips lift off the bed, arching into him, but his hand on my lower back is a heavy, forceful weight that keeps me in place easily.

"If this is what you wanted, or what it took to make you accept how much I want you, I would've done this days ago," Wren promises, mouth close to my ear as he leans over me. "You think a day goes by I'm not coming in bed thinking of this sweet, tight little cunt of yours? You think I waste any single dream not imagining all the things I want to do to you?"

"There can't be that many," I whisper, fingers gripping the pillow.

"You don't think so?" He's almost conversational as he removes his fingers, but before I can get nervous, I feel his length at my entrance. "You'd better be ready for me, baby," he says, and it's all the warning I get before he thrusts into me completely, so his hips are pressed to my ass.

A satisfied, growling groan leaves him, reverberating through his chest as he leans over me to blanket me with his body. "I want to hunt you," he whispers in my ear, a hand

encircling my throat. “I want to set you loose in the woods and give you a head start.”

“You want me to run?” I ask, barely able to focus on anything but the slide of him inside me. *Why is he so good at this?*

“I want you to run as hard as you can until you collapse in the dirt again. Then I want to hunt you down and ruin you so completely that you’ll never be able to stand being without me. I’ll find all the ways to make you mine that there could ever be, and invent a few of my own.”

I open my mouth to speak, but when his fingers tighten on my throat, I gasp before fighting out, “That feels like overkill, Wren.”

“Feels like not enough to me. Stop talking, Hazel. You’re using up all of your air. Don’t want you passing out on me now.” He’s gleeful as he says it, and when his fingers dig into my throat, my head spins. I whimper, grasping at his arm, but he only brings the other one up that I immediately latch on to.

Wren laughs. “Are you light-headed? Dizzy? Poor little *prey*. Am I too much for you?” He fucks me like he’s trying to make a point. A dramatic one.

And my head continues to spin.

Impulsively, I bite his forearm that’s on the pillow beside my face, teeth sinking into his skin as he takes a breath.

“Oh, what a good fucking bunny you are. That’s it. Bite me. Bite my arms. *Fight me*, Hazel. Let me feel you fight me for it.”

Somehow, terror isn’t forefront in my mind. Especially when he lets go of my neck enough for me to suck in a breath and for me to *bite him* like I’d already threatened. My teeth sink into his skin, and I’m sure I feel him shudder behind me.

“Keep going,” he urges, though I’m not sure if he’s talking to himself or me. With his movements unsteady and his hand shaking, I have a pretty good idea he’s about to come.

But so am I.

I grab at his arm and bite him again, but that's as far as I get before I cry out in ecstasy, my gaze whitening out as he squeezes just a touch more tightly.

If there's a heaven, I hope this is what it looks and feels like. He fucks me to his own completion as I all but black out, nearly losing myself in his gentling grip and the way my teeth are locked in his arm.

It's only when he rolls me onto my side, and eventually my back with him staring down at me, that I come back to reality with an unhappy sigh.

But then again, I do get to see Wren's lazy, pleased grin. And I get to feel the tickling of his finger as he strokes my bottom lip, not taking his eyes off of me for one moment.

"I must've killed the right person to get rewarded with you," he says simply, drawing me into his hold as I nip his finger petulantly. "You're perfect, little bunny. Has anyone ever told you that?"

"No, they haven't," I tell him hoarsely, unsurprised to feel that I'm shaking when he presses his knee between my thighs. "Maybe you should make up for it?" It's a joke, but the way he looks at me is anything but.

"I'd be glad to."

I t's just one night, little bunny.

Then you're free from me, I promise.

The words ring in my head over and over again, going between brain cells like a ping-pong ball that never goes off the table. Not that there's anything I can do about it, as I stand in front of my mirror with my head tilted to the side, eyes wide as I stare at myself.

I look way better than normal. Even I can see that. Of course, it helped that Wren had given me a flat seven hundred for his 'favor.' Otherwise, I never could've gone out and afforded this.

Is this what he's looking for? I'm not sure when it started mattering so much what a serial killer thinks of me, and I let out a breath. Maybe he'll hate it and go away and I won't have to face my greatest fear in the world.

A social event. Even worse, a fancy social event full of fancy people. At his needling, I had looked up Wren on the GreenCo website, and I'd nearly spewed ginger ale from my nose when I'd seen a picture of him arm in arm with the CEO of the company.

He's important. My brain has a hard time getting around that, too. He's *important* and a fucking serial killer who works at a damn environmental company. Maybe he kills lobbyists who pollute.

Maybe Andrew Thomas, age forty-two, was a rampant pollution fan who went from forest to forest undoing Smokey

the Bear's work. It's the only option I'm willing to accept tonight, since I'm going to a dinner held by GreenCo for their employees at some banquet hall downtown.

Even that is a mystery to me. All I can think of as I straighten my new, mid-thigh length black dress is that it'll be like a wedding where the tables are covered with cheap white cloth and the chairs are vinyl and crunchy. Maybe there will be a buffet, or at most catered meals with a choice of chicken or beef.

The knock on my door is a surprise, but only because Wren has never knocked before and I'm not sure why he is now. It doesn't feel like a very *stalker* move, and I don't answer it right away.

Not when insecurity and nerves sink into my skin like rain. I look better than normal, sure, but I'm never very nice about my own appearance. Especially to myself. My long, light blonde hair hangs in waves to my chest, and the dress I'd found is black, sequined, and more comfortable than it has any right to be. The sheer sleeves are comfortable instead of itchy and are loose enough until the tighter fitting cuffs that I feel like a pirate. My ankle boots are simple, black suede and propel me four inches higher into the night, not that it matters when Wren is six foot and I'm barely five-foot-five. I'm not normally one for jewelry, but tonight I've made the exception for a black choker and the Tiffany-key necklace my mom got me as a high school graduation present.

What if Wren thinks I look like shit?

When he knocks again, I sigh, my fingers clenching at my sides. There's only one way to find out, and that's by answering the door. The walk there seems to take longer than normal, and by the time he knocks for a third time, my hand is on the knob and I pull it open, frowning. "You could give me a minute," I tell him, knowing he gave me longer than that. "And since when do you knock?"

"I would say that I always knock when I look this good," Wren begins, his dark eyes on me. They stick to my face for a few moments before traveling down until I'm sure he's

scanned every inch of me and can probably draw an accurate picture of the scars my right knee is decorated with. “But how can I compliment myself when you’re standing there looking like that?” His voice is rough and low. He’s unreadable as he looks me over again, and I frown.

“So it’s okay?” I ask finally, lifting my hands like I’m on a game show and trying to sell some product to the contestant. Instead of a meaningful gesture, however, I just let them flop at the wrist, worried that he’s going to tell me he *doesn’t* like some aspect of all of this.

“You’re worried it’s *not*? Little bunny...” He sighs and walks forward until I have to step back into my apartment. I’m only a few inches shorter than him in my heels, and when he leans down to brush his lips lightly to mine, a tingle goes through my body. “I’m just sad I won’t get to tear it off you.”

“I mean, if you hate it, I guess you can,” I tease. “But that would mean I can’t go be your, uh, alibi tonight.”

“Girlfriend,” he corrects automatically, and pulls away. “You’re not my alibi, Hazel. You’re my girlfriend.” He looks around my apartment and stops when he sees my phone and keys on the table. “Are you ready to go? Do you need anything else?”

“No, just those. Do I need any money?” I ask lamely, like this is a date and we’re going halves. “Though if we’re going in an Uber, I’m not paying half. I refuse.”

He smirks and lays a hand gently on my waist like he might mess up my dress. “We’re not taking an Uber or a bus or whatever else you think. I drove over here, and I’ll drive us there. Also, you don’t need any money. Why in the world would I make you pay to help *me* with this?”

“Because you like seeing me in metaphysical and emotional pain at spending money?” I ask sweetly, garnering a snort from my serial killer. “Because you’re willing to drop me off at Waffle House on the way home so I can get emotional support, chocolate chip waffles?”

“There will be food there, you know,” he reminds me as I gather up my things and follow him out the door. “Since it’s a *dinner* and all.”

“Yeah, but will they have waffles?” I ease Morticia away from the door before closing it, only to hear her screaming protests as I lock the door.

“Did you know she’s the first to welcome me to your apartment when I break in?” Wren asks conversationally as he leads me down the hallway. “I love your cats.”

“That’s weird of you.”

“Why? They *love* me. They never made noise when I broke in that first time.” He hits the button for the elevator and I walk in beside him, arms curled around myself as it jolts into motion. “We hung out when you were taking a shower, actually.”

“Not Shadow,” I deny, side-eyeing him. “There’s no way he likes you. He barely likes *me*.”

His grin is painful in its brilliance. “The black one? He slept on my chest and *purred*.”

“I hate you,” I tell him, as he snags me into his grip and yanks me to him so hard that I stumble on the slick floor.

It’s only thanks to him that I don’t fall, and for a terrifying moment, I’m off balance as he chuckles against my ear. “Do you? Do you *really*? I don’t think you do, little bunny. Not one bit and certainly not like you should. Hell, I don’t even think you have a healthy amount of fear of me. And I like that.”

“Why do you care if I like you, anyway?” I ask, pulling myself back upright. “You’re done with me after tonight, right? Out of my life, out of my mind, and all the things you’ve said to me?” I don’t know how to feel about it, but I hate the way my stomach twists and hurts at the thought. It’s not a rational reaction. It’s not *right* for me to care that he doesn’t want to see me again after tonight.

But it can’t be helped, and I can’t exactly argue with him.

I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts that it takes me a few seconds to realize Wren never replied. By the time I try to say something, however, the elevator door opens, and he breezes out into the lobby with me behind him. As he walks past my landlord's office, she looks up, glasses dangling at the end of her nose, and smiles warmly at me.

"Have a great night, Hazel!" she calls, looking pointedly at Wren. Honestly, I'd look at him that way, too. He's gorgeous, he's all smiles and friendliness... he's everything that a girl would want if she didn't know what his hobby is.

But I do, and somehow, that's not as much of a turnoff as it should be. As I follow him to his car, I can't help the way my eyebrows jerk up in appreciation, but I also don't miss the way Wren glances back at me to see my reaction to his car.

"Maybe your google search results are true," I admit, opening the door of his sleek, black Camaro before he can do it for me. I'm not helpless, damn it. "Though I guess you could just be renting this." I slide into the passenger seat as he gets in as well, a chuckle ready on his lips.

"I'm not renting it," he assures me.

"Must be difficult to fit bodies in here if you're like, carrying them away or something." I regret saying it when he doesn't answer right away and worry suddenly that he's upset. Wren instead turns on the engine and puts the car in gear, then pulls away from the curb smoothly.

"I have an SUV for that," he says finally, sounding amused. "Who in the world would transport bodies in a sports car, Hazel?" I sigh, thankful he's *not* upset, and settle back in my seat to pick at my sleeve. Gently I deposit my keys in the console, but I keep my phone in my free hand. If I'm clutching it like a lifeline, Wren is kind enough not to say anything as we drive.

When he pulls up in front of the museum, all I can do is stare. There's valet service, for one, and Wren gestures for me to get out of the car so that he can hand the keys off and loop his arm around mine.

Grudgingly, I walk, letting him drag me up the few stairs to the large, glass-doored entrance of the Natural History Museum without tripping over myself. “I don’t know if I can do this. I thought being your alibi just meant saying you were at my apartment instead of murdering people,” I whisper, leaning close so no one hears.

He chuckles, teeth flashing in a bright smile. In his blazer and well-fitting trousers, he looks so different from the Wren I’m used to. “It’s not a big deal, Hazel,” he purrs, lips close to my ear. “You won’t have to do anything except look pretty.”

“That sounds too complicated.”

“Well, you’re already doing it,” he points out sweetly, but I shake my head.

“I feel sick. I think I’m allergic.”

That startles a laugh from him and he pulls me closer, like I’m a flight risk who’s going to book it back to the valeted car and wait there until this is over. Then again, now that I think about it, I might. “This is all I need from you, all right?” he asks, kissing my temple as we walk through the door and into the grand lobby.

Wren doesn’t stop, however. He keeps walking, greeting a few people, but only when we’re in a room labeled with ‘*banquet hall*’ does he slow down and let me take in our surroundings.

“So I guess we aren’t going on an actual museum tour, huh?” I ask, looking around the huge room with its high, arched ceilings. The talk in the room is a bit like white noise to me, especially as it echoes off the walls and bounces back into itself, and I don’t bother trying to listen. Wren’s hand slips down my arm until he can grip my fingers, and I glance up at him with surprise as he squeezes my hand comfortingly.

“Not this time. But if you want to go, I’m sure we can make it happen,” he says. Before he can continue, however, I hear his name echoing off of the walls nearest us, and he looks up to see a brown-haired, dark-eyed man with a wide grin coming his way with his hand outstretched.

Wren releases my fingers, making me feel suddenly alone, to shake the man's hand. Beaming, I try to look like I belong here, with him, instead of under my blankets at home. *I can do this*. I agreed to do this, didn't I? It would be rude of me to break a promise I'd made.

Even if it was to a serial killer.

But it's *Wren*. This weird, problematic man with a charming grin is so weirdly alluring and charming that I always want him coming back for more. Not that I'll say that out loud.

He doesn't want to stick around, after all. And I certainly can't make it seem like I want him to. Right?

"This is my girlfriend I was telling you about." The words jar me out of my thoughts and I smile up at the man who's an inch or so taller than Wren himself. I do everything I can to make myself look like I'm supposed to be here.

Like I'm supposed to be with *Wren*.

"Hey," I greet, grasping the offered hand lightly as he shakes it. His palm is warm and calloused, and the man looks me over with a hint of surprise.

"I thought you said your girlfriend was a redhead," he says, turning his gaze back on Wren.

Before he can answer, however, I do. "It's because I was a redhead when we met. I'd been dyeing my hair for a while, and I'm pretty sure you thought it was natural." I grin at Wren, who smiles wickedly in return.

The man says a few more polite things to Wren that I tune out, then walks away to talk to someone else. Wren watches him go, as do I, then turns to me with a brow raised. "I wouldn't put you on the spot, you know," he assures me. "Don't think you have to cover for my mistakes if you don't feel comfortable with it."

My heart sinks. "Did you not want me to say anything? I just thought—"

“You’re perfect,” he interrupts. “Especially that sweet little uncertain look you get where your nose scrunches up and you gaze up at me like that.” He starts to lean in, then sighs and looks up. “No, that’s not what I meant at all. I mean, I’m not trying to ask the world of you. If something happens that you don’t know how to answer, don’t stress over it. I’ll take care of most things. I just need you to be *you*.”

“I have no idea what that means,” I admit, his hand slipping back into mine as he leads me further into the room with round, cloth-covered tables and waiters walking around to offer food and drinks.

Wren takes two glasses of champagne and hands one to me. “It means that you’re perfect like you are, and you don’t need to pretend to be anything for me or them,” he explains with a shrug, watching to see if I like what he’s given me before taking a drink of his own.

It’s not until after dinner is served, which I eat almost nothing of because I’m worried about being rude and self-conscious all around, that I feel worried. The head of GreenCo, Jonah, who I recognize from his pictures, is making his way over to Wren with a woman whom my serial killer informs me is his wife.

Jonah lunges forward to hug Wren, drawing him away from me as his wife closes in, her eyes gleaming with interest. “We can just let them be,” she confides, her hand on my wrist. “Jonah likes to get a little tipsy at these and this is the first time Wren hasn’t been around to catch him constantly.” Her fingers on my arm are tipped in ruby-red nails shaped like claws, and I let her walk me away from them, trying to look like I don’t mind.

The brunette woman certainly doesn’t notice when I look back at Wren, who throws me a quick glance, and tugs me instead to a table on the outskirts of the party where another woman and man sit.

“I hope we’re all enjoying ourselves?” she asks, sitting down and gesturing for me to do so as well. “You know, Jonah wanted to hold this at the botanical gardens, but I didn’t think

it was proper enough. Oh..." She looks at me, suddenly realizing something. "You're Wren's guest, but I don't know your name."

I smile, my heart thumping hard in my chest. "Hazel," I tell her. "And I'm really sorry, but I don't really know any of your names either." I look around the table, trying to appear apologetic as my body tries to melt into the floor.

"Arianna," the woman who'd dragged me over introduces. "Jonah's my husband, so I've known Wren for *years*. This is Michael Adamson and his wife, Heather."

The blonde, a woman in her mid-fifties, smiles kindly. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Hazel. We've all been saying for a while that Wren needs someone in his life. He's always so... lonely. And he's never brought anyone before."

"Have you known him for long?" Arianna asks, jumping on the question. "He's been rather close-lipped about your relationship, so I'm sorry if it feels like we're prying."

"We've been together since spring," I lie, hoping that he hasn't told them differently. Maybe this is something we should've gone over, but I can't do anything about that now. "And he's hinted at me coming with him for a while, but if I'm honest?" I lean in, my smile turning a bit nervous. "I've been a little afraid to. It's kind of intimidating that he's so important here. I was worried about what everyone would think of me."

The admission softens Holly's face, and Michael takes a drink of his water before asking, "What is it that you do, Hazel? Do you work in environmental affairs as well?"

"No," I deny, my heart slamming against my ribs. I know it doesn't matter, that this isn't *real*, but the possibility of their disdain is terrifying all the same. "I'm finishing up my anthropology degree right now, actually. And I work as a florist's assistant." It's not at all prestigious or important like their jobs, and I'm almost too afraid to look up at them.

But I do anyway, and before any of them can say something disparaging, I add, "I had to take some time off, unfortunately. I had some health issues that put me back a year

and a half, and this is the first full year I've been back to one hundred percent." It's not a blatant lie. Before this year, I hadn't had a therapist or been on a proper medication regimen. But I'm nowhere near one hundred percent.

"Oh, I'm so sorry," Holly says instantly, face lined with worry. "But I'm glad you're back to being able to do things. Where did you meet Wren, if you don't mind me asking?"

I've had this planned out all night, but it's still scary to put the plan into motion. "So, with my anthropology work, I like to study generational cultural influences in children," I say, proud that it's barely a lie. "Before I got sick, I'd gone to Malta to look at the Knights of Saint John, the Moors, and the Romans so I could see how their influence was passed onto the children of this generation. I wanted to do more, but obviously, that was put on hold. Anyway, this year a friend of mine asked if I'd help her in the spring and summer with some children's programs. I modified my study to make it fit, only using the children of this generation in Akron instead of Malta, and helped out as much as I could. It was a great experience and really influenced my thesis. I met Wren at a lake up north. I was out getting coffee and kind of spilled it on him. Frankly, I was surprised he didn't shriek at me, let alone ask me what my *name* was." I snort at my own false tale, and Michael chuckles.

Even Arianna looks amused, and all of them seem to believe it easily enough that I can feel the tension slowly easing out of my shoulders.

"I bet an anthropology student has a lot of interest in a museum like this," Michael remarks, his wife nodding. "Have you been here before?"

"Only when I was in seventh grade," I admit, barely noticing Jonah approaching to sit next to his wife.

Wren sinks into the chair on my other side, his arm wrapping around my shoulders as he leans into the conversation. "I felt left out," he admits, grinning. "What are we talking about?"

“I was about to ask your girlfriend about Malta,” Arianna replies. “You didn’t tell us you have a budding anthropologist as your partner, Wren.”

He gazes at me, and I can tell he’s trying to work out the lie. Unfortunately for him, the only part of my story that isn’t true is how we met, and that’s still pretty on point, save the murder and the picnic table mishandling of machetes.

“I got kind of long-winded,” I admit, catching his gaze. “It felt weird just saying ‘we met at a kid’s spring and summer camp.’ So I explained my anthropology work in Malta last year versus my studies closer to home this year.” I hope it’s enough for him to pick up on, and when his smile widens, I realize that, of course, it is.

“We’re planning another trip,” he admits, the lie flowing smoothly from his lips. “To Malta. She talks highly about it, and I’d really like to see it.”

“Only because I won’t stop talking about the Knights of St. John,” I snort. “And he thinks half of what I say is a lie.”

“Have you thought about what you’ll do when you graduate?” Holly asks, her question catching me off guard.

I haven’t, because at this rate it feels like I never will.

“Umm, I’m not sure,” I admit, tucking my hair behind my ear. “I enjoy what I’ve studied for my thesis, but I’d like to do something else as well. I love to study different cultures and their histories, and my college offers quite a few graduate programs, depending on my course of study.”

“Where do you go?” Jonah asks, curious.

“Baltianic University,” I reply, naming one of the better colleges in Ohio.

“Do let me know when you guys are done monopolizing my girlfriend,” Wren adds casually, his voice a drawl. “I’d like her back when it’s convenient for you.”

“You can’t blame us,” Arianna accuses. “You’re the one that’s been so secretive about your budding anthropologist.”

Wren shrugs, his boyish, playful grin wide on his face as he changes the topic to something that doesn't involve my past or what I'm doing with my life right now.

Collapsing into the passenger seat with a sigh, my head flops back against the seat. "I'm sleeping for six days," I inform my serial killer as he gets in as well, oddly quiet. "I'm only getting up to eat pizza and feed the cats."

"Why Malta?" he asks as if he hadn't heard me. "How'd you come up with all of that?"

I open my eyes and look at him as he shifts into gear and pulls out onto the museum's side road. "What?" I ask, momentarily confused. "What do you mean?"

"I was nervous," he admits. "That was a pretty elaborate story to remember all the details of."

It hits me, suddenly, that Wren barely knows me at all. Part of me feels like I've known him forever, even though it's been only a few weeks.

"It wasn't a lie," I say carefully, fingers gripping my phone in my lap. "All of that was true, except for how we met. And, well, that I'm finishing my degree."

"What do you mean?"

"I'm eight credits out and not enrolled anymore," I shrug, pretending it isn't important. "But I really did go to Malta, and I really was an anthropology major."

He's quiet for a few minutes that feels like hours. Finally, he says, "That was amazing of you, Hazel. I knew I made the right choice all along, but that was just brilliant. Do you know how much they liked you?"

"Did they?" I ask, looking over at him in surprise. "I kind of felt like they thought I wasn't good enough for you."

"Not a chance," Wren denies quickly. "Not a chance in hell."

Minutes later, he pulls up to my apartment building, but I don't get out of his car. I don't *want* to, I find, even though I definitely need to. "Guess you don't need me anymore," I

sigh, leaning back. “Though, I thought ‘alibi’ meant more ‘talk to the police’ and less ‘pretend to be your girlfriend at a banquet.’”

Wren doesn’t reply for a moment, but when I reach for my keys, he slips his fingers over mine. “Me too,” he admits with a crooked grin. “Guess I’m better at staying under the radar than I thought I was. Hazel?” I look at him and he leans across the console to pull me in for a kiss.

When he withdraws, his lips still close to mine, I’m gasping in the air I need, even though he seems completely unaffected. “Don’t follow any more serial killers into the woods,” Wren purrs, his eyes glittering. “I don’t think it would go well for a little bunny like you.”

*H*e's gone.

With my arms propped up on the counter while Miss Jenkins works on an arrangement for someone's fancy dinner, I stare at the door with a small frown on my lips. He's really, actually gone. For three days I'd held my breath, thinking he'd come out of nowhere and tell me that it was all a joke, that he needed me for something else.

That I'd have to help him more with his alibi, like we'd both thought I would.

But he just... doesn't. My life rights itself to how it was before he showed up in the flower shop; but even so, things feel off. It's stupid, and I know that. No one should want a serial killer to show back up. What if he'd gotten angry or bored? What if I'd said something he didn't like? Wren *kills* people. What's to say he wouldn't kill me too?

The phone rings and I answer it automatically to take the person's order. I barely have to think about it, or much of anything else, as I write down the details for Miss Jenkins. She's still busy with her experimental dinner piece, humming lightly and stuck in her own head for however long it takes. Not that I can complain. All I have to do is man the counter for the next hour. With it being Friday, I doubt there will be any kind of real rush.

That is, until the door opens and four people walk in, the three women here to sample bouquets and whisper to each

other as they pick up vases and then sit them back down in ways they weren't displayed before.

I can't help the sigh that leaves me. Now I'll have to rearrange shit before I leave, unless I want to do it on Monday before the shop opens, which would require me to wake up a whole five minutes early. There's no way I want to suffer such a fate, so I watch and note which things are moved that I'll have to put back before focusing on the older man in the shop.

He's not with them, I don't think. At least, he doesn't acknowledge the three loud women or look over at them. Instead, he peeks through the greeting cards and straightens a stuffed animal on the shelf, looking like he just stumbled in here to browse.

Except that he doesn't look like Miss Jenkins' regular customers. Maybe I'm paranoid, but he's just too... unhappy. His face is too set. He's too stern. The only thing I can think of is that he's buying flowers for a failing marriage, or for a mistress that he's trying to buy off. It's happened before, and I always have to try extremely hard not to make my feelings known or break out into nervous, high-pitched giggles.

When I think about it, though, I can't help but remember the time it *did* happen and I couldn't hold back the nervous, unhappy laughter. I'm not sure who was more embarrassed back then. Me or the guy who'd been cheating on his wife with a pair of identical twins, that also apparently didn't know about each other.

I blink, realizing that the women are at the counter, still talking, and wait as they finally get through their conversation to look at me.

"We're wanting to order arrangements for a party," the one in front informs me, like I should be excited about a party I'm not invited to.

But like a good little retail worker, I slap a smile on my face and lean my elbows on the glass counter, the catalog and my notepad on the surface as I try to mirror even a tenth of her excitement. "Do you have any idea what you want?" I ask, regretting every word as she happily informs me that she

doesn't, which is why she wants me to help her pick out three unique and, in her words, 'outrageous' statement pieces.

Trying to force my jaw to unclench at the way she talks and the enthusiasm that has her spitting on me, I open the catalog and nod along with what she says, pointing out our popular options and directing her toward the more expensive flowers that we have. "Oh, everyone would love that," I assure her when she asks about dipping the tips of roses in gold paint to make them look jeweled. I know Miss Jenkins has done it before, rather unhappily, but it drives up the price so much that I doubt this woman can pay for it.

Finally she decides, and I've just talked her out of adding on a zebra-print bow as the man comes up to the counter, his hands empty and looking thoughtful. From the corner of my eye, I scrutinize his expression, still willing to bet that he's either lost or looking for an apology gift like so many men before him.

"Hi," he greets, resting his hands on the glass as he frowns at me. He's balding, with only a little grey hair left to cover the sides of his head. Some of it is combed over in a poor attempt to hide the fact that he really is about to go bald. "I was hoping you could help me."

"Yeah, okay," I agree, barely paying attention as I slide the notes for the last order toward Miss Jenkins' pile. "Give me just a sec. Umm, do you know the details about what you're wanting? An event, maybe, or the occasion?"

"Oh, I don't want flowers," the man assures me hurriedly. "I'm looking for a friend of mine, and I think he was in here a few days ago."

I glance up at him blankly, tilting my head to the side. "I doubt I'd remember," I admit. "And I'm not here all the time." I am, but it feels weird admitting that right now.

"Could you try to remember for me? I think he's pretty unique. He would've been here alone, probably. Black hair, dark eyes. He's such a friendly guy." The man laughs, though it doesn't reach his face. "No idea what he ordered, though. Maybe something for a girlfriend?"

Could he be talking about Wren? Part of the description lines up. Such as him being here, his hair color, and his eye color. But he wasn't alone, and he wasn't *really* ordering something for his girlfriend. Not only that, but why would this man be asking about Wren? They certainly don't look like friends.

"I'm really sorry," I say, biting my lip as I try to think of anyone else that matches the description. I barely pay attention to the customers, and it's normally the women that come in here who are memorable in some way. Most guys my age don't come in here to buy flowers for a girlfriend. "I honestly don't think I know of any customers that have come in recently with that description." I don't mean to be obtuse, and I hope he doesn't think I'm lying.

But this really feels like a shot in the dark, and this guy just missed.

"All right. I could be wrong," the man assures me, moving his hands to shove them in his pockets. As he does, his jacket is swept back, and the bright gleam of something catches my eye.

A badge. It clicks in my head that it's a badge, and I'm sure he's seen me look. If I hide that I know, then he's going to think it's suspicious. Especially when it feels like there's more of a chance he *is* here for Wren.

I glance up at him again, eyebrows lifting. "You're a cop? We give discounts to law enforcement and veterans, but I'm sure you're not interested, huh?" My half-smile is rueful and earnest, and he chuckles.

"No, ma'am. I see she's busy..." he trails off, looking over at the still-humming Miss Jenkins. "But would you ask your boss for me when she's done if she's seen my friend? For some reason, I just can't get in touch with him, and I'm worried."

"Yeah, absolutely," I promise, knowing that I won't. "And I'm really sorry I couldn't help you. I would if I could, but there aren't many guys that come in here, and the last five or so had grey hair. Sorry," I say again like I'm really put out

about it. “I’ll keep an eye out for someone like that, though. If you want to drop by again.”

It works, I hope. He nods, barely listening to me, and reaches out to push his card onto the counter. “That would be helpful,” the officer agrees. “Call that number and let me know if you see him. Though, I don’t think you should tell him I was in here looking if he does show up.” He hesitates and frowns. “I don’t think he will,” the officer confides, looking like he’d rather be anywhere but here. “Between us, I don’t think it’s his kind of place.”

“I get that,” I agree, pocketing the card. “Well, hey, if you need anything, you know where we are. I hope you find your friend.”

“Thanks again.” He nods respectfully and pushes back out the door, heading to the craft store across the street. Was Wren wrong? I wonder as I begin closing up and fix everything that got shoved around in the showroom. Maybe there’s someone looking for him and he doesn’t know it, or somehow doesn’t know that the cops are looking in his direction.

Though I guess it could be someone else the officer is looking for, even if it does fit Wren’s appearance and fake reason for coming in perfectly. It hits me that I still have his number in my phone, though I’d half-forgotten it was there after days of not using it. Then again, it’s not like I’d ever called or texted him. It had been the other way around.

Maybe I should tell him, just in case.

“Okay, *okay*,” I hiss, massaging my knee as I walk into the kitchen where the cats’ food bowl is. Shadow meows at me again, escorting me to the food bag and back as I set down their kibble on the mat near the sink. “You know, it’s not like you’re starving. What, has it been empty for *twenty minutes*?” I still feel half asleep, and mostly out of it, so I’m surprised when I make it to the table and sit down without breaking my leg tripping over a cat.

I could go back to sleep, I know. But feeding the cats has made me hungry, and it dawns on me that I haven’t eaten since

this morning. I'd had a bagel and what seemed like a gallon of coffee, which I refuse to accept is *not* a food group of its own.

Teriyaki chicken doesn't sound good tonight, and I definitely don't want to get up and cook. I'm way too lazy for it, and it would require more effort than I'm willing to put in. Unless I throw a box of potato skins in the oven, which is a completely viable option that my bank account would enjoy more than my taste buds.

"Fuck it," I murmur, levering myself to my feet. It's the weekend, and to celebrate, I've changed into just an oversized, lightweight hoodie, PJ shorts, and socks. That's another reason I don't plan on going anywhere, because real clothes sound awful right about now. "Must you?" I sigh, as Shadow attacks my tapping foot with vigor. He doesn't do any real damage, but it's still irritating to have to shake him off on my way to the freezer.

The sound of knocking, however, makes me freeze in my tracks. For one terrifying moment, I'm sure it's that officer from the flower shop, and I stay where I am, unsure of what to do. Maybe if I pretend I'm not here—

The knocking sounds again and I bite my lip, concerned about who's on the other side of my door. It could be my landlord. That wouldn't be unheard of, even at this hour. Or it could be that cop wanting to interrogate me about Wren.

Either way, if I go to the door dressed like this, they're going to know it's a bad time, and that's what I'm going for. "Just a second," I call, walking quickly to the door and gripping the handle. "Hey, I'm really sorry," I say before it's open. "But I was actually about to go to... bed." I trail off, my face dropping in surprise as I see who's standing there and dangling a bag in his hand labeled *the Waffle Hut*.

"*Wren?*" I gasp, eyes wide. "What are you doing here?"

"Well, I tried to stay away," he admits, with amusement on his face as he looks me over before stepping into the small apartment. "Promise, I did. But..."

"But?" I ask, heart pounding in my throat. "But *what?*"

“But then I thought... ‘what does my little bunny need today?’”

“Waffles?” I assume, using context clues.

“Me in her apartment, telling her I’ve decided to never let her out of my snare.”

I have no idea what to say to that. Especially with him so close. I watch as he rests the bag of food on the table, his eyes on mine when he's done.

"I bet you thought you were rid of me," he purrs, tilting my head up with a hand under my chin. "That you were going to celebrate without me."

"I wasn't," I assert, letting him back me up to the kitchen table. He slots a knee between both of mine, keeping me there and off balance, and his smirk widens.

"You weren't?" he teases. "Did you want me to come back, little bunny? Little *prey*?" His voice is goading, more so than I've heard since I first met him as a masked killer in the woods. It causes my stomach to flip and my insides to clench.

I'm terrified, and turned on, and nearly breathless as he leans down so our lips almost touch. "You could've called me, or texted me," he whispers. "If you wanted me back, I would've been here the morning after our date. I *waited* for you." He pulls back, accusing.

"...What?" I ask, still confused as hell. "Waited for me?"

"To text me. I thought I'd stay away unless you did. Because I didn't want to force you, little bunny. I didn't want to do anything you don't want me to do. But then you didn't. And I realized that maybe my little Hazel is just too afraid of the big bad wolf to invite him back into her straw house. Afraid I'll blow everything down?" His eyes glitter as he

taunts me, and the hand on my chin twists so he's gripping my throat instead.

It's the first time he's been so much like he was in the forest... and with a jolt, I realize I kind of missed it.

What the fuck does that say about me?

"I thought you were gone," I whisper, eyes on his. "You didn't act like you wanted to stay. You didn't say anything—"

"Not killing you *was* me saying something," Wren interrupts. "If that wasn't clear enough, fucking you on a picnic table was me saying something. Coming to your apartment with food was me saying something."

In retrospect, I suppose the signs were pretty clear, but I still shake my head at his words. "But you didn't *say something*," I protest, heart pounding in my chest. "You know, with words. I need words. And you don't even know me. I just thought—"

"I know everything I need to."

"Do you know my last name?"

He thinks about it, then shrugs. "It's not the point, Hazel. I don't need to know the little details about you."

"So you don't know it," I accuse with a small frown.

Wren rolls his eyes. "Teague," he replies flatly. "Your last name is Teague. You're twenty-three. Despite working at a camp this summer, you don't like kids very much and you'd rather lie under the fairy lights in the trees and stare at them. You're left-handed, obviously, because the first time you tried to hit me with a rock was with your right hand and you missed dreadfully. You're ticklish more on your right side than your left."

I just stare at him, not knowing what to say. "Okay," I agree, eyes narrowed. "But you don't know *me*."

"I know that *you* are my little bunny, and that I'm not going anywhere." He flashes a grin. "And that you haven't eaten."

“How do you know?”

“Because it’s Friday and I don’t see any takeout boxes. I brought you food, but I don’t know if I trust you to eat it properly. It seems like every time we have dinner together, you’re too nervous and don’t eat enough. So, I’m here to fix that.”

“By leaving?” I assume dryly, and he snorts.

“No. Go sit.” He points toward my couch and steps back, deftly avoiding Shadow, who’s arrived to twine about his ankles like the treacherous creature he is. I shake my head and go, though. There’s not much else I can do with my mind racing as it is, so I sink down on my sofa and listen to him unbox whatever he’s brought.

It doesn’t take long. Minutes later Wren appears, a box of food in one hand and two bottles of water in the other. He shoves the coffee table back with his foot, which I watch with confusion, and sits down beside me on the sofa, looking... eager?

Eager and smug, and there’s a glow in his dark eyes that I don’t understand. He reaches out to brush my hair back from my face, his hand ending up on my throat again. “Get on the floor for me,” he murmurs sweetly, his eyes dark.

I tense, suddenly nervous. “Yeah?” I ask, grinning like he’s joking. “On the *floor*, Wren?”

“On the floor, little bunny. Don’t you trust me? Don’t you know by now that I won’t hurt you too badly? At least... not more than you enjoy. Though if you don’t get on your knees for me, I’m sure I can put you over my lap instead.”

“Okay,” I mutter, dropping to my knees gently on the hard floor. Seeing my grimace, Wren shoves a pillow off the couch, dropping it between his knees as he crooks his finger at me.

“Come here,” he murmurs, drawing me onto the pillow between his thighs. “Right there. Just like that.”

My insides still twist nervously as I gaze up at him, watching as he opens the box. It is, indeed, my favorite waffles, but I’ve certainly never eaten them on my knees on

the floor before. I don't reach for the box, because I'm sure that'll end with my hand slapped or something else that's just as humiliating. Instead, I sit there, my face burning when he brandishes a fork with a piece of waffle on it.

"You're joking," I deny, meeting his eyes with raised brows. "You're absolutely joking. I'm not a pet. I'm not going to beg for table scraps."

"Of course you aren't." He sits back and pops the bite of waffle into his own mouth, barely paying attention to me. "You can do whatever you want, Hazel."

God, I hate when he's like this. That's what I tell myself, anyway, as he lifts the fork up teasingly, just out of reach. "C'mon," he purrs, holding it right above my head. "Just sit up a little for me. All I'm doing is making sure you eat enough. Is that so mean of me?"

"Yes."

He laughs and lowers it enough that I can take it off the fork, my hand coming up to rest nervously on his thigh. Wren murmurs his approval and repeats the process, even though it's clear I'm squirming with embarrassment each time he gives me the fork again. My fingers curl in the denim of his jeans, and by the time the food's gone, I realize I'm half lying over his lap.

"You look so tempting," he tells me, surprising me by suddenly pulling me up off the floor and across his thighs. My knees fall open so I can straddle him, my hand pressed against his chest as I look at him in confusion. "I should've fed you with my fingers so you can lick them clean."

"Not on your life," I assure him enthusiastically. "Not on *my* life, even."

"Oh, no? Really?" He loops an arm around my waist and pulls me in for a harsh kiss that makes me wonder if he's trying to find the taste of chocolate chip waffles in my mouth as his tongue presses against mine. "Do you think maybe now would be a good time to talk about how you're dressed,

Hazel?" he asks out of nowhere, his hands sliding down my hips until he can grip my ass hard.

I yelp against his lips at the sudden roughness, pitching forward as he jerks my thighs wider apart over his.

"What if it hadn't been me? What if someone else had seen you like this? Do you know what my first thought was when I walked in, little bunny?" His mouth is close to my ear, and I shake my head against his shoulder. "Just how easy it would be to fuck you. I don't even have to *undress* you, do I?" One of his hands disappears, only to shove my PJ shorts to the side so his fingers can stroke my slit. "Maybe you didn't know. Is that the case? Did you just not know?" He sounds goading as he speaks, and I reach up with one hand to tangle it in his hair, my face still on his shoulder.

"No one else would've thought it," I assure him, keeping my voice level as his fingers tease me. "No one else would've even considered it—" I break off with a gasp as he plunges two fingers into me, his grin wolfish.

"Well I did," he reminds me sweetly, casually fingering me as I turn my face to his for a kiss that he enthusiastically returns. "I think about it all the time. I think about all the ways I want to claim you as mine, and how I want to make sure no one else ever gets the chance."

"Ever?" I murmur, only half thinking about the word as he scratches lightly up my side.

"Ever. I hope you don't think you're getting rid of me, little bunny. Besides, it feels cruel to let you go. If I let you out of my trap, you'll fall into someone else's. You'll get hurt. You'll find someone who doesn't know how to treat precious prey like you. Can you take a third finger for me?" He's not really asking, because he presses a third into me before I can reply.

"I'm not *really* prey," I point out, gripping his hair tighter. My other hand comes up to his neck, and I press my palm gently to the side of his throat so that I can feel his pulse under my fingers. Unconsciously, I dig my fingers in lightly, which draws a hiss from the man under me.

“Maybe,” Wren replies teasingly, his fingers becoming more insistent. “But I don’t know. You certainly aren’t a *predator* like me.” I bite him without thinking, my teeth sinking into his shoulder, and he groans. A shudder goes through him, along with a murmured ‘*fuck*,’ and I feel his hand leave my hip for a few seconds before coming back up to grip it hard. “Bite me again,” he urges, even though my teeth are still lightly against his skin. “Come on, Hazel. Sink your teeth into me like I want to do to you.”

I do, barely thinking about it as I bite the juncture of his neck and shoulder and I feel him unbuckling his jeans. His fingers slide free of me, only to grab my hip as I feel him slide against my entrance.

“Good little bunny,” he purrs, and pulls me down, his length sliding into me as I gasp and release his throat from my teeth. It’s too much at once, yet so perfect in the way that the stretch *burns* when he’s seated inside me and my hips are pressed to his.

“*Fuck*,” I breathe, my head spinning. “Wren—”

“You asked for it,” he laughs darkly, a growl in his voice. He doesn’t wait to move, instead holds me against him as he rocks into me. “You and your fucking mouth. You really bit me. Do you know how much of a turn on that is?” One of his hands wanders up my spine until he can grip the back of my neck over my shirt. “You asked for this. And you fucking love it. Don’t think I can’t tell how wet you are. How ready you’ve been for me. Did I even need to fuck you on my fingers? Or could I have just pinned you down and taken what’s mine when I first walked in the door?”

His grip tightens as he fucks me, and my fingers scrape his scalp as my other hand presses to his shoulder where I can twist at the fabric of his shirt. “I’m glad you came back,” I gasp, eyes closed against his shoulder as I focus on the feel of him. “I didn’t think you wanted to, I just—”

“*Shhh*,” he orders, hand tangling in my hair. “I know, baby. You don’t have to tell me. Actually, you’re doing an excellent job of *showing* me.”

I whine as he thrusts harder into me, and his movements become more deliberate as he holds me against him so tightly I can't do much except wiggle.

“You're showing me so well how much you want to be mine. You're so good for me, and you're all mine, Hazel.” He moves my hips just enough that on his next thrust, I see stars, and before I can say anything to the contrary, I'm coming. My thighs clamp against his and he chuckles against my hair. “You're all for me, and just mine. And I will never, *ever* let you go.”

I don't need to open my eyes to know that Wren isn't gone. I can feel him above me, his knees over my hips as his lips brush mine. So I don't open my eyes. Instead, I tilt my head up just a little, just enough that I can chase his lips in a proper kiss as my heart races.

"Ah, ah—" He pulls away, teasingly, and I frown. "You're supposed to be asleep. I like watching you sleep, I've discovered. It's a new hobby for me."

"It's creepy," I breathe, starting to move my hands, only for him to pin them over my head. "It's something a stalker would do."

"It's something your very devoted stalker does," he corrects, shifting his grip on my wrists to one of his large hands so the other is free to curl around my throat. "Is this okay?" he asks, even though my head is tilted back so he can do what he wants. "Is it okay that I hold you this way so I can feel your every breath?"

"Seems a little intense," I admit, opening my eyes anyway to stare into his dark gaze. I wonder if he can feel my pulse under his fingers. I wonder if he can feel how it speeds up when I gaze up at him.

My serial killer, who could've killed me a million times over by now, but just... hasn't. "I didn't expect you to still be here," I admit, as his grip tightens just enough to be felt. "I thought you would've gone home."

“Did you want me to go?” he asks, unbothered by my supposition.

“That’s not the point,” I dismiss, swallowing under his hand. His nails scrape lightly at the skin of my throat when I do, and he moves so his thumb is under my jaw, just at my pulse point.

“It is the point. I’d be content with never going home, little bunny. Maybe that’s not clear to you right now, but I’ll make it clearer, I promise.” His assurances are strange. Especially when he pulls his hands off of me only to jerk my knee up over his shoulder.

He’d jerked off my PJ shorts last night before crawling into bed with me for round two, but I hadn’t thought much about it until now. The air of my apartment is cold on my bare flesh, and when he slides two fingers teasingly along my slit, I shudder.

“I need to talk to you,” I tell him, but he doesn’t stop. Instead, he moves so that he’s leaning over me, his mouth just over my body as his eyes find mine again. “Go right ahead,” he invites, dipping down to kiss just under my navel. “I’m not stopping you from talking, Hazel.” He kisses downward until his breath is hot against my entrance and I can’t stop the shiver that travels up my spine.

“It’s important,” I insist, voice breathy in anticipation. I can’t tear my eyes away from him, and he shrugs as his hot breath teases me once more.

“I’m sure it is. So tell me.” He’s so inviting, like his mouth isn’t four inches above my clit, that I just stare at him while my heart pounds against my ribs. “I’m listening,” he goads, and as soon as I open my mouth to speak, he dips down suddenly to press his mouth against me, tongue flicking against my clit and causing me to gasp.

“I’m *serious*,” I say, my hand flying down to tangle in his hair. It doesn’t do anything to subdue him, and then he licks up my slit, tongue teasing my entrance, before finding my clit once more and teasing it with quick, pointed strokes. His eyes

flick up to mine, eyebrows raised, and I can tell he's once again inviting me to speak.

Like it's so easy with him like this, between my thighs, and working me up with his mouth.

"Tell me," he orders, wrapping his arms around my hips. "Tell me, Hazel. It's important, right? So tell me." He doesn't hesitate, and I can't pull away as he goes back to his 'task' of tasting as much of me as he can.

"Yesterday, before you came over, I was at work," I begin, unable to tear my eyes from him. He doesn't even look up at me this time, as if he's dedicated to what he's doing. His tongue plunges into me, and my thighs tense, but he doesn't let me go anywhere at all.

"That's so interesting," he says, pulling away just enough to hum the words with false enthusiasm. "Go on."

I roll my eyes at the attitude, but keep going. "This guy came in and he was acting kind of weird." I can feel his attention more on my words now, by the way his movements become less insistent. "I just assumed he was cheating on his wife and wanted to get her flowers to fix their relationship." My fingers tighten against his scalp, my thighs going slack when he finds my clit with his teeth and tongue once more. "I-I get that a lot in there. Some guy comes in and wants to try to buy off his wife's anger." I know I've gone off on a tangent, but it's hard not to right now.

Wren sighs and pulls away again. "I take it this isn't the important part?" he hints, moving his hand off of my inner thigh so that he can spread me with his fingers. His tongue teases me, not going deep enough or to my clit like I want, but it makes me shudder just the same.

"No," I agree. "It's not. Umm. So he came to me and asked about his 'friend.' Said he was looking for a friend of his, and that he was sure he'd been in the shop a couple of days ago. Wren, he described you perfectly—" With the hand no longer wrapped around my thigh, he presses two fingers into me and scissored them, a hum sounding from behind his smirk.

“Tall? Gorgeous? *Mysterious?*” he teases as he opens me on his fingers. “That does sound like me.”

“Can you be serious? He was a *cop*.”

“I figured. You know, since I doubt you’d be telling me if he wasn’t.”

“You’re being an ass,” I tell him boldly, and Wren rolls his eyes at me.

“Am I?” he asks, releasing my hips so he can suddenly scratch down my thighs, then back up. I squeak in surprise at the new angle of attack and try to sit up, but all I do is make it easier for him to flip me onto my knees under him.

“There we go. That’s exactly where I want you. Go on, little prey. You were saying?” He’s goading me, taunting me, and he sounds so smug that I want to bite him. As if he can sense that, however, he pins me under him with his weight, not allowing me to do anything other than turn my face out of the pillow to sneer at him.

“This guy was looking for you! Tried to get me to admit you’d shown up. He wanted me to help him find you.” I bite my lip when I feel him at my entrance, and he chuckles.

“Good girl,” Wren says simply, before sliding into me. He doesn’t stop until our hips are pressed flush together and I suck in a breath at how it feels with him behind me. His hands cup my ass, then scratch back down my hips again. “What did you tell him?”

“I acted like I’d never seen you in my life. I told him I’d keep an eye out and ask my boss. But she wasn’t there anyway, so it wasn’t like she’d know—” I break off with a choked gasp as he pulls out, only to thrust back in hard enough that I’m worried about smacking my head against the wall.

As if he worries about it too, his hand comes down to pin me in place, fingers on the back of my neck. “I bet I know who it was,” Wren says conversationally as he fucks me. “There’s a really dedicated detective. Well, he wasn’t always. But I thought he’d come sniffing for me sooner than this. Lift your hips a little. Rock back into me, little bunny.”

I do as he says, my mind spinning with his words and the way he makes me feel. “Just like that. You’re perfect, Hazel. And you feel so good around my cock. Maybe I just won’t let you get out of bed today. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like you aren’t worried about being caught,” I snap back, my heart pounding in my chest as an ache builds in my body.

“I’m not. Because I have friends, and I have you. I haven’t been caught yet, and I’ve been doing this for a while. Or... is it that you’re willing to be my alibi for a little longer? Is that it? Are you asking to help me out of this mess?”

“Not anymore, I’m not,” I snap, my fingers tangling in the sheets. “Get caught for all I care.”

“But *Hazel*,” he purrs against my ear. “If I get caught, who’s going to fuck you like this? Are you bored with me? Do you want more? I was going to take things slow... I thought maybe you needed to get used to me first before I take you all the ways I want to take you.”

I shiver against the words, and bite my lip when he nips along my spine. “This is going slow? You cutting my clothes off in the forest is *slow*?”

“Yeah,” he says darkly. “It is. I’ve been really nice, actually. All I’ve done is fuck this pretty little cunt and I’ve let you up afterward every single time.”

Excitement builds in my chest, though I take a breath to push it back as I ask, “What’s *not* nice and slow, then?” I’m close to coming, but he’s slowed down in the past minute to the point where I feel like he’s edging me.

“I could take you home and keep you there. Maybe tie you up so you can’t leave my room. I could make you my little pet bunny, instead of letting you run around like a wild rabbit who lets me come back for more. I want to use all of your holes, Hazel. Not just your pussy, though I’m definitely addicted to how it feels when you come around my cock. You’re going to, aren’t you? You want to so bad. Am I teasing you, baby?” He’s taunting me again, and he pushes my hair back from my

face so he can kiss me. “Let me help you.” He snakes a hand around me and teases my clit, his thrusts picking up once more. “Come on, Hazel. Come for me, baby. I want to feel you.”

I want to, and even if I didn't, I'm trapped under him, against him, and with him inside me. It's perfect, and too much, and everything I never knew I wanted as I come with his fingers on my clit and his cock buried in my pussy. “Perfect,” he purrs, still fucking me. “Always so fucking perfect for me.” He only lasts a few more seconds before he murmurs a soft curse against my ear and buries himself inside me as well.

“You promise you won't get caught?” I ask, letting him roll me onto my side so he can wrap his arms around me. “I don't want you to, you know.”

“I know,” he chuckles, nipping my shoulder. “Don't worry, Hazel. You're stuck with me for the rest of your life. I'm not going anywhere, not anymore. Not now that you've let me in.”

“Yeah?” I ask drowsily, half-asleep again. “That a promise?”

“An unbreakable one.”

“I’ll see you later, little bunny.” I feel his lips ghost against my cheek as Wren sits up, and when I open my eyes, it’s to see that he’s across the room, in front of the open bedroom door, and looking back at me with an inscrutable look on his face.

“Where are you going?” I ask, sitting up and crossing my legs under me. “Seems a little early for murder, doesn’t it?” My voice is dry and humorous, but at this point, I won’t put it past him that murder is on the agenda again.

“It is,” he agrees. “But I have to go into my office today, and I’d like to go back to my place and change. If you’ll let me, that is?”

Shrugging, I watch him. “I can’t tell you what to do,” I remind my serial killer, gaze never leaving his as I watch the grin spread across his lips.

“No,” he agrees thoughtfully. “I guess you can’t. But I’ll be back later. I’ll bring you dinner, too. Can’t have you forgetting to eat.”

“I never forget to eat, Wren. Because I’m not a child.” I especially don’t like being treated like one, or as though I can’t take care of myself. If he’s going to stay, it’s something I want him to know.

The smile falls, just slightly, and he tilts his head as he watches me. “I know,” Wren assures me in a quiet tone. “Trust me, I know that. But I enjoy taking care of you, Hazel. Won’t you let me indulge myself?” Thankfully, before I can respond,

he's out the door and striding across the kitchen. I hear him greet the cats, and the door closing behind him a few seconds later as I get up to look around for my clothes.

Quickly, it becomes obvious that laundry should be on my list today. At long last I find a pair of leggings stuffed into my closet that are probably clean, an old tee, and put them on with a grimace. The tee is coarse, having lost its softness in its hundredth wash cycle, but I can't bring myself to care enough to jam my clothes in the laundry basket and take them downstairs to wash them. It's not like I'm going anywhere important enough to do laundry today, anyway.

Especially when I'd rather stare endlessly into the abyss and dwell on all the things Wren says to me that make my heart twist and my lungs tight with anticipation. I *like* him, I've come to realize. More than I ever thought I would, but there's a nagging worry in my heart at the same time.

The obvious one, of course.

He's a fucking murderer.

My phone rings just as I grab it off the nightstand, and I bring it to my ear, half expecting it to be him. "Hello?" I ask, toeing on my sneakers.

"*Are you busy today?*" Jenna's voice is friendly and hopeful. It's impossible to say no to whatever she's going to ask me to do when she talks like that. Not that I would today, probably. I could use the distraction that hanging out with her would provide. And I wouldn't mind talking to her about my worries in a way that doesn't tip her off to what's really going on.

"I'm not," I reply as I swipe the cat's food bowl off of the floor. Shadow yowls his disapproval of it not having been done before, and I fight the urge to trap him on a cat tree in the middle of the lake.

Not that I would, of course. I love him, probably. Somewhere so deep, *deep* down in my heart that even I have trouble locating when he screams at me and smacks at my feet like I'm possessed. "Here," I mutter, putting down the food

bowl so he can smash his face into the kibble like he hasn't eaten in weeks. On the other hand, Morticia is much more polite and waits a few steps away, sitting with her tail curled over her cute, dainty paws.

"Would you want to go get lunch with me? I could be at your apartment in a few minutes? I thought we'd go get sushi." Her voice cracks a little bit, and I can tell I'm on speaker in her car.

"I would love sushi," I agree. "And I just got dressed and fed the cats. I can be outside in just a second." Sushi was not on my mental plan for the day, and while it isn't my absolute favorite food in the world, going with her to our favorite little inexpensive sushi place on this side of town sounds amazing.

And way better than anything I currently have in my freezer.

Seconds after I drop into the passenger seat of her white sedan with a sigh and close the door, Jenna pulls away from the curb and rejoins traffic. "I have no idea why I'm tired," I admit, flopping my head back against the seat. "I've only been up for an hour, so you'd think I'd feel as refreshed as hell."

"Maybe you slept too long?" Jenna is always helpful when she thinks she can be and gives a shrug as she swerves onto a side street that will have us at our destination in ten minutes or less. "I do that sometimes. Especially when I was really tired the day before."

"I don't know," I shrug, glancing up at her. "I've missed you, by the way. It feels like it's been months. Years, even, since we did something together."

A smile curls her lips. "Like we didn't spend the entire summer together or something."

"When it's full of screaming, accident-prone kids, it doesn't count."

"And murderers."

The car goes quiet and guilt hits me full force about what I'm doing. What would Jenna say? Or do? Would she tell the

cops if I explained to her about Wren, or would she just try to commit me straight away?

It doesn't seem rational after all. Maybe she wouldn't believe me, and she'd check me into a residential treatment facility for sudden, spontaneous madness. It would be a fair assumption of her if she did. After all, who in their right mind would do what I'm doing? Or admit it?

"What?" I ask, realizing she's talking to me and I haven't heard a word of it. She repeats herself with a glance at me, and I fall into easy conversation with her until we pull into the parking lot of The Mermaid's Fin.

"Okay, but we haven't been *here* in forever," I point out as I get to my feet in the parking lot and close her car door behind me. "Since May. It's too long, and I'm offended for us, actually."

"I'm offended for them," Jenna replies. "Can you imagine how they must feel since we've been depriving them of the pleasure of our company?" She walks inside and I follow her, waving at the familiar, round-faced waitress who beams as we show up. From what I know, she's one of the owner's daughters, and the one next in line for the throne of owning this place.

According to her, anyway. Though since I haven't met the other daughters also vying for the kingdom, I don't really know how true it is. She could just be trying to seek unlikely alliances in the event that succession becomes an all-out civil war among the Mermaid Fin family.

In such a case, I can only hope their sushi quality doesn't suffer.

"Finally!" Our hostess, whose name I can't remember, beckons us over to a table near the bar that looks into the kitchen. "We thought you two must have died during your summer camp excursion, since you haven't been back in so long."

I almost wince at the words. She means them as a joke, but unfortunately, she's close to what could've happened.

Well, not to me, I guess. That was never in the cards for me, and I have to shove the thoughts of machetes and picnic tables out of my head before they can get me in trouble here. It's definitely not the time or place for those, after all.

"It's definitely been a while," Jenna agrees smoothly, covering for my awkwardness as she sits and slides into her side of the booth. I do as well, hating that I feel like my boobs are sitting on the table instead of behind it, like Jenna's so clearly are. It's always an unhappy reminder that these tables are made for people thinner than me, and with less chest radius.

But it's not like me bitching about it is going to change anything, so I fold my arms in front of me and try to pretend it isn't as awkward as it is. Besides, once she's gone, we can maneuver and wiggle a little so that it's not this bad. The tables are always a little off here and it just takes a second to fix that for me.

"Do you want a menu?" She's already placing one down, and beams at me as I slide it closer. "And you both want black tea, right? Iced? I'll get the sugar for you," she adds at Jenna.

"You know us so well it's like we never left," I say, not wanting to be rude. I'm antisocial, sure, but not an asshole. I like this place just as much as Jenna and I'd prefer them to be under the right impression that I enjoy it here, not that Jenna just drags me around for scowling dog privilege, or something.

She laughs and walks away, and I lay the menu down so Jenna can pick it up to scan its contents. "I'll split the Mermaid Fin with you?" I offer, naming their signature roll. "And I'll get soup and dumplings, too."

"I think I'll do the same," Jenna agrees, and when our waitress comes back, we're quick to give her our order. She leaves again a few seconds later, and I watch Jenna open two packets of sugar and stir them into her tea absently.

"I'm seeing someone." I say the words without meaning to, and without thinking about it. Jenna's brows raise, but she doesn't stop stirring. The clinking of ice is a small distraction, but I talk over it as I explain. "I think we're seeing each

other... anyway. That's definitely how I'm going to describe it. He's a little older. Like thirty. I really like him." I'll leave out the part that he's a serial killer, obviously.

I really don't want to know what she'd think if I tell her who he really is.

"No shit?" Her brows shoot up. "That's awesome. I'm really happy for you, Hazel." Her grin spreads across her lips, turning them up mischievously. "What's his name?"

"Wren."

"Where does he work?"

"GreenCo. He's in advertising."

"What's he like?"

"He's nice, and—"

"No, I don't mean like that. I mean, what's he *like*?" She wiggles her eyebrows suggestively at me and I snort, some of the tension leaving my body.

"He's umm..." I press my lips together, but I can't contain the smile that finds them, anyway. "He's *really good*. And he's into a lot of stuff. A lot. Honestly, I'm into it too. I'm into him. He gets a little bit..." I try to explain his attitude and his desire to 'take care' of me. "I don't know. It's weird, I guess. Like, he says he enjoys caring for me, and making sure I'm okay. Sometimes it feels condescending, but I like it. I think."

"I'm jealous. And if you find you don't like it, feel *free* to send him my way."

I don't think she'd like him, though; mostly because of what he is.

"Hey, by the way. I don't want to dampen the mood or anything, but did you hear about Brett's father?" The change of subject catches me off guard and twists my stomach into a knot.

"No. What happened?"

"He's selling the camp. He says that he can't stand to keep it anymore, since his son, you know. Died there." She frowns,

her eyes narrowing in sympathy.

Unfortunately, all I feel is interest in the news and a slight sadness for his dad. But only a little, because *someone* had to raise Brett to be a predator and I have a good idea it was probably his dad.

Still, I can't bring myself to be sad for my fellow camp counselor.

He deserved what he got.

The viciousness of the thought surprises me, and I miss part of Jenna's words about the specifics of the funeral and the sale. Finally, when I'm able to zone back in, Jenna has launched into talking about next year's camp, and which programs she hopes to work in, if they still exist.

"I don't think I'll go with you next year," I admit, smiling at our waitress as our soups arrive in small, white bowls. "Thank you," I say, and she nods before leaving again. "No offense or anything, Jenna. But I've had enough of Camp Clearwater."

"Yeah, I get that. Sometimes it feels like part of it followed us home. Does that make sense? Do you know what I mean?" she asks, her elbows thumping onto the table.

"Oh, yeah," I agree, picking up my spoon. "I definitely know what you mean, Jenna. I absolutely feel like something from Camp Clearwater followed me back to the city."

She glances up at me, surprised at my words or the enthusiasm behind them, but then just shrugs. "Well, you have better shit to think about, don't you?" she asks with a laugh. "What's *Wren* do at GreenCo? Can he get me a job?"

"You want one there?"

Jenna thinks about it, then shakes her head. "I don't know what I want to do, honestly. Except that I don't want to work at my mom's office for the rest of my life. What about you?"

"I want to finish my degree," I admit, meaning it more than I have for a while. "And maybe go back to Malta sometime."

The startled look on Jenna's face isn't lost on me, but I don't reply as I sip my soup. Instead, I meet her eyes, waiting for her to say something.

She smiles, picking up her spoon to do the same. "Maybe I'll sneak along in your suitcase?" she asks, eyebrows wiggling. "I wanted to go last time, so clearly this time I'll have to take drastic measures."

"Maybe I'll win some kind of grant contest and get us all first-class tickets there," I suggest instead.

"All of us?"

"You, me, and my papers."

It isn't the answer she expects, and Jenna cackles, surprising someone at the next table over into looking up before going back to their food.

When I open the door to see Wren's predatory, amused smile, it takes me a minute to look up from his black tee to his face. I drag my gaze up to his, however, and I watch him scrutinize my expression and mentally catalog what he finds there.

"You want to talk about it?" he asks, not moving from my doorway.

I step back and make a dramatic, sweeping bow that has him snorting as he comes into my apartment and collapses onto the sofa with a groan. "So kind of you to let me in."

"I always let you in," I point out, sitting on the opposite end of the sofa. He lunges, grabbing my legs so he can drag them into his lap, hand across my calves as I stare up at the ceiling in stunned surprise. When I try to sit up, he doesn't let me. Instead, he tosses me a pillow that I put under my head to be a little more comfortable.

"Well, half the time I break in," he reminds me. "The other half of the time you're usually pretty surprised, or I've been stalking you for a few streets. I haven't been today, in case you're curious."

"You wouldn't have been able to, unless you were going to hide in Jenna's trunk," I accuse, and realize that, for him, it's not that far of a stretch. "*Anyway*. I went to lunch with Jenna today."

"And?" he prods curiously, circling my ankle with his fingers. He moves up slowly, kneading my muscles with warm

fingers and nearly sending my brain offline right there.

“We were talking about everything. I told her I was dating someone. Though, at the last second, I decided *not* to tell her you’re the serial killer who terrorized us at Camp Clearwater.”

“Terrorized feels like a strong word.”

“I don’t know. I felt pretty *full of terror* when you got Brett’s blood on me.” He snorts, and I go on. “She brought you up, anyway. The serial killer version of you, not the boyfriend version.” It’s strange to say *boyfriend*, but before I can correct it or apologize, Wren cuts me off.

“The boyfriend version of me and the serial killer version of me are the same person. You understand that, right Hazel?” His hand has stopped on my calf, and I can’t even hear him breathe, he’s so still.

As though our relationship hinges on what I’m going to say.

“I get that. You get that. Jenna doesn’t need to get that. Unless you want her to *commit* me, at best.”

“I won’t let her,” he promises lightly. “I’d run away with you first. Or buy the place she commits you and have you secretly released into my custody.”

“That feels very villainous of you,” I point out, voice dry.

“I am a villain, so that tracks.”

I can’t help but roll my eyes at the ceiling, a frown on my lips. “*Anyway*. It’s just... I don’t know. It’s not a big deal.” I start to pull my leg out of his grip, but he holds onto it harshly.

“It is a big deal,” Wren argues, only yanking me further into his lap so my ass is against his thigh and I *really* can’t sit up. “To you. And that means something to me.”

“You barely know me,” I point out, not for the first time.

“So?”

“*So*, why is it that much of a deal to you?”

“Oh, I see.” Before I can stop him, he pulls me upright and into his lap, forcing me to straddle his thighs as my eyes find his sweet, easy smile. “We’re back to this. I figured we would be soon, based on what Virgil told me.”

Who the hell is Virgil?

“Let’s address your friend first, all right? I don’t think you should tell her how you met me, truth be told. I don’t think you should tell her what I am. Not because I’m ashamed, but because I’d rather not have to kill the cops that come to arrest me.” He pushes my bangs out of my face and I fight the urge to kiss his hand. “But I would, if it came to that. I just don’t want to. You can feel conflicted about me. You probably should, being the questionably mentally healthy, not-so-well-adjusted individual you are.”

“That’s rude.” But not exactly wrong.

“I can even understand why you’d think it’s too soon, or I’m crazy for feeling this strongly for you. Maybe you even think I’m lying. But Hazel, if I could let you into my sociopathic brain or even give my heart to you so you could see just how I feel, you’d see I’m not lying.”

“What if you stop feeling that way? What if you get bored?” I whisper, unable to help myself.

He cracks a grin, eyes dark. “That’s like asking me if I’ll get bored of breathing. As long as I’m alive, I’ll always want you. Maybe I love you.” My heart flutters at the words. “Maybe it’s obsession. Hell, I kind of think it’s both. I’m fucking *obsessed* with you, Hazel. I will always be obsessed with you.”

I want to have some witty, sarcastic comeback to offset the tension. I want to find a way for him not to look at me with a soul-searching gaze that breaks right through my defenses, because the way he looks at me like that terrifies me.

“I don’t know if I can believe you,” I admit, and I don’t expect the chuckle that travels up his chest to ring in my ears.

“And that’s okay. Because I have the rest of my life to convince you of it. *So.*” He stands up, setting me on my feet as

he does. “Before you decided to get so serious, I was going to ask if you wanted to go out with me. A couple of my friends really want to meet you.”

“You have friends outside of GreenCo?” I ask, unable to keep the shock out of my voice. “Like, friends who know what you are?”

“I do. And you’ve seen one of them,” Wren assures me. “They’ll like you.”

“In the murder way?”

“No. In the friend way. And since you don’t believe me, I’m prepared to throw you over my shoulder, take you out this door, and carry you all the way to the restaurant.”

I can’t help it. In my head, I visualize what that would even look like, and I can’t imagine he’d really do it. I’m so caught up that I barely notice the wolfish look on his face, or the way Wren sidles closer to me.

“Don’t think I will?” he hums, and I ignore the alarm bells going off in my head.

“No,” I tell him frankly, because that sounds ridiculous. “That’s—” I don’t get to finish my answer. Not when Wren swoops down and picks me up, throwing me over his shoulder so his hand is on my ass and he can just stride to the door unobstructed while I stare at his gorgeous behind.

“Put me down!” I gasp breathlessly, hands scrabbling for purchase. “Holy shit, Wren! Put me—”

“Nope,” he says cheerfully, closing my door with his foot and locking it while still holding me like this. His hand comes back to steady my thigh, and he literally *whistles* as he walks to the elevator at the end of the hall. “Shame none of your neighbors are out,” he tells me, stepping into the metal box and letting the doors close in front of my face.

“You’re insane!” I punch his thigh lightly and he laughs, finally letting me slide to the floor.

“Yeah,” he agrees. “I should be put away for life and all that. Anyway, do you like Cajun food? And live music?”

“Who doesn’t like *live music*?”

A restaurant with its patio shoved right up against the rocky shore of Summit Lake isn’t where I expect to end up as the sun sets. I look around as I get out of Wren’s car, mouth open in surprise as I take in the building and the even larger side patio with fairy lights wrapped around the columns and a live band playing on the side nearest the restaurant.

It isn’t packed, but it isn’t empty, either. Wren comes around the car to grab my hand, smile ready, and I reach out to twine my fingers with his in a move that’s more me than him. His smile turns surprised, then warm, and he pulls me against him and presses a kiss against my temple that has me wanting to swoon.

“I would point out that I’ve never been here,” I say, glad that in my leggings and tee, I’m not underdressed for the crowd or for him. “But I go to places that specialize in carry out. So, it’s probably pretty obvious.”

“Very obvious,” Wren assures me, pausing at the hostess stand that’s outside the patio and fixing a friendly grin on his features. “My friends are here already,” he says, gesturing to the patio that’s framed by waist-high rails with decorative lattice work.

She smiles and nods us on, and Wren takes the invitation to pull me through the tables until we’re on the side closest to the river. The music is quieter here, being farther from the building, and all I have to do to see the churning water is tilt my head slightly to the side and look over the light-wrapped railing.

“*Finally.*” The voice is lighter than Wren’s, and familiar, so when I look up I’m less than surprised to see the man that had been with Wren that day in the flower shop. He smiles when he sees me and lets the front two legs of his chair fall back onto the floor. His companion, a leaner, slighter blond with hair that’s probably eternally tousled, sits at the chair closest to the railing and only looks up at me after a moment of gazing out over the river.

“No Virgil?” Wren asks, not sounding very put out about it.

“Nah, he says he’s ditching you for a date of his own. It’s the last night of the week Sloane spends at his house,” Cass says in a reproachful tone like Wren should’ve known. “And he thanks you to remember his ever important schedule. Also, he’d like me to remind you that he has the dogs eating organic treats, not the rawhide crap you tried to buy for them.”

“It wasn’t rawhide,” Wren groans, pulling out a chair for me and looking like he might toss me lightly into it if I don’t do it myself. “It just wasn’t up to his new pet food standards. Have either of you had the balls to ask Sloane to chill him the fuck out?”

“Not on my life,” the blond admits, a small smile on his face. “If you want to die, Wren, that’s all on you. But leave us out of it.”

“Please,” Wren scoffs, his voice casual, but lowering as he adds, “He hasn’t killed anyone in months, anyway. I bet he’s rusty.”

It shocks me that he’s so open about it, and the blond’s gaze darts to mine before he asks, softly, “You’re Hazel, right?”

“Yeah,” I say, trying for a smile as my heart tries to pound out of my chest. “You’re... Wren’s friend?”

“I’m Jed,” he says, with the hint of a southern drawl. “‘Friend’ is an understatement. He picked me up at the side of the road and never let me leave.”

I glance at Wren in surprise as he snickers and shakes his head. “Sad part is, he isn’t lying. We found Jed hitchhiking up from Texas. But you make it sound so malicious.”

“It was malicious,” Jed promises, his face empty of humor.

“I’m Cass.” The man from my shop’s introduction is friendly, and he sends a light smile my way. “Wren did *not* kidnap me from a street corner, though his ability to make friends is pretty awful.”

The waitress comes to take our drink orders and smiles brightly at me as she hands me a menu. “Never thought they’d let anyone into their boys’ club ‘til Sloane started showing up. It’s nice to know she’s not a fluke.” She glares at Cass like he’s offended her personally and leaves, not bothering to give him a menu.

“I think she hates me,” Cass admits, leaning back with a sigh. “She used to like me. She used to flirt with me, actually.”

“What happened?” Wren teases. “Did she sleep with you?”

Cass rolls his eyes and looks at me pointedly, making me feel like I don’t belong.

“Better she knows now that you’re a *problem*,” Wren points out sweetly.

“Who’s Sloane?” I ask, instead of commenting on that. “Is she another of your friends?”

“Sort of. Well, yes. She *is* our friend,” Wren explains. “She’s the other half of the fourth member of our ‘boys’ club.” He sneers the words, clearly not liking them. “He met her last year and now they’re inseparable. But she won’t move in with him, so she only spends five nights a week at his house, instead of all seven. I forgot, that’s my bad, that tonight is that night of the week and he always makes a point to spend all day with her.

“She’s really nice,” Jed admits, leaning onto his elbow so I can hear his quiet voice over the music. “If you stick with him, you’ll get to meet her. We’re normally together a lot, and she’s usually here too. How did you meet Wren?”

“He... killed a man and got blood on me,” I reply in a whisper, leaning close as well. No reason not to tell him, right? Since he already knows everything. “Then chased me through the woods and took my phone.”

Jed’s gaze slides to Wren, who stops his arguing with Cass to look over in surprise. “What?”

“You... killed someone and got blood on her?”

“He was bothering her.”

“You took her phone?”

“She was calling someone for help.”

Even Cass looks at him, perplexed, and Wren scoffs. “Neither of you were there, and she’s obviously fine.”

“Are you fine? You could be not fine with this, if you don’t want to be,” Jed assures me, soft, friendly eyes back on me.

“I’m fine,” I promise, unable to stop my smile. “As bad as it sounds, I’m really fine. Except that it was my favorite jacket and I don’t have it anymore,” I say, loud enough for Wren to hear.

He pauses again, looking at me in surprise. “Really?”

“Uh, yeah.” I sit back in my chair, somewhat relaxing, even though all of this feels so strange. Is it possible to feel awkward around Jed? I wonder. He’s just so sweet and with the kindest smile... He’s disarming by nature, I decide, and if he’s a killer, too, I bet he’s a pretty efficient one.

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

I shrug one shoulder, surprised at the words. “What were you going to do? Go steal it back for me? It’s okay, Wren. I have more jackets. And I’d rather have you than it, anyway.”

He still just... *looks* at me. And I can’t decide whether he thinks I’m lying, or he’s just that surprised at the admission that I’d rather have him than my soft, warm, comfortable hoodie.

Which I will miss until the day I die.

“Wren says you’re an anthropologist and that you’ve been to Malta,” Cass says lightly, breaking the silence. He and Jed both seem quieter, and I wonder if Virgil is the same, or if he’s louder and more social than these two. Otherwise, I can’t help but imagine that it’s Wren who does most of the talking.

“Yeah,” I agree, sitting up in my chair at the prospect of having something easier to talk about. “I am. Kind of, even though I’ve never finished my degree. And I went to Malta a couple of years ago for a research trip.”

“Why don’t you finish your degree?” Jed asks, voice just as soft as ever.

I don’t respond right away, frowning down at my glass and raking my finger over it to clean up a drop of condensation on the glass. “Things just happen,” I shrug, not wanting to lie. “But it’ll happen, eventually.” Probably. Maybe.

Maybe not.

Wren drags the conversation away from me instantly and effortlessly, though thankfully the other two don’t say anything to the contrary as he complains once again about Virgil and his newfound love of all things holistic for dogs. I think it’s adorable, and I’m pretty sure Jed does as well, but I say nothing about it when Wren complains.

Instead, I admire the way he makes sure everyone is a part of the conversation and allow myself to be pulled into the tide of it. Surprised to feel like these people are my friends, even though I’ve never met two of them and I have a feeling they’re just as bad as Wren in their own ways.

But at the end of the day, I’m feeling like that might not be so bad, as far as I’m concerned.

I don't realize I've dozed off until the car comes to a stop and Wren reaches out to gently drag his fingers through my hair. I sigh, leaning into him, and I hear his soft huffed chuckle as he turns off the engine. "Are you awake? I thought we'd do something fun before I took you home, but if you're too tired, we can skip it."

"I'm not tired," I yawn, forcing myself awake. My eyes open, and when I look up, expecting us to be in the city, I pause.

This definitely isn't any part of the city *I* know. All I can see are trees, and the dully glinting metal of a swing set near the parking lot we're currently sitting in.

Anxiety rises in my chest, and I look at Wren with confused snark ready on my lips. But his smile draws me up short, so I give him a bemused half-grin. "Where are we?" I ask, pulling my hoodie around myself and zipping it up just in case we're going out for some kind of midnight hike.

"We're in Rawls," Wren answers, and it takes me a minute of searching my brain to figure out where, exactly, that is.

"It's outside of Akron, right? There's a country club here and I think not much else?" I've certainly never come to this small, exclusive town for rich people, so I don't know what in the world Wren wants to do here.

"Yeah," Wren chuckles. "They have an awesome park. There are hiking trails, there's a pond. A shitty pond, but still a pond. Some campsites, though none of them are booked right

now. It's a popular place during the day, but I've never seen another person here at night."

My heart pounds in my chest as I look at him, more anxious with him than I've been in a long time. Or at least, what feels like a long time to me. As always, it's a surprise that I've only known him for a few weeks, and not at least a few years.

"What are we doing here?" I ask carefully, nervous that he wants me to help him do something that will 'bond us forever' or something just as cryptic.

Like murder.

Yeah, murder is definitely the thing that keeps lighting up my brain in all the worst ways, and I hope, suddenly, that there's not someone tied up and drugged in the trunk.

At the look on my face, Wren suddenly snorts. "Why are you looking at me like that?" he asks, unbuckling his seatbelt and settling back. "What did I do?"

"Are you going to ask me to help you kill someone?" I ask, heart pounding in my chest. My voice is softer than I mean it to be, and the words hang in the air between us for a second, turning his small grin into a full smile.

Wren laughs, the sound harsh and genuine, and he tilts his head back as his shoulders shake. "Little bunny, do you *really* think I'd make you kill someone? Or that I'd even ask? Why in the world would that even occur to you?"

"I don't know! You brought me to the woods, by a pond, kind of like where we first met! I thought you were going to tell me that, like, I have to prove my loyalty or have some skin in the game so that I can never rat you out. Like the mafia or something!" I explain, my voice high with both nerves and embarrassment.

Now that I say it out loud, it feels... stupid.

"You already have a stake in this," Wren points out. "You've already helped me not get caught. *Please*, little rabbit. I'd never want you to do that. I wouldn't ask you, that's for sure. You're not a murderer, or anything like that."

“Maybe you’re trying to change me, to make me into your little protégé, or something,” I mutter, recalling one of my favorite true-crime series where the plotline between the two men was just that. Of course, I barely remember much of the plot, truth be told. I was just reading it for the really hot, imaginative sex.

“I would never try to change you.”

The words drag me out of my thoughts and I look up at him, a smile curling over my lips. “That’s a nice thing to hear. Though I kind of suck.”

“You don’t suck.”

“I *mean*...”

He reaches out to press a finger to my lips, telling me without words to hush. “We can argue about your finer qualities some other time. Or never, since I’ll never agree that you’re anything less than perfect.”

My heart twists at the words, and I fight the urge to bite his finger just for fun. Just to see what he would do.

“But I remember how much you enjoyed what we did when I first met you, little bunny.”

I do too, even though it still makes heat claw its way up my face when I think about it.

“So I thought we’d do something like it again.”

My eyes flick up to his, holding his gaze as he drops his hand and just *looks* at me with that smirk on his face.

“What?”

“You heard me.”

“But I’m not running from you. You’re not chasing me?” I ask, not sure how him taking me to a park to fuck has much to do with how we first met. Except for nature, of course.

“Maybe you should start before I am.” His words ring in the small space of the warm car, and he doesn’t move except to drum his fingers on the console.

“Are you serious?” I ask, excitement warring with the fear catching in my chest. “You really want me to—”

“Or I can drag you out of the car and fuck you in the parking lot. It would be a shame if someone were to show up, though. Since there’s no way they wouldn’t see you.” That savagely teasing tone from the first night we met creeps into his voice, making my heart beat all the faster.

My lips curl into a smile, and I press them together to hide it, though Wren’s already seen the expression, I’m sure. “Anywhere I shouldn’t go? What if you can’t find me?” I ask softly, my heart so loud I’m surprised he can’t hear it.

“Just don’t leave the park,” he chuckles. “That feels like it would be out of bounds, and I don’t want anyone else to find you or think that you’re really in danger.”

That’s a fair point.

“Are you going to just start chasing me? I haven’t practiced for this. You’ll probably catch me as soon as I’m out of the car,” I point out, flexing my fingers in my lap before putting one hand on the door handle.

“No. I’m going to count to twenty,” he assures me, looking as relaxed as he possibly could.

“Eighty.”

“Sixty.”

“Eighty?” I try again.

“*Sixty*,” he replies firmly. “Argue some more, and we’ll make it ten.” When I hold his eyes, his smile turns less friendly. “I’m already counting, little prey. Don’t you think you should, I don’t know... *run*?”

His words are enough to force me out of the car and I stand beside the still-open door, feeling like a frozen rabbit as I wish I’d found something better than my tee, hoodie, and leggings to wear tonight.

Though I suppose battle harnesses, black face paint, and all black suits to blend into the night aren’t in fashion this time of year, so I never had a chance to pick one up. What a shame.

“Are you going, or not?” He tries to sound casual, but I’m not fooled. I can hear the undercurrent of excitement in his voice. The soft tone of anticipation that has me actually preparing to run and looking at the park to plan my escape.

“What if you can’t find me?” I ask, hesitating.

He tilts his head to look up at me, eyes glittering. “Do you really think I won’t, little bunny?”

My breath catches in my chest at the sly, predatory look. I know he will, but I don’t say it.

“If you don’t, then I get your car,” I reply, trying to sound as bold as I can manage without it feeling like a lie. Though, it feels like a lie anyway, if I’m being honest with myself.

“Whatever you want, Hazel,” he chuckles. “Now *run*.”

I do.

I turn, slamming the door before I bolt into the woods and immediately veer off in another direction. I don’t understand how he’ll find me, unless he’s just going to yell my name or pretend to need help. The park seems big already, and I barely know anything about it.

But I keep running until finally I come out near the dock on the shore of the pond he’d mentioned. The trees are thick, though missing the fairy lights from the campground. I slow, looking around, and I hear only the sounds of the breeze through trees and the water at my left.

Will he even come this way? Can I sit *here* until morning, or whenever he decrees that he can’t find me? I guess he’ll call me if or when he gets frustrated, and—

A heavy weight knocks me off my feet and I gasp, landing on my hands and knees in the soft, damp grass by the dock. Wren chuckles against my ear, then nips it in reprimand. “I told you to run,” he purrs, one hand snaking up to catch my throat. “What in the world are you doing, little rabbit?”

“I didn’t think you’d find me so fast—” I break off with a soft cry as he bites down on my ear, harder this time, as if in warning.

“Try again,” he invites, letting me up. “Come on, Hazel, you can do it. Don’t let me catch you so easily.” His words are taunting, dark, and a warning all in one. I turn to look at him, unsurprised to see that he’d abandoned his jacket in the car. Dressed only in his tee and jeans, he’s just as gorgeous as I’ve ever seen him.

And the look on his face? The one with a hunter’s intent and dark delight? It has my stomach curling in the best and worst of ways.

I run again, taking off back into the trees as he turns to look at the lake and count once more. Not that I get to ask him how long he’s giving me this time.

And this time, I don’t stop running. I keep going until my legs burn and I find myself starting to stumble over roots and branches. Once more I slow, though this time I hide behind a couple of huge trees, well off the hiking trail and obscured on three sides by bushes and debris in the woods.

This time, I don’t see how I won’t hear him coming.

That is, until I close my eyes and lean my head back against the tree, only for Wren to grip my legs and *jerk* me out of my hiding place. He laughs, enjoyment plain on his face as he hovers over me, braced on one arm and his knees.

“You’re cheating,” I accuse, panting harshly. “There’s no way you’re actually finding me so fast.”

“I’m not cheating,” Wren assures me, not sounding upset about the accusation. He reaches out with his free hand and grips the base of my throat, tilting my face up to his. “You’re just very, very loud. And somewhat predictable. Would you like to try again?”

“Why? So the next time you find me, I’ll be collapsed on the ground in exhaustion?”

“Exactly.”

I search his face, then let my lips curl into a semblance of the smile he wears. My best attempt, anyway, though I doubt that’s saying much. “No,” I tell him, more curious to see what he’ll do than anything. If he really wants me to, I’ll run again.

I figure it'll throw him off his game if I refuse, even for a moment. He wants to chase me, so—

“Good.” His voice is a low hum that has me stopping in my mental tracks.

“What?”

“*Good*, little bunny. I'd rather you have some energy to fight me, anyway.”

Oh. Well, then.

I can't say I'm disappointed, either. I stare up at him, watching as he scrutinizes my face and lunge upward toward him, grabbing his hair and trying to roll him onto his side in the dirt.

Not that I succeed, and I can't really say I'm surprised.

He laughs as I do it, ducking his head and gripping my throat hard. His weight comes down on my hips, free hand immediately jerking down the zipper of my hoodie so he can fist a hand in the fabric of my t-shirt.

“Good girl,” he teases, the praise sounding more like a taunt than anything else. “Come on. *Fight me.*”

I don't say that I'm trying, because I don't want to feel more pathetic than I already do. My other hand comes up, though he takes the moment to shove my shirt and bra up and over my head, along with my hoodie, in a movement that I'm too slow to even comprehend, let alone do anything about.

“You were so close,” he taunts, pushing me down against my hoodie that's still under me. “So *close* to escaping me, little bunny. So *fucking* close, weren't you?”

I have a feeling I wasn't that close at all.

“Won't you lie there and let me look at you?”

“No,” I reply sweetly, still writhing as his hand tightens on my throat, putting enough pressure on both sides of my neck that I see stars. He's careful. I can feel that in his movements, but I'm still dizzy enough after a few seconds that I don't have

a choice except to collapse back on the ground and breathe in whatever air he'll let me.

“Such sweet little *prey*,” he purrs, one hand coming up to skim over my stomach. He presses slightly; his nails prick against my skin as he drags them up and up, then kneads my breasts lightly. “I love looking at you,” he admits, letting go of my neck so he can cup my breasts in both hands.

I open my mouth to say something, but he doesn't give me the chance. Wren drags his nails down my sides sharply, and I all but *shriek* at the sharp pain before he does it again, causing me to repeat the noise.

“So loud,” he teases, lightly gripping my throat once more when I try to sit up. He tickles my ribs, just over where he'd scratched, and I can't help the gasping plea that leaves my lips as my brain nearly short circuits from the feeling. “Did I hurt you?”

“Yes,” I tell him, eyes wide as I look at him.

“And you liked it so much, little bunny. So much more than you should, you know. Tell you what...” He hums, tilting his head to the side. “I won't blindfold you this time. Isn't that nice of me? To let you see the whole time?”

“Doesn't feel like it's nice.” My voice is low, and he grips my jaw in warning, like it could be my throat.

“It is, though. It's generous, that's for sure. All you have to do is *beg* for me.”

“To not blindfold me?”

“For me to fuck you like you obviously deserve.” He sits up to pull off his t-shirt, and I don't even think about what I'm doing before I do it. I roll onto my knees, kicking out from under him, and lunge forward in the grass, trying to get to my feet.

Instantly, Wren grabs my ankle and *drags* me back to him with a low sound of both surprise and amusement. “Oh no, little bunny. Oh *no*, you fucking don't.” He hooks his fingers in my leggings, and I realize I've given him the perfect

opportunity to do anything he wants now that I'm on my stomach in the grass.

I attempt to fight him off again, but it only helps him drag the rest of my clothes down my body before he tackles me once more, holding me under him with his body pressed against mine.

“Let me go!” I snap, though my heart beats in exhilaration. He won't, and I don't want him to. But that's part of the game. Some part of me *does* want to run, because I can. Because I want to prove that I can get out of his grasp.

But most of me wants him to stop me at every turn, and he isn't one to disappoint.

Wren snarls in my ear, his teeth finding the side of my throat as he forces me back onto my stomach, nails dragging down my sides and causing me to scream.

“Never,” he says, dragging his hips against mine. “I'll never let you get away from me, little bunny. You're all mine. What did you think you were doing, exactly, hmm? What did you think you'd accomplish with your little stunt? Were you really trying to run, or...” He pulls away just enough to shove his jeans down his thighs, so that when his hips find mine once more, I feel his hardness against my ass.

“Did you just want to show me how much you want me? Are you on your knees for me so I'll breed you like a needy bitch?”

I shake my head, letting him press me downward until my spine is arched and my face is against the grass.

“Then why are you dripping for me, Hazel?”

“I'm not. It's not—” I try to lie, I try to deny that it's that when we both know it isn't true.

“Yes, it is. It's all for me. You want me to fill you up, little bunny? Make sure no one else can ever come along and claim you for theirs? I'll be so thorough that you'll be *ruined* for anyone else.”

I whimper, and let out a soft sound as his teeth graze my shoulder before he nips along it.

“*Beg.*”

I shake my head, and he sneers against my jaw. “*Beg*, or I’ll keep you here like this all night. You know you’re mine, so say it.” When I don’t instantly reply, he slaps my thigh, sending hot, sharp pain rippling through me.

And it feels just as good as it had the night we met.

“You’re caught, little prey,” Wren warns. “There’s nowhere for you to go. You can’t even move if I don’t want you to. You’re caught, and you want me to fuck you. You think it’s not obvious? Do you think I can’t feel how much you want me buried in your cunt?”

“Maybe I don’t,” I lie, peeking out from between my arms just enough to see his face. “Maybe you’re just imagining things.”

He grins, catching my eye, and reaches back to shove three fingers into my entrance, drawing a cry of surprise from my lips. “Oh yeah,” he agrees mockingly, fucking me with them. “Maybe I’m imagining how needy your cunt is, huh? That it, Hazel? I’m imagining this?”

I nod, and he pulls his fingers away just to bring them to my face. “Then open your fucking mouth so I can show you just how little I’m imagining things.” He doesn’t give me a chance to reply. He presses his fingers against my lips, forcing them against my tongue so I have no choice but to taste my wetness on his skin.

“Does that taste like I made it up to you?” He’s quick to rip them from between my teeth just as I bite down, and as if in retaliation, he wipes them against my face before grabbing my throat once more. “Enough pretending. Enough lying, little bunny. Game’s over. You’re done. All that’s left is for you to accept your fate and *take it.*” He rolls his hips against me once more, and I can’t help the shudder that works its way through me. “So beg.”

His fingers around my throat loosen enough that I can take a deep breath, and I lick my lips as I close my eyes hard. “Please,” I whisper, not surprised when he makes a noise of disapproval.

“Do better. Be explicit. Stop making me *wait*.”

“Please fuck me like I deserve. Please, Wren, I need you ___”

“I know you need me.” He slides against my folds, dragging a gasp from me. “But that’s still not good enough.”

“I’m sorry. I’ll do better. Because I need you to fuck me. I want you to...”

“That’s so vague. So timid. Tell me *where*, and *how*, and *why* you want me to fuck you.”

I feel my face burning, but he won’t let me pull away. He won’t let me move, and when I try to push away from the ground, he presses his hand between my shoulder blades to keep me in place.

“Fuck my pussy, *please*,” I beg finally, writhing against his grip. “I want you to—I *need* you to fill me up. I want you to absolutely wreck me, Wren. Ruin me for anyone else, because I don’t want anyone else. Ever.”

“Want me to breed you?” he taunts, moving so his tip slides against my entrance. “You look like you need it after all.”

“Yes.”

“Say it again.”

“Yes, *please*—” I break off when he slides into me, not stopping until I can feel his hips pressed to mine. He’s so big that without him stretching me with his fingers for a while, it’s almost painful. But that makes it even more worth it. I gasp, collapsing into his hand on my throat as he lets me lie back down under him, my hips still up and pressed to his.

“Good girl,” he praises, his strokes slow for only a few seconds before he’s speeding up, slamming into me and making me dizzy. “Such a good fucking girl for me. You

always are, aren't you?" He drags his nails up my sides and I can't help it. I *scream* and clench around him, which only causes him to drape his body against mine to keep me in place in the dirt under him.

"You take me like you were made for me," he purrs in my ear. "So tight for me. You like being full of my cock? You like how it feels when I fuck you like this?"

"Yes," I sob, arching against him when he nips my ear. I drag one hand free from the dirt and reach back to grip his hair, twisting my fingers in the inky black strands while he fucks me. "Please, Wren—"

"You don't need me to stop," he promises. "You don't need me to be *gentle* with you, either. Little bunny, you never fucking did. You're so perfect when you're taking me like this. It's where you belong. Say it with me. This is where you fucking *belong*."

I repeat the words, stumbling over them a few times as he continues to wreck my body. It's not just the way he thrusts into me like he'll never see me again, or the way he scratches my sides and hisses against the tearing grip I have in his hair.

It's the way he nips at my skin, and the way he reminds me with such arousing accuracy that I'm *his*.

"*Fuck*," he hisses, tone changing as his voice hitches against my ear. "I'm going to come. You're close, but I can't hold out this time. Not when your pussy is just so greedy, little bunny." I whimper and I can feel his resulting shudder. He slams into me once, twice, then buries himself so deep that I see stars while he rides out his release inside of me.

"Come for me," he pants, still inside me. His hands wrap around my body, jerking me up against him so my weight is on my knees. One hand snakes around me, his fingers finding my clit unerringly so he can stroke me ruthlessly with one hand and hold me against him with the other.

"Right now, while I'm buried deep in your pussy. Come for me, Hazel. If you try to hold out, then you're going to be in trouble."

“H-how?” I ask, barely holding on as it is.

“Because I’ll take it as a challenge.”

I want to hold out. Somehow I want to prove I’m more in control than I seem. But I can’t. With a sob I come, my orgasm hitting me like a fist as my muscles clench around him and my body nearly gives out to slam my face back into the dirt.

He strokes my clit through it, drawing my orgasm out with a few gentle, rocking thrusts and his fingers until finally I’m a panting, sobbing mess and he lays us back on the ground so he can ease out of me without me moving one damn bit.

“You’re going to have to carry me back,” I complain as he reaches up to stroke my back, fingers skimming my body up to my neck. He does it again, going the opposite way, and I shiver at the sharp teasing of his nails against me.

“Roll over for me, darling,” Wren purrs, sounding so sweet that I do as he pulls me into his lap.

“Did you hear me?” I ask, laying my head back against his shoulder as he drags me up against him.

“Yeah, I did.” He hooks my knees over his and suddenly presses two fingers into me again.

I suck in a breath, eyes open, but before I can move to stop him, my wrists are in his other hand and he’s adding a third finger as he gently fingers my pussy.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, unable to do much more than turn to look at him.

“I just love touching you,” he admits. “And well, let’s be honest, Hazel. We haven’t been here nearly long enough to justify the drive... don’t you think?” His smile is wicked, and I moan at the overstimulating feel of his fingers.

“I just came,” I remind him, my knees tense.

“I know,” he teases, in the same voice as my whining plea. “So come again. I’ll help you, little bunny.”

“I’ve never—”

“That’s okay, shh. *Shhh...*” He brushes his lips against my temple, thumb finding my clit. “I’ll *make you.*”

He’s good on his word, and my eyes close hard as my second orgasm tears through me, more desperate than the first. It takes him long enough that I can feel him against my lower back, ready to go again, and when he helps me turn in his lap, a smile on his face, I can barely believe we’re really doing this.

“What?” he asks, teasing in every inch of his expression as he pushes me down against his lap until he’s inside me once more. “I told you I was going to breed your sweet cunt, little bunny. Did you think I meant I’d only fuck you *once?*”

“Yes,” I admit, knees falling open when he moves to push me onto my back.

“Poor thing.” His smile is dark and teasing and his eyes dance with enjoyment. He pauses, though, one hand against my stomach as he looks at me. “You know you can tell me to stop, and if you mean it, I will. We’ve always been clear on that, right, Hazel?”

The way he checks in, and how serious he looks, makes my heart twist in my chest. I reach up and drag him down to me, mouth seeking his for a kiss that he accepts and deepens. “Of course I do,” I tell him, a slow grin finding my lips. “But I also mean it, and you’re carrying me back to your car, Wren.”

“So long as I get to ruin you first, that is absolutely okay with me.” He groans, hands on my hips as he rocks his hips into me and pulls a cry from my lips. “Good girl, Hazel. You can take it. I bet you can come a few more times for me, don’t you think?”

I shake my head, throwing my hand over my face, and I hear him chuckle.

“That’s okay. I believe in you, even if you don’t. And I’m such a supportive boyfriend that I won’t stop until I’ve shown you that I’m right.”

I feel like someone is following me.

Maybe it's because Wren *has* been following me around for nearly a month. Or just because I'm jumpier lately and feeling like something, anything, could go wrong at the drop of a hat and I'll wake up from whatever this is.

God, I don't want to wake up.

I blink, wishing I had eyes in the back of my head so I could see who's walking behind me closely enough that I can smell their cologne. That was my first tip-off, I think. I've been smelling the same cologne for twenty minutes and it isn't Wren's. That would barely make sense, as I'd just washed these clothes, but it would be more believable than a stranger's strongly scented body spray permeating my nose.

So I keep walking. I don't want to stop just yet, when I'm here in the middle of a crowd of people. I don't like this part of town, and more importantly, I haven't finished my coffee.

Absently, I take a sip, getting just as much whipped cream as I do caffeine, and pointedly turn away from my apartment. If someone *is* following me, I don't want to lead them back home.

And besides, maybe it's just a coincidence.

So I walk on, and cross another street. And still, that cologne stays in my nose and every time I can unobtrusively glance behind me, I think I see the same man in sunglasses and a black leather coat close behind.

This sucks, quite frankly. I'm afraid to pull my phone out and text Wren. I'm afraid to go home, and I don't know what in the world I'm going to do if this man catches up to me or I make a wrong move.

I clasp my coffee cup tighter and take another drink, belatedly realizing I'm sucking on nothing but ice and the dredges of my coffee. *Shit*. Now I don't have a lot of reason to still be walking around here, and I'm not sure where I'm going now that I've come this far.

I turn onto another street, still unsure of things, and my heart sinks when I realize it's more residential than business, and that means there aren't as many people. But I can't just stop and turn around, or act like I've gone the wrong way. That'll tip off my stalker that something *is* wrong, and then I'll be in trouble.

Not knowing what else to do, I fumble for my phone and type a message to Wren while I walk. Hoping that above all else, I look like I don't know someone is following me, and like I don't have reason to know or suspect that I'm not alone.

Apparently, it doesn't work. Not if the hand closing around my upper arm has anything to say about it. I only barely manage to put my phone back into lock mode as I'm jerked off of the main sidewalk and into a yard sheltered by two cars and a large, brick archway.

I gasp and fight the man, my empty coffee cup falling to the ground, causing the lid to fly off on impact. Ice spills on my shoes, and his, as I look up into the face of the detective from the flower shop. He whips off his sunglasses with his free hand, eyes narrowed as he glares at me with red veins popping in the whites of his eyes.

"What the hell?" I gasp, pulling away from him finally as he looks down at his feet in disgust. "What do you want? Why did you just grab me?!"

"You've been lying to me," the man growls in a low, agitated voice. "You lied to me at the flower shop about your 'friend,' didn't you?"

“What are you talking about?”

“Seriously?” He gives me a flat look and pulls out his phone, turning it to show me a picture.

It’s me.

But more importantly, it’s me with Wren. We’re walking down the street and he’s laughing, arm clasped with mine, while I just drink coffee and grin in the picture.

It’s also pretty damning evidence that I was, in fact, lying.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” I say again. “*That’s* your friend from the flower shop you were looking for?” I’m going to play dumb until it’s exhausted. “How was I supposed to know you meant my *boyfriend*?” Maybe if I admit to that much, he’ll think I’m not lying about the rest. Though, by the look he gives me, that’s not very likely.

Indeed, the cop looks at me with irritation in his dark eyes. Like I’m lying, or trying to just piss him off. His grip on my arm tightens, and I wince. If I’m not mistaken, he’s pressing close to the bruises left by Wren at the park, and it makes me uncomfortable in more ways than one.

“Let go,” I request, voice softer than I mean it to be.

“You lied to me,” he repeats. “So tell me what you know about him.”

“He’s my boyfriend, not whatever you’re looking for,” I protest, trying to jerk out of his hold. “What’s wrong with you? Aren’t you law enforcement? What have I done to you that warrants me this kind of attention?” Again, I try to jerk out of his hold, and his fingers tighten until I gasp in pain.

“I was,” he agrees in a sneer. “Up until recently. Which I think your boyfriend has something to do with as well, you stupid bitch.”

What in the world is wrong with this man? His hand, still gripping me like claws, shakes, and I grit my teeth at the constant burn of his grip.

“All because I couldn’t find him, and my chief said I was acting obsessed.”

I, for one, agree with his chief. Not that I plan on saying it.

“I don’t know what you want from me, but you’ve clearly lost it,” I say quietly, my words slow and precise. “Please let go of me.”

“Why? So you can run back to him and tell him that I’m looking for him? So he can kill me too?” His eyes widen with every word, and it occurs to me that he might be on something. Surely, no normal person acts like this of their own volition.

A growl cuts him off, and before I can say anything else he lets go, reeling back, as a dark, furred shape lunges past me, hits the end of a leash, and comes back to the ground on all four paws. The dog, a large German Shepherd, barks and snarls, teeth bared, as the ex-cop trips over the discarded cup and nearly falls to his ass on the sidewalk.

“She asked you to let her go.” The smooth, velvety voice is not Wren’s, but I can’t help finding that there’s something similar in the sound. “Didn’t you hear her? Or have you really lost it for good, Detective?” The man who steps into the brick arch to stand beside me is tall, with curly, dark brown hair and dancing eyes full of wicked amusement. The dog, a huge German Shepherd, hits the end of the leash again, snarling, and the man doesn’t call him back. “Doesn’t seem like Vulcan likes you very much,” the man adds, not bothering to force the dog to stop his threats. “It would be a shame if my grip on his leash slipped. He might kill you.”

“I’d shoot him first,” the detective, or former detective, growls, groping for a gun that isn’t there. The man at my side watches, unimpressed.

“I’m sure you would. But why don’t you leave her alone? Or you’ll have bigger problems than my girlfriend’s dog shredding you to bits, I promise.”

The detective hesitates. “I’ll make you pay for this,” he promises, tight-lipped and panicking, but that seems to be his last line of defense. The detective flees, walking so fast it’s basically a trot as he shoves his trembling hands back into his

pockets and pretends to look like he's not terrified of the dog and the man beside me.

I know I am.

The dog calms down when the detective is gone, however, and turns to sniff my hands. He gives a quick tail wag, as if deciding I'm okay, and wanders back to sit beside the man instead, eyes on him only.

"Let me take a guess," he sighs, eyes still on the receding shape of the detective. "You must be Hazel."

I bristle internally at the words and take a step away from him, wondering if he's someone else who hates Wren. The man notices, and tears his lazy glare from the man to look at me, head tilted to the side. "You don't need to do that. I know who you are because Wren is my best friend, and he's told me so much about you that I could probably guess your favorite color by now."

"Oh, yeah?" I challenge uncertainly. "What is it?"

He rolls his eyes. "I mean that as a joke." He glances back up, a frown evident on his features, and adds, "I don't like that he knows so much about Wren. Or that he's trailing him so much. Detective Hartmann got fired from his department, like he said. But I think that's only made him more insistent to find my friend. You don't live far from here, right?"

"Right," I agree, hoping that he's telling me the truth. "Maybe."

He looks at me again, lips quirked in a frown. "I'm Virgil," he introduces finally, and something unwinds inside me as my ribs feel like they're unclenching from my lungs. "By that look, you've heard my name before."

"Wren mentioned you were supposed to come to dinner with us the other night," I admit, hands tightening into fists at my sides. "But you didn't because of your girlfriend."

"You'd like her, and I'd prefer that she were here," he admits quietly, looking away. "It's nothing personal, Hazel. I'm just not a people person."

No, but... My eyes drop to the dog that stares up at him with happy eyes and a slowly wagging tail. Apparently he's a dog person. From what I'd heard, this might be one of his girlfriend's dogs. Did he 'adopt' them when they started dating?

Is he just like Wren? And more to the point, I can't help but wonder what his girlfriend thinks of that.

"Let's go back to your apartment. I'm texting Wren, so I'm sure he'll meet us there. Hazel, I won't hurt you. I promise." He flashes me a quick, friendly smile that doesn't feel at all genuine, but I return it with a sardonic half grin of my own that makes him snort.

"I really hope you aren't lying to me," I admit, taking off back down the street so I can find out how far we are exactly from my place. "Otherwise Wren is going to kill me, if you haven't done it already by the time we're back."

"Oh, he'd kill me for it," Virgil assures me. "Best friend or not. If he feels the same way for you as I do for Sloane, then he'd tear me into little bits and feed me to the dogs."

"Cute," I reply, and look for the street sign to lead me home.

As soon as I open my door, Wren is there to sweep me up into a hug. The dog, Vulcan, meanders into the apartment alongside Virgil, and my cats stare at it with horrified curiosity.

"Are you all right?" He pulls me away to hold me at arm's length, searching my face. "He didn't hurt you?"

"He spilled coffee and ice on my shoes," I reply, heart pounding in my throat once more. Wren opens his mouth to say something, but I grab his hand that's on my arm and add. "He had a picture of you. And me. But you're the important thing right now, yeah? He shouldn't have a picture of you, or know who you are, and I think it might be my fault—" My words are becoming hysterical as I talk, but before I can continue, he crushes me against his chest once more.

“Thanks,” I hear him say to Virgil. “I’m happy you ran into her. I owe you one, Virgil.”

“You so do,” he agrees in that lazy tone he’s had since I’d met him. “Come by my apartment later. We should figure out what we’re going to do.”

“Tomorrow,” Wren insists, still holding onto me.

“She’s fine, Wren,” Virgil promises. “She’s not hurt. You don’t need to check her over for invisible wounds, I promise. Tomorrow morning. But we need to figure out what to do about your new friend.” He doesn’t say anything else, but I hear the sound of him leaving with Vulcan at his side, and their steps moving down the hallway after the door closes.

“He’s right,” I say into the material of Wren’s shirt. “I am fine. But I’m worried. What if he knows who you are, Wren? What if—”

Wren only pulls me away enough to kiss me hard. “He doesn’t know enough to find me,” he promises, dragging me backward, further into my apartment. “And he doesn’t know where you live, I don’t think. He doesn’t know that much. Eventually he will, but not right now. Are you sure you’re okay?”

“Yes, mother hen, I’m fine.” I grab his hand on my shoulder, voice still too-loud and too-high. “I’m sorry. If I messed up, or got caught somehow or—”

“I’m a serial killer, Hazel,” he reminds me, finally pulling me down onto his lap on the couch. “You know what that means. People are always looking for me. Sometimes they’re stupid and they get too close.” He kisses me hard, his hands finding the hem of my tee.

“Doesn’t that make them smart?” I point out when I’m finally able to break away. With wide eyes, I see the rueful, unfriendly grin curl on his lips, and the way his eyes darken with excitement as he says, “Oh no, no no, my little bunny. It doesn’t make them smart at all. Because not only has he earned himself death from me and my friends, he’s touched

what's *mine*. My little prey. My Hazel. Virgil told me he had his hands on you."

"Only for a minute," I reply, breathless, as he strokes his fingers up my arms.

"That's sixty seconds too long. I'll make it up to you, though. I'll cut off his fingers and make you a necklace. Then I'll remove his palms and make you a plate.

"That's fucked up."

"Then I'll just have to settle for ripping out his heart and putting it on your coffee table for your new centerpiece."

When I see him at the end of a street corner, I hesitate.

With his sunglasses and leather jacket that stands out in the August heat, it's easy to tell the detective apart from anyone else. My stomach does a quick flip, and I'm almost glad that Wren isn't here for him to see.

He can't hurt me in a crowd. Probably. I haven't done anything, in my opinion, to warrant being shot or arrested for. But then again, according to Wren and Virgil, he's off his rocker and doesn't have a badge anymore. I'm sure that makes him more dangerous, and I bite my lip as he stares at me from across the street.

Thankfully, the traffic whizzing by separates us, and the light won't be changing for a few seconds. There's really nothing he can do except scowl, which he's obviously perfected if the look on his face is anything to go by.

His presence makes my stomach curl with nausea and brings sweat to my palms, but I refuse to let him see it on my face. Instead, I force myself to think about something else. Anything else. Like the fact I need to stock up on toothpaste.

I turn away from him, sniffing in distaste, to face the street that I've ended up on thanks to the bus. I don't know this side of town well. It's too expensive for me, first of all. And second, I don't know anyone here.

Well, *didn't* know anyone here. Wren lives here, as per the address he's given me, and so does Virgil. At least, that's what I've been told. When I'd asked if Jed lives here too, both of

them had shaken their heads and told me that he lives somewhere in a suburb in a nice house with a nice mailbox and no one else to bother him.

Seems like a lonely time to me, but what do I know? I live on my own as well, with two howling cats who rarely shut up and clearly like Wren more than me.

I keep walking down the street, passing on by Wren's duplex instead of stopping and knocking. I fish out my phone as I go, and turn the corner at the end of the street like this place wasn't my destination at all. Casually, I pull up my text conversation with Wren.

He's following me again. I don't want to lead him to you.

My heart pounds at the idea, at the very suggestion, of leading him to my boyfriend, and my shaking fingers tighten on my phone as I watch the *delivered* status change to *read*.

The text bubble pops up a second later.

Okay.

Then, after a few seconds, I get another message.

Do another loop around. A friend of mine is going to meet you outside. She'll act like the place is hers, and he won't know that it's mine. Unless he does already. It's okay, little bunny. You're fine.

Good, I send back, glancing up so I don't walk off the sidewalk and into the road. *I was scared I'd have to do something drastic.*

He reacts to my message with a laughing emoji.

Like what? Hop in another direction? It's fine, I promise.

I take his word for it and shove the phone back into my pocket as I make my way around the block again. I hadn't been considering running and hiding or hopping the other way.

I'd meant something less legal.

The thought, and the conviction of it, surprises me. Is Wren rubbing off on me? Surely I'm not a violent person like

him. One who's okay with doing something bloody or painful to help someone who's broken the law.

I'm not a monster like Wren, though that pill gets easier to swallow every day.

He's a serial killer.

I take a few steps and glance back over my shoulder, scanning for him once more.

Wren is a monster, but more importantly, he's mine. My serial killer, my monster.

My boyfriend who killed someone in front of me and got their blood all over my face. And if I'm starting to feel like I'd help him do it to someone who deserved it, then that's a problem for another day. I can't be in love with him. That's some *folie à deux* shit right there that I refuse to look into or *give* into.

Especially not today, as my feet carry me back around the block and I catch sight of the black leather jacket that pegs him as different in the crowd.

A bark catches my attention, and my eyes land on the dog that Virgil had been walking before. Only this time, there's a girl walking him, maybe a year or so older than me, and when she meets my gaze, she grins and waves at me like we're old friends.

"Hazel!" the brunette calls, her voice warm. "I told you that you missed it. I'm sorry you had to walk around the block again."

This must be Wren's friend. More accurately, I wonder if this is *Sloane*, who I've heard a few things about.

"Hey!" I greet, jogging the rest of the way to her. She nods down at Vulcan and I reach out, letting him sniff my hand like I've done this a thousand times before.

At least this time he isn't barking or growling his head off like he wants to eat someone. That's promising. I pet him, stroking his dark ears as I grin up at my 'friend.' "I can't believe I missed it," I say, catching sight of the black leather

from the corner of my eye. Sloane does too, and I notice for the first time that her eyes are different colors, with one of them being a light brown and the other medium blue. It's pretty, if a little jarring.

"Vulcan missed you," she adds, when the detective loiters and finds any excuse to stop walking. "I've missed you too. I can't believe you haven't come by to see my new place."

"I've been busy," I remind her, like it's true. As though we aren't just doing this to put on a show for the man not ten feet away. "Want to go in?" There's no point in pretending I don't know he's there. I can be as uncomfortable as I want, because that's not an act and he wouldn't believe otherwise. "I'm starving."

"I ordered food," Sloane promises, and gestures for me to follow her back into the small, well-manicured courtyard of the first duplex. Altogether, there are four units split between two buildings, and I look around with interest while walking right behind Sloane.

It's only in the moments before the door closes behind me that I turn around to look at the detective, who's shrugging his coat further onto his shoulders and turning to stomp away.

Both of us pause, and I watch him through the thick, wavy glass of the window.

"He's leaving," Sloane promises lightly, though her voice is a little unsure, like she's not quite certain. "It's okay. Wren says there's no way he knows that he lives here."

"How? Can't the cops just find out that his name is on the lease?" I ask, following her further into the open living room.

"My name's not on it," Wren says, padding into the room with a wry grin. "Or else he probably would. Thanks, Sloane." He wraps an arm around her in a quick hug, sealing my suspicions about her identity.

She grimaces at him. "Just remember this the next time you want to insult the dogs," she says, poking at his side. Another dog, a German Shepherd like Vulcan, gets up and

stretches, walking to Sloane and scenting her leg like there's something to find while she unclips the other from the leash.

"I'm Sloane," she introduces, turning to me with a rueful smile. "Though I guess you already know that. And you're Hazel. Who is somehow crazy enough to want to put up with Mr. Camper." She throws a quick, pointed look at Wren, who smiles sweetly in return.

"You love camping with me," he points out. Virgil walks into the room and lounges on the large, plush sofa as he adds, "Since your boyfriend only wants to go *glamping*."

"It's not glamping," Virgil complains. "It's in a fucking cabin. And I'm sorry I'm not a wilderness junkie like the two of you. Well, three of you, I guess?" he looks at me and I shake my head.

"No, oh God no. I would never sleep in a tent or out in the open. Sorry," I apologize, hoping that's not offensive to the brunette.

"Not even if it's with me?" Wren asks, eyes wide.

"Especially not with you."

Sloane snorts as she falls onto the sofa with Virgil, and I look over as she leans up against him, letting his arm fall over her shoulders so he can pull her close. As he does, something seems to melt out of her. Some fear or tension that I hadn't noticed until now. I can't help but wonder if she's okay, or if something about me being here or so near her is a problem.

Does she not like me? Or maybe I just smell. Nervously, I reach my hand up to finger comb my hair in the safety-spots that are always mostly tangle free. Wren steps forward to hug me, his chin on my head as he pulls me into a recliner.

"So... what am I doing here?" I ask, though I feel like it's probably rude, so I add, "Not that I'm upset about it. I just thought it didn't feel like you were inviting me here to hang out."

"We didn't," Virgil assures me in that off-handed way that he seems to have for everyone other than Sloane. For her it's

all soft glances, and even when he talks about her it's sweet, unless he's telling Wren to keep his words to himself.

Does he love her?

More importantly, does he love her like Wren loves me? If so, I'd love to sit down and talk to her about it. About how she met him, or how she feels about what he does. Is she upset about the fact that he kills people?

Does she help?

I take in a breath as Wren drags me back to him, breaking my concentration and making me realize that they're talking.

"We're planning on how to get your boyfriend out of trouble," Virgil explains, eyes on mine. "He fucked up, Hazel. And now someone's looking for him. Rule number one of being a serial killer." Sloane snorts at his honey-sweet tone. "Don't be a spree killer."

"I thought it would've been don't get caught," I point out, glancing back at Wren.

"Well, it probably should be," my stalker admits. "But that's a lot easier to do if you aren't on a spree."

"Are... you?"

"I was," he says after a moment, and it's so nonchalant that it feels like he isn't bothered by that at all.

"What stopped you?"

"You have to ask?" he murmurs, as he adjusts his grip. "I kill people for fun. More than our other friends combined, probably. I'm not afraid to admit that to you, or tell you that out of all of us, I'm always the most likely to get caught. I get *bored*, and some people are just..." His gaze goes dreamy and distant. "Just my type, I guess."

"But not anymore?"

"No."

"Because...?" I wish he'd get to the point, the reason, or whatever.

“Because, Hazel. Now I have you. And you’re so much more interesting than taking people apart could ever be.”

When I tear my gaze away from Wren, my eyes land on Virgil, who's grinning with open amusement that brings heat to my face and the undeniable urge to squirm. "Don't say shit like that in front of other people," I mutter, like I'm not too late to save face.

Not that Wren cares. He chuckles, amusement plain on his gorgeous face, and settles forward to lean against my back. "I think we can admit I'm not a spree killer," he protests, as the doorknob turns on the other side of the room, making me tense.

Vulcan, the more agitated and moody of the two dogs it would seem, gives a bark to alert the room as the door opens, revealing Cass and Jed.

"Did you know there's a cop circling around?" Cass asks, closing the door behind Jed, who remains quiet. The blond-haired, shy man walks over to sit on the floor in front of Vulcan, and for a brief moment, I worry the dog is going to eat him, or at the very least, bark at him.

But seconds later, Vulcan is rolling on the floor, Jed's fingers expertly scratching his chest as his tail thumps on the floor.

"Ex-cop," Virgil clarifies, eyeing Jed lazily. Is it because he's so close to Sloane? In a lot of ways, he does remind me of Wren. They all do, to a certain extent. "And yeah, he's pretty sure he's caught up with Wren and thinks he's responsible for the murders this year."

“Are you responsible for all of them?” I ask, turning to look at him in surprise as I move to sit on the arm of the chair instead of his thigh.

Wren smiles up at me sweetly. “I sure am.”

“How many have there been?” The question should bother me more, but it doesn’t. Instead, I find that I’m just curious to know, rather than upset or frightened. Besides, I doubt it’s more than three or four bodies, not including Brett.

“Uh, seven,” he says, a little bit unhappily.

“*Seven?!?*” I have no idea how he hasn’t been caught already. That feels like a lot, though it’s not like I have any kind of experience with murder.

Murder. He’s a fucking murderer.

“Yeah. I got a little carried away after the new year,” he admits.

“Why?” I can’t help but ask, but he just looks at Jed, an eyebrow raised.

“That dog is going to *eat you* one day,” he informs his friend, who snorts and shakes his head. “And won’t that be poetic for you?”

“Ironic,” Jed muses, not looking up. “Not really poetic, I wouldn’t think. But then again, how would you know? You were never into poetry, anyway.”

“So Wren’s a spree killer now,” Cass adds, dragging in a chair from the dining room. It makes a dreadful noise on the hardwood floor that has Wren looking less than thrilled, but he doesn’t verbally protest when Cass falls into it and sighs, rucking a hand through his hair. “If Kat were here, she’d end you,” he points out, brows raising as he looks Wren over. “You should be happy she’s not.”

Who the hell is Kat?

“Whatever.” I’ve never seen Wren act like a petulant child who’s getting scolded, but that’s what it feels like. Especially right now, when it seems like he’s shut down and doesn’t want to talk about whatever it is they’re implying, other than his

impending death. “Look. Hartmann isn’t the only problem. He’s the main issue, sure, but he has friends. They’re still in the department, and they’re starting to talk. If it’s more than just him, maybe I *would* have some kind of issue.” Not that he sounds particularly bothered by it.

“But you can’t kill him,” Virgil points out, drawing Sloane closer to him. “That’s just asking for it. From what I hear, the others in his former department know why he left, and that he’s obsessed with you. If he dies because he was looking into his leads, then...” He doesn’t finish, but he doesn’t need to.

“What if one of you did it?” Sloane suggests, like the idea is obvious. “Make it look like he got tangled up with something he shouldn’t have, but give Wren an honest alibi.”

“It’s a better option,” Cass admits dubiously. “But it still gives all of us more attention than we’d like. Still, if we can’t think of anything else, then I’ll do it.”

“Let me.” Jed’s voice is light and sudden, and he looks up with a sweet, rueful grin. “No one looks at me like they do the rest of you. I haven’t killed anyone in years, and never around here.” His pale blue eyes seem to lighten as he talks, until they’re ghostly and creepy. “Besides. All of you dispose of bodies in the obvious ways. You’re creative, somewhat. But predictable. They’ll never find him if I do it. Not like they would from you.”

The way he talks sends shudders up my spine. I thought he seemed too nice to kill anyone... until now. Now, it feels like I’m looking at someone else.

“But I’ll need a chainsaw,” he points out. “And a hammer. But I could—”

“No,” Wren and Virgil cut him off together, and Wren frowns with concern as he shakes his head and trades a look with Sloane’s boyfriend.

“No,” Virgil says again, worry etched in his face. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I don’t either,” Wren agrees. “I appreciate it, Jed. But I think we’d all be safer if you didn’t.”

Jed only shrugs, the scary light fading from his eyes as he goes back to giving the dog belly rubs. From the sofa, the other dog watches, but doesn't leave his place there with his paws on Sloane's lap.

"What if none of you did?" I ask, trying to put a few stray thoughts together. "What if none of you killed him, so there was no way to think you were involved at all?"

"But that's the problem here, Hazel," Virgil reminds me, not unkindly. "They already believe your boyfriend is a homicidal maniac with a tendency to chop people up with a machete. And sooner or later, even an idiot can be right. Currently, Hartmann is the idiot, and he's running out of chances to be wrong. The odds aren't quite in our favor this time, I don't think."

"Not in my favor, you mean," Wren points out with a sigh. "But he's right. It's do or die. For either of us."

"Yeah, I'm not arguing with that. But I just meant what if none of *you* kill him? If it's clear as day that none of you did it, and the department knows it too, then wouldn't that be it? None of them are dogging you like him, so..." I shrug, glancing back at an unsure, almost worried Wren. "What?"

"Hazel..." he trails off, worry creasing his features. "I'm not letting you kill someone for me. Or go to jail for me."

My mouth quirks into a frown. "I'm not offering to. Contrary to what you're thinking, I'd like to stay out of jail or a grave, too. No, I mean, what if another cop kills him?"

"And why would they do that?" Cass asks, his voice interested but carefully non-judgmental.

"Hartmann is insane, or getting there," I remind them, looking at Virgil for confirmation. The brunet nods his agreement, not hesitating. "And he thinks that I know all of Wren's secrets, or that I can lead him to them. He follows me. Especially lately, he's been following me more. I know he doesn't believe my lies, and he gets angry. He gets kind of violent." Memories of the day Virgil had gotten him away from me flash through my head, fueling my plan. "But what if

that's a good thing? He gets so angry when I lie, or when I deny that I have anything to do with it. Maybe I force a confrontation with him, and we set it up so other cops come? What if..." I trail off, thinking. "What if we make someone else kill him? Like a police officer. If he's a danger to the public, and we're in a public place, then surely they'd have to. Right? Surely they wouldn't just let him walk away or keep going, and at the very least they'd put him in jail and discredit his theories of Wren... maybe?"

I look up, realizing that there's a strong possibility my plan is stupid.

"Well, that's elaborate," Virgil points out dryly. "And dangerous. You want her to do something like that?" The question isn't for me, but for Wren.

My serial killer shrugs carefully. "No," he admits, turning his dark gaze on mine. "I don't want to do anything to hurt her. And I can't promise that I won't kill him if he gets violent with you, Hazel. And then your plan is ruined, and I go to jail anyway." His smile is wry, making my heart sink.

"Then don't go," Cass says firmly. "There are four of us. You don't need to be there."

Wren opens his mouth to argue, but Virgil cuts him off to say, "No, he's right. And your girlfriend is right. *Hazel*, is right," he corrects himself, like I've finally earned my name being used in a room of serial killers. "It's a good idea, if it works."

If I don't die doing it.

"You just need to be somewhere else entirely."

When the door slams behind Virgil, I give it a few seconds. Instead of following an angry Wren to his kitchen, I wait in the living room, wishing that there was still someone here to talk to other than my brooding boyfriend.

He's angry with me.

While I'm not afraid of *him*, it still makes me nervous. It makes me worry that I've fucked up and messed this up for us.

Though I can't help but think that even if I have, if at the end of the day my plan works, Wren will still be safe.

"Here." A cold can of Coke presses against my temple, making me yelp, and I look up into his face, surprised he's back. I hadn't heard him, but it feels like one of his greatest talents is moving silently. "You look upset," he adds, not moving when I take the can.

"I look upset?" There's a nervous tone to my voice that I wish wasn't there, but it is what it is. "You kicked out your friends, basically. You seem *really* upset over this. At me."

He sighs and leans against the column behind him that separates the living room from the dining room and kitchen. "Not like that," he says finally. "Not like you think. I'm not mad at you, little bunny. How could I ever be mad at you?"

"Well, the way your face looks, you're giving it your best effort."

He glances my way, a grin catching at his lips before he smooths it away with his hand. "Are you hungry?" he asks, gesturing for me to follow him. "And surely you want to see more of my place than just the living room."

He's right, though my stomach flips and twists nervously, like he's going to blow up at me in the next minute. Still I follow him, silently admiring the large dining room table with matching chairs, and the granite topped counter that I nearly bump into on my way after Wren.

There's a bowl of fruit on the counter, like this is some show home, and when I eye it, Wren snorts. "It's not for show or something. I really like apples, and bananas are good for you." On a second look, I realize the bowl is *only* apples and bananas.

What an adorable weirdo.

"I'm just trying to help you. Because I don't want you going to prison, or getting killed," I say, sliding onto a bar stool as he sets his own drink down beside me and goes to the fridge to rustle in it. I can't help but think, though, that he isn't hungry so much as looking for something to do.

“I know,” he says at last, straightening. “That’s what makes it worse, you know? I hate that I’m the one putting you in this position.” He comes over to lean on the counter in front of me, his hands inches from mine around my drink. “If I could go back to the start of this year, I’d tell myself to hold back. To stop. There were a few times I could’ve. And my friends think I *should’ve*. But I’m not exactly like them.”

“Because they don’t go on sprees?”

He snorts at that, shaking his head. “Cass kills people that remind him of someone. He has a type, and there’s normally only a few times of year he even *feels* like killing people. It’s why we all have a nice party on Halloween night and lock him in. Otherwise, it would be the Halloween of 2019 all over again.”

I have no idea what that means, but I don’t ask.

“Jed hasn’t killed anyone in years. I don’t even know much about it, except that his family are...” He looks at me, and I raise my brows. “They’re cannibals,” he says at last. “But I’ve seen him get like he was earlier a few times. It worries me. I don’t know if he’d be able to stop, if he were ever to start again. So we try not to let him. And Virgil, for all his arrogance and his threats, has killed less than Cass *or* I have. He’s soft, but don’t tell him that.”

“He doesn’t seem like it,” I admit.

“He doesn’t *want* to seem like it,” Wren chuckles.

“So what about you, then? You were leading up to telling me why you’re different.”

“I’ve killed more than all of my friends combined,” Wren says without hesitation, his eyes dark as he taps his finger on the table. “Easily. I bet you could double their numbers and still not match mine. Do you want to know what sets me off, Hazel?”

“Yeah?” I whisper; feeling like this is the most interesting secret I’ve ever heard in my life.

“Nothing.”

But the answer is anything but the great secret I was expecting. He must see the confusion on my face, because he grins and leans closer to me, lowering his voice to whisper conspiratorially, “Because I don’t need a trigger. I don’t need a type. *Everyone* is my type, and I’m always looking for a reason.”

The words, even if they aren’t a threat to me, cause me to go cold. It’s an instinctual reaction. One that comes from my very DNA, not my brain or my heart. My own feelings chase it away a second later, but I can’t help the way those words echoed in my body, just for a second.

Wren is a monster.

But, more happily, it’s not something that bothers me very much.

“Could you maybe like, not so much?” I ask lightly, turning to look at him with a small smile. “I like to think I’m not doing this for nothing. Like, I don’t want to have to do it again anytime soon.”

He looks at me, surprise coloring his features, and scoffs. It turns into a full, meaningful laugh, and Wren kisses my cheek before he stands up. “I love you,” he tells me, like a punch to the chest. “Maybe not like other people. Maybe it’s not normal love at all, but Hazel?” He meets my eyes, still smiling. “I fucking love you to death.”

Happily, that doesn’t give me pause. It doesn’t scare me like it would’ve a week ago, or two weeks ago. It just makes me roll my eyes. “You love the idea of me getting rid of *your* stalker,” I accuse, trying to keep this light. Do I love him back?

Can I love him back?

Yes, a small voice inside my head whispers. *You can, and you do.*

But does that make me a monster, too?

“But I *wish* you weren’t going there tonight,” Wren admits quietly. “I’m so fucking worried for you, little bunny. I’d rather just kill them all and do it that way.”

“That’s a stupid way.”

“Well, it’s *my* way.”

He walks away, back to the fridge, before announcing he’s going to go grab something out of the pantry. I watch him go, head on my hand as I rest my elbow on the counter under me. I’m terrified, but I don’t want him to know. Because even though Cass is going to be there to try to make sure I *don’t* end up dead, I still have the terrible nagging feeling that I might, anyway. Or that he won’t be enough to help me.

I can only hope that I’m completely wrong, and this will go smoother than I ever could hope it would. Then, by morning, Wren will be free of this shadow trailing him and can stop worrying about a bullet to the back of the head or spending the rest of his life in prison.

This is a bad idea.

Well, to be fair, it's the only idea we could come up with. The only one I could really figure out how to execute, and no one else was saying anything else, so if it's a bad idea, it's the best of the worst.

Though, I'm not sure if that's a compliment, when I think about it in those terms.

A breath of anxiety builds in my chest, and I stand at the corner of the street as a bus goes by, intent on the station that's so close behind me that the bus slows almost to a complete halt in my face. My eyes go up as I think, barely focusing on it, and only for a second do I see the flashing sign in the front of it proclaiming *Springwood, Ohio*, before it makes the turn into the station.

I never come to this side of town. It's not the greatest, that's for sure. But that's what makes this a better idea than doing it on, say, the steps of the museum. At least here, even if Wren and his friends are in the shadows, they probably won't be recognized. For their part, Virgil and Jed blend in seamlessly, and I have no idea where they are. I don't even know what they could look like today, since it's obvious they won't be looking like themselves. No, they'd decided that since Hartmann knows about Wren, there's just as much of a chance he knows their faces too.

I'm the only one who can risk this.

I don't see the detective either, though I know for sure he's not that far away. I've gotten used to the feeling of being watched, and it's here, in full force, like eyes burning holes into my back.

"Excuse me." The soft words make me jump, even as my brain registers that they're not coming from anyone I know. I whirl anyway, like I'm in danger, but the man behind me only lifts a brow and watches me do it. "Did I scare you?" There's a backpack over one shoulder, and a week's worth of a beard on his angular, handsome face. His light brown eyes, deep set over a too-large nose, never leave mine, even when he reaches up to run a hand through chestnut hair.

"Sorry. I'm always pretty jumpy," I lie, wondering if he'd just hopped off the bus that's now parked outside the terminal. "Am I... in your way?" I can't help but ask, confused about what he wants.

"No." He smiles kindly, and when I see the lines around his eyes deepen, I peg him at being in his mid to late thirties. Older than Wren and his friends, for sure. But not by much. "Do you know what the fastest way to Baltianic University is? I'd prefer not to take another bus, but if that's the best way to go..." He shrugs lean shoulders under a light black jacket. "I'm sorry again for frightening you."

"You didn't." I watch as he flexes his fingers again, like he can't keep his hands still or they ache. "I'd take an Uber if I were you," I say finally. "The bus would be brutal to go that far across the city. And it's late, so you won't have a great time."

He grimaces, but the look smooths away as he finds my gaze with his once more. "Thank you," the man says, like he really means it or I've done something other than give him lazy advice. "I hope your night starts going better."

I smile at him, unsure if it's happy or just as painful as my twisting, nervous insides are becoming. "No problem." I expect him to leave then, but he holds my eyes for another second, and I swear I hear him humming softly.

But then he shrugs and moves, heading up the sidewalk toward a line of restaurants that are normally open until midnight or later. I spare him a few seconds of my time before shaking my head to clear it, and quickly walk across the street like I'd just lost my train of thought.

And not like I'm urging the detective to follow me deeper into the warehouse district.

The lights from cars, shops, and the posts along the street cast creepier, more anxiety-inducing shadows than I'd hoped for. Despite the rising fear, I walk like I have a purpose. Like this is all part of some thought out plan to get to some destination, and not the winding trail of invisible breadcrumbs I'm trying to leave for the police officer.

I try not to look as hurried as I feel. So I stop and look inside a bakery window and even read the poster about a musical that's making its journey from Broadway to Akron. I scuff my feet on one corner and compliment the dog that's milling about, then cross the street again with the pair and wish the owner well before I break off from her.

Warehouses line the streets in front of me, along with a decrease in available lighting that gives me some pause. But I trust Wren and the others, and I remind myself that I'm not really alone here.

Well, especially since now that there are fewer people around, ex-detective Hartmann's presence is pretty obvious. Stupidly, he's still wearing his sunglasses, even this late at night when it's almost one am, and his black, slick jacket is another dead giveaway with the gold star embroidered on the pocket.

One that, from what I hear, he no longer has a right to wear.

Surely if he still is some kind of detective, or isn't completely crazy, he'd know that it makes him recognizable and obvious. Just like the glasses.

Is something wrong with him?

The thought is almost enough to stop me in my tracks. If something is wrong, if he's got a screw loose and rolling around his head to cause even more damage, is this such a good idea?

Well, surely the others have already thought of that.

I turn onto Danvers Street, happy I'm not too afraid to forget where I'm going, and finally slow my steps, trying to look 'lost.'

Which isn't hard when I've never been here before.

The steps behind me slow and finally stop, and I turn around sharply, like I haven't known he was following me. A low sound leaves me, and I back up in fear, the look on my face probably too dramatic for the anxiety I feel.

"What do you want?" I yell, loud enough for someone nearby to hear. It's empty, but not empty enough for me to go unnoticed. After all, the plan is for the public to hear my distress and call the police.

Then, when the police come, they'll have to do something about Hartmann. He'll go to jail, or something. Maybe he'll just get in trouble with his former superiors. But either way, threatening a twenty-something year old girl won't look good on his record. It can't.

Hartmann stops, a harsh and unfriendly grin on his features. "What the hell are you doing out here?" he snaps, adjusting his jacket enough that I can see the gun at his hip. It makes my breath catch, and my heart stutters in my chest. This is the terrifying part, because he really *could* hurt me.

"You have a gun?!" I pitch my voice higher, hands upraised, and from the corners of my eyes I see a few people look up and take notice, though most of them speed in the other direction or freeze. "Please leave me alone!" I back up, feeling almost as terrified as I'm making myself seem.

It all feels a little bit like kindergarten to me. Back then there had been a girl who didn't like me, and she'd pretended that one day, on the low balance beam in the middle of the rock covered playground, that I'd punched her.

Of course, I'd never punched anyone in my life. And I wasn't about to start with her. I'd been too afraid of her, for one. Not to mention I wasn't exactly a violent child. But she'd made me out to be the worst kid on the playground that day. She'd doubled over in pain, wailing about me doing it when I'd come up behind her. The teachers had rushed over and even though I'd cried just as hard as she had, they'd put me in timeout for the rest of recess and called my parents for a conference.

Years later, Emily had admitted that she'd lied, and it was all a ploy to get me into trouble. But by then we weren't little kids, and it was something to roll my eyes at, not cry over.

And this certainly has higher stakes than the playground. Still, I channel Emily as best as I can, and dart into the warehouse behind me that I'd already visited when we'd planned this hours ago. Thankfully, back then, Hartmann had been off for the break he always took around three in the afternoon, leaving us to scheme and me to nearly pass out from anxiety.

"Wait!" He doesn't draw his gun, but predictably follows me into the warehouse like I knew he would. His footsteps echo on the stone floor, and I don't go too far in before whirling and coming to a hard stop, still looking petrified.

By now, Jed or Virgil would have called the cops.

I put my hands up in front of me, doing my best to 'talk him down' as I interrupt him at every turn. My heart pounds in fear the whole time I do, and every time I beg him to leave me alone yet again, I can see more and more red creeping up his face. Like his irritation is increasing by the second.

God, I hope he doesn't shoot me.

If he does, then Wren will kill him, go to jail, and none of us will live happily ever after.

If he does, it'll probably hurt like a bitch.

"Why are you following me?" I beg, straining for the sound of distant sirens. "Please, please just leave me alone!"

“You know why!” he snaps, with more control than I expect. “You know what he is, and so do I.”

“No, I don’t know what you’re talking about! He’s my boyfriend, but that’s it. He comes to the flower shop and we go on dates! We talk about anthropology and cats. You’re making our lives miserable and you won’t leave me alone!”

There they are. During a breath I take to steady myself, I hear the distant sound of sirens. Thankfully, we aren’t far from a station, so it hasn’t taken officers long to show up. They screech to a halt outside, and Hartmann looks more frustrated than anything.

But he isn’t... angry. Not like the other day. Not like I’d expected. *I need him to be angry.*

If he isn’t, and he can explain things to the cops coming in, then I’m screwed. At the very least, this will be a lot harder and I don’t have anyone to help me.

Doors close outside and Hartmann rolls his eyes, looking more exasperated than anything, as two cops run into the warehouse, guns drawn.

Only... this isn’t exactly the scene we’d needed them to walk in on.

Where’s the furious, screaming detective? The one who couldn’t control himself and had threatened me?

“Finally,” he grumps, looking at the two of them. “I told you to hurry up.”

“Sorry,” the darker-haired one says, and turns to look at me, gun pointing at the ground. “You’re under arrest,” he says, and the words make my brain go white and terror to grip me.

“For *what?*” I ask, taking a nervous step back.

This isn’t how things are supposed to go.

Had my plan really been so bad?

“For aiding and abetting a suspected killer.”

“But he’s not—”

“But he is. And I think we both know it,” Hartmann interrupts, more confident than I’ve ever seen him. Was the other day an act? A one time thing? He’s been brutal in his tracking of me. Relentless. Surely all of that wasn’t an act to try to push me into doing something stupid.

Surely he wasn’t just trying to needle me into doing something that would have Wren crawling out of the woodwork to help.

“How do you know that?” I demand. “Why do you have such a hate boner for my boyfriend?”

Hartmann smiles darkly and opens his mouth, the words unkind and unfriendly as they flow through my ears and into my head. I should be afraid of them. Afraid of the explanations and how he’s been waiting for a chance to prove it all.

He threatens me.

I hear it, though none of it processes in my brain.

How can it, when the man from the bus station stands behind them, one long, metal claw to his lips as he silently stalks closer to the police officers?

But the real reason the air is knocked out of me isn’t because of his clawed hands, or the finger to his lips. It isn’t because he’s stalking closer, no. It’s because with every step and every breath, I see it in his face.

He’s going to kill them.

My eyes flick back to the officers and I fight the urge to look around for Jed and Virgil. They should be here. They'd *promised* to be here.

But they aren't as far as I can see.

Worse, this man is a stranger. I'm willing to bet he's a stranger to Akron, and if Wren knows him, he sure as hell didn't tell me.

"Are you listening to me?" Hartmann walks forward, brandishing handcuffs, and I blink up at him, eyes wide. He reaches out to grip my wrist, fingers hard and clammy.

Stupidly, I ask, "Weren't you kicked off the force?"

His smile grows sinister on his lips, eyes glinting. "And who told you a thing like that? Everyone knew how close I was to catching Wren. And I thought maybe, just maybe, if I made you believe I didn't have the department behind me, you'd do something you wouldn't normally do." He looks up at the warehouse with an appraising eye, frowning. "Don't know what the hell this is, though. Why would you come here? And to beg for the police?" He snorts. "Who did you think you were running from?"

"I'd say she was running from me." The man slides forward in a graceful movement before the other two can turn. Even Hartmann doesn't react quickly enough, and the stranger's metal claws attached to leather gloves on his hands stab into the throat of one of the police officers.

Time seems to slow as the other raises his gun, but with one hand on my wrist and the other holding cuffs, Hartmann doesn't even think to go for his sidearm.

Before the second officer can fire a shot, the man wrenches him around, gripping his face in one hand and wrapping his other arm around the officer's shoulders.

I know what he's going to do just as the officer does, and fear flickers in his eyes.

"Oh God, please, no—" He screams once as the man twists, then again right before a sickening crunch meets my ears and the man falls to the floor, limbs jerking.

"What's wrong, officer?" he purrs, twisting his fingers so the claws make soft *shhkh shhkh* noises as they rub together. "You've been looking for me for this long. I thought you'd be happy to see me."

He's lying.

Something uncoils in me at the stranger's words, because he's covering for Wren. He isn't telling the truth about the murders, but Officer Hartmann doesn't know that.

Officer Hartmann is currently looking at the two men on the ground, his hands trembling. "Go," he hisses, shoving me backward. I stumble back a few steps, lips pressed together as I fight not to shake. My hands curl into fists, and I watch the stranger round on Hartmann as the latter finally goes for his gun.

"I wouldn't," the stranger warns, and I wonder if he knows, somehow, that Hartmann's gun will get stuck in its holster, causing him to have to give two additional tugs.

But surely, he hadn't. There's no way for him to have known. He's just human, like me. He's not some psychic, or something worse.

Maybe it's just fate.

The stranger lunges forward, punching Hartmann and slashing at him with metal claws that sound like fingernails on a chalkboard when they hit one of the many metal fixtures in

the warehouse. He doesn't give the officer a chance, only moves around him and out of his reach. When Hartmann does finally get his gun free, the stranger slaps it out of his hand, surprisingly graceful even with the claws.

And I just watch. I back up another step, scanning my memory for anything Wren might have said about another 'friend.'

But I certainly can't think of a damn thing.

Finally, Hartmann lets out a pained cry, his voice low and reluctant, like he doesn't want to give the man even that admission of injury. The stranger grins and hits him again, showing that the back of his gloves are inlaid with metal as well. There's a spatter of blood, and when Hartmann tries to run, it's in my direction.

The stranger hits him again with those metal backed, deadly gloves, and he goes down in a slump, blood splattering on my chest and bare arms.

Hartmann doesn't get up. The other two cops don't either, and it's easy to see why. One lies in a pool of his own blood, the claws having hit an artery in his throat. The other, who'd had his neck broken, lies with eyes that stare sightlessly at the door, like he wished in the end he could've just run.

Even though this man has saved my life, I can't help the way my heart pounds. I can't help the terror I feel as he looks over his work, whistling a low tune from pressed-together lips.

"Th-thank you," I whisper, having to swallow to get some moisture back into my bone-dry mouth. "You saved me."

"They didn't seem to like you very much," the man agrees, kicking Hartmann gently. "Especially this one. Were you trying to lead him here, little one?"

The nickname immediately makes me uncomfortable. I reach up to hug myself, eyes never leaving his. "You don't know?" I was so hopeful he knew Wren that the question puts me on edge.

The stranger looks up, eyebrows furrowing in interest. "Should I know something about why you're here?"

“I just. Umm.” I lick my lips and look around, still finding no sign of Virgil or Jed. “I thought you might know my boyfriend. That’s all. I thought you did it to pull suspicion off of him... like I was trying to do.”

“You didn’t do very well.” Now that his eyes are on mine, he won’t look away. He prowls closer, the claws making that *shhk shhkhk* sound at his side as he moves his fingers. “What’s got your boyfriend in so much trouble that the police are dogging you, too? I guess you knew you were being followed at the bus station as well.”

I nod, my heart in my throat.

Up until now, I haven’t been truly afraid tonight. I’ve been apprehensive, anxious, and scared.

But not *terrified* like I am right now. The icy fear that wraps around me has me nearly locked in place, and I’m barely able to take a step back before the stranger’s hand comes up to cradle my jaw, the metal of his six-inch claws still glinting with blood.

“Who are you?” I whisper, feeling like the little rabbit Wren has always pegged me to be. Because I can’t run. I can’t even *move*.

All I can do is stare into the face of the hunter who might be the one to finally kill me.

His other hand comes up, causing my breathing to quicken, and I can’t help the shudder that runs through me as the back of one claw strokes against my face. My knees feel like jelly, and my palms are so clammy I wouldn’t be surprised if I leave handprints everywhere for the next hour.

If I live that long.

At my shivering, the man inhales. His eyes widen, like he can scent my fear, and he leans in until his face is only a few inches from mine. He is so close, I can smell the dark, musky cologne that sticks to him like a cloak.

“Oh my,” he purrs, not answering my question. “I guess I’m touching someone else’s property... aren’t I?” He looks up and jerks backward, just as Wren appears at my side. Though I

have no idea how he's carried it around all night, he grips a machete in a white-knuckled grip as he stares at the claw-wielding man.

"How dare you?" he whispers, eyes wide. "How dare you touch her?" He moves to stand in front of me, one hand on my shoulder, and asks, "Did he hurt you, Hazel?"

"N-no," I say, then realize that there's warmth on my cheek.

Am I crying?

I reach up to my face, and the stranger's lips twist into a smile. "I only marked her a little," he admits, as I draw away a droplet of blood left by his claws. "She's fine."

"What are you doing here?"

"Saving her, apparently. Are you the boyfriend they were looking for? The one they accused of murder?" His eyes dip to the machete, then flick back up to Wren. "If you are, you must be sloppy. They would've killed her. And I think your two friends were supposed to be here... were they not? Or maybe I'm thinking of two others who were trying to come to the warehouse and were detained by the cops that are patrolling extra heavily tonight."

Wren pauses, and the man takes the moment to continue. "Oh, they're fine too. But they called you, didn't they? They were *worried* about her. Maybe you, too?"

"He killed them," I whisper, looking at the bodies. "He broke his neck and stabbed the other. And the detective—"

"I left him alive," the stranger interrupts. "I thought that was the right call. Since I took the responsibility for your crimes and all. Don't worry. I doubt he'll remember much. And if he does..." The man shrugs. "I won't be here for long."

He moves to walk away, but Wren blocks him. I hold my breath, terror clawing its way back up my throat as the stranger looks up at him after a pause.

"Why did you help her?" Wren asks finally, searching his face.

For the first time, the stranger smiles, and the malice etched into his face fades away. “Because I can’t stand when kids get hurt. *Move*, Wren.”

He knows his name.

Wren doesn’t move for a moment. He stares at the other man, who’s just as tall as him and of a similar build... except he’s *less* somehow. With shoulders hunched and his head slightly lowered, he looks more like he’s trying to take up the least amount of space possible.

“How long will you be here?” Wren asks, sounding like he has to force the words out. “What do you want?”

“I won’t be here any longer than I have to be,” the man promises, holding his hands, and claws, up as if in surrender. “As soon as I find what I’m looking for, I’ll go.” He looks at me once more, smiles, and walks around Wren, who hasn’t moved an inch.

And even though Wren tenses like he’ll stop him. Even though I think he’ll take the machete and stab it into the stranger’s back, he doesn’t. He stands there, like he’s frozen, and it’s only when the stranger is gone that he exhales and drops the machete to crush me in a hug that pulls a squeak from my chest.

“Holy shit,” I whisper, reaching up to grab at his jacket. “Holy *shit*. Was that planned? Did you know—?”

“Of course not,” Wren promises. He kisses me once, hard, and then hugs me again. “I shouldn’t have let you do this.”

“It’s fine. It worked out, it...” I look down at the still breathing Hartmann. “We should go. *You* should go, actually.”

“Not without you, little bunny.” His voice is firm, but I shake my head. “No, no. That guy was right. Don’t you see?”

“He’s never right about anything.”

That has implications that I need to figure out, but not right now.

Not yet.

“Hartmann will hopefully believe him. He won’t think you did it. But if I run off with you, he still will. Let me stay and answer their questions. Let me stay so that he can never trace this back to you.”

Wren hesitates, and I reach up to hug him, my body still rigid with fear. “It’s fine,” I whisper, even though I don’t feel fine at all. “Let me do this for you.”

“You’ve already done too much for me,” he murmurs, and I shake my head.

“Well, then you’ll owe me. So go, *go*, please. I’m okay.” I don’t really feel okay, but that isn’t the point. Wren kisses me again, promising that Virgil will be back to make sure I don’t end up dead.

And this time, I hope he’s right.

But either way, I kneel on the floor near Hartmann, my hand on my phone as I call the cops and wait for the sirens. Over and over, I rehearse all the things I’ll say when I’m asked about this horrible tragedy and the twist tonight has taken.

This time, I know when he comes in.

Even listening to my music, earbuds jammed into my ears as I lie on my stomach with my face in the pillows, I know that Wren is here. Watching me, judging by the way I can almost *feel* him hovering at the door.

But I don't move. I open one eye and look at my phone that's sticking out of my curled fingers, and I hope I'm not about to start drooling on the pillow under my cheek.

Why isn't he moving?

I nearly get up to check, wondering if maybe I'm wrong or it's one of my cats that Wren has welcomed into his duplex, when the bed shifts under me and I feel Wren climb up the mattress until it dips on either side of my hips.

He reaches out and pulls my earbuds free, tossing them to the bedside table as he comes to his hands and knees over me. "You're making this too easy."

"Maybe I do it on purpose," I murmur, yelping in surprise when he leans down to nip at my bare shoulder.

"Lying in my bed without a shirt on and only your underwear? I think that's an easy guess, little bunny. My sweet little prey." He moves to kiss down my spine while he speaks, and I can't help but shudder. "All of your stuff is here, right? And you've turned the key into the landlord?"

"What are you, my mother?" I moan, like it's some kind of hardship that he so easily convinced me to move in with him

only a few weeks after the issue with Hartmann.

Which, at this point, isn't an issue at all. The officer had been apologetic. Friendly. Had even looked at Wren and shook his hand, saying they'd definitely have to catch the bastard who was really responsible. I'd wondered if he'd vomit at the prospect of shaking Wren's hand, but somehow the detective had made it through.

And all the while we just looked at the still healing gashes on his face and knew we'd just tricked him into wholeheartedly believing something that wasn't true.

"No. I'm your stalker," he teases, two fingers sliding against me over my underwear. "I'm your serial killer." He rearranges me under him and yanks me up onto my knees so that he can more easily grind his body against mine.

It's then that I notice that I'm not the only one barely clothed.

"You're my problem now, I guess. That's what Cass said," I sigh, though when Wren yanks me up with a hand on my throat and growls playfully in my ear, I can't help but laugh. Nor can I help the soft sound of arousal that leaves me when he slides his hands into my underwear and against my clit. "But, hey. I want to talk to you."

He doesn't stop, only mouths at my throat, and I turn to look at him while I grip his hair between my fingers. "Please, Wren?"

"What's wrong, little bunny? What could possibly be wrong?" Still, he falls over onto his side, taking me with him, and tangling his legs with mine as he kisses my shoulder.

Ever since I'd moved in, he'd had such a hard time keeping his hands off me that for a while, I'd thought it was an addiction.

Now I'm convinced it is.

I can't say anything while he nips at my skin. I can't do anything but enjoy it when he shoves my panties aside to thrust two fingers into my wet and aching entrance.

Fuck, I want him.

“Come on,” he goads, pulling his fingers free to slide my underwear down my hips. “You want to ask me something? You want to say something, little *prey*?” He grips my thigh, forcing it up and back over his hip so that his length brushes my leaking core.

Fuck, I need him so much.

“You’re awful,” I whisper, biting at his hand that’s resting against the pillow.

“I’m dreadful,” he agrees mockingly, holding himself with one hand so he can sink into me. Then I bite him again, causing him to moan, and his hand coming off the pillow so he can hold me by the throat instead. “I’m so dreadful, aren’t I? Just the *worst*. I’m a monster.” He says the words in a growl, even as he fucks me and I lose my train of thought.

Finally I come again, for the third time today, and he lets me roll onto my stomach as I suck in a breath and try to reassemble my train of thought.

“Fuck you,” I murmur, hating how he can just so easily derail all of my conversational plans.

“Well, we just did, but I can eat you out?” he suggests, hand splayed against my stomach. “But don’t you have class tonight?”

I don’t say anything to that. He knows how nervous I am to have signed up for classes again. It had been last minute, and it was only because of his connections that I’d gotten into Baltianic for this semester’s classes instead of in the spring.

Not to mention, he’d been the one to pay for it when it turned out I didn’t have the scholarships I once did. The only thing he’d asked for, when I’d told him I’d somehow pay him back, was to go to the park that night with him and take a walk through the hiking trails in the woods.

Of course, it hadn’t just been ‘a hike.’

“I’m nervous I won’t pass,” I admit, scared my old dedication and passion had left me in the dust. I’m nervous

about classes. Nervous about things that might've somehow changed even in this amount of time.

“You’ll pass, Hazel,” he promises lazily. “And you’re not skipping.”

“I wasn’t going to skip!”

“You were.”

He might be right, but only because he’s such a more attractive option. After all, there’s nowhere I’d rather be than here. “*Now*, can I ask you something?” I demand, when he settles down on the bed beside me. “Or do you have something else to say?”

I sit up and look down at him, but Wren only gives me a lazy smile. He’s never attempted to hide anything from me, and as I look at him, I can’t help but admire him. He’s gorgeous.

And he’s mine.

All tan and muscled and teasing... all for me. He’s not just my boyfriend, or the love of my life. He’s one of my best friends, and the first person, other than Jenna, to be okay with everything I am. Even if that means we spend some nights with him brushing out the mats in my hair while I cry over something I’m sure he sees as stupid.

“What do you want to ask me, Hazel?” he purrs, stroking a hand down my spine.

“Do you think he’s gone?” We hadn’t really spoken of the stranger since that night. Wren hadn’t even told me his name, though I figure there’s no way he doesn’t know it.

His hand pauses, and he looks away.

“I don’t know,” Wren says at last, movements picking up again. “But I also don’t think he’ll bother you again.”

“You know him, right? You know who he is, or what he’s done?”

Again, Wren doesn’t answer. Not right away, at least.

“I used to know him,” he hedges at last, the nerves in my stomach causing my guts to do somersaults. “A long time ago. When he was different, and I was as well. He’s not good news. And he’s not part of our little ‘club.’ He’s not my friend. Hazel...” He meets my gaze, his dark eyes serious. “If you ever see him again, promise me you’ll run.”

“He said he didn’t like seeing kids hurt, implying me.” Even though I’m not a kid. “But you think he’d hurt me anyway?”

“I think he’s the least predictable creature that’s ever walked this earth, and I don’t intend on finding out if he’s changed or not.”

We sit there in silence for a moment until Wren gets to his feet and comes around to yank me to mine. “Come on,” he sighs, dragging me toward the bathroom. “I looked at your schedule. Your class is in two hours, so go take a shower.”

“It won’t be very efficient if you come along,” I protest, not bothering to pull away as he leads me into the bathroom and turns on the faucet in the glass-walled shower.

Wren whirls around, his smile sweet and searing at the same time. “Then, little bunny, I guess you’re just going to have to take two.” Without another word he pushes me into the shower and I let him, not stopping until my back is against the wall so he can bracket me against it and stare down at me with that terrifying, exhilarating predator’s grin on his face that I love.

I don’t mind. I’ll just take two.

EPILOGUE

“You can’t keep gluing your hand to picnic tables, Sara,” I sigh, dumping another cup of soapy water on the ten-year-old’s wrist and hand that she continuously wiggles on the wooden table. I can see the work that the soap does on the Elmer’s glue as she frees her pinky, but I splash another dose of it onto her hand, knowing that it’s going to need a lot more for her to actually come free. “Work it under your fingers. Not like that. Or that.”

Closing my eyes hard and sucking in a breath to give myself a moment is absolutely necessary to every fiber of my wellbeing. So I count to ten in my head as she continues to wiggle.

I haven’t been back in the States long enough for this.

On Wren’s urging, I’d taken this summer’s trip for Anthropology students to see Italy. Even though it had meant almost a month away from my boyfriend, it had been worth it in so many ways.

Especially since the bedroom *really* needed a break from all of Wren’s celebrating that started directly after I’d graduated with the degree I’d thought I’d never see.

“I got it!” Sara gasps and jerks upward, nearly tumbling off of the bench and to the ground below. I jerk forward to catch her, the little girl’s head smacking the large plastic pitcher full of lukewarm water loaded with soap suds I’m carrying.

And, as is life, all of it ends up on me. *Don't say fuck*, I think, the words on my lips as my teeth dig into my bottom lip. *With your luck, Hazel, that'll be the word she picks up to show off to her mom. Don't say—*

“I’m sorry, Counselor Hazel.” Sara’s voice is small when she looks at me, eyes wide when she sees the dripping, dark splotch coating the front of my red shirt and black denim shorts.

“Don’t be sorry,” I whisper, opening my eyes and giving her a small smile. “Seriously, it’s okay. Main thing is we got your hand unglued from the arts and crafts station.” But if she does it again, I’m getting a backpack leash for her and *mittens* to put on anytime she gets near this part of camp.

“Can I still go swimming?” She looks up at me dubiously, like she thinks I might deny her for today’s glue incident.

Today’s *second* glue incident.

God, it’s a good thing Elmer’s is non-toxic and water soluble.

“Yeah, for sure,” I wave my hand towards the dock and the beach, still able to hear the distant squeals of children dunking each other under, and the lifeguard occasionally using his whistle to calm someone down.

At least none of the kids have drowned... yet.

Sara scampers off before I can say anything else—or threaten the mittens—and I lace my fingers behind my back, head tilted to the side as I watch her, before my chin tips up and I stare up at the trees intertwined with small fairy lights.

Yeah, it's still my favorite part of this place. I hadn’t thought it would be. I’d wondered, at least. But when the sun starts to set and darkness finally falls at night, I love staring at them from the deck of my cabin, or from just inside the window.

I’m pretty sure the lights are most of the reason I said yes when Jenna called me, begging for me to be a counselor with her here again this year.

When footsteps crunch through the leaves behind me and my brain recognizes that they're too heavy and deliberate to be Jenna's, I can't help the grin that curls my lips upward.

The memories were also a pretty big motivator to me coming back.

Fingers touch mine, running up my wrists as the person's warmth settles in the space behind me. My sleeves are brushed up just a little, and a chaste kiss is pressed against my cheek.

"I hate you," Wren tells me in his sweetest, most dangerous voice.

"You volunteered," I shoot back, my gaze flicking over to him. He's dressed similarly to me, in jeans and a red tee that says *Camp Clearwater Counselor* in big white letters. I know his name is on the back, as is mine. "*Counselor* Wren."

"I was under duress," he argues, though there's no malice in his tone. "Do you know what happened with my cabin at breakfast?"

Of course I do. *Everyone* knows that his group, easily the rowdiest at camp this year, had devised a plot to get him out of the dining hall long enough to have a food fight. Embarrassingly for Wren and his ego, their stupid plan had worked.

"Everyone knows," I point out sweetly. "And I don't think you were under duress. How exactly was I duressing you?"

"That's not a word."

"Thank you, counselor."

He rolls his eyes at me, the motion slow and theatrical so I get the full weight of it. "I was under duress..." he begins, crowding closer as one hand slides indecently around my waist, gripping my hip for any of the kids to see.

Well, if they weren't too preoccupied with trying to drown each other.

"Because you were riding me when you asked. And you literally made sure to ask right before you came. That's not

particularly fair.” His nose brushes my neck, just under my ear, and I can feel the grin he doesn’t want me to see.

“Maybe it was just spur of the moment. Not everything is a plot,” I point out, though I can’t really deny it. Not when it absolutely was a plot. I hate how I feel the edge of my mouth flicking upward once more, and it would be dumb to think he doesn’t see it.

Sure enough, Wren snorts, his black curls brushing my skin as he shakes his head. “You’re a terrible liar,” he informs me, but that sweetness is still there, and I know he’s not as irritated as he’s letting on.

“I am *the best* liar,” I reply stubbornly. “You’re just upset a bunch of ten-year-olds outsmarted you today.”

He winces. “They didn’t outsmart me.”

“The dining hall would beg to differ.”

Wren starts to reply, then stiffens with a sneer that falls from his face just as quickly as his hand does from my waist. A year ago, I would’ve questioned what he’s doing, and why, but this far in, I know it’s because he’s noticed someone that I haven’t.

“Hazel!” Jenna’s voice is as unmistakable as the dislike that colors Wren’s face, and I push him away, forcing him to turn around until he at least *looks* like he doesn’t think my best friend is scum of the earth.

I know what he thinks. I know that he’d rather I have someone, *anyone*, else. He thinks she doesn’t care, that she’s selfish, and a few other things I’m sure he’s been courteous enough to not say out loud.

But Jenna has been my friend for longer than I’ve known Wren, and even though last year had been pretty rocky for us, we’ve moved past it. Otherwise, I wouldn’t be here this year.

I turn to her, beaming, and step away from Wren as my friend jogs in our direction, finally stopping to double over and pant, hands on her knees. “Sorry,” she apologizes, out of breath. “I just ran over from the archery range. Your boys just finished over there, Wren.”

“No casualties?” he asks airily, like he’s expecting it. “No eyes taken out by arrows?”

Jenna doesn’t bother to spare him a glance. His grumpiness is known camp-wide, though somehow, it only applies to the other counselors. Never the kids.

“They’re still in one piece. And yelling for you. A lot.” She grimaces, probably unsure why the boys Wren is responsible for actually like him most of the time.

I’m not. For all of his casual sarcasm and arrogance, he’s still a good guy. Just not in the legal sense of the word.

It’s impossible to tear my gaze from his wolfish grin, and I’m sure Jenna thinks I’m the stupidest lovestruck twenty-something she’s ever met. But, well, maybe I am where Wren is involved.

I’ve never felt like this about anyone before.

He looks at me as the thought whispers through my brain, a slow smirk curling over his features. He has to know how gorgeous he is, right? And how I feel about him? “I’ll go make sure they don’t kill anyone,” Wren tells Jenna, who’s now head counselor since last year’s oh so unfortunate murder.

God, she’d flip if she ever found out it was *Wren* who did all of last year’s killing. More than flip, she’d run to the dining hall and get a knife to stab him with herself.

“Cool,” Jenna sighs, tucking a lock of hair behind her ear. She looks away from both of us, measuring the distance to the lake as if she’s considering taking off toward it. I see her eyes darken with thought, and when she blinks, it clears the faraway look from her face. Jenna’s grin is quick, her words of dismissal quicker, and by the time she’s halfway to the dock and ensuing screaming children, Wren has only tilted his head to study her, eyes dark like a predator’s.

“Don’t look at her like that,” I sigh, stepping closer to him. Unexpectedly, Wren drapes an arm over my shoulders, pulling me closer to him.

“Like what?” he asks, checking to make sure we’re as alone as we can be before he turns to lean down, pressing a

kiss to my temple for a few long, perfect seconds.

“Like she’s prey.”

“Why?” He drags me closer, as close as he can, until the line of his body presses hotly against mine and I feel his lips curve against my skin. “Are you jealous? Do you want me to only look at *you* like that?”

“Maybe I just don’t need you killing Jenna,” I reply crisply, trying to ignore the rest of his words.

“Maybe you just want to be my prey tonight instead.” I shiver at his growl, unable to deny the words. “If I can’t even *think* about hunting her, then you’d better give me some damn good distraction.” He’s joking, mostly. I know he won’t actually kill Jenna.

But he’s also not wrong about me wanting him to look at me with those dark hunter’s eyes. Like he’s a predatory animal, a wolf, in a man’s body. While I know it signals danger, violence, and probably blood, it’s also incredibly, inexorably hot as hell.

“Here? In a summer camp full of children?” I ask, raising my brows at his offer. “You’re joking.”

“Well, last I checked...there is another side of the lake,” Wren points out innocently, inclining his head in the direction of the water. “Where there are no kids, a really nice dock, and a picnic table that has some great memories attached.”

I try to will away the flush that climbs my cheeks, but from his chuckle, I know he’s seen it. “What do you say, Hazel?” he asks lightly, playfully, as he holds me to him. “Want to play with me and make some delicious new memories tonight?”

I suck in a breath, close my eyes, and my fingers curl into my palms at my sides as I mull over the answer in my head before finally looking up at him, my brows raised. “Let’s go over the rules first,” I compromise, and the way his eyes light up has my insides fluttering like nothing else.

It’s almost like last year.

My steps crunch on leaves, breaking twigs as I run with the lake on my left. My heart pounds, but instead of last year's panic, I'm filled with exhilaration and just a touch of healthy fear. How could there not be fear, when Wren has always made it oh so clear that I'm his favorite *prey*?

And God, as good as that feels to even think about, it fuels me onward with adrenaline shocking up my spine, through my veins, and racing through my heart.

You win if you get to the dock you found me at before, he'd said earlier today, when we'd agreed to no machete and nothing until *everyone* was asleep.

At two am, the rest of the camp is as asleep as they can be. Except for me, and Wren.

Who's probably hunting me by now.

I haven't seen him. Not one flash of him through the trees, and that's enough to nearly make me slow down to take a better, more sustainable pace through the trees, some of them twinkling with the fairy lights I love so much.

If anyone ever asks me why I came back to this campground, my first and easiest answer will always be these trees. It isn't Christmas, but these lights never come down. Last year Jenna told me they were solar, which explains their dimness, and the way they flicker like fireflies in the night.

One day, I'll have property full of trees so I can do just this, and anytime I look out my window, I'll be able to see the twinkling lights I've always inexplicably been drawn to like a moth to a flame.

It's that exact problem that strikes as I run, and unintentionally my steps slow, breath coming in gasping pants as I nearly double over to suck in the cool night air. I've never been a runner, and that isn't about to change just because I'm being chased.

But I've never seen this tree before, somehow. It's wrapped in lights, from the trunk to the branches, and even though they're solar as well, they're brighter and newer than

the regular lights around me, spreading sporadically through the trees surrounding the campground.

“So pretty,” I murmur, reaching out a hand to touch a string of the bulbs on the bark.

“Yeah,” a voice behind me murmurs gruffly, and Wren takes a deep breath. “You really, really are.”

I don't get to turn around fully before he's there, fingers slipping around my throat as he jerks upward enough to pull me to my toes. My hands fly to his wrist, and I feel his other hand settle on my hip to keep me steady, a courtesy he probably wouldn't have extended if he really planned on killing me.

“Did you know that chasing someone isn't the only way to hunt, little *prey*?” Wren purrs, the fairy lights bright enough to pick up the dark gleam in his narrowed eyes. “I thought we'd try something new tonight. I thought I'd see if I could set a trap for you and if you'd fall into it.” His eyes slide to the tree, chin tilting upward, and he smiles. “I think we can call this an overwhelming success, don't you?”

“You did this?” I gasp, scrabbling against the dirt with the balls of my feet. “The lights?” He shifts his grip quickly, just enough that he's not pressing on my windpipe, and I'm silently thankful for the concession to my ability to breathe.

“All for you, Hazel. All to catch you exactly where I want you. By the way, in case you didn't realize...” He drags me across the dirt, his height and strength giving him every advantage he needs to make sure I don't get away. “You lost the game.”

“Not if I keep running when you put me down,” I reply instantly, fingers digging into his forearm.

“Oh, little bunny...” Wren's smile is wicked, and he backs me up once more, causing me to retrace the steps he'd forced me to take a second ago. But this time he keeps going until the hand on my hip disappears and he reaches behind me to grab something against the tree trunk. “I said this was a trap, didn't I? If I let you go, then the trap is useless. I want you...”

trapped.” He sneers the word lightly, and his hand on my neck is pulled back suddenly, so I drop back to my feet.

But I don’t have a chance to run. Before I can even consider making my feet move, both of my wrists are in one of his large hands, and he wraps a length of the solar LED lights around them, the bulbs pleasantly cool against my skin.

“Fuck,” I whisper, eyes wide as I stare at the fairy lights securing my wrists. His answering grin is wolfish, and he pulls the restraints tight enough that they dig in enough to be felt, before jerking my arms over my head and backing me up the rest of the way against the tree so he can fasten the lights binding my wrists to the rest of them.

Rendering me just as trapped as he’d threatened.

“No, no, not so soon,” Wren chides, running his hands down my body as I pull on the lights, surprised at how well they hold my arms over my head, keeping my body flush against the bark of the giant tree. With so many strands wrapped around this tree, the clearing is brighter than I’d realized; the angles of Wren’s face stand out in relief, letting me see every single look he gives me, and how his face moves ever so slightly as his eyes flick over my body.

“Poor little Hazel,” he goes on as I watch him with wide eyes and rapt focus. “Can’t get away from her hunter, no matter how hard she tries. You love these lights so much, I knew it would be easy to trap you with them. I knew you’d look so good when I tied you up in them so I could play with you.” His voice is a low purr as he prowls around me, walking far enough that he disappears around the trunk of the tree, completely out of my sight.

“What are you going to do?” I can’t help the note of fear in my voice, and I jump when his fingers trail up my arms. Then my boyfriend reappears on the other side of the tree a moment later.

“Why do you think I’d tell you?” he asks in reply, words cheerful. “Does the hunter owe his prey an explanation? Or should the prey just feel grateful she’s still breathing and in one piece...though terribly overdressed.”

“Overdressed?” I parrot back at him, surprised at the statement. He’d told me to wear clothes I wouldn’t mind getting destroyed. Until now, I’d assumed it was from getting dragged down into the mud post-chase and fucked until I can’t breathe.

But my heart stutters in my chest when Wren reaches into his pocket and pulls out a knife, the small blade flipping out with a small *snick* as he shows it to me, putting it close to my face teasingly.

“What do you think, Hazel? I knew you’d want to play, so I brought toys. You like this one, right?” He strokes the flat of the blade down my jaw, my breath hitching as I go still under the cool metal on my skin. But when he turns it so that it’s the edge of the blade he’s dragging across my lips, I can’t help the soft whimper that breaks free.

“Shh, *shhh*. Don’t move around too much, now.” I trust him implicitly, but it’s impossible not to be afraid when the knife blade drags down my throat, its point pressing lightly under my chin to force up my chin until I’m meeting his gaze, my throat fully exposed. “Such a good little thing, aren’t you? Tilt your head back more, Hazel. Bare your throat and pray I don’t want to bite it out.”

This definitely shouldn’t be turning me on as much as it is, but I press my thighs together as I watch him, unable to deny the ache building between them. Wren notices as well, judging by the twitch of his lips as his eyes flick downward, watching my reactions to him. “Can’t have you working yourself up without me,” he admonishes teasingly, the knife disappearing into a pocket once more. “I hope you know how to balance on one leg, darling.”

“Why?” I demand, pulling against the fairy lights above me.

“Because I will not let you stand here and rub your thighs together to give yourself satisfaction.” His answer is as cheerful as it is threatening, and my stomach twists when he grabs my left knee, the one with an old injury that crunches like bubble wrap when I walk up too many stairs, and runs his

fingers along the exposed skin. “If this hurts, let me know,” Wren orders, suddenly back to business and meeting my gaze to make sure I’m paying attention. “Okay?”

I nod twice, but he just lifts a brow, still unmoving.

“Yes, okay, I understand,” I tell him in a rush, cheeks burning as I realize I’d forgotten his *verbal answers only* rule for when we play like this.

“Good girl. You’re learning so well,” he praises, raising my knee higher and forcing me to balance on my right foot.

“Wait, are you—” But Wren doesn’t wait. He grabs a loose strand of lights—with only one end connected to another strand, instead of both ends—and wraps it around my knee, looping it up and under until it’s steady enough for him. Then he lifts the other end, dragging my knee impossibly higher, and connects the strand of lights to another, lighting it up suddenly and bringing more illumination to my pale skin.

“*Oh*,” I whisper, eyes fixed on the cords wrapping around my knee. The lights are small enough that they don’t bother me, but when I try to move, I find I can’t do anything except focus on balancing like this.

“Lean back. Let the tree do the work,” Wren murmurs, hands on my hips so he can push me back as he’d said. “There you go, Hazel. Just like that.” *Just like that* is harder than it should be, and my stomach clenches as I try to curl my toes, fighting for the little balance I have and only succeeding in squirming my way into almost falling over.

It’s only when I regain some composure that I see Wren watching me, dark amusement evident on his face. “You’re enjoying this,” I accuse, flexing my fingers above me. “Watching me struggle.”

“Guilty,” Wren assures me. “So, so guilty. But can you really begrudge me? I made this trap just for you. I deserve to watch you *squirm* in it.”

I try to stop squirming, to dangle in the light strands on one foot with all the balance I can muster while staying as still as I can, only to find it’s rather impossible. Some part of me

constantly moves, constantly feels like it's not completely steady, and I can't stop shifting my shoe against the grass under me, looking for a way to stand that makes me feel more confident in remaining upright.

And Wren just...*watches*. Happily. He does reach out to run his finger up my ankle, curling his hand around my knee before going higher to pull teasingly at my old, ratty tee. "You don't want to beg me to let you go?" he asks offhandedly, wrapping the loose shirt around his fingers as he takes one step forward, the space between us still too much for my preference.

"And give you the satisfaction?" I smile lightly, the look fleeting under the heat in his dark eyes.

"You'll give me all the satisfaction I could ever want," he counters. Then the knife is back in his other hand, flashing as he flicks it through the fabric of my shirt. He cuts it until he can tear the fabric off of me, leaving it to hang at my sides and pulling a small gasp from my throat.

"Wow, you weren't kidding about me losing clothes, huh?" I mutter, eyes wide as I shiver under his sharp look. "Wren..." I can't help how much I'm moving, my wrists rubbing together as I lean my knee back against the tree again. "Has anyone told you this isn't, you know, super supportive?"

"Probably not that comfortable, either," Wren agrees, still so fucking jovial that I grind my teeth in frustration. "It's not supposed to be. It's supposed to feel like you might fall. I don't *want* you to be so comfortable tonight, I've decided."

"That's so kind of you."

"Oh, it's terrible of me," Wren corrects, the knife sliding up the pale, exposed skin of my abdomen and making the muscles there twitch. My breath hitches automatically—I can't help the response to a *knife blade* against my skin—but he doesn't even nick me.

The blade catches in the clasp of my bra, and he meets my gaze when he starts to pull, brows raising.

“Wait,” I say suddenly, twisting my hands again and trying to jerk them free. “I don’t have anything else out here to—” He jerks on the knife, cutting through the clasp and causing the bra to fall to my sides, just like my shirt had. Only this time, he quickly cuts both straps, until he can pull the pieces of my now-ruined clothing off to the side and drop it to the ground.

“You were saying?” He asks sweetly, hooking one finger in the hem of my shorts as I shudder under his gaze.

“Someone could see us,” I point out, sure my eyes are pleading as he fiddles with the soft, stretchy material of my running shorts.

“Someone could definitely see if they came out this far,” Wren agrees. “Don’t worry though, Hazel. I’m a jerk, and I don’t share. Ever. But you can help me decide on a plan for the worst-case scenario, okay?” His voice is rough and teasing, and I know he’s not being serious... With the offer, at least.

“Oh, yeah?”

“Absolutely.” The knife is suddenly against my hip, and he uses the point of it to trace circles on my skin. “If someone shows up...” He slides it downward, the blade flat against my skin, until it’s under both my shorts and panties. “What shall I do with them? I could kill them for you, of course. You know I’d kill anyone for you.” As he speaks, Wren turns the blade, pulling it outward with the sharp edge against the fabric of my clothes.

“Don’t. I really don’t have—”

“*Or*, and this is kind of my favorite option, if I’m being honest.” He gives a small jerk, and I swear I can hear my clothes tearing as the knife parts through the fabric. “I don’t kill whoever it is. It won’t be one of the counselors from the camp—we’re too far for that. But maybe some fisherman or a hunter? Probably one of those two.” His other hand joins the task, and he ignores my stuttering, nervous breaths as he cuts through the only covering I still have, taking the pieces in his hands and tearing.

Slowly.

“I bet they’d love to watch. Maybe we let them? Maybe we show everyone in our woods just who you belong to. Just who *caught you*.” He rips harder on the last two words, something in his face becoming feral as he shreds the offending clothing. “Not only who caught such a sweet, soft little thing...but who claimed you and likes to remind you of that. You want that? To show anyone who comes by that you’re *mine*, Hazel? In every single fucking way that matters, you’re *mine*.” His voice is barely more than a growl by the time he finishes, and with one last impressive motion, Wren rips my shorts enough that he can pull them and my underwear off of me, dropping them to the ground at my feet.

“*Wren*,” I whisper, hands twisting as I writhe in the bonds he’s so creatively made for me. “I—” But whatever I’m going to say is lost when he lunges forward, claiming my words with his teeth and tongue, swallowing my whimpered protests for long seconds. His hand curls around my knee, supporting me and giving me something to relax into for as long as his mouth is on mine.

“Oh, little bunny...” he pulls away, just enough to press his forehead to mine, eyes closed. His hand is still on my knee, stroking the skin around the light strands, but I have no idea where his other is. “I’m sure I’ll apologize for this later...but I really do want to see you struggle.” I feel him move, though I can’t see it, somehow pulling the lights around my wrists tighter, forcing my elbows straight before looping more lengths of lights around my leg, using the strands to give me less slack to move around on the ground for balance.

“Wait—” But Wren never waits. He steps back to admire his handy work, watching me squirm against the trunk of the tree. He’s removed the ruined pieces of my shirt as well, and the rough bark digs into my skin uncomfortably, but not painfully.

It’s also not lost on me how vulnerable I am. How open I am for Wren to do whatever he wants to me. But obviously, that was his plan all along. He watches, ignoring the protests

that fall from my lips, the amusement in his gaze being slowly eaten up by a dark, and probably dangerous, hunger.

“*Fuck,*” he breathes, and he doesn’t just step forward. He lunges, his hands coming forward to catch my knee and my throat as he eats up the distance between us to slam his lips to mine once more. This time it’s more than playful, more than needy. It feels like Wren is devouring me, hands moving all along my skin to touch me everywhere he can.

I can feel his grin at the catch in my breathing, his fingers teasing my breasts just under my nipples.

“Always so sensitive,” he teases, both hands cupping my breasts as his thumbs finally ghost upward, teasing me when he knows what I want. I love it when Wren is rough, when he leaves marks. When he’s more demanding, less taunting.

But I know how much he loves to do *this*.

Sure enough, Wren takes his time. He plays with me, fingers ghosting over my nipples, between my thighs, and only once, very lightly, my clit. “I hate you,” I tell him, throwing my head back against the bark. “Can’t you just—”

“I’m *so sorry*, Hazel,” he growls in reply, mouth close enough to mine that he barely has to move to nip at my lower lip. “Am I taking too long to finish this? Would you rather me move onto the main event...where I take what’s mine from the prey I caught?” He nips my jaw again, but when I turn to kiss him, he pulls away smoothly.

“And here I thought I was sparing you for as long as possible.” With the words, he drops to his knees, palms on my thigh and ankle.

“What are you doing?” It’s a dumb question, because there’s not exactly much he *can* do from this position, and his wolfish grin is enough to tell me exactly what the answer to my question is.

“Claiming my little bunny.” He sits up on his knees, hands sliding upward. Since I can’t move much of anything, he doesn’t have to worry about holding my thighs apart, or keeping me in place.

He can do whatever he damn well wants.

Wren's teeth nip and stroke against my inner thigh, but before I can beg him to do more, he turns, breathing out against my slit and making me lose the words I'd been about to say.

"Did you know..." He looks up at me, one hand disappearing just for two fingers to slide easily into my entrance. "That you're already wet for me, Hazel?" He scissoring his fingers when he says it, stretching me open on them while watching my face. His other hand presses on my hip, keeping me flush against the tree. "It's as if you like being my prey. Is that the case, little bunny?" he adds another finger, his mouth *so fucking close* to my clit that I could spontaneously combust out of frustration.

"Please just touch me," I beg, letting most of my weight fall back against the tree behind me. "Please, Wren, I want—"

"I know what you want, Hazel," he chuckles smoothly. "I can promise you that. But *I* want you to answer my question. Do you..." He thrusts his fingers suddenly deeper, curving them forward to rub against the spot in me that has me twisting in the ropes. "Want to be my little bunny? Do you *want* me to claim you as my prey, my prize? I deserve to, don't I? For setting up this trap for you?"

"*Wren—*" I want to hold out in giving him what he wants. I want him to beg for it for a change. But when his fingers twist inside me, and I feel his breath against my slit, my resistance shatters instantly.

"All you have to do is say it," he reminds me, looking as patient as a monk. "That's all I want, Hazel. Just for you to say what we both know is true. I'll give you what you want, little bunny. I *always* give you what you want when you're a good girl, don't I?"

A hoarse laugh leaves my throat, and I try hard to focus on something, anything else. "Maybe this time I want to be the feisty prey that nearly breaks your nose before squirming out of the trap." My voice is sharp-edged with need, the words stammering and uneven.

“Bold of you. Explain to me how you’d do that?” He sounds like he’s really asking, even though he’s fucking me on three fingers with his face between my thighs.

“I’d...I’d umm...” I can’t construct a valid argument. Not when heat is pooling between my thighs, and all I want to do is relax as much as I can and beg him to fuck me.

“Because you don’t look like you’re about to escape.”

“Then what do I look like?”

“You look like you’re about to beg me to breed your pretty pussy and never let you out of this trap.” He drives his fingers deeper, and instead of waiting for what he’d wanted, his patience snaps as well. With a growl he leans forward, free hand gripping my thigh like a vice as he buries his face against my pussy, tongue instantly finding my clit and lavishing it with attention.

I nearly scream at the rush of pleasure, and I can’t help writhing under his hands. His tongue never gives me any mercy while his fingers still fuck me, each thrust feeling deeper than the last. My arms twist over my head, and my eyes close hard as I try to keep myself quiet, the soft mumbles of *please* and *oh, God*, kept to as much of a minimum as I can make them.

“Wren—” Just as I’m going to beg him to keep going, for more, Wren suddenly rolls smoothly to his feet, shirt off and jeans unbuttoned faster than should be possible.

“*Fuck, Hazel,*” he growls, pressing his lips to mine without further explanation and forcing his tongue into my mouth so I taste myself on him. “I always say I’ll be patient. That I’ll draw this out.” He laughs darkly, length already in hand as he gives himself a few light strokes. “But then you just...look like that...” he trails off with a barking laugh. “Pretty sure if my cock isn’t buried inside your cunt soon, I’ll die.”

“You’ll probably die,” I agree breathlessly, eyes on his. “Definitely die.” He starts to move, stepping forward so his cock brushes against my slit, but I stop him with a soft sound of protest, his gaze searching out mine once more.

“Can I tell you something?” I ask in a soft, barely there tone. “Please?”

“You can tell me anything, Hazel. You can tell me *everything*.” I tip my chin back, brows raised, and with a small scoff, he leans forward until his ear is close to my lips, and all I have to do is turn to brush my mouth over the shell of his ear.

“Claim me as your *prey*, Wren. Please?” It’s a question, but only because I’m never good with absolutes. I’m not even sure he still wants to hear it, or how much was just to work me up.

Especially when he just...stands there for long enough that I fidget; anxiety claiming my thoughts and causing my heart to miss a beat.

Did I do something wrong?

“Oh, little bunny...” He lets out a soft, whispering sigh. Before I can open my mouth, his hand is in my hair, and without another word Wren thrusts into me so hard I see stars, not stopping until his body is flush with mine.

“*Wren!*” I yelp, my hands twisting, fingers curling and uncurling. “Wren, *fuck*, that’s—”

“Perfect. You’re so fucking perfect. Everything about you. From that mouth.” He nips my lip, then closes in for a deeper, soul-sucking kiss that leaves me wheezing for air. “To every inch of your body. And your fucking *cunt* was made for me.” He fucks me harshly, his pace is brutal and leaves me barely able to breathe, yet he still talks. “But it’s not just that. You’re so much more than just a few compliments. Hazel.” He nudges my jaw with his, urging me to open my eyes and look at him.

I do, and the amount of devotion, the amount of love in his dark eyes, is enough to nearly stop my heart.

“I will *never* let you go. And I will never let anyone hurt you. Do you hear me?” He’s breathing sharply, sucking in air through his nose as he grips my throat in one hand, the other still holding my knee up for added support.

“I hear you,” I whimper, heat building in my body like a fire has been lit between us.

“Do you understand me? That you’re mine? That you will *always* be mine?” He bares his teeth and lunges forward, sinking his canines into my skin and kissing me harshly, sucking a mark onto my pale skin that’s going to be visible for days. But he doesn’t stop at one. After every time I reply, he asks the question in another way, and accompanies it with a bite to my shoulders, my breast, and my collarbone, until I’m a roadmap of bites and bruises and claims.

“I love you.” The words come out before I can stop them, and Wren stills for a moment, his gaze locking on mine. “Shit, I’m sorry, I—” He’s never said those words before, and I haven’t either, for fear of this exact thing.

“I love you, too. I love you more than anything, more than anyone else in this world.” He starts moving again, but this time there’s tenderness there, too.

“I—” I whine suddenly, when something in me changes and my thighs tense. “I’m going to come, Wren. Please—”

“I’ve loved you since the moment I killed for you. Since I watched you last year, when you didn’t even know my name. I *love you*, Hazel. And it fucking terrifies me.” His thrusts are erratic, and I can hear the strain in his words as he fights his own release.

“Yeah, think of how I feel,” I gasp with a soft snicker. “I’m the one in love with a serial killer. What does that make me?”

His thumbs slip under my jaws, closing on my throat as he leans his entire body into me, pinning me against the tree. “It makes you perfect, Hazel,” he purrs in my ear, his other hand gripping my knee harder. “Come for me, sweet and perfect girl. Come for me so I can breed your pussy and tell you all the ways I love you.”

“*Fuck.*” I can barely see straight, and Wren consumes my vision. Hell, he consumes my entire reality as he fucks me, pressing open-mouthed kisses to my face and shoulder. “Wren—” But I definitely don’t get the chance to finish. Not when my orgasm rips through me like a tidal wave, nearly knocking me into another dimension, by my reckoning.

But I'm not the only one about to pass out. Not considering the way Wren snarls and buries his teeth into my shoulder like a hungry wolf as he fucks into me with desperation lacing every movement, every breath, and every clench of his fingers. He doesn't last much longer, but continues dropping praises onto my skin from his very full, very kissable lips.

By the time both of us have recovered enough for rational thought a few minutes later, though, I can't help but shiver, as the lights wrapped around my hands and knee become more and more irritating by the second.

As if he can read my mind, Wren kisses me sweetly, sliding out of me even though I groan at the loss, making him grin at the noise.

"So greedy," my boyfriend chides, kissing my cheek. "Let me get these undone, Hazel. Just hold still for me." He's quick; his deft hands unwrap the lights from my leg first so I can let it fall to the ground, though I'm still unsteady as hell, even on two feet.

My hands take a bit longer, and when they're free, he brings them down in his, cradling my wrists in his fingers. "Are you okay?" He rubs my wrists lightly, massaging the marks from the lights. "Come here." He picks me up suddenly, apparently not trusting my unsteady legs, and as if I weigh almost nothing, my boyfriend carries me to the other side of the tree, to a space between it and a much smaller tree where a blanket is messily spread on the ground, duffel bag beside it. "I have clothes for you," he informs me, setting me down on my feet. "And water. *Sit.*" His look is adamant, and I raise my hands in surrender to do just that.

He really did think of everything.

As he cleans up some of the extra lights and finds our torn and tossed clothes, I pull one of his t-shirts and a pair of my shorts from the bag, slipping them on tiredly before fishing out a bottle of water.

Hell, he even has breakfast crackers in here.

The blanket is warm on my skin, and I kick off my shoes so I can draw my legs up under me, toes curling in the soft fleece as I watch Wren, still shirtless, bathed in fairy light as he finishes up.

“We don’t have to go back yet, right?” I ask, unsure of what his plans are. He drops my ruined clothes, his shirt, and the knife into the duffel bag before coming to sit behind me.

“Of course not, Hazel,” he assures me, still moving so he can stretch out on the oversized blanket, one arm propped up under his face. “I did this all for you.” His eyes slide to the lights, then come back to mine. “We can enjoy it for as long as you want to.”

My heart twists at the words. At the gesture, and for a moment, I swear I’m going to cry.

I really, really love Wren.

And I don’t think I’ve ever been more sure of anything in my life. When he lifts his brows in clear invitation, I flop down beside him, curling close to Wren for his warmth and his touch. Thankfully, he’s not stingy with either. Wren curls an arm around me, dragging me close, and I turn my face upward, intent on saying something, but get distracted by the sweet, too-chaste kiss he presses to my lips.

“You know, if I love you, then it means I’m attached for life,” I tell him, unable to stop grinning like an idiot. “You’re stuck with me.”

“Good,” Wren tells me, hand splayed against my stomach. “Because you’re already stuck with me, Hazel. You have been for a long, long time.”

“I love you.” I say it one more time, still loving the feel of the words on my lips. “Like, I *really* love you, Wren.”

“And I love you too, Hazel. More than anything in this world.”

“Enough to turn rogue and start wearing Hawaiian shirts and going to Greece with me?” I tease, not expecting a serious answer.

But his smile fades just a little, and he reaches his hand up to cup my face, keeping his eyes on mine. “I love you more than that, little bunny,” he promises in a soft whisper I’ve never heard from him. “I love you enough to kill anyone for you, or to set everything on fire just to keep you warm.”

“That’s...” I run my tongue over my chapped lower lip, unsure of what to say. “Well, I mean, that kind of blows my proclamations out the window, huh?”

He laughs at that, a smile curving his lips upward as his eyes sparkle. “I don’t need your proclamations or promises of violence toward anyone who isn’t us.”

“Then what do you need?” I can’t help but ask, reaching one hand up to tangle my fingers with his.

“The only thing I need in this whole world, Hazel, is you.” And when he kisses me, his lips warm and soft against mine, there’s no part of me that doesn’t believe him.

I just hope he knows the way back to camp, and how to disassemble all these lights before morning.

VICIOUS

AJ MERLIN

“When are you going to let me show you how I feel?”

*“When you’re **dead.**”*

*O*f course I'll help you.

The memory of his hands cupping my cheeks, of the look in his warm brown eyes, isn't enough to tear my attention from the diner.

It isn't enough to make any of this go away.

My hands shake as I let the door close behind me, eyes fixed on the blood that's sprayed up the wall behind the bar of the fifties-themed diner. Music still plays through the jukebox, and when I turn to look at the lit up display of its old-timey front, I see that it's one of the few things in the building not marred by blood.

You can trust me.

Whistling, constantly whistling. Dr. Gabriel Brooks is always whistling whenever I walk into his office until he turns and sees me. Then he smiles and remarks about me being a breath of fresh air compared to the other patients he'd taken over from Springwood Medical.

I just like to whistle, he'd told me, mouth curved into the sweetest smile as the smile-lines around his eyes had deepened. *Is it weird?*

I'd just assumed my new therapist was bullshitting me about being his favorite patient. Until this morning.

Until now.

My hands shake as I round the counter, eyes pinned to the shape on the floor. Marcie Owens, her blonde hair tangled and

matted with blood, had owned the diner with her husband, Frank. Neither of them were particularly great people, and they'd raised a son with just as much entitlement and arrogance as them.

They'd always been out of place in Springwood.

What's wrong? He'd caught me when I came into his office, sobbing, with blood on my hands and feeling light-headed. *Just tell me what's wrong, Quinn. You can tell me.*

I had. I'd told him everything. Like a good therapist, he'd gotten the story from me without me even realizing he was asking for more details than I'd wanted to give.

I'd been so afraid, so terrified after what had happened. It wasn't *my fault*, but no one else would see it that way. My fault or not, I'd be kicked out of my scholarship program because of it. I'd end up on the street, instead of on my way to college. Being eighteen meant that foster care didn't give a damn anymore.

I'd be alone, even if it wasn't *my fault*.

He'd told me that he'd take care of it, and I'd thought my therapist would just appeal to someone. I'd thought he'd bring in Billy Owens' parents and talk things out with them.

I'd thought that everything would be *okay*.

I kneel beside Marcie, my shaking hand reaching out before coming to a stop just over her face. With her eyes open wide with fear, I find it hard to tear my gaze away from her. Nausea rolls in my stomach, and finally I get to my feet, unable to stay down here with her body in its dried pool of blood any longer.

Marcie Owens is dead, and there's nothing I can do about it.

My steps take me further into the diner, even though I have a good feeling about what I'll find. If Marcie is dead and the place is silent, then there has to be only one answer.

When I find the body, though, I wish I hadn't. I step back, shoes slipping on the wet floor as a wretched gasp claws up

my throat and escapes my lips.

If Marcie was bad, then Frank is so much worse.

My eyes take in the scene in pieces. His head pressed against the fryer, face burned and blackened; melted where it's touching the burners. The sight makes my stomach churn, and I clap a hand over my mouth to stop from throwing up all over the crime scene.

He's still holding a knife in his hand, like he was trying to avenge his wife or, more likely, save himself. In death it's clutched in his bony, too-long fingers that rest by the sink. Slashes mark his arm, the same kind that had cut through Marcie's body in so many places.

I'm sure they aren't from a knife, but I'm not in a position to do some kind of analysis on the weapon used to kill the Owens couple.

But it isn't just his face that makes me want to shrivel up on the diner kitchen floor. It's the rest of him. The arm wrenched out of its socket; the skin flayed open so I can see muscle underneath. He died more violently than his wife, and a small voice in the back of my head says that he deserved to.

He was just as bad as Billy Owens, after all.

I edge past him and try to look everywhere but at his seared off face. It's the worst part of the whole picture, though the muscles I can see in his arm and shoulder make my stomach churn as well. I could leave, I reason, as I stare at the floor instead of at him. I *should* leave.

But I have to know what's behind door number three.

Eyes fixed on the dragging blood stain that adorns the linoleum at my feet, I follow it with my eyes up to the door that leads to the back office. It's ajar, standing open enough that I don't need to go much further to see what's inside.

Besides, I already know, don't I?

It's Billy.

Billy Owens, who had been the bane of my existence, is sprawled on the desk with fewer wounds than the others, like

he was granted some kind of mercy that his parents provided. Even in death he looks like an asshole, and my eyes linger on the jagged cuts adorning his hands and arms, the black eye. My body takes that moment to tell me that my time is up.

I can't do this anymore.

My head reels and I turn on my heel, nearly slipping in the same place as before as I run past Frank's body, then skirt past Marcie's as I arrive back in the front of the fifties diner.

Does it smell like death, or is it just me?

The diner looks different from this angle, though it might be my tunneling-vision as I stumble and trip around the metal bar. A jingle in my ears, like bells hitting on the glass door, registers in my head as I stare at the wavering, pulsing floor and try my damndest to make it back to the front before I collapse.

I don't make it.

My feet give out and I fall, only to be caught by hands around my shoulders that drag me back to my feet so I can meet disapproving brown eyes set in a lean, handsome face.

"You shouldn't be here," my therapist, Gabriel Brooks, admonishes gently. "What are you doing, Quinn? Didn't I tell you to be a good girl and let me take care of this?"

"You killed them," I whisper, finally noticing the blood on his face and his white tee that stands out sharply against the rest of him. "You *killed* them," I say again, making the words more real.

He tilts his head to the side, studying my face. "I killed them," he agrees. "Because he hurt you. Why would I ever let that go?"

"Because—I didn't ask you to—you can't *kill people* like this! You *slaughtered* them." My voice fades to a whisper, heart pounding rabbit-fast in my chest as my entire being looks for a way to escape.

He could kill me too, with whatever weapon he used on the Owens family. He could shred me into a million pieces,

while I just watch.

“They deserved it,.” He shrugs, hand coming up to my face again so he can cradle my cheek against his palm. “Sweet girl, they deserved every bit for what he did. I took care of it for you. I took care to make sure no one will ever stop to question that you’d done anything wrong.”

“How could you do this?” I whisper, my hands trembling where they’re pressed to his shoulders. “How could you—”

“The same way I’ve done it every single time before, of course.”

The horrified shock on my face elicits delightful surprise on his, and his eyes glitter. “Oh no, oh *Quinn*, did you really think this was my first time? Darling, no. I was getting a little restless, actually. You gave me the perfect opportunity to let off some steam. I should thank you—”

“Don’t say that!” I rip myself free of him, stumbling into the bar and nearly falling. His face falls in concern, but when he steps toward me, I grope around the bar for a weapon, finally holding a large piece of shattered glass between us. “Move,” I tell him, trying to ignore the way my hand shakes.

Gabriel doesn’t. He combs his fingers through his messy, light brown hair and tilts his head to the side to watch me like I’m a particularly interesting animal. “You’ll hurt yourself,” he informs me, glancing down at the glass. “You could never hurt me.”

“I’ll give it the best I’ve got,” I threaten. “If you don’t *move*.”

He holds my stare for a few more agonizing seconds, deliberation plain on his face before he shrugs. “All right,” he says at last. “But I’ll find you later, when all of this has blown over. You won’t tell, Quinn. We both know that, and I’ll certainly be fine.”

He moves to the side, waving his arms with a flourish like he’s inviting me to leave. I pause, my fingers so tight on the glass that it cuts into my skin, and dart forward toward the door.

Before I reach it, one hand closes around my shoulder, the other gripping my wrist so I can't use the glass against him. "But don't go far, all right? We're not done, Quinn. Not by a longshot."

"Yes we are," I hiss, yanking away from him. He lets me go and I take off without another look or word, slamming open the diner door as he leans against the counter and watches me go like he doesn't hear the sirens in the distance or see the blood spattered on the wall beside him.

He may not get caught, but I'll take whatever time I have to run as far as I can, to make sure he never finds me as long as he's alive.

While I'm not exactly a snob, I can't bring myself to enjoy Akron's pizza. Maybe it's the fact that a lot of it borders on Chicago style, which to me is barely pizza, or that I just don't like most tomato sauces. Either way, when I look down at the slice in my hand that was given out free by our campus's student union, I let out a breath of disappointment through my nose.

But hey, free is free. Especially to a foster-turned-scholarship kid with a freshly minted social work degree and nothing to use it on. Yet, anyway. Because there's definitely work for me in Akron, if I really want it.

Preferably, though, I want to work somewhere else. Somewhere out of Ohio, and further than the few hundred miles that separate me from Springwood, where I grew up.

You're being dumb, I tell myself, choking down a bite of pizza like it's made of cardboard or slime. Then again, this pizza is congealed and cheap enough that I probably would have preferred slime-covered cardboard to some extent. *It's been five years, and he's over a hundred miles away*. Not quite two hundred, if I'm being exact, but one hundred and ninety-three-point-four miles is enough for me to call it *hundreds*.

And it isn't just that. There's no way Gabriel Brooks could show his face anywhere after the investigation.

Hell, I'm not even sure if he's still alive.

My chest twists at the flashbacks that try to overwhelm me, and I gnaw on shitty pizza in an attempt to make them go

away as I walk. With all of my stuff already packed up to leave, the problem now really is figuring out where to actually *go*. I could live out of my car if I have to. I have before, and I have to be gone in two days from my dorm, or risk getting forcibly evicted. There's probably not a good chance that they'd let me stay as the janitor or wayward RA who's already graduated.

But the job in New York had said I might not hear from them until Monday, and that leaves me forty-eight hours of homelessness, joblessness, and wondering what I'll do. My stomach tries to twist at that as well, but I quell it with pizza as I walk on the sidewalk that will take me out of campus and toward a few cheap restaurants that have become favorites of mine over the years.

If I'm lucky, the Oregon job will get back to me before then. Today, maybe. Tomorrow at the latest. But God, I want to go to New York. I want to go somewhere new, and Oregon isn't the idea that tickles my brain just now. Maybe later, when I can leave my junior social worker job and apply for something better, I'll go across the states to LA or the desert.

But for now, it puts me at odds with myself. It's not that I'm afraid.

I'm usually only afraid of things that are trying to kill me or force their way into my room on a dark and stormy night.

But I'm... unsure.

Absently, I dodge around a couple of other students, wishing the weather was warmer. Not that it mattered to me like it did everyone else when the rain had threatened our graduation. There was no one there to take my picture or make memories with me.

There never had been.

My steps continue on the sidewalk as I swallow the last bite of lumpy pizza. It's good enough to last me until dinner, but I've decided that since I've graduated with all honors, a milkshake everyday this weekend is in order. It certainly helps that one of my cheap hideaways is having a special on them all

weekend, so I don't have to do more than scrape a few quarters together in order to actually feed my lactose addiction.

It isn't long before I reach the small diner, and I walk in as thoughts of another diner from years ago try to press into my brain from all sides. Sometimes the memories are worse than others, but today isn't so bad. The seventies decor doesn't make me stop and stare, and it takes only a nudge to get my thoughts under control as I step up to the counter and smile at the older woman with curly gray hair cascading to her butt.

"Good morning, Quinn," she greets in a high, scratchy voice. It's somewhere between vocal fry, smoker's lungs, and excitement, but I've certainly never thought to ask. "How was graduation?"

Her question catches me off guard, and I look at her for a moment before replying. "It was good. It was *cold*," I amend, sharing a smile with her. "A lot of people were pissed their pictures were ruined by the weather, but I'm sure they'll get over it."

At least they have pictures.

I force the unexpected thought away, not liking the jealousy bubbling up in my insides. It's never a good look for anyone, especially me. "Can I get a medium mint milkshake, please?" I produce five quarters from my jacket, but she shakes her head and waves for me to put them back in my pocket.

"We'll make it a large, and it's on the house since you just graduated. Are you going to any good parties? Have any plans on where you'll go next?"

Not a one.

I don't say that either, but I do shake my head. "Thank you. I really appreciate you guys, and I don't know what I'll do without your milkshakes. I'm just waiting to hear back about a couple job offers, actually, but I'm probably moving to New York." The optimism hides the nerves that flicker in my voice, and she doesn't notice.

Instead, she talks about normal things, being friendly and polite until she slides my milkshake back across the counter. I tell her goodbye, accepting her well wishes, and leave before the smile slides right off my face and to the ground below.

Must be nice, I think, to assume everyone else has the same shit in life you do. Good for her. Good for them, I guess.

Still, the milkshake is better than normal, and I hum softly in surprise as I turn down the street toward the end of the block. The quickest way back to my dorm isn't back through campus, and since I hate walking, exercise, and sweating, I'm always looking for shortcuts. Especially on days like today when the foot traffic in Akron is noticeably more than normal, like everyone is parading about to celebrate the end of a week of bad weather.

I don't take my eyes off the prize as I walk. One foot in front of the other, I make my way to the end of the block, wait, and cross. Then I do it again, the timer in my head counting down at stop lights until I can move.

Wait and cross. Just wait and cross on repeat, and within a few blocks, I've made it to the backside of campus, where the dorms tower above the rest of the university. Not that it's much of a contest, when the academic buildings are, at most, three stories tall and the highest dorm, Fernwood, is eight.

It's huge, has a lot of rooms, and as it's the building they stuff all the freshmen, the rest of us stay clear of it as much as we can. Our university is hard to get into and harder to stay in, so about twenty percent of those freshmen won't make it to the next year. If they do, they'll be much less irritating, at least.

I'm just about to cross back into campus when a hand grabs me, and my stomach plummets as I'm towed backward to the front of the shop behind me. My hand tightens on my mint shake like a lifeline, and my hand comes up to grab the man's wrist as he stares down at me with suspicious, worried eyes.

He's gorgeous, my brain says, taking the worst time in the world to note the man's soft-looking black hair and full mouth. His eyes are a darker brown than what I prefer, or what I was

expecting, and there's a light sheen of sweat on his forehead as he looks at me.

"Let go," I tell him quietly, noting that we're in an empty enough area that no one is stopping to see if something's wrong. "Let go, or I'll scream."

"Don't scream," the man murmurs, loosening his grip on my arm. "I just want to help you."

My eyebrows jerk upward, and I can't help the unimpressed, disbelieving frown that pulls at my lips. "No *offense*, friend, but men who grab me and shove me against a wall aren't my idea of help. What do you want?" I don't want to throw my milkshake at him, but I will if I need to so I can get away.

Still, even though I know he could hurt me, he doesn't *scare* me. My heart doesn't race. My blood doesn't cool in my veins. I haven't been afraid of anyone in over four years, and he's not what'll do it now.

Even if he stabs me and I bleed out on the ground, I don't know if I'll taste the same fear as I had before.

"He's looking for you." The words drag my attention out of that abyss inside of me that's gotten bigger and bigger over the years. His voice is rushed and soft, and he changes positions so this doesn't look so non-consensual. "I didn't know it was you until today, and it's hard to warn you when he's watching."

My heart skips a beat, but I refuse to think the worst. "Who?" I ask, taking my time to ask the question. "Who do you think is following me? And who the hell are you?"

"My name is Wren." He pulls his hands away and lifts them up in surrender. "I don't normally help people, but..." He shakes his head as he trails off. "I've seen what he'll do. If he's following you, it's to do more than just hurt you. You need to run."

"Who's following me?" I demand, my bravado falling from my tone. I don't know this man, this *Wren*, any more than

I know the people walking by. He doesn't know me, and he's probably some drunken, drugged up tweaker.

I don't need to listen to him.

“Look, dude—”

“You ever met a guy named Gabriel Brooks?”

Time stops, and my world shatters. I feel it and hear it break into pieces around me, and for a long moment I wonder if I'll fall, or if my legs will simply give out so I can fall through the ground.

My lips tingle, numb, and the shake falls from limp fingers to splatter all over our shoes below us. “No,” I say, refusing to hear him. “No.”

With racing thoughts, I look away, to either side, like Gabriel is standing there, waiting to make an entrance. Suddenly every stranger could be him, and every hood hides his face while my heart slams into my ribs to try to make some grand escape.

“No,” I say again, looking back up at Wren. “You're wrong—”

“*Run*,” he tells me, stepping back. “If you're what he's after, if you've done something to him? *Run*. And never stop running for anything. Do you understand me?”

Of course I understand; I understand better than he can ever know. Even as nausea claws at my stomach and my soul tries to abandon the rest of me, I prepare to do exactly what he's told me to.

Run.

3

I don't think I've ever run so fast in my life.

The fact that I nearly get hit by a car does little to penetrate my panic, and I only run faster to hit the sidewalk on the other side. Thankfully, I was already close and know the route by heart; my sprint takes me down a winding path through the back of campus that I half-ignore, choosing instead to trample on the landscaping beside it in my mad dash.

By the time I'm back at the dorm and my heart is threatening to quit, I'm gasping for air and clutching my side. Cramps are real, and my lungs burn while I stumble through the glass doors of my dormitory. It's warm enough that I'm sweating, and I slam the elevator button hard enough that I'm surprised it doesn't break.

"Quinn?" The voice behind me belongs to my RA, and I turn with a pained smile on my face to see her. "Are you okay?" she asks, concern lining her face and entwined in her words. "You look..." She doesn't say terrible, but I have a feeling she wants to.

"Totally fine," I tell her, still breathing hard with my hands on my sides like I'm trying to hold myself together. "Great. Wonderful. I just need to get back to my laptop for a job email. You get it." I don't know if she gets it, or if I'm making sense at all, but I need her to back the fuck up so I can pant in peace.

"Yeah," she agrees, giving me a supportive smile. "We're having a pizza party in the theater tonight, by the way. You

coming?”

No. I'm not. I'll be busy running away, being anywhere but here. But I make a show of thinking about it, then nod like I'll consider the invitation.

“Maybe, if this call goes well.” The elevator dings and I cross my fingers, only belatedly realizing I'd told her email, or something.

But who gives a fuck?

Mashing the elevator button for the doors to close, I give her a false, wide smile and pray for the elevator to *move*. When the doors finally do close, I fall back against the metal of the back wall, groaning.

Where could he be?

Akron, obviously. But how has he been following me? I don't do much except go to class, get milkshakes, study, and sometimes fall asleep in the library. Though, the thought of him watching me while I snore and drool on my textbooks on the third floor makes me shudder.

How did he find me?

That's the real question. I'd wanted to go further. I'd hoped to go further, actually. But after a year, my really good scholarship had been cut off, and I'd had to come back from Nevada to go to school in Akron. But even then, it had been a year and a half since I'd heard from him, and from my information, he'd fled from Springwood with the police on his heels.

So why doesn't he have better things to do than be *here*, stalking me?!

My door protests when I slam the key into the lock, and ricochets off the wall at the force I open it. My roommate is gone, having packed up before graduation and leaving the moment it was over. She'd been nice, but not nice enough for us to really be friends. While I don't think she hated me, I'm glad now that she hadn't tried to stick around or needed to stay for a few extra days, like I did.

Though, that plan is out the window and shot dead. Very dead.

With my heart still pounding in my ears and my vision still questionable, I look around and momentarily freeze, my hands still working to pull my shoulder-blade length black hair into a ponytail.

What am I doing?

I want to pack. I need to pack, obviously, like I have every time I've needed to escape or go somewhere new.

But now, surrounded by the mess of the few things that I've kept for myself and made mine, I don't know what to do. The smartest thing to do would be to leave it, but rationality kicks me in the ears as I consider that option. Without any of my stuff, or my money, or my computer, I won't be able to do anything at all. I need my things, and it isn't like I have a lot.

Will thirty minutes or so really kill me?

God, I hope not.

Sucking in a breath, I try to channel my inner foster child. I don't go for the garbage bags, because something tender and fragile in me will break if I do, but I haul out my two duffel bags and get to work throwing my clothes into one of them, followed by my shoes. Personal things go next, and I've zipped that one up and half the second one half full when I realize, with a jolt of relief, I'm basically done.

Sure, it's tragic as fuck that I don't even have enough to my name to fill a dorm room, but in this situation, it's helpful. It's necessary, even, and when I stare at the white-washed walls and empty room, I can't help the sadness raking at me.

I can't help the way I pause, or the way my feet want to drag so I can look at this place for just a while longer. My home for three years hasn't been much, but it has been the safest place I've ever had. Even before Gabriel, I hadn't known safety in Springwood. I hadn't known what it was like to look around and have things that really, actually belonged to me.

I'd just felt... lost.

Closing my eyes hard, I suck in a breath, let it out, then repeat the process. Out of every moment in time to fall apart, this has to be the absolute worst one. I need to leave. Now that I'm packed and I have nothing left to do or get, I need to go. Emails, calls, texts... they can all wait until I'm in my car and out of Akron.

Surely if I'm fast enough, Gabriel Brooks will think I'm still here. Or at least, he won't know where to look for me. Glancing toward the door, I frown at the pink mug on my roommate's desk. I'd told her she'd left it here, but Kaye had just snorted and told me to chuck it for her, or let maintenance do it. I still haven't, and at this point I'm not making a trip to the trash can. The condition of our room is what it is. Things will be fine, or at least as fine as they can be.

"Okay..." I murmur, glancing around one more time to make sure I hadn't forgotten anything. "I think you're good to go, Quinn. Now it's time to actually do the thing." I walk forward, hand on the doorknob, and give the room one last, last look.

I have everything I need for an escape, and once the door is open and braced, I'll drag my bags to the elevator and down to the parking lot.

"You look like you're all ready to go somewhere." The cool, neutral voice hits me hard, my fingers slipping from the door, even though I refuse to look back at the frame.

"Not Nevada though, right? I didn't think the desert agreed with you, though you did get such a nice tan there."

How does he know? The words whisper through my brain and every fear, every bit of anxiety I've ever felt floods my body tenfold.

I'm not afraid of anything.

Except for him.

"I bet you burned," I say flatly, turning my gaze on the man leaning against the doorframe. "You're too pale for that much sun." It isn't quite true, though his complexion is a few shades lighter than mine.

A smile flicks across his lips, warm hazelnut eyes dancing as he lifts his hand that holds the same kind of cup my shake had been in. “I don’t get your fascination with *mint*. Don’t you taste it enough when you brush your teeth?” I can’t tear my eyes away from his as he sucks on the straw, gaze never leaving mine. “The lady at the counter was so nice, though. They think a lot of you, there.”

“Go away,” I say, the words a whispered plea, and not the command I want them to be.

“But I just got here,” Gabriel replies, eyes wide and earnest. It’s not real, though. Nothing about this act is real. He reaches up with his free hand to comb his fingers through light brown hair that’s a little longer than I remember, and when I blink, I realize he looks older.

But I suppose I do too.

It’s been five years, and Gabriel looks worn out. There’s impatience and frustration in the lines of his face now, and while he barely looked thirty back when we both lived in Springwood, he now looks every bit of thirty-five. Unfortunately, it’s not a bad look on him.

“I don’t want you here,” I say, hating that I back up when he takes a step forward. “I don’t want you to be here, Gabriel.”

“I figured, based on the frantic packing,” Gabriel admits, eyeing up my duffel bags. “But why is that, exactly? What have I ever done to hurt you, Quinn? What have I ever said to make you think I was a danger to you?” He pushes into the room and closes the door behind him, causing my heart to sink so low I worry it’ll burn up in my currently rolling stomach.

“You killed them,” I remind him, my hands curled into fists. “You *slaughtered* the Owens. I saw it. I saw what you did to him, his face, his—”

“Well, maybe they shouldn’t have raised such a shitty son, hmm? Maybe they shouldn’t have been complicit, or wanted to go to the cops about you.” His words are matter-of-fact, like he doesn’t care at all about what I’ve just said. “But I don’t think I’ve ever heard you say thank you.”

“Because I haven’t. And I don’t intend to,” I say, trying to steel my nerves and lend some of that to my voice. “Because I didn’t do anything wrong back then. I was a kid who fucked up, because of something that happened that was out of her control. So I went to you for *help*, and you made everything worse.” My nails cut into my palms, though I barely notice the sharp pain. I’m much too fixated on him, and the way he sets the milkshake on my desk ever so gently.

“That’s not how I remember it,” he says, and his slow, careful movements vanish as he strides across the room. I stumble backward, surprised, and my legs hit my roommate’s bed beside her desk, giving Gabriel the perfect opening to lunge forward and grab my chin in his hand, body trapping me in place as he towers over me. “And I worry that you’re lying to yourself, Quinn. Maybe you should schedule another session with your therapist.” His nails dig lightly into my jaw as he stares at me, face calculating.

“My therapist sucked and didn’t understand my needs,” I hiss, eyes darting around the room. “What do you want? An apology? A *thank you*?” I find I don’t want to give him either, and the thought of doing so makes my lips burn. “Tell me how to make you leave.”

“I want you,” Gabriel replies, his tone level.

It’s so easy, so honest, that I stop looking for an escape from the empty room. I stare up at him, confused and terrified, and find frightening honesty in that gorgeous face. “No, you don’t,” I say, mostly because I refuse to believe it’s true. “No, you fucking don’t, you psycho—”

“I’m willing to forgive a lot of this, as I know you’re scared,” he interrupts, though he doesn’t sound particularly impressed. “But I’m only so patient. I told you back then that I’d be back for you. I just hadn’t expected it to be this long of a wait for either of us.”

“Sorry, but I’m not looking for a travel buddy,” I reply, seeing the pink mug out of the corner of my eye. I try not to draw attention to it, though, and instead keep my attention

steadily fixed on him. “I don’t even think you’ll have enough room in my car.”

“No, that’s not what I was saying, baby girl,” Gabriel admits, a smile pulling at his lips. It’s not nice, not like the smiles he gave me when I was his patient. It’s cruel, and wanting.

It’s psychotic. Just like he is.

“I’m saying that you and I are going *home*. In case you haven’t been up to date on Springwood news, I’ve been cleared of any wrongdoing. I was even given an apology. Everything is oh so wonderful there now, except for one tiny problem. Do you want to guess what that is?”

“People still know you’re crazy?” I assume, thoughts flying at the speed of light. “You still can’t sleep?”

“You’re not there like you’re supposed to be.” He jerks me to my feet, a gasp leaving me as I stumble into his solid warmth.

“I’m not coming home with you,” I tell him, heart pounding with panic. “I won’t go *anywhere* with you. Not *ever*.”

“Never is a long time,” he points out, grin wide and cold. “And I have a lot of ways to make you see things my way.”

“I’ll kill you,” I tell him, the words escaping my lips before I can stop to think about them. “I’ll kill you, I’ll *hurt* you. Because I’m not afraid of you, and I’m not going with you. Not now, not ever, *never*.” I spit the words at him, but he shrugs and takes a step toward the door, not realizing that he’s putting me closer to my goal. He’s helping me, but I can’t let him know. Not when he yanks again and I stagger more than I probably need to, putting me in range of the mug on the desk.

“I don’t really believe you,” he admits, hand tight on my upper arm. “But I’m really looking forward to you surprising me, Quinn. Once we’re home.”

“Then believe this, *Doctor*.” I don’t know where I get the strength, though I assume it has to be from desperation. All I know is that I grab the mug handle and whirl around, the

ceramic *cracking* against his skull and causing Gabriel to crumple to the ground in a dead faint.

Even though I'm reasonably sure he'll be out for at least a few minutes, I'm still terrified that he's going to appear in the parking lot behind me as I throw my suitcases into my trunk, probably with a knife to end my life then and there.

But he's never tried to hurt you, a very unhelpful part of my brain reminds me coolly, as if it has any right to do so.

"Shut up," I whisper to myself, throwing myself into the driver's seat of my '05 Camry that's starting to fall apart. All I need is for it to get me somewhere that's not here. Then it can die or combust, for all I care.

As long as it does so outside of Akron.

"You're fine," I tell myself, pulling out into traffic. There's steel in my voice that I force into existence, and coolness floods my veins as I create distance between myself and Gabriel. In hindsight, I should've called the police.

But the thought twists my stomach unpleasantly, and instead of trying to examine the root of the feeling, I shake it off and throw it in the trunk with my stuff. I won't call the cops, because I don't have time and I don't want to deal with the questions. Not because Gabriel Brooks is undeserving of jail time. Hands tightening on the steering wheel, I work to calm myself down the rest of the way by working through my thoughts in sections.

He won't know where I've gone.

He has no way of following me.

I have no reason to fear Gabriel.

The last part isn't precisely true, and my brain reminds me of that by walking through a mental picture of the Owens' diner without my consent. I remember the way Marcie looked so limp, like a rag doll.

I remember the smell that had invaded my nostrils when I'd walked past her husband, and the way his face had melted onto the grill, with—

A car honks and I jerk back into my lane, cursing myself and my wandering attention. I can't do this right now. I don't have the time or the freedom to fall apart, and I wonder if I've gone soft in the years since escaping my final foster home.

I used to be so good at compartmentalizing. At making things seem less real than they actually are. But without having to do it in a long time, I'm finding that it's harder than it ever was before.

You're escaping into your daydreams. Dr. Brooks' voice echoes in my head and this time I don't put the brakes on the memory, since it isn't accompanied by the smell of burned flesh and too much blood. *Do you find yourself needing them to get through the day, Quinn?*

He'd sat in front of me, on a sofa draped with a black, soft blanket, while I'd stuffed myself into an armchair. His office had always been so friendly, so welcoming, that I'd wondered if he'd decorated it or had his secretary do it instead. The pillows had been the expensive kind, not cheap and rough fabric. I should know, since I spent so much time running my hands over their seams as if looking for a way to take out their insides.

I need them, I'd admitted, half to him and half to myself. *But you don't understand, Dr. Brooks. It isn't because I like to daydream or make up stories in my head.*

I'd seen it then. His face had fallen slightly, and he'd clutched the pen in his hand just a little tighter. *You need them because they hurt you.*

I manage to slam to a stop in front of a red light, mouth set in a line as I'm nearly thrown through my windshield. I need to calm down and chill the fuck out. Otherwise, I'm accidentally going to off myself before I even get out of Akron.

My phone rings as the light turns green, making me jump, and I reach out blindly to curl my fingers around it before setting it to speaker and answering the call from a number I don't know. "Hello?" I ask, voice politely bemused. If this is a job offer, I don't need to sound hysterical out of the gate.

"*Miss Riley?*" The woman on the other end sounds as polite as I do, and I imagine that she's putting on an act, same as me.

"This is her. Can I help you?" God, this had better be an agency I'd interviewed with.

"*My name is Melinda Yates. We spoke the other day?*" Realization slams into me, and I remember the sweet-faced, older lady who had interviewed me from an agency in Kentucky. *Rural* Kentucky, I'd realized, when I'd looked it up after the meeting. It's not my first choice of jobs, but if she's offering me one, then I'm a little nervous at the prospect of turning it down.

"Oh, hi!" I say, like the realization brings me joy. "It's so good to hear from you." She'd been a backup interview, with a place I hadn't really wanted to work but felt like I had to apply to, due to my worries about getting into a social work career anywhere big, like New York. My demands for Kentucky had been too high, I know. It had been my way of turning them off of hiring me, and I'm surprised she's called me just to tell me that.

"*We've been discussing what you asked for in terms of salary.*" Here it comes. The denial I expect and am half hoping for. "*And we're willing to meet your asking wage.*"

What?

"*If you're still interested in the job, we'd love to have you start on Tuesday. Would that be possible?*"

I don't know what to say. Or even know how to feel, since this is equal parts fortunate and unfortunate. I want to tell her no, that I'm waiting for a call from somewhere else instead. I want to tell her that there's no way in hell I'm dragging my ass down to *Kentucky* to work, especially some western lake-town near a prison that seems like the last stop before hell.

"That would be perfect," I find myself saying instead as logic takes over. I've known the other jobs are a longshot, and there's probably nothing saying I can't last minute decline this job before taking one of those. At least, I hope so.

And this gives me somewhere to go. Plus, the cost of living there seems to be dirt-cheap, meaning that I wouldn't have to live in a cardboard box. Gabriel, from what he knows of me, would never suspect me to go to Kentucky. Especially since I'd shared with him my dreams of moving to a bigger city.

It's perfect, in the worst possible way.

"Thank you so much, Mrs. Yates. I'm really excited to start on Tuesday." Excitement isn't the word that rings true in my head, but I want to sound as enthusiastic and bright-eyed as possible so she doesn't dislike me without meeting me first. "Will you send me the information through email, please? I've actually just left my college, so I'll head that way now. And starting on Tuesday gives me time to find a place to rent, even short-term." I'll probably have to find a hotel for a couple of days, or a cheap backyard cabin that was once owned by serial killing moonshiners. That seems more in my price range.

"No problem, Quinn. My sister rents out some homes in the area, if you'd like to check them out? I could send you her number?"

The homes had better be cheap, but I don't say that. "I would be really grateful." If they are, or they're apartments, then maybe I could get everything taken care of today. That would be nice and give me a chance to sleep off the panic draining out of my veins. "Just send me everything and I'll be there bright and early on Tuesday. Thank you so much, again."

“You’re actually working a bit of a later shift,” the social worker informs me sweetly. *“I hope that’s alright?”*

Great. Graveyard shift; here I come. But as beggars can’t be choosers, I tell her that I am just so perfectly happy with that arrangement and say goodbye.

Maybe it’s a blessing. Probably not, since I don’t believe in those, but I *am* a night person, after all. If my shift is as late as I’m afraid it is, at least I’ll be more awake for it, hopefully.

Then again, as long as Gabriel Brooks isn’t there, I’m sure I’ll be able to manage.

The best thing that can be said about the house at 402 Knickview Road in Eddyville, Kentucky, is that it isn’t nearly as bad as I’d expected it to be. It isn’t a cardboard box, there’s electricity, internet, and even running water.

Which, being from a small town in Ohio and ending up in homes that sometimes didn’t have hot water or working, reliable internet, is still enough of a selling point for me to agree to the price and immediately drag my stuff in from the car.

Marian Yates, who reminds me quite a bit of her sister and my new boss, watches me with abject horror in her eyes when it’s clear that I have literally nothing else to my name. “You’re okay, right honey?” she asks, with all the motherly worry that she can muster.

Though I smile, the look is probably too wide and too happy for the occasion. “I am,” I promise. “I’m totally okay. It’s just that I don’t have a lot.”

“It’s furnished,” she says, like I hadn’t just done a walkthrough of the two bed, two two bath home that’s somewhere just under fifteen-hundred square feet. “And if you need anything else, I’m sure we can get it for you.”

I need to sleep. The seven and a half hour drive meant that it’s almost dark now that I’m ready to go into the house and pass out, and part of me wishes I’d broken it up into two days. The other, more rational part of me is thrilled I hadn’t, since

now I have two whole days to sleep and eat junk food before I start my first shift as a social worker.

Which is a worry I'll save for some time other than *now*.

"It's really okay," I assure her, and lift my bag of gas station groceries to show her that I won't starve, either. "I'm pretty happy to be able to call it home. It's really great, Mrs. Yates, thank you."

She waves a hand at me. "You don't have to be so formal with me, honey. Just Marian will do. And if you need anything at all, my husband and I live just over there." She points at a considerably cleaner, better lit house down the road. "You let me know, and we'll be out here in a minute or two. Okay?"

"I will." I doubt I'll ever actually do it, but I smile at the offer with as much appreciation as I can muster in my tired brain. "Thank you again for this. I really appreciate it." I'd like it more if she left me alone so I could pass out for a while.

"Anytime. Have a good night, Quinn. And welcome to Eddyville." She says it like there's something here to be proud of. Like it isn't some small town at the edge of a few lakes in western Kentucky.

The only thing that it has going for it, in my mind, is the lack of serial killing therapists, though I suppose that could change if I'm incredibly unlucky.

How would he know? I ask myself cynically, my thoughts dripping with disbelief as I drag myself up the rickety deck and into the house. It smells clean, at least. Like Marian had sprayed Lysol in here when she'd known I was coming. That's fine with me, though. More than fine, since there's nothing questionable, dirty, or dangerous as far as my eyes can tell.

There were a lot worse places to end up. And moving in has gotten my mind off of the email from the agency in New York that I'd seen when I'd checked for the information Melinda had sent. As I'd hoped against, they'd politely declined hiring me, telling me they would consider me in the future.

Not that I believe a form letter.

“It could be worse,” I tell myself, dropping onto the sofa and pressing the power button on the remote until the television flickers on. The living room is small, with just enough space for a couch, coffee table, and tv in an old-fashioned entertainment center perched against the opposite wall. There are wear marks on the wooden floor, and the couch feels like it’s played host to dozens of behinds over the years before I’d had the nerve to sit on it.

“Things could *always* be worse.”

Things don't get worse for the entire weekend. No matter how many times I stalk to the window and stare out of it like I'm in a bad horror movie and waiting for the inevitable monster to creep up my driveway, it never happens.

Gabriel never shows up, and every time I stare out a window picked at random, I feel dumber than the last time I'd done it.

Kentucky is far away from anywhere I've even thought about going. There's no reason for him to look for me here, or even come here, truth be told. The whole place feels a little too rural for him, and I doubt the perfect Dr. Gabriel Brooks even likes lake country.

Hell, I'm not even sure I do. I've played with the idea of renting a boat with money I don't have and discovering the art of fishing, which I don't think I'd be very good at. Would it be hot? Would I have to get up early in the mornings like I've seen on the nature documentaries I keep finding on my newly acquired cable?

I don't realize I'm glaring until I meet the eyes of one of my neighbors as he walks his dog down to the end of the street. The balding, blond man gives me an uneasy look and turns, like *I'm* the monster in the movie, and not the inevitable final girl.

"Great," I mutter to myself, and walk back to the small, cluttered kitchen to dump the remains of my coffee. While my shift isn't exactly graveyard, it isn't the normal nine to five,

either. I'm supposed to be at the office at noon, and I won't be done until eight. Not awful, but not exactly my idea of a good time. Not to mention, I'm currently on a trial, probationary run. I work for four days a week, instead of five, and naturally I don't have health insurance. God bless America.

But as long as I don't get stabbed or pneumonia from my constant lurking at windows, I doubt I'll have much need for it. Back when I'd been under eighteen, the state had paid for my healthcare, and my therapy. When I'd lost that, Dr. Brooks had oh-so-helpfully taken me as a pro bono patient.

What a nice fucking guy.

I shove the thought of him from my head, hating that he exists there without me wanting him to. It seems nearly impossible to stop thinking about him, and the worst part is...

Not all the thoughts are bad ones.

But the ones that aren't are a little easier to push away for now, especially when I set my mind to tasks like grabbing my keys, doing one last check to ensure my flat iron won't burn the house down into ashes. Then I lock the door behind me on my way to my old car that somehow hasn't exploded.

It's good for me that it hasn't, since I still need it to get to and from work. My newly rented house is too far away from the Eddyville office on the western side of town to be closer to its neighbor, Kuttawa, for me to walk to. Until I can afford the payments on something newer, prayer and duct tape had better keep this one running.

The drive is easy, if a little boring. Eddyville is even more rural than Springwood was, and the only interesting parts of it are when I get to look at the lake and see people speeding along in fishing boats or larger pontoons.

After twenty minutes of weaving in and out of the country traffic and wondering if I need more coffee, I pull into the Social Services Office of Eddyville... and just look at it.

Holy shit, my brain provides, staring up at the tiny building no bigger than a café and much less interesting to look at. *This is so small*. The exterior is dark brick, with a cheery white

door that plays host to laminated paper signs I can't read from here.

Even the property itself is small, with the nearest building being a McDonald's with much more traffic and curbside appeal than this. Slowly, I walk up the cement sidewalk, eyeing the cracks and chips missing from parts of it and providing evidence that this place is just as old as it looks. The landscaping is tidy, with small flower beds bordering the sides of the small building and a white sign that identifies it as *Eddyville Social Services Office* stuck in the ground and painted with black, cracked letters.

It certainly isn't like the other places I'd applied to, that's for sure.

Without hesitating, I grab the doorknob, and only succeed in pulling instead of pushing, as the bright green, printed sign reminds me to do with a cheery smiley face. I roll my eyes and *push* instead, causing the door to swing forward on squeaky hinges.

The first face I see inside is one that reminds me enough of Marian's that this has to be my new boss, Melinda Yates. She beams from ear to ear, tortoiseshell glasses perched on the end of her nose and held there by two beaded chains that loop back around her neck. Her hair is more grey than blonde, and she's already too friendly, just by the look alone.

But I return the smile and walk inside, trying to remind myself not to ignore all the things she'll tell me about what I need to do in order to succeed in Eddyville.

Because, as I remind myself while she gives me a tour of the small office. I don't have anywhere else to succeed right now. It's here or nothing, and nothing isn't an option.

Especially when *nothing* sounds a lot like Springwood in my brain.

"Do you like to swim?" Melinda tries to get comfortable in her hard-backed chair as I watch, though it takes me a moment to drag my thoughts back to her question. It wasn't what I was expecting, since the Blaiken family are about to show up at

any moment for their assessment with Melinda. It's a particularly sad case, by anyone's standards, and my heart thumps nervously in my chest at all the possible outcomes for two parents who had lost everything because of the dad's addiction to gambling.

They'd gone further and further down the rabbit hole until finally they couldn't afford to feed their kids and the dad was self-medicating with alcohol. According to Melinda, they're on the right track to getting their two daughters back, but the look on her face isn't exactly optimistic when she talks about them.

"Hmm?" I ask, needing a moment to actually hear her question and think it through.

"I was just wondering if you liked to swim. My husband and I host pool parties in the summer, and since it's getting unbearably warm, we're planning our first one. Marian told me you might enjoy some company and some time out. She says you haven't left the house much since you got here."

I hate pity. I hate her pity more since it's delivered with practiced kindness and sympathy.

Sympathy is almost as bad as pity.

"I've been tired," I say, cracking a smile. "And I do like to swim, though it's been awhile since I have." God, I wish the Blaikens would show up so I wouldn't have to do this right now. It's sad to think that their misery could save me from my own discomfort, and worse, that I'm begging for it. But what else will stop the words and kindness from pouring out of Melinda's mouth?

"You should come. I'll let you know the exact date when we figure it out. Probably next weekend, actually. Though there won't be too much swimming just yet. Water's still figuring out it's summer." She chuckles as the door opens, and from her office I see two adults walk in, both of them looking like they might be marching to their death.

As if sensing my discomfort, Melinda reaches out to pet my hand, though I wish she wouldn't. My fingers tense under

her touch, and she gives me a comforting smile to go along with the unwanted touch. I don't know her. I don't want her hand on mine, even though she seems like an okay person.

But that isn't the point.

"It'll be fine," she promises, and opens the folder on her desk as one of the other social workers, Abby, directs the Blaikens toward her office. A bright, barely believable smile settles itself on Melinda's lips, and I try to give a less-than-morbid look to my own expression as the Blaikens walk in and sit on rickety, metal chairs that squeak and protest when they perch on them.

For a few moments while Melinda shuffles papers, the only sound in the room is the spinning fan on its stand in the corner. It rocks a little as it turns, giving it a noticeable squeak when it gets too far to one side. The *swish-swish* is predictable, and I find myself counting the swivels as Melinda leafs through the papers and I survey Mr. and Mrs. Blaiken.

They aren't what I expected. They don't beg or threaten. They don't look disinterested or even really poverty-stricken. In fact, they look... *normal*.

Like two, normal, down on their luck, humans who have made one too many mistakes in their lives. My heart clenches, twisting in my chest, and it's unfortunate that Mrs. Blaiken looks at me at the moment that I remember my mother's face, and how different it was from this woman's when I'd seen her last.

"She's new," Melinda murmurs, beaming as I try to fix my face. "I'm having her sit in with me so she can learn. Do either of you mind? She's very promising, and I'm hoping she can provide some insight on the help we can give you after today."

The last part of her sentence is what melts their apprehension, and Mrs. Blaiken turns on me again with wide, fearful eyes that try and fail to hide that she's terrified of Melinda right now. Or rather, what Melinda's judgment could mean for their family.

You should've left him, I say silently, glancing at her husband. He's better at hiding his feelings than his wife, but I can't help but remember the words I'd read in the file concerning them both. Their kids would be fine and living with them, if not for him and his problems.

Why didn't you leave him? I don't ask, because it isn't my place. It wasn't her fault initially, sure. But to just sit by and let her husband wreck her children's lives? It doesn't seem right to me, and something in me twists at the notion of her just *letting it happen*.

God, maybe my first sociology professor had been right when I'd opened up about my history of foster care. He told me that this job would most likely be harder for me than most, because my empathy would mean that I felt every case that was similar to my own more strongly than most.

I'd brushed him off then, but it hits me now that there's a good chance he was right.

Taking a deep breath, I force my body to relax. My fingers unclench, and my ribs pull away from the lungs they were trying to close in on. My heart stops pounding in my temples, and I look at them rationally, like I would a scenario back in school, instead of real life.

I can do this, and it's dumb of me to let my emotions get the best of me now, when I'm normally so good at keeping my feelings or sympathy at bay.

Melinda wastes no time in going over their reports with them, and from the beginning, I know it won't be good. There's a frown on her face that I haven't seen yet today, and she's careful to avoid words like *messed up* or *mistakes*. Even though I don't know how she skirts around them, since this whole ordeal is a clusterfuck.

Mr. Blaiken's drug test had come back positive. His wife had known, based on the disappointed acceptance on her face, and when she opens her mouth to speak, it isn't to condemn him or divorce him on the spot, like I'd hoped.

“What will happen to my kids?” she asks, her voice wobbling. “I know you said that he needed to pass this time, but...” She swallows hard. “Can we keep trying? He’s trying so hard. It was just a mistake, and I know he can do better.”

Melinda’s face is sympathetic and kind, but not hopeful. “I’m afraid we’re running out of options at this point, Mrs. Blaiken,” she admits, looking from her to her husband with more understanding than I’d be able to muster. “I know we’d discussed your children coming home with you, but the first step is your husband’s ability to not use or drink.” She looks at him, still so understanding, and not at all like she wants to punch him.

But he won’t look at her. He mutters a few words of explanation that I can barely hear, though none of them sound like the pleas and apologies he should be screaming out. If he cared about them, why not divorce her himself? He has to know that his wife would have a better chance of getting their kids back without him.

Unless he doesn’t care.

By the time they leave, Mrs. Blaiken is crying. I watch her go, a handful of Melinda’s pink-tinted tissues balled up in her hands, and force myself again to stop tensing every muscle in my body.

“It’s hard,” Melinda says, holding out the box of tissues. I shake my head and she puts them back, giving me a worried look.

“It’s frustrating,” I correct, waiting for the Blaikens to leave before I speak. “Why doesn’t she just leave him? She has a job, and she’s not the one drinking or using. She could get her kids back without him.”

“I doubt that’s even occurred to her,” Melinda says, voice tinged with surprise at my words. “He’s her husband. Her partner.”

“He’s the problem,” I argue. “He’s not a partner when he’s the problem.”

“You’re very practical, though these situations rarely are.” She closes the file and gets to her feet. I follow, rolling my shoulders, and she goes on, “Do you think you’d be able to leave the man you love, if you were in that situation?”

“Yes,” I say without needing time to consider it. “The moment someone I love is hurting me is the moment I cut them off. You shouldn’t let people have that much control over you.”

Melinda looks me over, and for a few seconds I’m sure I’ve said something wrong and she’s going to fire me on the spot. The fan *swish-swishes* behind me, and just before the inevitable squeak, Melinda smiles. “So practical,” she chides, ushering me out of her office and toward the break room. “You’ll have a hard time finding a husband with such radical views. And who knows? Maybe you’re just young, and you’ll probably feel differently once you’re in love.”

I don’t agree. I couldn’t disagree more, actually. But I just smile and give her a noncommittal answer of agreement. She’s wrong, but then it doesn’t matter. The only thing that matters is that I keep my job and make this work, at least until another, better option comes along.

6

It takes the phone ringing twice for me to remember that as the newest member of Eddyville Social Services, I have the shitty on call hours.

I sigh and open my eyes, staring at the ceiling of the small bedroom I'd claimed in Marian's house. I could let it just go to voicemail, but that's not part of my job. My hand darts out so I can grab my phone, and I answer it before it can go to voicemail and pull it to my face. "Hello?" I mumble, uncurling my legs and stretching them toward the bottom of the bed until my muscles protest.

"*Did I wake you up?*" Melinda's voice isn't tired, like she was up anyway, and I wonder if this is her normal social hour, or if there's a reason for her call. Right now, I can't decide which would be worse.

Of course she woke me up. But I swallow back the words and instead reply, "It's okay. What's up? Is something wrong?" Checking the digital clock beside the bed, I cringe. It's almost three in the morning. Prime sleeping time with my hours. But also, apparently, prime Melinda time.

"*I don't think so, but since you're the social worker on call tonight, I need you to check something out for me. It's more of a formality than anything, and a good way for you to get some experience doing this,*" my boss explains, her tone more cheerful than it has any right to be this late at night.

"You want me to go knock on someone's door at three am?" I ask, sitting up in bed and rubbing the heel of my palm

against my eyes. I need to get my brain working properly if I'm going to go do what she's asking. Even though I don't want to.

“Not exactly. They both normally check in with me by ten or so over email. They work late shifts and are a... bit of a special case. This has happened before, but I want a note to call me on their door by the time they wake up.”

All I want to know is why a fucking email won't do.

Still, I suck in a breath and close my eyes hard, steeling myself for what I need to do. “All right,” I say finally, getting to my feet. “Okay. Yeah, just text me the address? Is there a letter I should write or something?”

“It's in the office's mailbox, if you're okay swinging by. It should be on your way.” Clearly I'd underestimated how shitty of a boss Melinda can be when she wants to.

“Sure,” I tell her, trying not to sigh sharply and make my disdain for the job super clear. “Shouldn't take me long, I hope.” God, I hope it isn't that far. “I'll do all of that. And I'll let you know if I need anything or get lost.” Without changing out of my pajama shorts, I drag on a pair of sweatpants and a lightweight hoodie.

“That'll be fine. I'll be awake for a few more hours.” At this point, she's just solidifying to me that she's some kind of ancient, eldritch demon that uses the night as her time to perform clandestine rituals, or something.

“Okay. I'll talk to you later.” I manage to keep my neutral facade up until I hang up the phone and groan, wanting to flop right back down in bed and pretend that this entire thing was some lucid dream.

But I'm the one that wanted to do this. It's just my fault that I thought some rural lake town wouldn't demand hours like this.

While I promise myself that I won't judge, it's hard when the house comes into view.

Trash litters the yard, decorating the grass in place of lawn ornaments while a worn mattress leans precariously against

the deck. Stairs leading up to the door look unstable at best. A tetanus disaster at worst.

Part of me wishes I could just stuff the letter in the mailbox and leave, but that's not possible. Well, not if I want to keep my job or stay on Melinda's good side, at least. Maybe if I get past this trial period, I won't be the one sent out on middle of the night excursions to tape a paper to someone's door.

"God, why couldn't this have waited til morning?" I mutter, pushing out of my car and slamming the door behind me. My skin prickles, goosebumps running up my forearms and I pause to look up at the house again.

Something feels *wrong*. It feels off here, and not just because the house looks like it should be condemned instead of lived in.

"You're okay," I remind myself, voice flat. "You are so fucking okay it's unreal. It's been a week. You're fine. He doesn't know you're here." I don't want to consider how many times I've repeated that to myself lately, but who cares? There's certainly no one around who might judge me for it. The fear ebbs, though doesn't disappear completely. This place still seems eerie, and some part of my brain wants me to jump back in my car and speed away instead of going up to the door.

But it's just a door, just a house, and just a town at night. I won't let some instinct take over. So with that thought, I make my way across the minefield of a yard and open up the rickety wooden gate that blocks off the front of the deck.

Another shiver travels up my spine, and I hate that I give into my nerves and glance behind me at the still-empty yard.

Well, empty of people, at least. The yard certainly looks terrible, and foreboding. Like a landmine laden field that I'd be likely to either break my leg in or end up with shards of glass embedded in my skin.

How could anyone live like this?

While I've always been on the lower side of middle class, by a lot, it's never been this bad for me. Not since I could

personally help it, anyway. My brain reminds me of a foster home long ago where the trash was piled higher than my tiny, emaciated cheeks and hollow eyes.

But that was so many years ago, and not something I could've helped. Now that I'm in charge of myself and my surroundings to some extent, I'd never let my life overflow to this extent. I couldn't, unless I wanted to lose my grip on the sanity I've been hanging onto all these years.

Reaching into my pocket, I unfurl the paper and hold it in both hands. While I'm not sure I'm supposed to look at it, that hasn't stopped me from reading the notice letter that's been printed in bold letters on the front.

From what I can tell, if the Birkins don't want to lose their court appeal for custody, they need to get their act together. But from what I can see here, that ship has sailed and no amount of *getting it together* will do whatever they need it to.

But it isn't my call, and not my case. I'm just here to do whatever Melinda wants from me, then go back to bed and pretend I got a full eight hours instead of five hours broken into pieces.

"Good luck with this making a difference," I mutter, and reach up to slide the paper into the small space between door and frame.

Or at least, that's the plan.

The door swings back some, like it wasn't properly closed, just as a hand rests on the frame beside my face, a body behind me warm and solid.

"I see you're still jumpy in the dark."

Gabriel's voice in my ear makes me nearly levitate and I whirl around, hating that it brings me closer to him instead of further away. "*You*," I hiss, eyes wide.

"It's always me," he promises, eyes sharp in the dim and dingy light from the porch lamp. "And it'll never be anyone else."

He's so close that I could bite him, and his breath is warm against my face. He looks the same as he had a week ago, and a part of me wishes I'd left some kind of mark on him with the coffee mug I'd shattered against his face.

"Shit," I whisper, meeting his eyes. "You're harder to get rid of than a fucking cockroach." For all of my bravado and insults, he terrifies me. Chills run down my spine, and my hands clench at my sides. "How did you find me?"

"The same way I always find you," he replies, leaning forward so his mouth brushes my ear.

"By some dark power you got from selling your soul to the devil?" I ask, voice sharp as I fight not to run screaming from him again.

"By the tracker in your car."

My blood runs cold and I jerk around to look at him, eyes wide and incredulous. "You put a *tracker* in my—" He reaches out and I pull away, my back slamming into the door behind me as my feet take me further from the threat that is Gabriel. I shriek, stumbling, and barely realize I'm on the linoleum of the kitchen instead of the wood of the deteriorating porch. "Leave me alone!"

"Quinn." Worry tinges his sharply handsome features and he follows me, though it only urges me to keep going. "*Quinn*," he says again, this time reaching out and grabbing onto my wrist. "Stop fucking running away from me—"

"I will never stop trying to get away until you leave me the fuck—"

"—*and look behind you.*" He yanks forward on my arm harder than he needs to, causing me to fall into him. For one precarious moment I worry he won't be able to balance both of us, but he straightens and pulls me around, hands on my arms to show me what I've walked into.

"Holy shit," I breathe, eyes fixed on the two dead adults slashed to pieces on the kitchen floor. "Did you—?"

"Never even met them," Gabriel denies, his own words thoughtful. "I guess you didn't go on a slashing spree tonight,

either?”

“No, no I definitely didn’t. So if it wasn’t me, and it wasn’t you...” I trail off at the wretched, depraved grin that lights up his eyes and hooks his lips up in an uneven smile.

“Then I think we’re trespassing on someone else’s territory, little girl. And if I know anything about being a bad person, I doubt he’ll like us very much for it.” I hate that he slides his arms around my body, holding me more firmly against him.

But even more than that, I hate that I let him.

“God,” I mutter, closing my eyes hard instead of looking at the bodies. “I came all this way to get away from you, only to stumble onto this?”

“You’re unlucky,” Gabriel agrees. “So fucking unlucky. You want to call the cops? We probably should, since you *stepped in their blood and all.*”

I barely hear what he says when he calls the police.

Instead, I sit down on the rickety deck with nails that are probably full of tetanus sticking out of it, and put my head in my hands with a sigh. Leaving Illinois should have meant leaving all of this behind, but here I am, finding dead bodies with him at my back.

Just like back in Springwood.

I scrub my face when he sits down beside me, immediately moving to get away from him, only for his fingers to grip the back of my shirt and hold me still, like he's scruffing a cat.

"Let's talk about what we're going to say when the cops show up," he tells me evenly, his eyes holding mine in the dim light from the lamp above us. "Don't run away from me. You don't have anywhere to go this time."

"I have so many places to go," I whisper, though the first of them is to a mechanic to get the tracker pulled out of my car... wherever it is. "How dare you *track me*? What's wrong with you, Gabriel? Are you *crazy*?"

His grin turns dark, morbid, and so unsettling that I wish I hadn't asked at all.

"Yeah, Quinn," he murmurs, his grip on my shirt keeping me in place as he leans in close. "I'm insane. That's why I'm here, with you, instead of in any of the other places I'd rather be. Doesn't that make you feel so special? That I'll cross the earth for you without complaint?"

“No,” I breathe, heart hammering in my chest. “Let go of me, or I’ll hit you.”

“Let’s talk about that.” His other hand comes up and I flinch away, expecting for him to hit me or grab my face harshly.

But he doesn’t.

Instead, Gabriel just watches me, and it reminds me of all those times in his office when he’d waited for my fears to pass, or for my anxiety to settle down. He does it now, with his hand inches from my face, and waits for some kind of signal that it’s okay to continue.

I hate him for it.

Seconds later, his hand comes to rest on my cheek, and he leans forward so my side is pressed against the wooden rail on my left. “Don’t do it again, Quinn. Unless you want me to make you regret it.”

“You already make me regret everything,” I breathe, eyes fixed on his. “I don’t think there’s anything else you can do to make this worse.”

“There is,” he promises. “There are *so* many ways for me to hurt you, and so many of them I’d never even consider. I like it when you fight me.” His hand moves to grip my wrist, stopping me from reaching for his throat. Instead, a low chuckle leaves his throat, though his eyes never leave mine. “But if you try to run away again, I’ll stop you. I won’t let you get nearly as far as you have the last two times.”

I don’t know what to say to him. My insides flutter, and I can’t decide if I’m nauseous or hyperventilating when my breathing picks up and I inhale the scent of his cologne and the leather of his jacket.

“Why did you chase me?” I ask, frozen and trapped on the porch with two dead bodies behind us. They don’t bother me nearly as much as him, though. How could they, when they can’t do anything to me, and he holds all the power I’d never want him to wield against me? “What do you want, Gabriel?”

He opens his mouth just as sirens sound in the far distance, and disappointment flits across his face. In the next instant, he's on his feet, pulling me up with him to support me on the stairs. "I came here to check on them like I was asked to," he says, voice flat. "We met in the driveway and saw the door was open. You went inside even though I told you not to—"

At my scoff, his grip on my arm tightens, and his mouth twists in a smirk. "You're the more believably naïve one here, Quinn. I came in after you and pulled you back. You almost got sick, you didn't mean to step in the blood. Do you understand me?"

"What if I tell them you did it?" I reply as more of a challenge than a real question.

I expect anger. I expect irritation, at the very least.

But I don't expect the smile that lights up his warm eyes and causes him to shake his head. "Do whatever you want, then," he offers, letting go of me as the cops appear in the driveway. "Do whatever you want, and suffer the consequences." The amusement fades only when the red and blue lights are blinding, and I watch as his face turns serious and official.

It's a perfect mask.

He greets the officers first and I stay behind, looking nervous. His plan is an easy one, and not completely untrue, except for a few key differences. But I go with it, explaining to the cops what had happened and agreeing with Gabriel that we got here at the same time.

"Do you know Dr. Brooks?" the female cop asks, glancing back at my ex-therapist. "I didn't think he was seeing patients just yet."

I don't miss the surreptitious look Gabriel sneaks my way, the question in his eyes, and the way he waits for my answer.

I could do it right here and now. I could tell them the truth, though they may not quite believe me.

I could seal his fate here as being under suspicion. They may not believe me completely, but it would still spell trouble

for him if I said something against him. If I told them that he's responsible for other deaths, even if he's cleared of this one.

He couldn't do anything about it, if I told them. Not right here, at least.

"I'd never met him before tonight," I lie, looking up at the woman in earnest. "He told me his name, and that he'd been sent to do a check in, just like I'd been sent with a letter for the front door. We found the door already open, and I..." I trail off, trying to look ashamed and apologetic. "I think I stepped in blood before he had the idea for us to get out of there."

"Weren't you afraid that whoever had done it was still around?" she asks, the sharp sound of stretcher wheels hitting concrete dragging my attention away from her and to the sidewalk behind me.

A body bag is the only thing I see, though. No mangled, torn up body. No wide, staring eyes. Part of me wonders if this is how the Owens family had been carried out of their diner, once Gabriel had been done with them.

Had it been hard to unstick Mr. Owens' face from the grill first?

Nausea rolls in my stomach as I look back up at the woman. "W-what?" I stammer, needing a moment to process her question. I try to put nerves in my voice, and fear.

She repeats the question, and I fight not to look at Gabriel.

Frankly, the idea of someone more dangerous than him still being here hadn't crossed my mind at all.

After all, how could it?

"I didn't, I'm sorry, I... I was just scared," I lie, trying to sound like I'm confused. "They aren't, right? Whoever did this?"

She hesitates, then shakes her head. "No. We did a thorough search, and it's completely empty. Both of you should go home. If we have any questions, we'll be in touch." The dismissal is as rude as it is cold, and I shrug my shoulders, trying to still look amiable and frightened.

Apparently, I succeed, as the cop pats me awkwardly on the shoulder. “You look pretty worn out,” she observes, and I pride myself for selling the act. “Are you all right to drive home?”

“I’ll take her home,” Gabriel offers, sounding a few degrees different from how he normally speaks to me. His eyes are earnest, his posture less sure of himself and more modest. This isn’t the real Gabriel, or the one I know from Springwood.

This is an act, and a damn good one.

“No, it’s okay,” I say quickly, kicking myself for selling the act so well. “I don’t mind driving myself home. It isn’t far, just across town. Thirty minutes or so,” I promise, hoping she believes me.

But she doesn’t, and she trades a look with the other cop.

I’m not a child, damn it, I want to snap. Stop treating me like one.

“I’ll take her home,” Gabriel says again, pressing the solution into their brains so they’re more likely to accept it. He tosses me a warning glance and I press my lips together, knowing that if I push the issue further, it’ll look suspicious.

Neither of us needs to look suspicious right now.

“But I need my car to go to work tomorrow,” I point out, vocalizing a very real issue.

“I’ll take it back,” the woman offers, holding out a hand for my keys. “I go that way, anyway. Really, I think it’s better for him to drive you home. You look exhausted, and I don’t think it’s a good idea for you to drive.”

I’m *fine*, but I finally only nod and hand my keys to her like any part of me is grateful.

I’m not.

How could I be, when Gabriel reaches out to gesture in the direction of his car and walks toward it with one last, grateful word with both cops.

“I’d rather walk,” I say finally, when we’re far enough away that only he’ll hear me. All I get is a snort, and him opening the passenger door of a black Camaro.

Of course, his car is much nicer than mine.

Hesitating, I look inside and my knees suddenly lock at the idea of getting into a car with him. I’ll be trapped.

I’ll be alone with *him*. There won’t be a way for me to protect myself, and he could just take off with me like I’m sure he wants to.

He could kill me, even. No one would be able to stop him, and—

“Breathe, Quinn.” His voice in my ear, soft and almost sweet, is unexpected. So is the hand on my elbow and his solid warmth behind me. “If I wanted to hurt you, I would. I know where you live, remember? I could’ve hurt you any night that you’ve been here, and it would’ve been a lot easier than getting your blood all over my car.”

I shudder, feeling his breath on my neck, just under my ear. “Is that supposed to be comforting?” I snap in a voice that shakes for real.

He chuckles. “Yeah, it is. And it’s meant to get you in the car before either of our cop friends comes over to see what’s wrong. Don’t make this harder than it has to be, all right?”

With those words I force my body to cooperate, reminding myself that he’s right, and that he could’ve done a lot worse than this by now if he’d wanted to. Still, it’s difficult.

I’ve been in enough dangerous situations for my body to recognize another one, and it takes all of my willpower to sit in the front seat of his fancy car and buckle my seatbelt with cold fingers that shake.

By the time I’m done, he’s in the car as well, the engine running softly as he looks at me. When I meet his eyes, my gaze narrows, and I fix him with all the dislike and vitriol in one look as I can manage. As if he needs to be reminded about how I feel about him.

But all he does is scoff.

He doesn't talk on the way to my newly rented house. He doesn't say a word until he's pulled into my driveway and turned the engine off, the lights off and throwing our surroundings into darkness.

"Thanks," I mutter, feeling like politeness is the bare minimum, and pull the door open.

Or at least, I try to.

Nothing happens, and when I try again, my heart slams into my ribs at the realization of being trapped.

"Gabriel—" I yank on the door handle again, putting my entire body into it like it'll make a difference. At this point, though, I have a better chance of breaking the door than unlocking it, and Gabriel doesn't seem at all upset about the possibility.

"Can I come in?" he asks airily, like I'm not fighting with the door.

"Of course not. Let me *out*—" The lock pops open and I nearly fall out of the car when the door suddenly swings back on its frame.

I swear I hear him laugh, just as I hear his own door closing and see him walk amiably up towards my small porch.

"No, I said *no!*" I remind him, catching up to him and overtaking him on the porch, right in front of my door. The small area is mostly covered, granting me privacy from my neighbors, and right now, it's that fact that works against me.

Gabriel shoves me backward, until my back is against the door and his hands are on either side of me, fingers splayed on the glass. With no light from my porch and nothing to see his expression by, I can only go by his breath on my lips and the warmth from his body, for all the good that does.

"I said you couldn't come in," I remind him, a tremor in my voice that I try to chase away. "I said—"

"I'm worried for you," he says, cutting me off in the middle of my reminder. "Seriously, Quinn. I know how hard

this was for you back home. I know you went back into therapy with someone else.” He can’t hide the disdain at it being not with him, and I nearly snort with dark amusement at his jealousy. “Talk to me.”

“I want you to leave,” I say when given a chance.

But he only snickers, and suddenly I feel his hand on my chest, just below my collarbone. “I won’t hurt you,” he reminds me, as confusion muddles my thoughts and freezes me in place. “I have never wanted to hurt you. Why do you keep running from me, Quinn?”

His hand slides up, gently, until his fingers are close to my throat and I tilt my head back to create space from his touch. “Then what do you want? To *help*?” I spit in his face. “Don’t make me—”

“I want *you*.”

The words are frank, honest, and I can’t move when he says them. I feel stricken, like a deer in headlights, but there’s no light here and it’s his words that have me paralyzed.

“What?” I ask, sure I’ve heard him wrong.

“I want... *you*.” His fingers close around my throat, cradling it gently. “From the first time you opened up to me in my office and showed me how sweet you are, and how funny. From the first time I killed for you, it’s always been *you*, Quinn.”

“No.” I swallow underneath his fingers, and wish I had more than one-word answers in me. I’m not supposed to be afraid of anything, and even if he is the only exception, I’m not the type of person to let him do this and stand here like a victim.

I have to do something.

Anything.

“Aren’t you tired of running from me?” he goes on, his face so close to mine that I feel the brush of his unshaven skin against my cheek. “When are you going to let me show you how I feel?”

“When you’re dead,” I say, trying to find my voice. “Or when I’m dead. But I don’t think we’re going to the same place afterward, so—”

“Are you so sure about that?” He certainly doesn’t seem perturbed by my words, but I refuse to let them sink in.

“You’re a murderer,” I remind him. “You killed the Owens —”

“I’ve killed a lot more people than that.”

The words stun me. My breath catches in my chest, just as his fingers tighten until he’s half-restricting my breathing, and I feel him with every bit of air that enters my lungs. “You’re not really shocked, are you?” he taunts, and I hate that I am. It had been almost romantic, if a bit deranged, to think that he’d become a murderer for me.

But to know that it’s just part of *him*, and that they weren’t the only ones?

That’s another ballpark entirely.

“Let go,” I order, trying to sound anything other than terrified.

“Or what?”

“Or I’ll break the glass door and stab you in the throat, Gabriel.”

He laughs. I’ve always loved his laugh, but the tinge of madness it holds makes me shiver and close my eyes hard against the implications.

“You’re not even lying, are you?” he snickers, and his face is back to being too close, his breath hot against my parted lips. “I’d love to see you try, but not tonight. Not now. Not when you need to sleep and figure out what you’re going to tell your boss tomorrow. Try not to panic, Quinn. Remember how I told you to relax and—”

“Shut up, *shut up!*” I slam my hands into him, but he doesn’t let go of my throat, and barely moves away. “You’re not my therapist anymore! *Shut up!*”

“Maybe not, but I still know you better than anyone ever could,” he points out, his other hand reaching out to grip my hip so sharply that I open my mouth in a surprised gasp.

It’s what he’s waiting for. Gabriel strikes, his mouth finding mine and pressing until I’m shoved against the door once more. My hands fall, one of them finding the door handle, and before I can stop to think about what I’m doing, my teeth close on his lower lip. *Hard.*

Gabriel snarls, a sound I’ve never heard from him, but instead of pulling away, he leans forward so his body is a solid line against mine, one of his knees pressing between my thighs. Warmth floods me, and heat sinks to a spot under my stomach, close to where his body rubs against mine.

But I refuse to think about that, or do more than acknowledge it. I bite down harder, until I taste blood, and finally he jerks away, clearly in pain.

Then Gabriel *laughs*. He sounds insane as I grope for the door handle again and step to the side so I can open it. He touches his lip, and in the dim light, I can barely see him swipe his tongue across the bite, still snickering.

“I always knew you’d like to play,” he tells me, lifting his head as if trying to find my eyes in the dark. “I always knew, Quinn—”

I don’t let him finish the sentence. Instead, I slam the door in his face, locking it and checking every window and door in the house before escaping to the bathroom, turning on the shower, and escaping into the hot water surrounded by darkness.

When I'm not dreaming of him, I'm dreaming of something worse.

Sometimes, it's just the feeling of a worse time, as opposed to one of the terrible things that had happened to me in foster care.

Tonight, it's the former, though I'm surprised that it isn't Gabriel when he's always so close to my thoughts lately.

In my thin, worn sneakers I walk along the dark hallway, my shoulders trembling under the threadbare cardigan I wear. If I could just change this one decision, so many other bad nights might have not happened.

I'm thirteen, and in my fourth foster home. This one is worse than the last, and all I want is to be free from here, no matter what it takes.

They hate me, the thought echoes in my brain, planting itself there with surety. My foster parents actively despise me, rather than just dismissing me like the others. They only want the money from the state, not to take care of us. For the most part, the seven other kids and I take care of ourselves.

The door creaks open to my left and I stop, eyes wide, to meet the eyes of the other girl who lives here. Sylvie shakes her head, face drawn and frightened. "Don't," she whispers. "They'll catch you, Quinn. They won't let you leave."

"I'd rather die than stay," I reply, so sure, even at thirteen, that my only options are death or escape. I'd seen what had happened to her.

I'd seen the times that our foster father had crept into her room, and how much she cried afterward. While it hadn't happened to me, I had promised myself that it wouldn't, one way or another.

I creep onward, making my way down the stairs as she closes her door and presumably creeps back to bed. I'd asked for her to come with me, but she'd told me that she couldn't.

She was too afraid.

It was a fair point, seeing as our foster father was mean. He hurt the boys and girls alike, and everyone went to their rooms the moment he came home, lest we trigger his drunken irritation before he oozed all the alcohol from his pores by yelling at his wife.

I can't do it anymore. The thought echoes across my thoughts, and my eyes fall on the front door that's nestled up to the kitchen counter. I don't know where I'll go. I don't care, really. As long as it isn't here.

"Where are you going, Quinn?" The voice shocks me to a standstill. Fear causes my throat to close, and slowly I turn to look up and up at the imposing, terrifying figure of my foster father.

"Nowhere," I whisper, my body shaking like a leaf in a thunderstorm. "Nowhere, I was just—"

"Don't you lie to me. Don't you dare—" He takes a step forward, only to stop with a choked off gasp. Metal claws stab through his chest, and from over his shoulder, Gabriel looks at me with pity, empathy, and worry.

"I'll keep you safe, Quinn," he murmurs, pulling the long blades back through my foster father's chest.

I can't do anything but stare at them. I can't do anything but watch as Gabriel stabs my cruel foster father over and over again, until he slumps to the ground and his blood spreads toward me like reaching fingers.

When I step back and look at Gabriel, the fear is gone and I'm no longer thirteen. I'm twenty-three, and the house from

my childhood has morphed into the house I'd seen the two dead bodies in only a few days ago.

There are lines on Gabriel's face that weren't there when I'd met him in Springwood, and I don't stop him as he steps forward to cup my cheek in the hand he doesn't wear his claws on. "I'll keep you safe. I won't let you do anything you regret."

"I've never done anything like that," I murmur, confusion sparking in my brain as he cradles my face and leans down, lips brushing mine. "Gabriel, what do you mean?" He kisses me, and in my dream it's the softest brush of his mouth against mine, just enough to have me on my tiptoes and begging for more.

"You know what I mean." He draws back and picks up my hand, where I'm suddenly holding a sharp, thin blade that glitters in the light from the window. Blood stains the metal and my fingers, and I drop it with a gasp, a question on my lips—

When I sit up, shaking, I'm surprised the force isn't enough to send me through the window on the other side of the small bedroom. I groan and bury my face in my hands, dragging my knees up to press my body against them.

"Fuck," I mutter, running the dream over and over through my brain. It does no good, though. No matter how many times I try to figure out what he meant, I can't. Worse, the dream shreds when I scrutinize it, blowing away my thoughts in the storm outside.

I've dreamed of my past before, but never with Gabriel taking center stage unless it was about him specifically. That night had happened before I'd ever met him, and it unfortunately hadn't ended in Gabriel saving me.

My foster father had hurt me, though thankfully not in the same way he liked to hurt Sylvie. He'd broken my arm, and when I'd put myself in front of him a week later to protect Sylvie, social services had no choice but to intervene.

Though I'd never been told what had happened to Sylvie.

I turn to look at the window, unsurprised to see that the sun is well and risen. With my schedule, sleeping past dawn is a given. A storm pounds against the window, and I shiver as I curl back up under the thick comforter I'd brought with me from my dorm room. I don't have to get up just yet, and as much as I hate it, I still can't get the dream and Gabriel out of my head. Though hopefully pouring a mug of coffee down my throat and inhaling a bunch of cereal will go a long way toward getting rid of him from my thoughts.

It's not that I dislike my job.

It's that Clara, the woman who shares my cubicle, is insufferable. For three days she's talked about the double homicide, chatting my ear off as I try to work through my pile of cases while she comes up with multiple theories about what could have happened.

Any part of it that was entertaining is gone, and whenever she sits down and rolls her squeaky chair close to mine, I have to fight the urge to get up and leave. "I heard they have a lead," she whispers conspiratorially in my ear, like she's letting me in on some kind of secret. "Did you hear me, Quinn?"

How could I not, when she's close enough to wheeze against my face?

"Yeah, I heard you." I sigh, putting down my pen and looking up at her. A part of me wants to reach out and push her away on her squeaky chair to give myself some space, but that would be wrong. It would not be building the *workplaces camaraderie* that Melinda is so fond of, and I'm sure that should mean something to me too.

At the very least, I have to pretend it does.

"Aren't you interested? I know you're not from around here, but you *found* the bodies with Dr. Brooks." She sighs and looks away, her eyes filled with what are probably thoughts of Dr. Brooks himself.

I have to admit, he's easy to have a crush on. He's easy to like, with his winning personality and inviting charm. He's

kind, understanding, and the therapist everyone would line up to see.

But it's a mask. A very good one, but the real Gabriel Brooks isn't just those things.

He's a monster.

But hey, more power to Clara if she wants to get on his bad side or bring down his ire on her. It'll give me more space to spread out, and the peace and quiet I thrive in. Though I somehow don't think he'd kill my coworker. Unfortunately for me.

"Aren't you off in..." I check my phone, and try not to praise the lord in relief. "Thirty-two seconds?" But who's counting? Certainly not me.

"I'm sticking around for a few minutes," Clara says shyly, smoothing down her blonde hair and glancing toward the door. "Melinda has a meeting."

"What does that have to do with you?" She tosses me a confused, possibly offended look, as if she can't figure out if I'm being mean. So I fix the brightest smile on my face I can manage, to appease her.

It works, though I'm not certain I don't look like I'm having some sort of stroke. As she speaks again, I relax my face, hoping it won't get stuck like that if I have to do it often, for Clara's sake.

"Melinda has a meeting," she explains, fidgeting on her chair. "I just thought I'd stick around. Maybe she needs some help, or..." She shrugs her shoulders as I survey her face in confusion. Clara's never this anxious. Like she wants the meeting to happen, but also doesn't.

"Is it about you?" I ask, wondering if she's at risk of getting fired. While I haven't heard any office whispers about her having a poor performance, I also don't know if I'd ever be privy to them. I'm an *outsider*, after all.

Clara opens her mouth to speak just as the door opens, the small bell sounding gently through the office as my lips press together in a thin line.

Gabriel stands at the entrance to the office, looking around with polite interest as he steps inside and gently closes the door behind him. He clears his throat like he's feeling awkward, or just out of place, and takes off his jacket to hang it on the hook beside the door before his eyes search the room and land on me.

Unlike Clara, who's trying her best to get his attention and look good doing it, I couldn't be less happy about his presence. He cocks a brow at me, but I don't give an inch. I only glare, and mentally urge him back out to whence he came, so my heart can slow down and my fingers can unclench from my pen.

I'm afraid of him. There's nothing to stop the thought from echoing across my thoughts, and I can't help the small shiver that travels down my spine. For all the false bravado I show when he's bothering me, I can't hide it right now.

Gabriel Brooks terrifies me just as much as he drags my unwilling interest toward him. He's gorgeous today, as he is every day. As I watch, he runs a hand through his light brown hair and smiles at Clara.

"Hello there," he greets in his sweet, warm voice. "Do you know where Mrs. Melinda's office is?" Is that a trace of southern charm I hear, just to please the people around him?

Most likely.

"Yeah, she's back here." Clara pushes into his space, smiling and trying to get his full attention. He gives it reluctantly, and allows her to lead him through the office to Melinda's small corner room while I shake my head and go back to my work.

It's no use, though.

The fact that he's here means I can't concentrate, and even though Clara isn't talking to me anymore, she's still existing in my periphery, jumping at the chance to catch him as he comes out. My stomach knots and unknots, no matter how many deep breaths I take, until finally I'm a flinching mess at my desk and I give up, burying my face in my hands.

The door opens from somewhere behind me, but I don't move. Not while Clara twitters at him, or while he responds to her politely, yet distantly. He doesn't like her, if I had to guess. But that's not exactly a shock.

"Give me a second, please?" he says, firmly but kindly, and I jump when I realize he's closer to me than I'd expected. "I'd like to check on Quinn." I look up at him as he says it, the action reminding me of my dream when I'd been so small, looking up and up into the face of—

"You look tired," he murmurs, leaning down over my desk. "Are you not sleeping, Quinn?" There's worry in his eyes, and a predatory gleam that I'm pretty sure he reserves just for me.

"I'm fine," I snap, wishing he wasn't so close. "I'm sleeping fine." It's not quite true, and my gaze falls to the desk, where I'm clutching my pen, as I say it.

"What's wrong?" he asks, voice still so soft. "You can tell me—"

"It's nothing you can help me with," I interrupt, wishing I was half as brave as I'm trying to sound. The effect is lost, however, by my trembling hands that I know he sees as well. His hand comes out, and he covers my fingers, stilling the trembling as he waits for me to go on. "It's just nightmares, okay? It's not—"

"I got that number you were asking for." Clara's back, and her eyes fall on our hands, then jump up to my face. Her eyes narrow at the contact as I snatch my hands away, putting them on my lap and away from him as he straightens with a sigh.

"Thank you so much," he replies, taking the business card from her. From the corner of my eye I see that along with some other number, Clara's name and number are written on the card. She's desperate for the wrong man, and I'm not about to be the one to tell her. "I'll see you ladies later, all right?" He winks at Clara, and it's so cheesy I feel like vomiting.

But not Clara. She sucks in a breath and looks at him with wide, adoring eyes as he walks out the door, her hands clutching the notepad in her fingers as he goes. "Do you think

he'll call me?" she asks, glancing my way. "I think he'll call me."

"Yeah, Clara," I agree, trying to refocus on the pile of work in front of me. "He's totally going to call you."

I t's happening again.

My feet are bare this time, and I stare down the hallway to the stairs where lights are on downstairs. My foster father is screaming, and my name on his lips means terrible things for me.

His silhouette throws the landing into shadow, and I hear my name again, this time with a threat as his steps seem to shake the house. He ascends one step, then another, and I slide down the wall on the opposite side, hands covering my head. Soon enough he's at the top, walking towards me with threats that cause me to tremble, and I can feel the moment he reaches out—

I sit up hard. A gasp ripping from my throat and the nightmare eats at me as the hand on my shoulder tightens—

“Quinn.” The voice isn't my foster father's. It chases away the dream until I'm blinking in the soft darkness of my room and staring up into a face I don't immediately recognize.

It takes two blinks and for my heart to nearly stop until I jerk backward. Then I shove Gabriel at the same time and pull a sigh from him as he barely budges.

“What are you doing here?” I shriek, trying to get off the bed and instead tangling myself in my blankets. “How did you get in here?!”

“Watching you sleep. And saving you from nightmares,” Gabriel replies coolly, rubbing his arm where I'd hit him. “You were having a rough time. What was your dream about?”

“You,” I lie, my heart speeding up until it feels like it’s trying to rocket me out of here. “I dreamed of you, doing shit like this—” I try to roll out of the bed, only for him to be faster. He lunges, until he’s situated above me and somehow, by some stroke of bad luck, there are no longer blankets between us.

It’s just him, in his perfect jeans and his black v-neck tee, and me in my tee shirt and running shorts. For a moment he just stares at me, and the breath catches in my throat as I feel his eyes wander down my body.

I don’t want this. The thought echoes through my brain, and I struggle under him only to hear a soft sound, like a growl coming from the man above me.

Except, it isn’t a growl. I realize that when his lips part and the chuckle bubbles up from between them. His mouth curls into a half-grin, rueful for all that it’s charming. “I love watching you sleep, Quinn,” he admits, not caring that I’m still struggling. Instead, he moves to sit on my hips, pinning me down with his weight. “You make the sweetest faces when you dream. It’s so hard not to do something about it.”

“Do... something?” I repeat, my voice soft. “You mean—”

“It doesn’t matter what I mean.” Is he irritated that he’s said it? A frown crosses his features, but is chased away quickly by amusement once more. “I came here to save you from your nightmares. No matter how not-real they are. Talk to me, baby girl. What are you dreaming of that’s keeping you tossing and turning all night?”

“All night?” I repeat again, like a parrot. “If you’re so concerned, why not wake me up before this?”

“I have,” he sighs, one hand coming up to stroke my face. I flinch away, though his touch doesn’t sear my skin or hurt like I wish it would.

His fingers are warm against my face, and trail lightly until I want to shudder under him. His nails are a sharp, pleasant sensation as he strokes up one of my cheeks, across my nose, and down the other before repeating the process.

“I don’t remember—”

“It barely took anything the other times,” he interrupts. “And you didn’t really wake up. You just curled up with me again and let me hold you as you went back to sleep. Like I said, Quinn. You’re just so sweet when you’re asleep.”

My heart pounds and I look anywhere but at him. I don’t move, as if that’ll just entice him to hurt me, but I have no idea what to do, or how to get him to leave.

He’s been here all night?

I’m never going to sleep again.

“What’s hurting you so badly in your sleep?” Gabriel asks again in a voice reminiscent of his therapist tone. “Talk to me.”

“Why?” It’s probably irrelevant, and his brows raise in the dim light from the moon that filters through the thin, cheap curtains on the window.

“Because I’m going to help you.”

“I don’t think you can,” I snap, trying to sound like I neither want his help, nor think he’ll be of any use. He won’t, I don’t think. I’m sure he can’t help me. Not with this.

“I was so good at helping you before.” When I try to bolt upright, his hand is suddenly at my throat, pushing me backward until my head is back on the pillow and all I can do is glare up at him. “Don’t make me keep grabbing you,” he suggests. “I’m not trying to be rough tonight. Besides, what do you have to lose?”

Images flicker through my head, of the bodies in the diner, of more bodies with shadowed faces that represent other people he’s killed.

How many have there been?

“I’ve been dreaming about my foster homes,” I admit hesitantly, and his grip loosens on my throat. “I don’t know. Maybe it’s this job. It’s what I’ve always wanted to do. To *help* kids in my situation, or stop people from doing... you know.” The only good thing is that I don’t need to elaborate.

He's heard this all before from me, and he knows about my past. "But every night now I dream of the bad house. The one with all the other kids." He knows about this too. He knows, because he worked with my social worker and she'd told him the details.

"What are the dreams like?" It's easier when I don't look at him. I can pretend it isn't *this* Gabriel that's helping me. I can, instead, pretend that it's Dr. Brooks, the therapist who had done so much for me when I was a teenager.

The one I'd had a secret, taboo crush on. I'd been secure in my knowledge that he'd never like me back. He was too old for me. Too established and successful.

Too *nice*, younger me had thought.

"I'll tell you if you let go of my throat," I say finally, feeling like I need some kind of bargaining chip here. My heart beats normally, as it should, and I take long breaths of air to try to calm the rest of me.

While he's the demon of my dreams who's never gone from them for very long, the unfortunate truth is that everything he likes to remind me of is true.

He's never hurt me.

I have a million reasons to be afraid of him, and one reason not to that never seems to want to go away. Gabriel Brooks has never hurt *me*.

Just declared that I'm his, killed multiple people for me, and followed me from town to town for the last five years.

No big deal or anything.

"I want to sit up," I add, after a few moments of tense silence. He hesitates, and I don't think he's going to let me do it. He likes his control too much, I think. His power over me to —

Gabriel sits back smoothly, reaching a hand out to pull me up once he's off of my legs entirely. I don't take it, because I'm not an idiot. I sit up on my own, knees pulled up to my chest as I eye him warily.

“Don’t you sleep?” I ask. “You’re not a fucking vampire, are you?”

“I sleep,” he assures me, amusement crossing his face. “But I’m a night owl by nature. I don’t mind staying up for you.”

“I don’t need it.”

“Tell me about your dreams.”

My eyes flick down to the bed, and I mentally unravel the small knotted thread sticking out from the edge of the sheet until my hand snakes down to it so I can run my nail across the bump in the fabric.

This, too, reminds me so much of our therapy sessions, though not in a great way. He’d always pushed me to tell him the things that had made me uncomfortable, and I had always balked and bitched about it.

Tonight doesn’t feel any different.

“First, I kept dreaming of the night I tried to run away.” The words feel like they’re being dragged from me, and I reach out to turn on the lamp by my pillow in order to see his face better.

It’s a mistake, of course. Because that just reminds me how much I enjoy looking at him, and the fact that he’s nice *to* look at. I chalk it up to another relic from teen-Quinn who didn’t know any better, and push it to the side.

“Of getting caught, and when I broke my arm. But...” I don’t like admitting the rest of it; that Gabriel had shown up in those dreams on and off. “But I don’t like that dream,” I lie instead, keeping my voice cool and even.

“Does it happen the same as when you were little?” he pulls his knees up to his chest as well, as if he’s mirroring my pose. “Dreams are rarely perfect memories. What things change?”

You.

Licking my bottom lip, I try to look like I’m remembering. “I don’t know,” I lie instead, shrugging my shoulders under the

thin cotton of my tee. “I don’t remember them so well. Lately, it’s another night. After that, or maybe before. It’s more general, and my foster father from the bad house is coming to find me.” My voice falters as fear spikes through my chest just at the memory.

I hate it; the feeling of weakness, of helplessness. And I hate remembering all the things that had happened, when—

“And what aren’t you telling me?”

He had always been so good at that, that I shouldn’t be surprised nothing has changed. I roll my eyes at him, wishing I could distract him from what I don’t want to say. “For someone *not* in my dreams, you like to think you’re skilled at figuring out what’s in them,” I say coldly, a brittle edge to my tone. “There’s nothing else—”

“I’m going to tell you a secret, Quinn.” Gabriel moves until he’s sitting beside me, and reaches out slowly to pick up my hand. “Do you see this?” His grip is light, though his skin is so warm on mine that it takes me a moment to realize what he means.

I blink at his hand, then at mine, but I don’t see anything except my fingers. “My... hand?” I ask, wondering if maybe he *has* lost it.

Gabriel sighs, and slides his grip down until he can hold my thumb up between us.

The skin around my nail is bleeding.

The sight of it seems to trigger the pain, and small prickles of sharpness assaults my senses, making me flex the offending digit. “Okay?” I ask, still not quite understanding what he’s getting at.

“You do this when you’re upset. When you’re *lying*, normally. Anytime you’re trying to tell a lie, you rip at the skin around your nails. You haven’t changed much in five years, and I can still read you like a book.” He drops my hand with a grin; but doesn’t pull away from me.

Instead, before I can move, he’s on me again. Pressing me back against the bed as I sink down until my head is on the

pillow with his fingers around my throat again.

“I asked you not to—” I begin, but he cuts me off with a sneer.

“You lost your privileges when you lied until I had to call you out on it. *Stay, Quinn.*” He isn’t sitting on me to hold me down this time, but I’m not sure I could break free of his grip if I tried.

Still, my hand flies up to grip his forearm, and under my grip, I can feel the flex of his muscles as he holds me in place. Experimentally, I try to pull him away, but just as I’d expected, there’s no way in hell I’m getting him off of me.

My heart speeds up, bile rising in my throat, but he doesn’t do a thing except watch me.

“Tell me the rest,” Gabriel orders in a soft purr that’s *nothing* like his therapy voice. “And I’ll let you sit up.”

“I dream of you,” I gasp, when his fingers tighten around my airway. They don’t stop, though. His face remains impassive, filled with casual interest, and his finger and thumb slide to press just under my jaw until the world is spinning and I’m trying to get him off of me in earnest.

I should’ve run the moment he let me up.

“I’m not lying! It’s you, it’s *always you*. But no—not like that.” His grip loosens ever so slightly, and the world stops spinning. “You always show up before... before the bad part. Before he hurts me. You show up and you kill him, then I’m older and not a kid anymore—” He shifts, moving his other arm toward my face, and I flinch.

“Shh,” Gabriel murmurs, dragging his knuckles down my cheek. “Don’t flinch away from me. I haven’t hurt you.” The discomfort in my neck begs to differ, and the way my world is still spinning.

But he’s right.

It doesn’t hurt. My heart pounds and butterflies do laps in my stomach, but it’s not from pain or fear this time, though more than anything I wish it was.

Instinctively I press my thighs together, wide eyes still on his, and I see the moment his attention is dragged downward, his touch on my face stilling as he realizes what I'm doing.

“No,” I say, before he can speak. “I know what you think ___”

“You don't know what I think,” Gabriel assures me, a quick smile crossing his lips. “But I have a pretty good idea of what's going through *your* mind right now. It's not strange to like it, you know.”

“I didn't like it,” I promise as he pulls his hand away from my face. He's so close right now that I can smell his cologne, sharp like frost in my nose. “I don't like any of this, or you, or ___”

“So you dream of me killing your foster father at the bad house.” He shifts until he's leaning over me, and my breath catches in my throat when he splays a hand against my stomach. “How do I do it?”

“You stab him,” I reply, unable to stop replaying the dream over and over in my head.

“And how does it feel when you watch me do it? Do you want to help? Would you rather it be you killing him, instead of me?”

I open my mouth to reply, and pause. Because I don't know. I've never thought about it, I realize. I've never stopped to analyze how I *feel* about Gabriel killing the man that had made a year and some change of my life the worst thing I've ever encountered.

But now that I *am* thinking about it, I can't stop. I shudder when his hand slips upward, under my shirt, but even that isn't enough to pull my thoughts away from my dreams completely. “I don't know,” I say finally. “But I know that when you do, everything feels so real. It's like I snap out of some kind of trance, and I don't have to follow the memory anymore—” I grip his wrist, eyes flicking to his and narrowing. “No,” I say firmly, and he just watches me, his hand stilling.

“You’re afraid you’ll like it,” Gabriel accuses, but I don’t have anything to say back to him.

We both know it’s true, after all.

Instead, I struggle to sit up again, and I’m surprised when he lets me. A breath leaves me and I get to my feet, hands shaking and my thumb throbbing, now that he’s brought attention to it. “Leave me alone,” I snap, pointing towards the door. “And get out of my house. Get your *own* fucking house.”

“I already have one,” Gabriel assures me, running his fingers through his tousled hair. “It’s a lot nicer than yours, and has better beds. Come over sometime. I don’t mind showing you.”

Instead of answering, I flip him off. He watches me, then snorts and gives a quick shake of his head. “You’re asking for it,” he informs me, on his way to the door. It’s not until he gets there, however, and it’s half open, that he stops and turns to look at me, gaze softening ever so slightly.

“Don’t forget what I said,” he reminds me, and I roll my eyes in fearful exasperation.

“That you’ll never hurt me? I *get it*—”

“No, Quinn.” He waits patiently until I look up at him again. “Not that part. The part about you belonging to me. Maybe if you understand that, it won’t come as a shock one of these days when you wake up and find me in your bed. Or better, maybe you’ll wake up in *mine*.”

He takes the moment that mind is trying to process that to grin and leave, closing the door hard behind him. Even from inside I hear him whistling as he goes down the driveway, and it isn’t until I can’t hear him anymore that I let out a breath and collapse onto the floor, burying my face in my hands and wondering if this is another nightmare I’ll wake up from soon.

There's something insanely cathartic about Carla's swooning, Melinda's worry, and the man in front of me who's currently screaming me down like I'm forty feet away, instead of four inches.

I take in a breath and look around to see Carla's stricken face and the absence of anyone else in the office. If Melinda is here, then she's doing a good job of not showing her face.

The problem, for the balding six-foot-five man with muscles that probably haven't come from the gym, is that I'm not afraid of him.

At all.

My fingers drum on my coffee mug as he screams, and I pull it out of the way to prevent any of his spit from landing in my hours old coffee. He continues, boasting more lung capacity than I'd expected, until finally I look away, bored with the show.

"It wasn't my call, Mr. Durham," I point out, when he inevitably stops to suck in oxygen. "I've only been your case worker for what? Three days?" My brows raise, and I search for a silent insult that fits how I feel about Melinda dumping *another* case on me. It's the third in the time I've been here, and I'm starting to wonder if it's becoming a permanent trend. "The decision to take away what was left of your custody had nothing to do with me. And if you wanted some kind of help from me, you shouldn't be here screaming. It makes me even less likely to help you; if we're being honest with each other."

I lean back in my chair, waiting for his next rant.

It's shorter than I expect, and I sip my coffee as it winds down. "Yeah, now I'm really not looking to make your case a priority. I'm not a big fan of name-calling, Mr. Durham." Before he can start again, I add, "Please leave before I have to call the police. I think both of us have better things to do today, don't you?" While he doesn't scare me, his unpredictability and the way he shifts back and forth in front of my desk make me nervous.

If I take away all of his options, will he try to hurt me? If I'm the one to snuff out his hope of ever getting his child back, even on every other weekend, will he flip over this desk and try to strangle the life out of me?

It's possible, though that still doesn't make me fear him.

"You're going to be sorry you've done this to me," he utters, his frame shaking like a leaf in the wind. It isn't fear, and it isn't worry.

He hates me. He *blames* me, though we've gone over the fact that it's not my fault and, frankly, the blame lies with him.

After all, I'm not the one who got drunk and hit his wife multiple times before moving on to selling drugs for extra money.

"I haven't done anything to you," I remind him, tilting my head back and closing my eyes to hide the eye roll that I can't avoid. "But I'll look into your case, if you would leave and stop yelling at me. I can't actually *do my job* with you here, after all." He holds my gaze and I refuse to look away, though the soundtrack of Clara's nervous, heavy breathing behind me is enough to make me fidget a little.

Finally he shoves away from the desk, not saying anything as he storms out of the office and disappears past the front window.

Clara lets out a long, nervous breath and sags back in her chair, just as Melinda appears from the staff room as if she'd really been there the whole time, organizing or doing something else that wasn't *hiding*.

“You were so good at acting like you weren’t afraid,” Clara remarks as Melinda wanders over. My boss frowns at the door, then at me.

“Everything all right, Quinn?” she asks, her wrinkled face drawn. “I heard the commotion from the staff room. I was wondering if I should call the cops.”

I shrug, not telling her that, honestly, calling the cops wouldn’t have hurt the situation. In fact, having an automatic out would’ve been nice. My fingers drum on the coffee mug once more, and I shrug my shoulders like I’m just pushing away the experience. And maybe I am.

“It was Mr. Durham. He’s... upset,” I tell my boss, wondering how much of the conversation she’d heard. Most of it, I’d assume. I’m sure people down the street heard it too, considering the volume of the man’s yelling. “It’s fine. I’m handling it.” Though I don’t add, *I wish you hadn’t put me on his case*, still meeting her gaze squarely. *I wish you’d let me do something that’s not so high stakes.*

“Well, I’m sure you’ll take care of it.” That she pawns off cases she doesn’t like on us doesn’t thrill me, but at least she’s willing to take responsibility for us. Melinda’s words are accompanied by a forced, tight smile, and she turns to me with a softness in her eyes that I don’t expect. “Why don’t you take off early today, Quinn? It’s slow, and you look like you’re almost done.” She surveys my desk as I set the coffee cup down, surprised.

“Oh... yeah?” I ask, more than a little taken aback. “If you want me to?”

“You deserve a night off. Maybe there’s someone in town who you’ll find to hold your interest?” She reminds me of the southern aunt in some old movie when she says it with a meaningful look, and I fight not to roll my eyes. Instead, a smirk crawls up over my lips, and I shake my head.

“I’m not really looking for anything,” I admit, getting to my feet with a pile of work. “Not right now.”

“Not even with our charming new therapist? Dr. Brooks is working with us now, you know. It wouldn’t hurt to get to know him a little better.” Melinda glances at me knowingly, her lips pursed.

Behind me, I can feel Clara radiating disapproval. If either of us is dying to get to know Dr. Brooks better, it’s definitely not me.

“Oh, Melinda,” my coworker chuckles sharply. “I think Dr. Brooks is a little old for Quinn, don’t you?”

“Not really,” Melinda shrugs. “I know when I was young, I was always interested in distinguished older men. What do you think?” She looks at me, and with a jolt, I realize it isn’t a rhetorical question.

“Err...” I blink, trying to find anywhere else to look as my stomach twists into a knot. “No, I... I don’t know what my type is.” That’s a dumb answer. It’s stupid, and I wince slightly. “I mean, I don’t think it’s Gabri—Dr. Brooks.” *Damn it.* Calling him by his first name isn’t going to convince them, and sure enough, Melinda looks up with triumph shining in her eyes.

If I’m not careful, her confidence is going to get me shot by Clara.

“Anyway, I really appreciate the night off,” I say hurriedly, dropping my finished files into a wire basket. “Thank you, Melinda. I’ll see you guys tomorrow?” They agree; with Melinda seeing me off with much more goodwill than the angry, clearly irritated Clara.

Well, it’s not my fault she has bad taste in men, or that she thinks I want anything to do with Gabriel.

That’s what I tell myself, as I try not to think about his hands on my thighs, or his voice in my ear after he’d woken me up from my nightmares a few days ago. It had been more helpful than I’ll ever admit. Especially since my nightmares had been chased away by his touch and his scent.

But I refuse to let him be my savior this time.

I'm so wrapped up in my thoughts as I walk down toward the parking lot that I don't notice the man standing in the hedges until Mr. Durham is stepping forward, his fingers gripping my sleeves hard.

"What—" I break off with a sharp intake of breath, eyes going wide as my fingers curl against my palms. "You've got to be kidding me. What are you *doing*?"

"We're not done," he hisses, so close to my face that I can feel his warm breath on my skin. He whirls me around, dragging me further behind the building so that we're not visible through the window to the two women inside. "You thought it was so cute, didn't you? To sit in there and make a fucking mockery of me?"

His voice rises as he talks, hands on my sleeves trembling. I take it all in calmly, though some part of me stirs with the fear that he's going to hurt me.

Maybe I'm not afraid of him, but apparently he doesn't know that. My body isn't so sure anymore, either, though I refuse to let myself fall into a pit of fear.

After all, he's nothing compared to Gabriel. He's nothing compared to the man who walks in my dreams and nightmares alike. Nothing like the man who'd followed me all the way from Springwood.

Compared to him, this is just an unfortunate interruption to my day.

"As I told you before, Mr. Durham," I say, stepping closer as I try to ignore the pain of his tight grip. "I can't do my *fucking job* if you yell at me. And if you assault me, I'll have to report it to the police. You think your chances of custody are bad now? Assault your fucking social worker. See how far you can throw yourself down the drain."

It doesn't dawn on me until I suck in a breath and smell the alcohol seeping from his pores, that reason is out the window. His eyes flit round my face, and it occurs to me he might not know what I'm saying, or see the logic behind it. But

unfortunately, I'm not good with drunks. I never have been, and I don't think I'm about to start now.

"You need to *listen*," he snarls for the third time since he'd walked into my office. "Just, just *listen*, and—"

I belatedly register the look on his face, and the way his expression contorts to something like fear. I barely notice the shadow that falls over me, just as a body forces itself between Mr. Durham and me. I'm shoved backward, and for just a moment I see his face as he's shoved hard back into the wall that he'd been trying to drag me to.

"The way I see it, you've made a mistake." Gabriel's voice is smooth, dangerous, and sends shudders down my spine. "Make another, and you're going to regret it before the sun sets."

Fuck. My body seems to light up, nerve endings suddenly on fire. "I'm fine," I tell him, my voice soft. "I didn't need your help, Gabriel."

He ignores me, though I'm not shocked. Gabriel leans close to Mr. Durham, whispering a threat that I'm sure I could guess at but can't hear. Part of me wishes I could, and I feel as if I'm vibrating in place; my teeth sunk into my bottom lip to steady myself.

There's a tense moment where Mr. Durham watches Gabriel, eyes wide... But it doesn't last. It can't when Gabriel is such an unstoppable storm and Durham is just a terrified stop sign ready to be ripped out of the ground.

He bolts, not looking back, until he's out of sight around the cars. I watch, trying to see where he goes, but it's impossible to see once he's disappeared down the street and I can't see him past the parking lot next to ours.

Once he's gone, my hands flex, skin clammy as I try to figure out what to say to the man still here, who's looking at me like he wants me to speak.

"Why would you do that?" I ask finally, my voice quiet. "Because you think I can't take care of *myself*?"

Gabriel chuckles and turns to face me with his hands shoved into his pockets. “Not at all, sweet girl,” he says, taking a step closer to me so he’s invading my personal space. “You could’ve killed him, couldn’t you? I bet you could’ve made him sorry. But just this once, I couldn’t help myself, Quinn. I needed to remind myself of it, you know?”

My blood runs cold, and I scrub my hands on my jeans to dry them. “Of what?” I ask, my voice soft and reluctant.

“Of the fact that you’re mine, obviously.”

This is the moment that I run.

We both know it, and the fear spiking in my body is a testament to how much we know it. This is the point where I flee to my car, or back inside if I'm too scared of being alone with him for a second longer. He's said those magic words that send me into fight-or-flight. He isn't cornering me, but he might as well be.

This is definitely the moment that I flee... but today, something changes. The pointer picks the other box instead, and before I know what I'm doing, I stride forward with a snarl and *shove* Gabriel Brooks hard in the chest, as if he's going anywhere.

Miraculously, he takes a step back. The confusion on his face is the same as what I feel, and my breath comes in angry gasps as I crowd him in the parking lot, further from the building.

"How *dare* you?" I hiss, hoping that I sound threatening. There isn't a hint of fear on his face, and the mix of intrigue and amusement almost makes me hesitate.

But not quite.

"I never asked for your help, and I am not *yours*." I shove him again and he steps back one more time until we're between two SUVs in the parking lot and completely blocked from curious eyes.

That should make me pause, but it doesn't either. It doesn't do more than blow past my thoughts, and it's not even a factor

in my decision-making. “You were my *therapist*, not whatever else you think you were.”

This time, when I reach up to shove him, he catches my arms and swings me hard into the black SUV at my back. It’s a wonder the alarm doesn’t go off, though the model looks old enough that maybe it doesn’t have a working security system.

“I was wondering when this side of you would come out to play. You look like you could stab me, Quinn. With all that anger and righteous indignation. Tell me, does it hurt?”

“Does *what* hurt?” I hiss, trying to push him away.

But this time, he doesn’t move.

“Sitting on that fucking high horse of yours all the time. Let me drag you down and give you a little break from being better than me. How does that sound?” When I move again, his hand shoots out to press against my throat, fingers wrapping around my neck as his body presses to mine.

“I’m not—” I begin, but he cuts off my air and I can’t help but choke.

“Better than me? Maybe you are, just a little. But not because of your personality. It was merely an opportunity. Maybe I should’ve let it go. I should’ve let him drag you into the bushes.” My stomach flips, and when I suck in a breath, the cold feeling of fear works its way up my spine.

“That’s fucked up,” I whisper, and it’s like Gabriel is leeching the heat from me. He crowds me, his height and muscle more imposing than I could ever be, and when he slides his knee in between my thighs, it radiates heat against my body.

“Why? *Why*, Quinn? Is it fucked up because in your mind you’re convincing yourself that I want something bad to happen to you?” He lunges forward, teeth coming together centimeters from my lips so he can grin broadly at me. “Or is it fucked up to let you do all the nasty little things that I know you were thinking of?”

The bottom drops out from my stomach, and I feel like the ground yawns open under me. Flickers from the diner, from

the past, try to overwhelm my brain, but I shake my head to chase them and his voice away. “You don’t know what you’re talking about. I’m not what you *think*,” I hiss. “I’m not *like you*.”

“You want to be,” he accuses. “Isn’t that what you’re so afraid of?” His mouth is still too close, much too close, and when my lips part so I can argue, he makes his move.

Gabriel’s lips find mine in a bruising kiss, and as if to pay me back from a few nights ago, he wastes no time in biting down *hard*.

I cry out in pain, the harsh, sharp burn bolting down my body as my mouth opens wider. He drinks in the sound as he laps the blood from my lower lip, and it takes me seconds to realize that his knee against my body is rubbing against me, sending undeniable friction through my core.

“Stop,” I tell him, heart pounding as I reach up to try to do what he does to me. My fingers aren’t long enough to curl around his throat like he does around mine, but I copy his movements anyway and slide my finger and thumb just under the stubble of his jaw.

“You want to play like this? Do you want to see who can *last*, Quinn?” There’s something in his eyes that sends my pulse skyrocketing, and I wonder if he can feel it in the pads of his fingers. “Let me help you.” He reaches up with his free hand to adjust my hand, putting it in a better place so my thumb and forefinger can sink into his skin more comfortably. “Now you just press. Just *press*, Quinn.” His words are an order, and the hesitation vanishes as I follow it. I press hard, and he does the same.

In fact, he mirrors every movement I make. When my grip lightens, his does too, so when I push even harder against his pulse, he does as well, and I see stars.

“Right there, baby girl,” he grates out, leaning forward again and forcing my thighs wide against his knee. “You’ll have to do better if you want to hurt me, though. Come on. Press harder.”

I do.

I'm not expecting the wave of heat that goes through me when he mimics the pressure, and I choke for air as my vision blurs and goes double.

"Don't give up on me now," he urges, still moving against me. "I know you have more fight in you than this."

"Stop," I gasp, my hand slipping from his neck to grip the collar of his shirt instead. "*Stop*, I ca-I can't—"

"Let go and just stop fighting me," he urges, able to press against me now that I'm not holding my arm up to his throat. "I've got you. *I've got you, Quinn*. Just like I always have."

"*Please*. You're... you're hurting—"

"You're loving every second of it, my precious little thing," he purrs against my ear. "And you're so desperate for me. Let go, Quinn. Just enjoy it."

"You're—"

"I know how to take care of you." The words echo in my ears just as my fingers release his shirt. I can't help but fall back against the car, and I barely feel his teeth against the base of my throat as my head spins, mind blurring until—

The moment he lets go, I take a gasp of air, and my eyes fly open. My lips part just for him to kiss me again, and his hand on my hips grip so hard I worry that he's leaving bruises.

"*Gabriel*," I hiss, the sound too close to a whimper for me to feel good about it. "Please, please—"

"I know, precious girl, I know. Not here, though. What if someone saw, hmm? What if someone saw you riding my thigh like this, or the way you're begging for me to touch you?"

The humiliation stings as he goads me on, though it doesn't help bring me back to my senses. If anything, it does the exact opposite.

When he kisses me again and worries at the bite in my lower lip, I really do whimper. He urges my arms up and over

his shoulders, and forces me higher against the SUV so my weight is resting mostly on his leg.

“One more,” he purrs, and I’m not sure if he’s promising himself or me. “One more, then I’m leaving. I don’t like other people seeing you like this. It’s for me, not them.” His hand comes up to brush my hair back from my face, and I feel the tremble that works through my body when his thumb presses against my bottom lip.

“Open your mouth,” Gabriel orders in a low growl, his eyes bright. “Open your fucking mouth, Quinn.”

“I’ll bite you,” I promise, meeting his gaze with mine. “I’ll fucking *bite you*, Gabriel.” He doesn’t listen, if he hears my breathy words at all. His thumb slips into my mouth, pressing against my tongue, and I do just what I’d told him I would.

I bite him.

My teeth sink into his skin as he whispers a curse against my hair, and his other hand fists in my shirt as a warning as he lets out a soft *fuck* just loudly enough for me to hear.

“Let go,” Gabriel orders, fingers twisting my shirt more harshly. “Let go, Quinn. This isn’t the place to play like you want.”

Like *I* want?

I let go, only to nip at him lightly as his thumb leaves my mouth, just to prove to him that I’m not his to order around.

He smirks, eyes bright, and slams me back against the SUV again, his mouth finding mine so he can kiss me like this is the last chance he’ll ever get.

I moan against him, and when he pulls away and drops me to the ground, it’s my turn to gasp out a soft string of swears.

Gabriel laughs and sweeps his hair back from his face. “You’re such a little monster when you want to be.” I can’t tell if it’s a compliment, so I don’t respond. Really, I don’t know how to, so I just glare at him. “I’ll see you later, Quinn. And I hope you’re looking forward to all the things I’m going to do to every *inch* of you the moment I get the chance.”

“As if I want you to?” It’s a weak argument, and he only stares at me like I’m being an idiot. There’s disbelief in his face, and it prompts me to roll my eyes and look away. “Go *away*. Unless you want me to scream about how little I want your help. Again.”

“Just so your boss sees us?” he taunts, hands in his pockets. “Maybe not a good idea, since you’ll have to explain why we were nearly fucking against her car.”

I jerk forward, away from the vehicle, shaking my head. “We were not—”

“Have a good day, Quinn,” Gabriel interrupts, chuckling. “Dream of me, won’t you?” He doesn’t respond to my rude reply, and seconds later, his car is speeding out of the parking lot. Leaving me a confused, anxious mess as I try to pull myself together and figure out what I’m going to do with myself.

Barely a day later, when I'm back in my cubicle and wishing I'd become something with more pizzazz, like a circus clown, I can't get him out of my head.

My neck aches when I turn just right, and I'd been right about his fingers leaving bruises on my hips.

They had, and they look like I've been claimed by a man who had just fucked me, even though Gabriel definitely is not that man.

Nor will he ever be, if only I can get certain parts of me to fall in line.

I close my eyes and rub my palms against them, sighing through my nose and wishing the week would get the hell over with. *It's Friday*, I remind myself. *It's Friday, and you're fine.*

Getting through today means a weekend to sleep, eat cookie dough, and *not* attend Melinda's pool party.

The bolts of colors behind my eyes as I dig my palms against them don't help, however, when every single one of them is either the color of Gabriel's hair or the sparkling brown of his eyes. *Damn it.* Getting myself under control is the first, second, and third step to successfully figuring out how to get him the fuck away from me.

The fourth step is getting the damn tracker out of my car, if it really exists. I'd dedicated a few hours to looking, found nothing, then spent the rest of the day trying to look up what they look like only to find that there are a thousand or so different kinds.

The day had been a bust, all things considered. And I was still no closer to finding out if there really is one hidden somewhere in my car.

There has to be, I reason, my frown dragging my mouth downward. *There's no other way he could keep finding me, unless he's secretly telepathic.* Likely, I suppose, since he somehow seems to know everything I'll enjoy, even when the idea of it makes me squirm.

Like being choked within an inch of consciousness.

My body tingles as I try to shove away the memory. Now isn't the time to think about it. But then, neither was last night, in bed, with my fingers buried between my thighs and my fingers around my own throat.

It had been fucked up in every way, but I'd never gotten off harder in my life.

When a folder slams down in front of me, I jump and look up, blinking hard, to see Clara looking down at me with a clouded expression. Her hand still on the folder tap's it, and she says nothing for a few moments.

She just looks at me.

She saw, I think, already trying to figure out what to tell her. How do I explain what had happened yesterday when I can barely wrap my mind around it myself? "Clara—" I begin, but she cuts me off with what I expect to be irritated jealousy, if not outright hostility. After all, the entire office knows about Clara's crush on Gabriel. Which is to say, Melinda, Clara, me, and the janitor know.

"I hate to do this to you," she says, lifting her hand off the folder. "Melinda isn't here, but she just called. Can you do something for us? This is one of her cases, but she's thinking maybe you could handle today's job."

I blink down at the folder, not recognizing the name. "What do you need?" I ask slowly, still half-afraid that this is some trick, and she's gearing up to exile me from the island or throw me off the roof.

“The Weathers family needs you to come pick up one of their kids. She can’t stay there, but we have another home lined up for her and everything. You just need to pick her up and take her to meet Melinda. She’ll be ready to go when you get there. And Melinda will be waiting for you at the McDonalds near the intersection.” As there aren’t many McDonalds or many intersections in town, I know which one she means. “I would, but I have a meeting. Can you pick her up?”

“Yeah, okay.” I get up and pick up the folder, skimming through it, until I find the girl’s name and current address.

Lily Jenkins.

My heart twists unexpectedly, and I frown. I’ve wanted to do this all my life, and this is a bad time to get cold feet.

“Hey, umm. By the way, the Birkin family. Did you hear what happened? Who did it, or...?” I trail off as Clara shakes her head.

“Last I heard from Ed, they’re starting to think they did it to each other. But there’s nothing official, yet,” she explains, naming her cop friend that I’m pretty sure she’s sleeping with. “Have a safe trip, okay?”

“Oh. Yeah, umm.” I nod at the folder. “Yeah, no problem.” My steps carry me out of the office, and thankfully I don’t ask any other stupid questions that might doubt her faith in my ability to do this, even though I’m questioning that myself.

“This is your job,” I tell myself. “Your job you get paid to do. You’re going to help, so it’ll be fine. Just don’t think too much about it, Quinn.” Once I’m in my car, I pull my hair up into a ponytail and sit back, eyes closed.

Of all the days to do this, I never would’ve preferred today.

Sweat rolls down my face as I stand at the sidewalk and stare at the black garbage bags at my feet. They haven’t been allowed for a while now, but what am I supposed to do when the little girl walked out with her belongings in them and tossed them down in front of me?

She'd disappeared back inside, dejected and hollow-eyed, and I still can't figure out how to confront the woman standing on the porch smoking a cigarette that's short enough to scorch her fingers if she moves wrong.

God, I wish she'd move wrong.

The little girl, Lily, comes back out with another bag and drops it, head down, before letting out a long breath. I can't figure out why her foster mother couldn't have helped her, but that's not my only problem right now.

My bigger problem is the fact that this brings back memories I like to avoid. I close my eyes hard and push back the memories of my own belongings in garbage bags and my foster siblings watching from the window as I'm shepherded into another social worker's car.

It sucked.

Kneeling down so I'm in front of Lily, I wait for her to look up at me before I smile. "Is this everything? You didn't leave anything by accident?"

The girl hesitates and looks back at her foster mom, who plasters a sour smile on her face and waves.

"She won't let me take my stuffed rabbit," the girl says finally.

"Why not?"

"She says I wasn't a good enough girl to bring it with me."

Anger churns my stomach as I stand and pop the trunk of my car. The bags are light enough that it only takes me one trip to get them, and by the time Lily is in my back seat with the AC on blast and a water bottle in hand, I'm ready to explode. Tremors make me clench my hands, and I turn on my heel to march toward the stairs.

"Did you need me to sign something else?" the woman asks lazily, rubbing her cigarette out on the porch railing. "Melinda already—"

"I need Lily's stuffed rabbit," I interrupt, not bothering to stop at the bottom of the stairs politely. "Where is it?"

The woman looks at me, dumbfounded, before glancing from side to side. “What rabbit?” she asks finally. “If there’s a rabbit, it’s in—”

“It’s in your house,” I say, finding myself sure that Lily isn’t lying or mistaken. “If you want, I can go look for it. Or you can bring it to me instead. I don’t mind either way.”

She meets my gaze with her pale blue eyes. I can’t help but wonder if age and nicotine have leached the color from them, rendering them more grey than blue, but I don’t look away. Not even when the scent of smoke curls my insides, my nose burning from it.

“I’ll go get it for you,” she snaps finally, flicking the butt of her cigarette in my direction. I don’t follow her as she turns on her heels, though I give her a mental count of fifty before I break down the door and go get it myself.

If this woman thinks that just because I’m young, I’m willing to let her walk all over me, she’ll be sorely disappointed.

Thankfully, it only takes her until forty-two to come out, and she thrusts a stuffed rabbit into my arms that’s half-missing an ear. I take it gingerly, treating it like it’s alive and not just a worn out toy. “You’re new,” she observes, looking me over coldly. “You’ll let these kids walk all over you if you don’t grow a damn backbone.”

As she says it, I examine the rabbit and run my fingers along the soft but worn fur. “I’m new,” I agree, my eyes flicking up to hers. I feel cold, and with the cold comes the absence of anything except irritation and immense dislike of the woman for how she’s treating this girl. “But I’m not letting anyone walk all over me. And trust me, I’m pretty experienced in the foster care industry, *ma’am*.” She holds my gaze for a moment more before turning and going back inside, slamming the door in my face.

It’s for the better, I think, as I jog back to my car and present the little brown-haired girl with her rabbit. A smile touches her lips, though it’s wary at best as she pulls the toy to her chest and hugs it hard.

I was that little girl once, and seeing her like this, so hopeful and yet also so scared for what's to come, *hurts*.

"Do you like milkshakes?" I ask, pulling the car out onto the empty suburban street.

"I like chocolate milkshakes," Lily replies after a few moments to think it over. "Are you getting me a milkshake so you can tell me something bad? You don't have to. I know how this works."

"Uh, heck no," I tell her, grinning in the mirror so she can see me in the back seat. "I'm getting you a milkshake and fries so we can wait for Melinda in style and not sweat our butts off. I'm not from here," I add, trying to make conversation. "Is it always so hot? It's only June!"

The little girl's smile widens at my own over the top attitude. "It's summer!" she replies, like she's the adult and I'm the clueless child. "Of course it's hot."

"Milkshake hot," I say, and pull into the first fast food place that I find to get both of us fries, milkshakes, and chicken nuggets.

"For if she's late," I say, when Lily questions this too. "Besides, everyone needs chicken nuggets."

It isn't until Lily is in Melinda's car, extra-large milkshake not even half empty, that I stop to take a breath. I know how I must look, and I'm sure Melinda isn't fooled.

Especially when she comes to stand in front of me, her figure blocking Lily from my gaze as she rests a hand on my shoulder. "The first one is always hard," she says, her own voice soft. "The hardest, until you see something so terrible you dream about it. We live in a poorer area, and parents here struggle."

"She shouldn't have trash bags," I say, the words like sharp-edged blades in my mouth. "That's not right. They aren't allowed anymore, and—"

"I know." She squeezes my shoulder and I look up into her face. "We're going to have a chat with her ex-foster mom."

We're going to make sure she knows that isn't acceptable from here on out."

"What did she do, anyway?" I ask, knowing most kids get moved because a home isn't quite right, or they act out. "Did she hurt someone?"

Melinda is quiet for a few moments, and I blink up at her face as she goes through her thoughts. "She's a good kid," my boss says finally. "And she wasn't the problem in that house."

"She wasn't? Then—"

"Their teenage son was."

The words nearly knock me over, and Melinda's hand tightening on my shoulder is the thing I hold onto. My eyes close hard, and I fight not to cry as my heart breaks into pieces for the little girl in the car who I'd bought a milkshake for only a few minutes ago.

"Will she be okay?" I ask, forcing myself to open my eyes and not say anything worse. "She's going to another foster home, right?"

"A *great* foster home," my boss promises. "I pulled some strings and she's going to one of the best homes I have. We'll be investigating her last home, too. It's not just the trash bags, as you now know. There are two boys there; I'll be looking to get them out as soon as possible."

The words make me feel better, but only a little. It isn't enough.

The mother and her teenage son deserve more. They deserve worse than a fucking reprimand and their payment from the government cut. But I know that my words aren't going to do anything, so I just nod and stare at the air over her shoulder.

"Have you thought about seeing a therapist?" Melinda asks, and I nearly scoff at the irony. From foster kid to social worker, it seems I'll never escape the need for a therapist in this life. "Most of us do. All of us do, actually. From one time to another. Evaluations help all of us do our job, and it's something I recommend for my workers. Especially when

there are so few of us and we're stretched so thin. I want you to see someone."

"I'll... look around," I agree, only half listening to her. "I'll ask Clara who she sees, or—"

"I think you should see Dr. Brooks," Melinda states, cutting me off. "He's signed a contract with the office, and has made himself available for the social workers at no charge. He seems like a great guy, Quinn." Her comforting squeeze on my shoulder suddenly feels like a threat, though I can't move.

If I say anything, I'll say the wrong thing.

I'll let on that I know him. I'll let on *what he is*.

I can't do that. Not here.

"No, I umm..." She won't accept no for an answer. I get that. So I jerk my head in a nod, and give her a smile that I force onto my lips. "Okay," I lie, knowing I won't do anything I say I will when it comes to him. "I'll get his number from the office. I'll see if he has an opening."

"I can call, if you'd rather," she offers, her words kind. "I don't mind."

Already I'm shaking my head. "No, Melinda. It's okay. I'd prefer to handle it myself, actually." Though in this case what I'm really trying to say is that I won't be handling it at all.

He isn't my therapist anymore, and I'll go back to him over my dead and very cold body.

Something isn't right.

Well, apart from me standing outside of the house where the Birkin couple were murdered, leaving their kids permanently in foster care, leaning on my car, and skimming my eyes over their file from the folder in Melinda's office. I was smart, I'd made copies, and now I'm looking at papers that are mine and mine alone.

Something isn't right, and even though I'm not from here, I can tell. The police tape is gone. There's nothing here that even looks like it was a crime scene barely a week and a half ago. Hell, there's even a for sale sign and the yard has been cleaned up.

As if everyone is trying to move on and pretend it never happened. But that isn't right, is it? When there hasn't been conclusive evidence on who in the world killed the Birkins?

I let out a breath as my phone rings, the number familiar enough that I frown. Though, I only know it's Gabriel because of his card. I've certainly never picked up the phone to call him. Not that I ever would, either.

"What?" I ask, voice dry as I hold the phone to my ear. "What do you want?"

"*You.*" The word is simple, to the point, and makes my heart thud nervously in my chest. My teeth press against my lower lip, sinking into it until my eyes water and I feel collected enough to take a breath.

"Well that's not happening, so what else do you want?"

“No, I mean you’re supposed to be here today.” He sounds so patient, like I’m a disorderly child he’s talking to instead of an adult with a social work degree. *“Melinda made you an appointment, and she said you’d signed off on it. Where are you, Quinn?”*

“Not there,” I reply lightly. “I’m not going to you for therapy, Gabriel.” I sound braver than I am, and I pause when he chuckles.

“Why? I’m the best therapist you’ve ever had. Do you think I can’t help you now just like I helped you back then? Or are you afraid I’ll help more than you want me to?” There’s some kind of challenge in his voice, like he’s trying to taunt me into action.

But I’m not angry today, and he’s not going to push me that far.

“Actually there’s this really nice lady in Eddyville I’m going to go see instead. She works with adults that have PTSD, and has a great report with social workers,” I inform him sweetly. “She seems a lot more like what I need. But you understand, right? After all, you were the one who told me that it was all about finding the right therapist.”

“Yeah. And your right therapist is me.” There’s a note of something in his voice that I can’t place. Something that goes past the usual cruel, yet playful nature he exudes. *“Careful with the mistakes you make, darling. One day you might regret the consequences.”*

There’s silence between us, and I try not to think of all the ways he’s right about being my therapist. He really is the best I’ve ever had, though I’m determined not to say those words out loud when he’s on the phone with me. I can’t do this. I can’t do this with *him*, more specifically. I can’t let him in like I had before. After all, who’s to say he won’t kill me if I disappoint him?

“I’m hanging up now,” I say, closing the folder in my hands. “I don’t have time for this today.”

“Do what you want.” The sudden shift gives me pause, and I glance up at the house with narrowed eyes.

“Oh yeah?”

“Yes. Do what you want, Quinn. It’s a free country after all.” His tone doesn’t match the words, sure, but I’m not about to question it.

“Whatever, then,” I reply, sniffing with disdain. “Sorry to mess up your therapy schedule, or whatever. But hey, call Clara, won’t you? I’m sure she—”

He hangs up, the phone going dead in my ear, and I snort. With a shake of my head I toss the folder back into my car, but before I can walk around to the driver’s side, I give the house another look.

I want to see what’s inside, because of some fucked up, macabre curiosity that can’t be tamed in my chest. Besides, with this not being a crime scene anymore, who cares? No one is likely to stop me. Unless the realtor shows up. But I doubt that’s going to happen.

Paducah is a small enough town that there isn’t much happening here this late in the day. Even on a Friday. I can do whatever I want here, and I won’t get caught. Hell, no one would even know to come looking for me here. It’s the perfect situation for exploring places I shouldn’t be.

My walk to the house is just as it had been before, and the steps are still a tetanus trap of loose nails. The railing is still bad as well, so it seems that any clean up or fixing up that had been done here were superficial at best.

The door handle turns under my grip and I walk in, my eyes on the kitchen that I’d been in before. Today there’s... nothing. No blood, no bodies, nothing to make it look like anything had happened here whatsoever.

But still I take a moment, exploring the kitchen and bending down to look at things even though there’s nothing to see, before moving on to the living room. It’s nicer and cleaner than I expect too, shining for all its cheapness, and I breeze by it until I find the main bedroom that sits on the first floor.

Or rather, what I *think* is the main bedroom. It looks like a primary suite, with a bathroom and closet with a worn and rickety door nearly hanging from its hinges. For all of that, however, there's nothing. No furniture. No bed. Just... *nothing*. I travel to the bathroom next, and search the clean cabinets for anything of note.

Nothing except the smell of bleach. Whoever cleaned this place had done so extra thoroughly, but I don't understand why. Especially when it's the main bed- and bathroom, instead of the other rooms that I've seen. Even the kitchen isn't as clean, isn't as *perfect* as this strangely empty room.

But if there's something to hide here, wouldn't it have been in the kitchen where the Birkins were killed? Wouldn't that be the place to bleach within an inch of its life, instead of coming in here and doing it?

Quickly I look through the rest of the house, which is intact and as clean as it can be, before coming back to the strange not-bedroom and looking through it one more time. Something feels off, like a clue just beneath the fresh paint on the walls, but short of scraping it off, I don't know what I'm going to do.

Hell, I don't even know what there *is* to do. Especially since the cops have cleared it and there's nothing here except new paint and bad memories.

The thought irritates me as I leave, and I barely look back at the house as I all but jog to my car. It's creepy here, and things just feel strange to me, like I'm being watched. The sooner I'm gone, the better, even if I don't understand the itchy, uncomfortable feeling being here brings.

The file is in my passenger seat where I left it as I get into my driver's seat, and I take a moment to lean back against my seat, eyes closed, and just *breathe*.

I need to get myself together. If I'm going to handle any of this the right way and not lose my sense over the dumbest thing, then I need to just—

The hand over my mouth jerks me back hard and I shriek, thrashing in the driver's seat, only to be trapped by the seat belt I'd already buckled. Another hand wraps around my throat, keeping me in place, and my eyes snap open as I try to see who's behind me.

They don't make any sound, however. Instead, they shift their hand until the rag they're holding covers my mouth and nose more profoundly, and with horror I can feel the dizziness in my head increasing, causing my limbs to feel heavier with every thrash.

"No!" I scream, trying to lunge forward and only succeed in hurting myself with the seat belt. "*No!*" I shriek again, my arm slamming against the horn over and over, for anyone to hear me, even as my struggles wane.

I realize as my head falls back against the seat and my breaths deepen against my will. Who's going to hear me when I timed my visit so perfectly for no one to know where I was? Who's going to save me when there's no one around except the ghosts of the Birkins and the person in my backseat who refuses to say a word?

I t's the sound of the AC kicking on that makes me realize I'm waking up.

I groan softly and curl further into myself, the pillow under my face soft against my cheek. Is it Saturday? I don't remember going to sleep, but I also don't remember what I did after going to the weird murder house.

Had I gone in?

Slowly my memories ebb back, of talking to Gabriel and refusing his therapy. Of the pristine kitchen and empty bedroom, and the rest of the house that had been as boring as could be.

With it being Friday, I'd hoped to come home, eat tacos, and make milkshakes. Since it's my Friday ritual, I try to be home by eight, so I'm not eating at two in the morning.

But I don't remember any of that. Though, unless I've fallen asleep on the couch, it had to have happened.

My brain searches for the lost memories as I slowly wake up more. My fingers flex and I rub my nose into the softness of the couch behind me. Maybe it's still night, I think, and I'm about to burn the house down with tacos on the stove or a blender full of ice cream that's about to explode.

But I don't even remember going home.

Finally, something pulls my attention to one thought, one sliver of a memory. It starts with discomfort, and a cloth

pressed to my nose and mouth. I'd breathed in deep and deeper, feeling my body relax against my will.

Had that really happened?

"Are you in pain at all?" The voice rockets me back to when I'd been a teenager and Gabriel had been so good at making me think he was the man he pretended to be. It's his therapist voice that I haven't heard in a long time, and my eyes fly open as I sit up fast.

Immediately I regret it, however. I groan and fall back onto my elbows, eyes squeezed shut as the world spins and dips around me.

"What did you do to me?" I moan, wondering if I'm going to throw up. "Why do I feel like this?"

"You made it easy," Gabriel replies kindly. "But then, you're always so good at being predictable for me, aren't you?" I hate the way he says it, but I find I can't disagree at the moment. "I knocked you out. You'll be fine, especially when you get up and start moving around to clear your head."

He moves, though I only know by the way it sounds when he walks across the room. I can't help but flinch when he touches me, and my eyes open again to fix on his face that swims into focus. "Let me help you," he says sweetly, gently, and in a way that makes me want to punch him. "Come on, Quinn. Let me help you."

"No," I say blatantly. "No, if you feel bad, you shouldn't have drugged me, knocked me out, dragged me here—"

"Actually," he cuts me off smoothly and kneels beside the couch, his smile turning less friendly. "I never said I was sorry, darling. I only said I'd help you work this off." Before I can stop him, he pulls me into a sitting position, and even though I protest with curses and try to bite his arm, drags me into a standing position.

I can't hold myself up. That much is apparently instantly, and I fall into him with a gasp, worried he's going to drop me.

He doesn't, though.

I suck in air as I clutch him, wishing my head wasn't spinning like a carousel and that I could get my legs under me. My fingers clutch hard at him as he steadies me, holding both of us up and not voicing a word of complaint.

"I hate you," I mutter, just in case he isn't aware of it. "I *hate* you, Gabriel."

"That's something we can talk about. Can you stand up on your own now?" He rests me more steadily on my feet, and when he pulls away, I find that I can. Barely. My hands are still clutched in his v-neck, long-sleeved tee, but that's all. I suck in air, trying to clear my head, and some part of me is grateful that he's not pushing me for more right now.

After all, it's going to be a few minutes before I can break his nose.

"Can you walk a little?" He pulls away, leading me into taking a few steps. I stagger, placing one foot in front of the other, and groan softly to voice my displeasure. I can walk, but I'm not having a great time. In fact, none of this is what I'd consider a good time.

"Fuck," I whisper, taking a few more dizzying steps. I pull away from him finally, walking slowly around the room with my palms pressed to my eyes. "What do you *want*?" I snap when I finally feel like I'm not going to pass out. "You can't just kidnap me, *drug* me, whatever. This is fucked, Gabriel." I turn to glare at him as I say it, taking in the office and the desk he sits at.

It's nice. Nicer than any office would be, and when I look through the French doors behind me, I realize with a jolt that we're in his house.

It's certainly a lot nicer than the one I've rented for myself. Fresh paint, hardwood floors, and tray ceilings meet my eyes, insulting me with their upscale appearance. It's definitely bigger than the house I'm renting as well, and as I peek through the French doors, I catch sight of a large living room with a sofa facing a television mounted over a long, modern-looking fireplace.

“We could go into another room if you want,” Gabriel offers lazily from behind his big mahogany desk. It’s similar to the one he had in Springwood, and this whole room reminds me of a better version of that office.

“I’d rather just leave,” I reply, trying the door handle.

It’s locked.

Of course, it’s locked, because Gabriel is always so damned good at thinking of everything in all the worst ways. Even if it wasn’t, I would’ve expected him to have traps set outside to keep me in here with him. Unless he’s planning on knocking me down and dragging me back in himself, should I escape. Which is always an option.

“Chair or couch, your choice of where you sit. But you *are* sitting, so...” he trails off as I look at him, shrugging his shoulders. “The sooner you get over here, the sooner you can leave. How does that sound?”

He makes a good point, and a better offer. I waver for half a second more before striding over to his side of the room, my head finally clear, and drop myself into the plush armchair in front of his desk to glare at him balefully.

It does no good. He barely seems as if he notices, and instead pulls out his iPad and stylus, a notes doc already up with my name at the top.

“Seriously? You’re doing this for real?” I ask, more surprised than anything else. “I thought this was some stupid excuse to make veiled threats and promises you think turn me on.”

“*Do* they turn you on?” he asks, looking down at his notes and scrawling something in his messy hand. I can’t read it from this far, especially upside down, but I doubt I’d be thrilled at whatever it says.

“Nope.”

“Are you sure? I really felt like that wasn’t the case in the parking lot the other day.” His hand pauses, long fingers stroking along the edge of the stylus. “Or are we pretending that didn’t happen?”

“I’m not talking to you about that. This is about *work*, right? How Melinda is worried about me for no reason.” I don’t want to talk about us, or him. I don’t want to talk to him about anything. Especially when it comes to my job.

But unfortunately, he seems like he isn’t willing to accept that as an answer.

Gabriel taps the stylus gently on his desk, eyes dragging up to meet mine. “Are your nightmares happening every night?” he murmurs, making my fingers itch. “Ever since you started taking cases at work?”

“Who cares?”

“Has it occurred to you that being a social worker is dragging up parts of your past that you’ve been trying to forget?”

His words make my stomach twist and I look away. My eyes land on the book case instead, and I walk over to it to examine the titles.

A History of Bees.

Fun and Fudge in the Kitchen.

If there was any doubt before that this house isn’t his, it’s gone now. I can’t see him reading about bees, fudge, *or* fun. Definitely not fun.

“I don’t need your help,” I say, turning to look at him and leaning against the heavy wood shelves. Crossing one ankle over the other as I do, praying I’m no longer too woozy to keep my balance. “I haven’t needed it in years. Can you please, *please* not do this to me?”

He holds my gaze, sympathy flashing through his caramel eyes. “It’s my job,” he reminds me sweetly, a smile curling over his full lips. “I’m just trying to help you.”

“If you were trying to help me, you’d tell me where the tracker in my car is!” I can’t help the way I snap at him, nor can I help the aggressive jerk toward him I can’t stop myself from.

“Oh, so we can’t find it, can we?” He writes something else down with a flourish. “I’m actually surprised. Have you tried taking your car somewhere? They’ll look for it. They’d have an easier time finding it than you, since I doubt you even know what you’re looking for.”

“I wanted to.” I stride over to press my hands against his desk, standing over him. “But it costs *money*. Which is something I’m in short supply of. Feels like an insult. Feels pretty shitty for you to put me in a situation that I financially can’t handle right now.”

He looks at his notes, writing more words I can’t read, even from this distance. Then he lays the stylus down and looks up at me until our faces are too close for comfort and I’m wishing I hadn’t come so close.

“Is that supposed to make me feel bad?” he asks lazily, his voice soft. “Am I supposed to... what? Break down and tell you where it is? Tell you what it looks like and offer to take it out for you? Do you really think that’s what’s going to happen here, Quinn?”

The air is still between us, and his warm breath is the only spot of heat on my skin as goosebumps break out over my arms and a tingle goes down my spine.

“I hate you,” I whisper, my temper rising. “You’re such an —” I lunge for his stylus, intent on breaking it or at least throwing it out the window. It’s childish, it’s rash, and above all, it’s stupid. But he has a tendency of pushing me too far, to the point where he gets to watch me act like I have no sense.

In fact, I think he enjoys it.

But this time he doesn’t just watch. His hand snaps out, pinning my arm down and then using it to yank me down over his desk until I’m flush against it.

“You’re very hostile for someone who could use someone to talk to,” he whispers in my ear, standing up but keeping his grip on me so I can’t. “This isn’t how I wanted this to go, Quinn. Why can’t you keep a hold of your temper for once?”

My cheeks burn at his chastisement. He's right, and I hate that he makes me so irrationally angry, or worse. He moves until he's pinning me down with a hand at the back of my throat and standing beside his desk, unmoving.

I writhe, squirming enough to send some of his desk things to the floor. Still, he doesn't move; finally I'm forced to give up my efforts with a frustrated snarl and try to kick out at him in irritation.

Naturally, I miss.

"What are you doing?!" I snap at last, groping around with my hand in an attempt to find his wrist. My face flushes, hot with embarrassment and frustration as my heart pounds. I want him to let go. To get off of me and hopefully fall through the glass door. "Let *go* of me!"

"No," He says simply, moving around the desk so he's behind me. With one leg, he kicks mine apart, sliding his thigh between them before I can regain my balance.

Taking a sharp breath, I try again to move, needing to be more balanced on my feet to do anything other than squirm around like this. But he has me trapped, and with him in between my legs, I can't do more than this.

What's worse is that every time I squirm, every time I move up and down on his desk to try to get away from him, all I feel is the heat and pressure of his thigh against my body. Through the thin material of my shorts, it feels like I'm intentionally grinding along his thigh. The thought makes more embarrassment burn through my veins. It's a combination of that and irritation that I finally stop, my cheek on his desk, and close my eyes hard as I pant out my frustration.

"Can you let me up?" I ask, trying to make it sound like a request and not an order. "*Please?*"

"I could," Gabriel replies, moving so he can press his thigh more forcefully against me. "But you were having such a good time. What's wrong, baby girl? Was it too much for you?" He

slides it against me, doing a much better job of hitting all the right places than I had.

“Can you *not*?” I snap, trying and failing once more to wiggle free. “I’ll do your stupid therapy, all right? Just let me up.”

“I think we’ll do it right here. How long have you been having nightmares, Quinn?” he asks offhandedly, surprising me with the frankness of his question.

“Since I was six,” I snap, rolling my eyes. “Which you already knew—” His hand comes down on my thigh, just below the curve of my ass, with a smack that echoes in my ears and stops my words dead in my throat. “What are you—”

“How long since you moved here have you been having nightmares?”

“Since I started taking cases,” I reply softly, still stunned. His hand rubs over the place he’d hit, fingers gentle and teasing.

“Explain to me how they make you feel. Are they all about the bad house? The one with your abusive foster father?”

When I don’t answer right away, he taps my thigh in warning. I don’t care. I don’t need him doing this to me, or dragging up the problems of—

He smacks me again, causing me to writhe against his thigh, once more. “Yes, *yes*,” I hiss between clenched teeth, feeling my thighs tremble. “They’re always about the bad house and always involving my foster father. It’s always the night he broke my arm. Sometimes you’re there and you kill him. Sometimes I do and he just keeps getting up. Can you please let me get up now?”

“No.” He shoves the material of my shorts higher, and I burn with embarrassment as he grips my thigh in his free hand. “Do you think these cases are doing you any good, Quinn? Is the life you’d always dreamed of?”

No.

I hate the way the silent admission makes me feel, and I close my eyes against the coldness of his desk. His fingers move upward, stroking over my skin, and a soft, almost-sigh leaves him.

“Come on, do your worst. Let’s go. Can’t be worse than —” I don’t get to finish. He does smack my thigh again, lightly, but it has me squirming against him all the same.

“You’re so difficult.” It sounds like praise when he says it. “You’re just so—”

I shove myself upward the moment his hand between my shoulders relaxes. He’s too slow to stop me, and I fight until I’m sliding off of his desk and to the floor, turning to glare at him. “Smarter than you today,” I reply, voice taunting as I grin.

But he doesn’t stop to appreciate my creative, amazing escape. Gabriel moves to grab me again, and succeeds in gripping my arm. It’s not a big deal, not something I can’t recover from; until it is. He jerks me toward him, using my momentum to swing me around and slam me against the bookshelf. *Fun and Fudge in the Kitchen* clatters to the floor, nearly followed by a few other books that I hadn’t read the titles of.

“Are you?” he asks, pinning my hands above my head with one hand, fingers wrapped around my wrist. I fight him, but he’s so much stronger than me it’s completely futile, and all I get is a pounding heart and my lungs gasping for air. “Are you so much smarter than me, darling?” He shoves his knee between my thighs again, forcing them apart.

“What are you doing?” I hiss, hating that he has one hand free to do whatever he wants with.

His grin is quick, and not at all friendly. “Whatever the fuck I want, Quinn. And you’ll enjoy every second of it.” He doesn’t give me the chance to argue. His free hand grips my shirt, twisting it until my stomach is exposed. He leans forward, catching my bottom lip sharply between his and biting down until I cry out at the burning, throbbing pain.

Only when I'm sure he's drawn blood does he move, turning the bite into a full-blown, filthy kiss with his mouth pressed so hard to mine that I can barely move, let alone do anything except enjoy it. Still, I protest, the sounds swallowed eagerly by him as he kisses me, thigh moving against my body.

"I don't know who you think you're fooling," he murmurs, the moment he pulls away and I'm still panting from his kiss. "Because it certainly isn't me."

"I don't know what you mean," I whisper, never breaking eye contact. "I'm not—"

"Fooling anyone," he agrees, shoving me back against the bookcase again. "So when I shove my fingers into you, your cunt won't be wet for me? You weren't getting off on getting spanked by me during therapy?"

I shake my head, hating that he might be right. I can feel how hot I am, how every time he rubs against me, bolts of electricity shoot up my spine.

"If I'm wet, it's not for you," I promise, my voice only slightly shaking.

"Then what's it for, darling girl?"

"The violence."

It's a weak excuse. A terrible one that I can't even bother to explain. Gabriel stares at me, as if in shock, before a wide grin curls over his features. "I could see that," he laughs finally. "Maybe. Are you admitting to being wet, then? To getting off on this?"

"No."

He doesn't answer. He doesn't need to, when the hand he uses to drag my shorts far enough down and slide his fingers between my thighs is answer enough. I suck in a gasp, mouth open in a protest, only for his lips to find mine again in another punishing, bruising kiss.

But it doesn't distract me from his hand. His fingers rub against my slit through my panties twice, then he's pushing

them to the side with one finger as two others slide into me. They do so easily, proving just how right he is and dragging a long moan from my mouth that he swallows eagerly.

He thrusts them in and out, mouth never leaving mine as he leisurely fucks me on two fingers, dragging me slowly toward what promises to be an achingly good release.

At least, until he pulls them away, leaving me empty. I whine, hating the sound as it leaves my lips into his mouth, and watch as he pulls away to lift his hand between us.

“Seems like it’s from more than just the violence,” Gabriel purrs, showing me his fingers that are coated in my wetness. “But you tell me.”

I open my mouth to argue as my stomach flips and twists itself into knots. My body is *begging* for his fingers back, or something better, but before I can say a word, his fingers are at my lips, shoving between them until he can press them against my tongue.

It hits me then that it’s not an answer he wants at all. It’s to prove a point. As his fingers curl against my tongue, forcing me to taste my own wetness, it’s clear on his face that he’s enjoying this just as much as me.

“Seems a bit much, don’t you think? I’m leaning toward it being from me and the way I touch you.” His words are husky, soft, and rough. He wants more than this, pulling his fingers from my lips and wiping them across my face. “Sit with that for a while,” he purrs as I open my mouth in complaint. “That’s my official ‘homework’ for you as your therapist.”

He steps back and I stumble forward, nearly falling to my knees on the floor. “You can go now,” he says, back to all business formal once again. He walks away as I watch, as if we hadn’t been up against his bookcase with his fingers inside of me.

Gabriel sits in his chair, looking up when he sees I haven’t moved. “Your session’s over,” he says, as if reminding me. “You can go now, Quinn. I believe you’ll find your keys in your car, which is parked in the driveway.”

“Fuck you,” I hiss, finally managing to stumble towards the door as my cheeks burn. “Fuck you!”

“Maybe next time,” he agrees. “But I don’t think insurance will pay for that much overtime today.” His grin is savage and teasing. Cruel in the sharpness of his face.

There’s so much more I want to say. I want to strangle him, scream at him, and maybe flip over the pretty mahogany desk if I can manage it.

But I don’t do any of those things. Instead, I gesture rudely at him, as if that’s what I’ve wanted to do all along, wait for him to unlock the door at his own pace, and try hard not to look like I’m running out of the room as I make the grand escape to my car, where I can scream all I want without anyone to judge or mock me.

When Mr. Durham has the audacity to show up in my office again, I think I'm going to throw something. Most likely my stapler, at his head, but the exact details are still up in the air. At least until I see if he's going to yell or threaten me again.

His eyes find mine, dark in his pinched and tired face, and I lean back in my chair to stare him down, hopefully preventing him from coming over to me.

But of course, life doesn't work like that for me. It would for Gabriel, I'm sure. Especially since he's the one who threw Mr. Durham into a wall, almost through it, and had made him fuck right off. But not me. I'm just the person who *wanted* to chuck him through a glass window and watch him bleed.

He sits down in front of me as I eye him with disdain. My 'therapy session' from two days ago is still too fresh in my mind for me to be anything resembling friendly, and I tap the end of my pen on the table, engaging and disengaging the tip on every smack. If Melinda were here, she'd be disappointed with me. She'd say I was being antisocial and uninviting.

I'd say that's tame for the vibes I'm trying to send Mr. Durham's way. Maybe he's not the source of all of my troubles right now, but he's not exactly going to *soothe* them, either. And I don't feel like being yelled at today.

"What can I help you with, Mr. Durham?" I ask, just as the door opens again and the star of my current bad dreams walks in.

He looks... good. And certainly better than I do today. With his hands shoved into his pockets and his long sleeves shoved up to his elbow, Gabriel is the epitome of aloofness and sexy, bad boy energy. His eternally tousled hair looks perfectly imperfect, and as he takes off his aviators to look around the room, I can't help but notice the way he grins at Clara.

Like she has a chance to be anything other than his victim.

My eyes narrow in surprise, however, when he strides over to her instead of coming toward me as I'd expected. He leans over her desk, mouth curling up at the edges, and says something I can't hear that makes her look down, eyes wide. A small smirk plays at her lips, and I press mine flat, hating the feeling that surges through my chest.

Mr. Durham turns around as well, his brows raised. "I thought the two of you were together," he says in a low voice. "Sure, I figured he was a little old to be your boyfriend. But with the way he acted..." He shrugs his shoulders and turns to look at me instead. "Judgin' by that look on your face, you thought so too."

I switch my attention to the man in front of me, frowning still. "I don't think that. He can be with whoever he wants. I don't care." Still, the tapping of my pen becomes more erratic, and irritation bubbles in my chest. *I don't care*, I remind myself, as if it's even in question.

"Don't mind me givin' you advice, but if you really don't care, you might try acting like it." When he's not screaming, he has a deep southern accent that draws my attention back to him, and I look the man over with surprise.

"You're less mad today," I point out, not caring that it's pretty obvious. "Did you stop drinking, Mr. Durham?"

He shrugs his broad shoulders, still watching me with interest. "Are you this nice all the time, Miss Riley? Or is it just because your boyfriend is flirtin' with your coworker?"

"He's not—"

Clara laughs loudly, the pitch high and fake enough that I know she's trying to impress him. I suck in a breath, letting it out slowly as she continues to giggle and respond to whatever he's said to her.

I need to get a hold of myself. There's no way that I can act like this with him here and able to see me. Besides, this is my job. I can't act like this *at my job*.

"What do you need, Mr. Durham?" I ask again, unsure if he's already answered and I just haven't noticed. "If you're going to ask about your case file, then—"

"I wanted to talk to you about something," he breaks in smoothly. He really is a totally different person than he was the other day. Much more reasonably, conversational, and mostly polite. It's like night and day, and I wonder if anger over losing custody of his child was really all that was spurring him last time. "Not my case file. Melinda called me, so I know how that's going."

I don't say anything as he thinks, though it's clear that he's trying to find the right words for whatever he wants to tell me.

"I saw somethin'," he says at last, dragging his gaze back up to mine. "And since your prince back there is probably making his way over here next, I'd like to discuss it quickly, while blonde and beautiful is holdin' on to his attention like a lifeline." I don't respond to his dramatic analogies, but I do manage to place the now broken pen onto the desk like I haven't spent the last few minutes battering it into oblivion.

"Something like...?" My brows raise as I trail off. "Did you go looking for your daughter, Mr. Durham? If so, you know I have to tell you that—"

"I did not," he denies, shaking his head. "I went to run a delivery by the Birkins' house the other night. It was addressed there, even though I knew they were dead, but I figured I might just take a drive by there anyway. Just to see if anyone was, uh, home for the delivery."

"It's not nice to investigate a crime scene," I say slowly, pointing out the obvious, like I hadn't recently been doing the

same thing.

“Too bad it isn’t a crime scene anymore. And ain’t that the weirdest thing? You know, I’d heard that you were the one who went out there with their letter. Though it’s not your case, is it? Mrs. Melinda was workin’ on that one with them.” He watches me while he says it, as if he’s looking for a reaction. If he is, I don’t know what it would be. And I don’t know what he thinks I know or suspect.

“How did you know that?” I ask after a moment’s pause and listening to Clara whisper something to Gabriel. My eyes flick across the room, only to see that Gabriel’s full attention is still on the blonde.

So he has the audacity to kidnap me, punish me, and fuck me, but not pay attention to me at the office? The thought rings through my head, souring my thoughts, and I find myself going for the pen once more.

“We were friends.” Mr. Durham’s voice drags me out of my irritation, and when I look back at him, he glances toward the pair at the far side of the room. “He’s sure layin’ it on thick, ain’t he?”

I just shrug.

“Maybe he’s trying to make you jealous. Done anything to piss off your fair doctor back there?”

“No,” I snap. “In fact, if someone should be pissed off, it’s me. I’m—” I cut myself off and close my eyes hard. “What are we talking about, Mr. Durham? The Birkins? Why?”

“Because there’s no real reason only parts of their house is cleaned out like that. And even less reason that the investigation was handled so swiftly, with so little coverage. You know where we are, Miss Riley?” He snorts and sits back hard in his chair. “Only a few hundred miles south of the Ashwick Murders a couple years back. That means, usually, any news of a killing blows up around here.”

Squinting, I try to figure out what he’s talking about. “The Ashwick murders?” I ask, voice soft. “That sounds familiar,

sort of. There was a girl who survived, right? A little girl who saw the killer die in front of her?”

“That’s precisely what I’m talking about. Like I said, since then, we get a lot of blowback for being a similar sized town on a lake. Every time someone dies and there’s a sniff of foul play, I see three articles asking if the Ashwick Butcher has a copycat in our town. But why not *this* time, hmm?”

I have no idea. And I certainly don’t know enough about Ashwick, Indiana, and its murders, to predict the reasoning he might be hinting at. “Okay, so you think it’s what, being covered up? Aliens did it, or the government, or—”

“I think someone might know more than what they’re lettin’ on is all. But who am I to say?” His eyes darken, sadness leeching away at the intensity there. “I’m just a drunk who lost custody of his kid and whose wife left him.”

We’re quiet for a few moments until Clara’s next giggle breaks the silence and I press my face against my hand. “Did you want to discuss your case while you’re here?” I ask, finding myself more amenable to the idea than I had been. “We can, if you like.”

“Because you want a distraction?” His words aren’t particularly unkind, but he’s not exactly the epitome of nice.

“Sure,” I say, refocusing on him. “According to Melinda, you’re doing really well. That’s what her notes say, anyway.” I gesture to my computer, where I’ve pulled up his file. “You have a meeting with your counselor on Thursday, right? I think you should continue on the path you’ve been taking. Seriously, this could work out for you, if—”

“If you give the right impression.” The smooth, velvet-like voice wants me to look up at him. So does the imposing shape standing over me. Gabriel leans over my desk and smiles at Mr. Durham. “I’m available to talk as well, if you need something before then. I’m licensed to work with the county, and I’d love to make things better for you, Mr. Durham.” While I don’t know how he knows the man’s name, the alcoholic opposite me squirms in his seat, obviously uncomfortable.

But then again, so am I. I'm just not going to squirm about it. I can't, when he's so close to me and I can feel his scrutiny.

"That's all right." Mr. Durham gets to his feet and dusts off his hands, like he has something on them or is just uncomfortable. I'm willing to bet on the latter, since Gabriel has that effect on people without even trying. "Thanks for your time, Miss Riley. I'll see you soon." He nods at me and turns, walking out of the office without waiting for me to say goodbye.

He also didn't bother to repeat the sentiment to Gabriel.

I sit there, biting my tongue and waiting for the man above me to *move*. "You can go now," I mutter icily. "I didn't need your help." I hate he can make me like this, that he makes me tremble in both fear and anticipation while burning with jealousy at the same time.

"I was worried for you," he murmurs, trailing a hand up my arm as the door to the staff lounge closes, giving us the room to ourselves.

"Yeah, you really fucking acted like it," I hiss, jerking away from his touch. "Seriously, comrade of the year, right here. I'll put it next to your master therapist award on the shelf you probably have in your room."

"You think I keep trophies?" He moves with me, dragging his fingers up my skin so hard his nails bite lightly into me. I shudder, wishing I hated it, and he does it again. "Well, you're not wrong. But they aren't for being a therapist, or a good boyfriend."

"Good. Because you're not a good therapist, and if you were my boyfriend, you'd *suck* at it," I say, looking anywhere but up at him. "Better be careful, Dr. Brooks. Clara could come back out and see you with me, and then how would you lure her into your bed?"

"I don't want to fuck Clara," Gabriel chuckles. "But I also know what a good relationship with the people around me can offer. Unlike you. Did he upset you, Quinn?"

I shake my head, eyes fixed on my broken pen. He's so close, and caging me in so completely, that I can't move without touching some part of him. Even now, with his hand still on my arm, I don't know where to go or how to escape.

He has me trapped.

"What did he want?"

"He wants to sue you," I lie, not wanting to tell him about what the man had said that has me both nervous and intrigued. "He says he's going to the cops for what you did to him last week. I agreed with him and told him I'd testify against you."

His hand wanders up to curl loosely around my throat, and he pulls me back so my shoulders and head are resting against his stomach. *Fuck*. I take a deep, shuddering breath as his fingers slide easily under my jaw, pressing just enough that I know he's there.

"You get so excited just from my fingers being here," he comments, amusement tinging his voice. "What did he say, Quinn? You're only hiding it because it was something important."

He's right, but I also don't want to repeat the words where anyone might hear me. Melinda could be in her office, and I would never know since she has a door out of the building behind her desk. Clara could come back out at any minute, and I don't think she should overhear either. I hesitate, my hand coming up to rest on his wrist as I think and concentrate of the feeling of his hand around my throat.

"Maybe there's some other time we can talk," I say finally, unsure if this is the right decision. "Maybe you could help me with this case later? I've wanted another pair of eyes on it... Do you think you would have time?"

His thumb strokes my jaw thoughtfully. It's impossible for him not to know what I'm asking, and he hums softly in his chest as if he has to think about the request. "I could make time," he says at last. "How about I go ask Melinda if I can assist you with your case. I'm sure she'll know which one, or be able to find one."

“I’m sure,” I agree, kicking myself. I’d meant that we could just talk *later*. Not for him to actually help me with something. But here I am, regretting my words and wishing I’d been clearer.

The door to the staff room opens just as Gabriel steps back and drops his hand. “Yeah, keep me updated,” he says, as if we’ve been having a work conversation. “I’ll let you know what I have on my end, Miss Riley.” He nods at me and I force a smile to my face, my insides quivering like jelly.

“No problem,” I mutter, giving him a false salute that I know he’ll hate. Sure enough, irritation flickers in his brown eyes, and his lips press flat. “I’m at your service, Dr. Brooks.” He chuckles, though it’s forced at best, and walks over to say something else to Clara before his steps take him toward Melinda’s office and out of view.

Clara sits down beside me in my cubicle instead of hers. “What were you two talking about?” she asks, picking up my broken pen and looking at it with confusion. “And what happened to this?”

“Nothing,” I lie, and shove a random file at her on my desk. “We were talking about this. I just wanted his opinion.”

She opens it, and the picture of Lily stares up at us. *Shit*.

“Oh, I understand.” Her frown is kind and caring, soft as she looks at me and studies my face. “It’s hard, isn’t it? The first kid who’s taken from a bad situation?”

“Y-yeah.” I wish I’d picked another file. “It’s... it’s really hard.”

“It’ll get better.” I doubt that, but I watch Clara get to her feet and stretch. “I’ll see you tomorrow? My shift’s over, and I’d like to get home before the dinner rush hits.” There’s no dinner rush here, but I’m not about to disagree with whatever reasoning she’s making up.

“I’ll see you later,” I agree, waving and leaning back over my files. “Have a good night, Clara.”

She winks at me, like there’s a joke I’m missing, and walks to Melinda’s office to stick her head in before leaving through

the front door, Gabriel behind her and not once looking back at me, though I can't take my eyes off of him until the door closes firmly behind him, cutting off my line of sight.

“Good riddance,” I mutter, and shake my head again. “I didn't want you here, anyway.” It's a good sentiment. A smart one.

If I only meant it.

No matter how much I tell myself I'm not about to go home and go on some research binge instead of eating ice cream and hibernating, I know it's not the truth. As soon as I've eaten and the dishes are in the dishwasher, I collapse onto the old, threadbare sofa and let out a sigh, eyes closing hard.

Would Gabriel know about Ashwick, if I asked?

I chase the thoughts away like dirt with a broom, and type Ashwick, Indiana, into the search bar to see what pops up.

I'm not disappointed. Article upon article, some citing cults and urban legends while others talking about an actual killer, march down my screen as I scroll through the results. One of them talks about the survivor instead, a girl who was a child at the time of the first murders.

But the more I read, the more I know that this has nothing to do with Ashwick. How could it, when the only similarity is geography? And really, if there were a copycat, wouldn't they be *copycatting*? That doesn't seem to be happening here, when the only dead people had their throats slit, not strange patterns of cuts all over their body.

The last article I read shows me the girl all grown up, and I study Parker Lowell's face for a few moments, noting how tired she looks and how paranoid, before I shake my head and close out of the article. Hopefully she's doing better now, though if it were me, I'm not sure I'd ever be 'better' again.

Finding nothing, I drift back to the top of the page, settling back against the couch as I do. I reach my left hand behind me,

and find the bottle of soda on the end table, seated neatly on the coaster. With my other hand, movements slow, I type in Springwood, Illinois, instead.

Police Still Searching for Clawed Killer.

Three Dead, More Suspected.

Formerly Accused Doctor Released From Prison In Light of New Evidence.

I roll my eyes at the last article, clicking it anyway. So it was true. He'd really gotten free because someone else had been found to take the blame, even though Gabriel had done it all along. My fingers drum against my laptop, and I look up at the television. I have no idea what I'm watching, apart from it being food related, and let my attention drift to what appears to be a cooking competition for a few minutes.

Then I type in the name Gabriel Brooks, instead.

Local Psychologist Rewarded for Advancements in Sleep Psychology. I wrinkle my nose at the words of the title, wondering what in the world Gabriel has for people who are still sleeping. Hell, he's made it clear that he thinks it's 'cute' when I sleep. A few more articles talk about his work with lucid dreaming, and I go through them quickly before sitting back and closing my eyes hard.

Has he always been this way? It's hard to remember a lot of what had happened before the incident with the Owens family. It's hard to think about Gabriel before I knew what he was, though there are some things that I can never get out of my head.

The scent of his sharp cologne.

The comfortable couch in his office.

His warm, sweet smile. It's the same he uses on me now, once in a while. And when I think about it, I realize it's one he reserves *just* for me.

Warmth blossoms in my chest, though I fight it back quickly. I shouldn't be happy about him feeling this way about me. I shouldn't be *happy* that his sweetest smiles are for me

and me alone. He's a bad person, and I still haven't figured out how he's tracking me.

But seeing his accomplishments online brings up more questions. Had he ever used dream psychology on me? Is that why he's so interested in my dreams and the nightmares I face about being a child?

"This is a bad idea," I mutter, and reach for my cell phone on the end table. I have his number, thanks to Melinda giving him mine for therapy, and even though I haven't saved it in my phone, it's easy enough to find in my call history.

I don't have to do this. While I'm itching to ask him something, a few somethings, it's still a bad idea. It's not one I have to follow through with, either.

Still, I hit the call button and wait.

It rings once, and I let out a breath when he doesn't answer.

It rings again, and I rationalize that maybe he just isn't there. Hell, I could hang up before the next ring, before I give him a chance to—

The third ring cuts off, and I hear a long, soft sigh against my ear, along with the sound of someone moving around. "*Every time I think I know what you'll do, you surprise me, Quinn. What do you need?*"

I look down, not answering, as I consider his question and why I've even called. I could still hang up, after all. It's not like he can force me to answer over the phone.

When I don't say anything, I expect him to hang up. Curiosity stretches my silence out longer, and all I hear is another exhale and what sounds like dishes clinking.

"Are you at home?" I ask finally, wondering why *that* is my first question. I should just get this over with, not try to make conversation.

"*Yes. I'm doing dishes. Why? Do you want to come over?*" He asks the question lazily, as if it doesn't matter to him either way. Maybe it doesn't.

“Has Clara seen your house yet?” It’s rude to answer him with questions, but I don’t exactly care about manners right now.

“*No. Would it make you jealous if she had?*”

“No. I don’t care.”

“*Liar.*” Amusement touches his tone, and a faucet comes on somewhere near the phone. “*You’re not in trouble, are you? I don’t mind playing whatever game this is, but I want to make sure you’re alright.*”

“What are you going to do if I say no and tell you that I’ve been kidnapped by a drug cartel and shipped to South America?” I ask, my words dry.

“*Come find you, kill them all, and bring you home.*”

“What if I want to stay and rule over them?”

“*Then I’ll make you their queen.*” The words aren’t what I expect. He said it all so casually, like murder isn’t the most unhinged thing in the world to discuss. Especially when he *is* a murderer, so it’s not as hypothetical as when other people mention it.

“How would you kill them?” I don’t know why I ask. Especially when my words come out soft, almost whispered, instead of in the deadpan tone I intend. Why do I care how he’d kill them?

“*Is this your phone sex talk? If so, I have to admit, it’s really doing it for me, Quinn.*” I don’t reply. Instead, I listen to him do his dishes, the sound of his off key whistling going in and out of my ears. Finally, I hear the faucet turn off, and after a few seconds of footsteps on his fancy hardwood floors, it sounds like he sits.

“How would you kill them?” I repeat, in case he’s somehow forgotten the question.

“*You know how I’d do it.*”

“Do I?”

“Oh, I see. You’re not really asking for the information, are you?” His voice deepens, the sound husky and velvety. If I were in the room, I’m sure I’d be able to hear his amusement more clearly, or see it in the warmth of his brown eyes. *“You just want to hear me talk about it. If I tell you, will you tell me why you’ve called? I know it’s not for this, though I certainly don’t mind answering your questions.”*

“I might,” I reply, words clipped as I shrug. He can’t see the movement, obviously, but that’s not relevant right now. I can barely think straight, let alone figure out why I’m doing this apart from some weird, sick fascination that I need to get checked out by a doctor.

“I’d cut them to pieces for you. I know you’ve seen the work my claws can do. I could rip them apart, or just slice them up. I like the freedom to explore my options.”

“What...” I swallow hard, hating that my heart is in my throat and my thighs are pressed together around the warmth pooling in my lower body. “What do your claws look like?” Until now I hadn’t been sure of his murder weapon of choice. Why hasn’t he shown them to me, if he cares so much and wants me to feel the same for him as he does for me?

“Come over and find out.”

“Not on my life.” I laugh, the sound grating and sharp. “I’m not that stupid.”

“Then tell me why you’re calling, Quinn. Unless it really is just so I can get you off with murder talk. Are you wet for me yet?” My stomach twists at the question, delivered in that same silky tone.

There’s no way in hell I’m going to answer.

“Do you know anything about Ashwick?” It isn’t the question I want to ask so badly, but it’ll do. “It’s in Indiana, and—”

“I know where Ashwick is,” Gabriel responds calmly. *“And I know it’s full of killers.”*

“What do you mean?”

“I mean what I said. If you’re planning a vacation there, I’d like to advise you against it. I’ve worked too hard to lose you to a town of crazies.”

What he said doesn’t make sense. There’s no way an entire town is full of killers, but I push his jokes out of my head. “Mr. Durham, the guy you threw into a wall, came to talk to me today. You could’ve listened in, if you weren’t talking to your girlfriend about your date. How’d it feel when she was undressing you with her eyes?”

He makes a grating sound that might be a chuckle, and sighs. *“You’re jealous.”*

“Of what?”

The silence rings between us, turning my stomach a few times. “No, I’m not jealous, Gabriel.” The words don’t feel authentic, they don’t ring true in my ears. I hate them when I say them, and hope he doesn’t see it too.

“He came to talk to you about Ashwick? About how people whisper about copycats around here, because the two places are within a few hours of each other?” There’s patience in his voice that grates on me, and I grit my teeth together at having the big reveal stolen from me.

“Something like that. Did you know they closed the investigation really fast on the Birkins? And that they’re basically keeping it out of the news? I went to their house the other day—”

It’s impossible not to hear the surprised noise from his side of the phone, nor the way that he murmurs something that might not be a compliment.

“Anyway. Their bedroom is cleaned out. Just their bedroom. Don’t you think that’s weird?”

“I think you’re very obsessed with murder for someone trying to prove to me she doesn’t want to be a part of it.” I don’t expect those words. My fingers feel cold, and I nearly drop the phone in surprise. The memories he brings back assault my mind’s eye, and I nearly hang up on him.

“Don’t say that,” I snap finally. “Don’t say shit like that, Gabriel.”

“*As you wish, Quinn.*” He certainly doesn’t sound too put out about it. “*Are you trying to ask me if I want to start a Scooby Gang with you so we can go investigate a murder?*”

“I never said I wanted to do it with *you*.”

Silence on the line makes me wonder if he’s hung up. I open my mouth to speak, and I check the phone once to make sure he’s still there. “Gabriel?” I ask finally, tentatively. Have I upset him?

“*No,*” he says at last. “*I’m not going to ask. I shouldn’t have to. But you shouldn’t be so fired up to investigate a murder like that. Especially alone. Do you hear me, Quinn? I’m saying no.*”

“I’m not asking your *permission!*” I snap back, losing my temper. “That’s not why I called you. You’re not my parent or guardian, Gabriel. I don’t need—”

“*You’re mine,*” he reminds me smoothly. “*And I’m telling you no, you aren’t going off alone. Mine or not, what if you find something? What if you end up dead?*”

“Then I guess you’ll have to find someone else to obsess over!”

“*That’ll never happen.*” He lets out a long sigh, and I can picture him pinching the bridge of his nose. “*I don’t wish to argue with you. Not about this. If you want to discuss it, you can come over. But if this is all you want—*”

“It’s not,” I interrupt, kicking myself for sounding so eager. “Don’t hang up. Please.” The word nearly kills me to say, and his silence makes me nervous. “Gabriel?”

“*I’m still here. What else do you want, princess?*” The nickname kicks something in me into high gear, but I refuse to think about it.

“Do you remember the first time we met? In your office?”

“*Of course I do.*”

“You told my case worker that you didn’t have time to take on another foster kid. Remember?”

“I sure do.”

“But you did anyway. Can I ask you why?” There are a ton of things I want to ask, and this wasn’t the one I’d planned, but now that I’m here, I find that I can’t help myself.

He takes his time in answering. I hear him shift, and wonder if he’s sitting at his desk or his big leather couch. *“Because you needed me,”* he says finally. *“More than anyone else I was seeing, you needed me. You walked into my office with a black eye and a chip on your shoulder that was dragging you to your knees.”*

“That sounds like every foster kid I know,” I point out. “And not that special.”

“But you came into my office with violence in your eyes, and promised me you didn’t need me. You said you would never let yourself be hurt again, no matter what, and that you could deal with your trauma on your own.”

I barely remember that day. I *do* recall what he’s talking about, only because I’d waited until my social worker was gone until I’d had the guts to say it to the nice, well-dressed man who’d agreed to be my temporary therapist. I’d been shitty, and he... hadn’t.

“I can’t believe you remember that,” I mutter, picking at a loose string in my tee. “That’s so random.”

“No, it isn’t. Do you know what I was worried about back then? Do you know why I agreed to take you as a client, then kept you?”

“Because you’re kind of insane, and you saw some broken kid with a messed up life?” I assume. That’s all I was back then, after all. Especially before he helped me.

“Because I saw a girl who was planning a murder.”

His words make me go cold. This time the phone does fall from my hand, and it clatters to the floor as I close my eyes hard.

It's not true.

If I leave the phone on the floor long enough, surely he'll hang up. Except, when I pick it up again, he hasn't. Sucking in a breath, I put it to my ear and say, softly, "You're lying. You're trying to freak me out."

"*Am I?*" There's something there, in his voice, that I don't want to think about. That I don't want to remember. "*Are you sure you don't want to come over? I can help you work through this.*"

"There's nothing to work through."

"*Only because you don't want to remember.*"

"*Shut up!*" I snap, nearly throwing the phone this time. "There's nothing to fucking remember, Gabriel. Nothing to work through. I'm sick of you doing this to me. I'm sick of you following me around and pretending I'm something I'm not. Can't you just leave me alone?!" I lunge to my feet, unable to sit still as my heart pounds with the fear I always try to pretend I don't feel.

"*No, I can't,*" he says, just so simply. "*I'll never leave you alone, Quinn. And I'll never let you go. And not because you were the girl who wanted to murder everyone who did her wrong. Do you remember the dreams you used to have?*"

"Shut up," I whisper, eyes closing hard. This had been such a bad idea. Everything about this call was terrible, and my body begs for a way to escape his words and the memories he brings to my mind.

"*Do you remember the ones about the bad house?*"

"No."

"*Because I remember that it used to not be me that killed your foster father in the end.*"

I can't do this. I won't, and I'm glad that he isn't in the room with me. Instead of answering, or letting him keep talking, I hang up on him and chuck my phone to the sofa, hoping it gets lost in the threadbare cushions and falls into some black hole.

I won't do this with him. I won't do it with myself, either.

No matter what he says, or does, I'm not the girl he remembers, or the girl I think he wants me to be.

He gasps when I stab him. My foster father's mouth falls open, and blood leaks from his eyes like tears.

"Why?" he coughs, though there's no fear or apology in his face or the word. "Why, why, WHY—" When he tries to step forward I stab him again, this time in the throat, and blood spatters my face and chest. It's hot enough to burn, though the feeling is distant and somewhere in the back of my head, it hits me that I'm dreaming.

Hadn't I been guided through this dream before?

I step back once, then again, as my foster father crawls toward me. His breath rattles too loudly, and the blood in his eyes turns them red as he just keeps coming.

Still I stumble backward, the knife falling to clatter on the landing beside me. He shouldn't be able to catch me, but I feel like I'm slowing down, as though I'm moving through molasses.

Finally, I can't move at all. My heart pounds, fear coursing through my veins as I stare at him, and one hand reaches out and up. He claws his way up my body, dragging me down until my knees hit the floor hard and one of his hands can curl around my throat.

He squeezes, and his smile widens. It hurts more than anything else here. The pain is real, instead of distant, and my blood burns in my veins. My foster father's face morphs, turning younger, until Billy Owens sneers in my face, blood pouring from him.

“Wake up, Quinn,” he hisses in my face, spattering me with bloody saliva. “Wake up, wake up, wake up—”

My eyes fly open, and I sit up with a gasp. Or rather, I try to. A warm, heavy weight pushes me back down, and for a brief, terrifying moment I see my foster father above me, his bloody visage leering down at me.

Lightning flashes in the room, coming through a large bay window that isn't mine. That sends my heart into overdrive, and when my eyes lock on a familiar face, the comfort that runs through my veins is embarrassing.

“Gabriel,” I whisper, my hands coming up to his face. I need to touch him, to touch something real, even as thunder crashes outside.

“Shh, Quinn,” he murmurs, letting me pull his face down to mine. “Shh, it's okay. You're awake now.”

“I dreamed of him.” My heart still beats rabbit-fast in my chest, only encouraged by the storm as my hands dig into his hair. “I couldn't help it, and I didn't want to. I killed him again, like I did when I was younger. But he wouldn't stay dead, he just kept coming, and—” I'm barely sure who I'm talking about, as my brain remembers the man in my dream as both my foster father *and* Billy. “I killed him,” I whisper, hands tightening on the sheets around me. “I did—”

He shushes me gently, and when I squirm on the plush bed, I realize that not only is it not mine either, but his knee is pressed between my thighs. Every bit of my body suddenly focuses on that fact, and remembers how good he'd made me feel in his office not that long ago.

“You're okay,” Gabriel murmurs. “You're all right. It was just a dream, and he can't hurt you. If you stab him, he'll be well and truly dead, princess.” He leans close, until I can feel his breath on my lips, and hesitates only to meet my eyes before he kisses me.

Kisses from Gabriel are never sweet, and this one turns filthy moments after it begins. His tongue coaxes mine against it, and when he pulls it back it's only so he can nip and worry

at my lips. But in the silence broken only by my gasps and the thudding of my heart, I finally realize what it means that this isn't my bedroom.

"Where am I?" I try to sit up, only for him to push me back down again. "This isn't my house."

His grin is slow to curl over his lips, and not the least bit apologetic. "I knew you'd have trouble tonight," he replies, as if it's an answer. "I thought I'd make sure to be here for you."

"But *here* should've been my house."

"You're such a heavy sleeper," he goads, and he can't help the dark amusement on his features now. "I thought for sure I'd wake you up. I thought for sure you *knew*. But you never did. Even though I carried you out of your house and put you in the back seat. You never woke up. Not *once*."

"You kidnapped me?" I repeat, trying to remember any of what he'd said. "You *kidnapped me*?"

"Yeah, Quinn." He doesn't even try to deny it. "And it was so *fucking easy*. I knew you'd sleep better in my bed, and I was mostly right. It wasn't until the storm that you started having nightmares." As I try to collect my thoughts, he buries his face in my neck. "And you look so fucking cute when you're asleep."

"You kidnapped me." I'm still stuck on that fact, though instead of increasing, the fear in my chest is ebbing away. "Did you drug me?"

"I didn't need to," he replies with a soft laugh. "Isn't that fucked up? I didn't even *need to* drug you."

"You're..." There isn't a word that I can think of to express my opinion of him, but I try anyway. "You're fucked up. Insane. You can't kidnap me!" I shove against him, though there's not enough conviction there to convince myself I don't love the feel of his teeth grazing against my throat.

"Tell me all about it," he purrs. "Come on, Quinn. Convince me that you're upset with me." He sits up, giving me room to maneuver, though doesn't move the leg that's still

pressed flush against me. “I’d give you a knife; if I didn’t have to go to the kitchen to get it. Do you want to hurt me, Quinn?”

“Yes,” I whisper, my chest heaving as I look at him. I shouldn’t feel this way about him. I shouldn’t be burning up under him, and aware of every tiny movement of his leg against my body. Really, I should be screaming, looking for my phone, and knocking him out with the nearest coffee mug.

I try to sit up, but he shoves me back down with a hand on my throat. “A couple of rules, my vicious darling,” he hums, and the look in his eyes is something I’ve never seen before. It’s hard to reconcile this dark, terrifying person above me with *Gabriel*, though I’ve known this about him all along. “If you leave this room, the game’s over. If you can’t answer me when I ask if you’re alright, it’s over. Understand?”

“What if I don’t want to play with you?” *I do*. I do, and that’s such a fucked up problem that feels like it’ll have to wait. At least until the sun rises.

“Then prove it.”

My hand comes up and I try to sit up again, this time mostly succeeding as I reach for the neck of his tee. I snag the fabric, just enough, and he’s forced to sit back on the bed, no longer pinning me in place.

When he hesitates, I lunge forward, my hand at his throat as I shove him down onto the king size bed. I know he lets me, because he’s never this easy, and I end up straddling his waist, my knees pinning his arms as I look down at him.

But he doesn’t fight me. His gaze is bright with interest, and under me I can *feel* that he’s into this as well. “How dare you?” I whisper, my trembling hand fisting in his shirt. “Why would you *kidnap me*, Gabriel?”

The burning in my body isn’t anger now, though. At least, not entirely. My other hand comes up, and I grip his throat the way I had before. The way he does it to me that makes me light-headed enough to feel amazing afterward.

He doesn’t even resist. He lets me, his head falling back to give me better access.

“How dare I?” he asks, sounding only mildly inconvenienced. “I can do whatever I want with you. *Whenever* I want. And I wanted you here, in my bed. Not in that shit stain of a house next to a neighbor that’s begging for a blade in her chest.”

“She never did anything to you,” I hiss, trembling. “Why would you—”

“Maybe I’m just jealous that she gets to be near you.” When I tighten my grip, he takes it as some kind of sign. Gabriel suddenly flips us, throwing me onto the bed so I’m on my hands and knees, before gripping my hair and forcing my face against the mattress. “Maybe I hate that she has so much access to you, when I’m all the way on the other side of town?”

“Maybe you’re inventing reasons.” My voice shakes, but I can’t tell if it’s from fear or excitement. Or both.

He snickers, his voice sounding closer than I’d expected, and suddenly, he bites down hard on my shoulder. “Maybe I am,” he teases in my ear. “Maybe I’m just looking for any reason to claim you as mine again. You left so fast last time. I was hurt.” Without warning, he grips my shirt, and I feel something sharp against my skin that makes me still.

“Wait—”

“I’m not going to hurt you,” he says carefully. “And I’ll replace what I cut within the week, I promise. Do you understand?”

I do, but I can’t help the shiver that goes through me. Especially when he tightens his grip, and I realize exactly what he’s going to do.

“I need something to wear, Gabriel,” I whisper, clenching my fingers in the sheets under me. I’m too nervous to really protest, when he has something that feels like a knife. “Please, I need—”

He’s not listening, or he doesn’t care. There’s a loud ripping sound, and moments later my old, ratty sleep shirt is pulled off of me in pieces.

“You don’t need anything, princess,” Gabriel replies, fingers catching the waistband of my shorts. “If you have it, then you’ll just hide from me. And I would rather you didn’t.”

“Just let me take them off.” I could tell him to stop. I could get up and head for the door, and I’m confident he’d let me.

I could tell him not to, if I wasn’t so invested in what this will feel like.

“I don’t want you to go to the trouble,” he purrs, and I feel the blade skim my thigh as he lifts the fabric away from my skin. “But try to convince me, anyway.”

“It’s easier, and I can’t stay here forever.” The fabric is tight against my skin where he’s pulling it, and I flinch away from the touch of his knuckles. “I need something to wear to work.”

“Yeah,” he replies, oh so agreeably. “I guess I didn’t think of that. What will the neighbors think, right? What if this just means that you can never leave, ever again? You have a point, Quinn. A really excellent one.”

“So you’ll let me take them off?”

His answer is a snort, and the sound of tearing fabric again. The blade parts the thin fabric easily, and when my shorts are done being given the same treatment as my shirt, he tugs them off of me as well and sits back and presses me to my belly against the bed.

“So gorgeous.” There’s a kind of reverence in his voice that I don’t expect, and when I try to move, he presses a hand to my lower spine. “No, princess. Just stay there for me, all right? Just let me play with you a little.”

The knife comes down next, trailing down my spine and up over my ass until it’s skimming the top of my thighs. I can’t help the small sounds that leave me as the blade dips between my thighs slightly, but he only huffs a soft laugh and drags it back up my body again, never once doing more than teasing.

“So docile with a blade against your skin,” he teases, leaning over me once more. “Is it because you’re afraid I’ll cut you? Or because of how much you like it.” The knife clatters

to the table beside the bed and he grips my hips, moving enough to drag me to my knees.

“I don’t like it,” I lie, trying to sit up, only for my face to be shoved back down.

“Normally I like to look at you, but I think this once you’re better right there. Right here, under me, where you belong.” I can barely move, especially when he fists a hand in my hair to keep me with my ass in the air and my face against his super soft pillowcase.

“Bite me,” I mutter sarcastically, closing my eyes hard. A second later I shriek, having not expected him to actually sink his teeth into my hip.

“Tell me to do it again,” he invites. “Tell me all the wicked things you’d like for me to do.” When I shake my head he bites me again, this time worrying at the spot and sucking a bruise onto my skin that I have a feeling will be there for days.

“I bet you’re wet for me,” he goads, fingers finding my slit. “I bet you’re soaked, aren’t you?”

“It’s from the violence, not for you,” I snap in reply, relaxing my shoulders when his hand leaves my hair.

“Oh, yeah?” He leans over me again, and I tense when I expect another bite. Except, it never comes. He settles behind me again, and his fingers dig into my hip when I try to look over my shoulder.

“Stay where you are, Quinn. Stay where you are and let me play with you, or I’ll have to handcuff you. Do you think I won’t? Do you think I wouldn’t enjoy you helpless and writhing on my bed? With no clothes and no one to come looking for you?” He snorts at his own words. “I’m still willing to let you go when I’m done, but if I have you handcuffed on my bed like a sweet, willing little pet... I don’t know if that’ll still be the case.”

“You can’t keep me here forever.”

“I most certainly can.”

The blade of the knife touches my inner thigh, and I cry out against the pillow. He doesn't give me a chance to move, however. He's positioned so that he can grip my hair and push down against my back, while still running the blade along my inner thighs.

"What are you doing?" I demand, wishing I could at least turn and look at him. "Gabriel—"

"I'm giving you what you want," he replies, all innocence. "I'm giving you what you *told me* you wanted. You like the violence. You like the knife, right?" The blade disappears, and I nearly scream when something other than his fingers finds my slit.

With a jolt, I realize it's the handle of the knife. I bury my face in the pillow, my thighs trembling as he pushes it into me. He's right about how wet I am, because the hilt slides into my pussy smoothly.

"Good girl," Gabriel purrs, still holding me with a hand on my upper back, just between my shoulder blades. "Good *fucking* girl, taking this for me." His movements speed up, impatience lacing them, and I close my eyes hard at the idea of coming on the handle of a knife.

"Do you want me to make you come like this?" he taunts, as if he can read my thoughts. "You want to come on a knife? That's fucked up, Quinn."

"That's not what I want," I hiss, fingers clenched hard against the pillow. Heat pools in my stomach as he fucks me with it, and I can feel just how wet I am. It doesn't help that I can hear it, too, and the sound of the knife going in and out is loud in my ears. "Please, Gabriel—"

"You don't want it? You don't want to come all over my knife, my gorgeous girl?" I hate the way he taunts me. And the way it makes something curl in my stomach that's impossible to ignore. "Well, you know what the alternative is, don't you?"

"Anything," I gasp out, feeling the way I clench around the knife involuntarily.

“Anything? Anything at all?” He doesn’t wait for me to reply. The knife is thrown across the room, clattering to the floor as Gabriel moves. He’s behind me seconds later, and through the rain that’s pounding against the window to my left, I hear the sound of his clothes being shoved out of the way.

By the time he’s draped over me once more, his shirt is gone. His skin is so warm against mine, and he feels like a burning line of heat against my body. His cock brushes my slit, and he teases me, guiding it against me but only letting it dip into me before he’s back to teasing.

I whine, hating how much I need him. “Fuck me,” I tell him, mind spinning. “Hurry up and *fuck me*.”

“I should make you say please,” he sneers against my ear, but when I open my mouth to reply he suddenly slams into me, causing me to choke on a gasp. “But I like you desperate and demanding. You’re so needy. Has no one ever fucked you properly before?” His movements are never slow or gentle. He starts off rough and keeps going, dragging gasps and cries from my lips as he fucks me.

“Not like you,” I say, lifting my head so he can more easily wrap his fingers around my throat. I expect him to tease, to just remind me he’s there.

I don’t expect the force of his grip that nearly makes me see stars.

“Gabriel—”

“Trust me,” he growls against my ear, his other hand circling my hip to find my clit. He circles it with one finger, and he’s just as rough with his teasing as he is with the rest of me. Yet, I can’t find the breath to complain. I can’t find the desire to, either, as he treats me like a toy he can use to his contentment.

When my vision starts to blur, I choke out a protest that goes ignored. The anger that’s kept me warm this whole time dulls, until the only thing that’s keeping me warm is his body against mine, and the way he fucks me.

“It feels so good this way,” he promises. “Don’t worry, Quinn. I won’t hurt you. I just want to feel you gasping, feel your pulse. It’s so fast, like you’re going to run away from me. But you’re not, are you?” I can’t respond now. Not when the only thing holding me up is Gabriel.

“You’ll never run away from me again.” His fingers tighten under my jaw and I feel myself slipping out of consciousness, just as his movements tip me over the edge.

Instantly he lets go and I gasp, my orgasm *ripping* through me so hard that tears stream from my eyes, staining his pillowcase. I can only grip his sheets and try not to shatter into a million pieces as I come, and focus on his long, uneven thrusts until finally he buries himself in my body and comes as well.

Gabriel’s teeth close against the skin of my throat, a soft sound trickling from between them as he coaxes a mark into my skin, so close to the spot he loves to choke me.

“Next time, I’ll let you rip me to shreds,” he promises, as my brain gives up the fight with consciousness. I’m exhausted, oxygen deprived, and I can feel myself slipping back into sleep as he rolls onto his side and pulls me against him without pulling out.

“Next time, I’ll let you do whatever you want to me.”

I groan, turning my face into the pillow and try to move, only for him to hold me tight against him. It isn’t uncomfortable. In fact, it’s anything but.

“No, you don’t have to move,” he laughs softly against my skin. “I like you right here, full of my cum, and where I know you aren’t going anywhere, Quinn.”

“Have to work tomorrow,” I mumble, eyes still closed. “I gotta go home.”

“No, you really don’t.”

I want to argue. I want to tell him that I most certainly do... but I can’t. Not when he’s so warm and the blanket he pulls up to my shoulders feels so heavy that I don’t want to move. I let him pull me against him, until he’s lying half over

me and still inside of me, but by the time he leans forward to whisper in my ear again, I'm so far gone that I can't hear what it is he's said.

I'll just have to remember to ask him in the morning.

When my phone rings, it occurs to me that I wasn't in a position to have brought it here last night. Still, it drags me from my sleep and I crack my eyes open to see that it's sitting on the end table, plugged in.

Not only that, but Gabriel is no longer in the bed with me. I hate that I feel disappointed. That something in me uncurls, and my morning is suddenly sort of ruined.

I shouldn't feel like this about a man who has kidnapped me, chased me across the country, and hasn't given me any real reason to return his feelings.

His feelings.

That twists me up inside too, even as I grope for the phone on the nightstand. He's never been clear about his feelings, except to tell me he thinks I'm his, that I belong to him. Is that it? Is he just some crazy guy I should've turned into the cops a long time ago?

Yeah, probably.

"Hello?" I murmur, still unsure where Gabriel has gone to. Downstairs, probably. And I suppose I should be grateful that I didn't wake up on the curb.

Not that he's ever given me a hint that he would do that to me.

A door behind me opens, just as Melinda's voice finds my ears. "*I'm sorry to call you so early, Quinn.*" She sounds as apologetic as humanly possible, and a hint of worry comes

across, even through our bad connection. *“But I need to ask you for a favor. Is that okay? You’re not out of town, are you?”*

Thunder rumbles in the distance, like a far off reminder of last night’s storm, or the promise of another one today. The bed dips behind me, and with a sigh, Gabriel drapes himself over me, kissing my arm.

So he hadn’t abandoned me after all.

“I’m here. I’m not at home right now, though.” I narrow my eyes, looking over my shoulder toward Gabriel as he nips and kisses his way down my arm. As I look at him, my eyes catch sight of the knife on the dresser across the room.

Is it the knife from last night?

“I hope everything is alright. And I’m so sorry if I’m ruining your morning.” She sighs and hesitates before going on. *“Do you remember Lily?”*

I tense under Gabriel’s touch, and I can tell immediately that he feels it. His touches pause, his mouth leaving my skin, and he snags an arm around my waist to pull me back against him.

Instantly, it’s pretty clear that he’s not wearing any clothes. I take a sharp breath, eyes closing, and try to focus on what’s being said to me, instead of his body against my own. “I remember.” How could I not? I’d felt so bad for the girl, and I’d seen myself in her more than I care to admit.

“She needs to be picked up. I’m not sure what happened. A relative came by for a visit that wasn’t approved by us... I don’t know exactly. She’s safe, from what I understand. But she’s at the Easter County office and needs to be picked up in an hour.” I have no idea where that is, though it can’t be more than a thirty-minute drive, but that’s why god made the Maps app and gave it GPS capabilities.

“It’ll take me a little bit to get there. I have to go home and, umm...” I trail off when Gabriel nudges my arm, pointing toward the window. Just under it, on the padded seat, is a stack of clothes that look suspiciously like they came from my house.

What a creep. A thoughtful creep, but a creep anyway.

“Never mind, I don’t have to. I can leave soon.” I say, because I feel the way Gabriel doesn’t care about a dire situation. No, he’s just really happy to be in bed with me. His hips move against mine, rocking slowly, and it’s not exactly a hardship for me to allow him to hook a hand under my knee and pull it up over his thigh. “Can I ask... she’s your case, right?” I don’t want to accuse her of putting off her work, but this isn’t the first time I’ve had to do something for her, or the second.

The Birkins come to mind, along with Lily’s first pick up. Those are, or were in one case, Melinda’s cases.

So why are they getting dumped on me?

Gabriel’s getting more insistent; his kisses on my neck pick back up as his teeth graze the mark he’d left last night. I shudder under the feel of it, my skin still oversensitive from his bites.

“*She is.*” Melinda doesn’t sound angry. She just sounds... tired. “*But I’m maxed out on overtime for the month. I’m sorry to drop this on you, Quinn. I know I need to hire another social worker for the office. If you know anyone, point them my way, I guess.*” She laughs, but the sound is absent of actual humor. Again, she radiates tiredness and being overworked.

My heart sinks for her, and I reach up to grip Gabriel’s hair, hoping he’ll get the memo and *stop* for a second.

He does, surprising me. His movements slow until all I can feel is his breathing against my back. “I’ll be there soon, okay?” I ask, hating how I’m so easy to convince. Especially since I know this will be just as difficult as the first time. That Lily’s case is going to hurt me all over again. I know that, just as much as I know I’ll jump at any opportunity to help her, because she reminds me of me in all the wrong ways.

“*Thank you, Quinn.*” She sounds relieved, and I hear the squeak of her office chair as she sits back into it. “*I’m making some calls to see if I can get someone else to go out with you. Like I said, everything should be fine. But lately...*” she trails

off, and Gabriel's patience wanes. He bites down on my throat, pulling a gasp from me that I cover with a cough. "*Things are weird lately,*" she says at last, acting as if she hadn't noticed the sound. "*Call me when you're there. I'm working out where to take her, but I'll know by then.*"

"N-no problem." I hate the unsteadiness in my voice, and when Gabriel's length brushes my slit, I fight hard not to make a sound to betray my feelings. "I'll be there soon." Hanging up more quickly than is polite, I'm suddenly pulled onto my back, the movement surprising me into releasing a gasp.

"You're impatient," I mutter spitefully as Gabriel reaches out to press a hand against my sternum. He jerks me to him with the other hand until one of my legs is up over his shoulder and my other knee is pressed to his hip.

"You let her ask too much of you," he replies, his length sinking into me without hesitation. I choke on the air I'd been breathing, but I can't do more than grab his wrist, nails sinking into his skin, as he holds me in place to fuck me. "It's your day off. You should've told her no."

My hips rock into his, then my eyes find his gaze and narrow. "Maybe I'm just trying to get away from you sooner," I say, though it's pretty clear by the situation that I'm not.

He lifts a brow, hand pressing harder so I can't arch up at all. "Somehow, I don't think that's true. But would you like me to hurry up? I could just use you for myself, come inside this sweet cunt, and leave you aching for the whole day. Is that what you *want*, Quinn?" He punctuates each word with a hard thrust that shakes my entire being. "For me to leave you needy and dripping with cum all day?"

Yes, please is obviously the wrong answer, and I shouldn't say it.

"Do it," I dare, still gripping his arm tightly as he hitches my leg higher over his shoulder so he can drive more deeply into me. "*Do it*, if you want. I'll just finish myself off later. I did just buy fresh batteries, after all. And I'm really good at knowing what I want."

His smile is rueful, eyes glittering. “You’re such a little monster,” the bane of my existence purrs. “You know that?”

“Only when it involves *you*.”

My leg drops from his shoulder as he lunges forward, hand moving to pin my wrists above my head harshly. He kisses me, biting down on my lip with a growl before using his free hand to grab my throat and hold me exactly where he wants me.

I return the sound with a snarl of my own, nipping at his tongue when it enters my mouth. I’m met with a careful squeeze of his fingers, and his thrusts becoming harder, more erratic. If he’s close, then so am I, but I don’t want to be the one to come first. Not with him, not this time.

“Are you close?” I taunt, when he pulls back for air. I lunge upward as much as I can, teeth coming together with a sharp *click* as I miss his lip with my bite. He laughs darkly, and kisses me again, forcing my mouth open wide to feed me the noises he makes.

“You’re just as close,” he tells me, his words teasing while his tone is more or less a growl. “I wondered for a long time what it would be like to fuck you. What you’d get off on. Turns out, you really do just like it when I’m rough. I don’t need to play with your clit or whisper sweet words to you, do I?”

“You could try. Who knows? I might *like it*,” I lie, knowing that he’s right.

It’s this that I love. More than anyone else I’ve ever slept with, Gabriel knows how to get me off. His personality, his actions. The way he’s so dominating and rough yet playful, really does it for me.

Does that make me just as fucked up as him?

My release catches me by surprise just as Gabriel’s teeth close over my nipple. His hand leaves my throat, coming down to play with the other just as harshly, and even though I can tell he tries, he can’t hold back as my knees tighten around his body, pulling him close as I come.

He curses softly, turning to pant against my neck as he presses close against me. My hands flex in his grip, but he doesn't let go. Not until he's well and truly spent and can sit up to look down at me, eyes glittering.

"What?" I snap, suddenly self-conscious as the last of my orgasm tingles down my spine. "Why are you looking at me like that? And I swear to God, if it's some cheesy fucking line that involves the word 'mine,' then—"

"I was just looking at you, Quinn," Gabriel chuckles, cutting me off with his light words. "Don't read so much into it. I just really like looking at you."

"Yeah?" I ask, falling back down onto my back. "Why?"

"Because you're beautiful."

Anything I want to say is choked off in my throat. All the comebacks I have go out the window as he looks at me. I can't tear my eyes off of him. From his golden skin, or the tattoos that litter his arms. *He's gorgeous.*

So why am I just now noticing it?

"I..." I lick my lips, knowing that I need to say *something*. I can't just lay here, looking and feeling dumbfounded.

Say something.

Say anything at all.

My mouth opens, even though I don't know what to say, but thankfully I'm interrupted by the ring of his phone.

Gabriel sighs and leans over me to the nightstand, picking it up before sitting between my thighs once more. "Hello?" he asks, back to his professional voice even as his hand wanders up my leg. "Oh. Hey, Melinda." His eyes find mine, and I'm sure my gaze reflects his confusion. "Sure, I have a minute. What do you need?"

I don't know what to tell Melinda, other than the same phrase I've been repeating in different ways for the last few minutes.

"It... went okay," I say, tapping my fingers against the armrest of the stiff chair. "I didn't really need G—Dr. Brooks, though," I say, hoping I haven't slipped up by nearly saying his first name.

After being called by Melinda to go pick up Lily in the rain, he'd been the one to convince me that his car was better than mine, and she'd like it more.

Though it had taken me until we'd gotten there and I'd seen Lily's new foster mom watching her stand in the storm while the woman glared from the porch, to realize why bringing Gabriel was a good idea.

He'd been livid. All righteous, therapist fury and citing laws the woman was breaking. She'd started off defiant, trying to poke holes in his argument. But Gabriel had never been easily breakable. Especially when he was upset.

"How is he doing now, anyway? You're seeing him for therapy, yes? He said that's where you were this morning when I called, and that's why you were both so quick to get there together." She smiles kindly, with an invitation for me to tell her the truth. Like she won't fire me for fucking the older therapist.

Will she?

I blink up at her, trying to figure out what to say. Trying to figure out how much she knows about us. Does she know Gabriel had to hold me away from the woman, because I'd been threatening to take away every child in her care and each cent of state funding she received for them?

Or does she know I sat in the back with Lily, letting her cry into my hoodie while I wondered why Melinda couldn't bother to show up and do something about the situation? It was *her case*. Hers, not ours. She should've been the one to rush out there, to protect Lily before anything had happened.

It shouldn't have been pawned off on the two of us, no matter how much it had my blood rushing through my body and causing my hands to curl into fists at the thought. I suck in a deep breath, trying to drag my thoughts away from my irritation, and focus on her words again.

"You know, I'm inviting him to our next pool party. It's in a couple of weeks at the house. We normally have them once a month, but we were working on the liner this time around. Pools." She huffs, throwing one hand up in the air like it's obvious to the world that pools are the bane of her existence. I don't say that she could use her evening hours, since she's always up like a creature of the night, but instead I just smile blithely.

"I wouldn't know," I laugh, knowing I sound uncomfortable. "I've never lived somewhere with a pool." Frankly, I wouldn't know the first thing about them.

"I'm always covered in the smell of chlorine at night," she adds, shaking her head. "It's dreadful. My husband and I both. Honestly, I'm surprised you haven't noticed it here."

"I don't notice anything," I assure her, wondering why this matters. "I've only smelled chlorine at public pools and..." Blinking, a frown touches my lips as a memory interrupts my thought process.

A pool isn't the only place I've smelled chlorine.

Still, I can't figure out exactly where I've smelled the pool-like scent before. It's been a long time since I've been to

a dirty, kid-filled, county run public pool. At least ten years, if not a few more. But the scent of chlorine is sharp in my nose, like it's been a few weeks, instead of a years.

Why can't I figure this out?

When I realize Melinda is speaking again, I give her another smile and try to look interested. "Like I was saying, thank you for taking care of that issue for me. Lily shouldn't have to be moved again, I don't think. Now she's in a better foster home than I could hope for. She would've been there sooner, but they didn't have any space." She hesitates, her pale eyes finding my face and holding my gaze.

Does she want something from me?

Is there some detail she wants that I haven't told her?

I take in a breath as she watches me, unsure of what it is she's going to say. She doesn't worry, or particularly scare me. How could she, when she barely looks like she could hurt a fly?

"You were in foster care, weren't you?" she asks finally, and I blink in surprise, eyes narrowing. It wasn't in my job application, and I'm not open about the fact. Unless Gabriel has said something, I have no idea how she'd know.

"What?" I murmur finally, unwilling to confirm or deny her accusation. "Why do you say that?"

"Because I know what it looks like," she says, leaning back in her chair with a sigh. "I know the look, and the reactions of an ex-foster kid. Especially one that never got adopted. You saw the worst parts of our system as a child, didn't you, Quinn?"

Tapping my fingers on the chair, I hold her gaze. I don't know what to say, or how to move forward. Hell, I have no idea what she could gain by bringing this up right now.

"Umm..." I look away from her, biting my lower lip as I cycle through the thoughts that won't stop flitting through my head. It isn't a big secret. She's not wrong, obviously. And she can't hold it against me. The thing is simply that I don't want to talk about it. "Yeah," I say finally, my voice soft, the word

not forthcoming. I don't want to have a heart-to-heart about this, or drag it out. "Is that okay? Is there something that you're worried about, job related for me?"

"No, no, not at all. You're good at your job, Quinn. You're the best hire I've had in a while. The first that's seemed like they'll stick around, too." She gives a sort of chuckle and glances at her computer. "I worry about you," she says at last. "I worry because I think these cases could get to you more than they get to anyone else. Like Clara." She throws a fond smile toward her window, where Clara is probably sitting. "I don't want you to get burned out, okay? But more than that, I don't want *you* to get hurt by these cases."

This is so strange. Have I ever had someone express such care about me so openly? Probably not, except for the social worker that had worked with me as a kid. She'd loved to tell me how things would get better, how I just needed to think positive thoughts and manifest my dreams to come true.

And yet, the only positive thing that had ever manifested for me were the murders of three people. And that wasn't exactly *positive*.

Sucking in a breath, I try not to zone out as Melinda looks me over with concern, waiting for some kind of answer that I don't know how to give.

"I'm fine," I say at last, each word slow and articulated well. "Really, I *am* okay. I've wanted to do this for my entire life. I've always known I want to help other foster kids. This won't burn me out, or hurt me, or anything else. I'm really okay." The words sound hollow to my ears, and I hate the feeling that brings.

Am I really telling the truth?

Am I sure?

"If you need to leave, if you ever think this isn't for you, I would never hold it against you." She reaches forward, her hand hovering like a limp, levitating fish on my side of her desk. I see what she wants, and I stare at her hand like it's a cobra that might bite.

I don't need to hold her hand. I don't need the comfort she wants to bring.

Still, I fix a smile on my face and do what she wants, letting her cover my hand with her clammy one. I don't like it. I've never been a huge fan of personal touch, and this isn't winning any points on the subject.

"I'm fine," I repeat, trying to sound like I mean it. "And I'll tell you if that changes, all right?"

"All right." She pats my hand and releases me. "I just worry about you, is all. Now, take off the rest of the day. Go get some lunch. Maybe *with* someone?" She winks at me like there's a secret we're both in on, though I'm not sure what it could be. So I smile at her again and get to my feet, nodding my head like her ideas are good.

Then again...

"Have a good day, Melinda," I tell her, waving on my way out of the office and delving my hand into my pocket to grab my phone.

"*Yes, Quinn?*" he answers on the second ring, sounding just as at ease and relaxed as always.

"Are you free, Gabriel?" I ask, almost jogging to my car. "Can I come talk to you, if you are?"

"*I'm free,*" he agrees, curiosity tinging his voice. "*But you can't come over.*"

My steps slow, and my mouth pulls down into a frown. "What?"

"*You can't come over, because I'm taking you out for dinner. I'll text you the address. Sound good?*"

"Depends on where we're going."

He chuckles, and I hate how much I revel in the sound. "*Guess you'll find out.*"

This is weird.

There's no way around the fact that it's weird to be here, in a restaurant that's dedicated to being an 1800s reenactment.

Especially when the person sitting across from me is Gabriel.

It's nice. I won't lie to myself about that. It's definitely one of the prettiest restaurants I've ever been in, the rooms are decorated in different themes and levels of complexity. The servers walking around all look like they've walked out of *ye olde times* in their floral patterned dresses and overalls. With the restaurant smelling of incredible food, homemade bread, and flowers, I can say with ease that I'll never come to a place like this again.

"This feels like a real date," I admit, surprised at myself. Gabriel, across from me, reads his menu slowly, going over the salads before flipping to the page that shows their steak options. Many restaurants I've seen over the past few years look like they're embracing a modern, minimalist feel. Not this place. Photos of the food decorate the laminated pages, and the green edges of the menu are worn from many years of fingers thumbing through them.

"It *is* a real date," Gabriel replies lazily, stretching out his legs under the table until his feet touch mine. I let him, though I glare up at him as his ankle presses against mine.

"Aren't you worried about what people will think?"

He flips a page of his menu and doesn't look up. His eyes are dark with concentration as he reads, and his eternally tousled hair is on point today.

He's gorgeous.

There's no way around the fact that Gabriel Brooks is the most attractive man I've ever met by a long shot.

His foot hooks with mine, jerking me an inch forward in my chair.

"No," he says, looking up at me intently. "Are you? Is this your way of saying I'm too old for you, Quinn?"

Slowly, I shake my head. "Maybe I was just implying that I look like the carefree, casual dating type and all the boys around here are lining up for my number."

“You should get theirs instead,” he says, eyes dropping back to the menu.

“And why’s that?”

“So I can track them down easier to kill them.”

The words cause my stomach to flip, cause me to press my lips together as my insides go from fluttering to crushing nerves. “I don’t know how to feel when you talk to me like that,” I say finally, being honest with him for the first time. “I don’t understand how you’re so comfortable with such casual violence. Especially because I know you mean it. You really would kill someone for asking for my number, wouldn’t you?”

He doesn’t answer as the waitress appears with our drinks in her pink floral dress that nearly drags the ground. She sets down sweet tea in front of me, and water in front of Gabriel. I watch her, noting her smile is wider for him than for me, and she’s more enthusiastic about taking his order than she is mine.

But who can blame her?

By the time she’s gone, my elbows are resting on the table, and my gaze returns to Gabriel. Without a menu in front of him, his attention is all for me, and a smile plays on his lips.

“Should I kill her?” I ask under my breath, glad we’re alone in our room that’s dubbed *the garden room*. “For being interested in you? Or Clara?”

“You know, you could,” he replies, leaning forward on the table and propping his chin on his hands. “I’d like to watch and record it. I’d probably get off to it once or twice a month. Maybe we could make a hobby of it. I kill someone for you, then you for me. We’ll just have to be careful about not leaving a trail.”

“Aren’t you afraid of getting caught again? Of not getting away so easily this time?” He still hasn’t given me a satisfactory answer as to how he got away in Springwood, and I wonder if he’ll continue avoiding the subject if I continue asking.

“No. The only complication would be teaching you how to stay out of jail. It’s a bit of a puzzle. A game, really, to make

sure you're never caught. I'd prefer to stop covering up for you, though I'm sure I'll have to keep you on a leash for a little while. You'd be my little protégé," he muses, his words causing my hands to clench, nails digging into my palms.

"I'm not a killer," I remind him slowly, trying to enunciate every word. "Not by a long shot."

He only eyes me up and down, then takes a long drink of his water. "Let's talk about something else," he suggests, setting it down again. "As much as I love the games and threats you so enjoy, I want to talk about *us*. About you, Quinn."

"I'd rather talk about you. You should tell me all about your awards for dream psychology," I counter, sitting back in my chair.

"Only if you tell me why you want this career to work out so badly. Is it really just that you're trying to save the countless kids in the system like you? The ones who needed help?" He doesn't look away, even when I do. "Or is it that you want vengeance on a broken system?"

"No, that's not—" I swallow hard, still not looking at him. "That's not why. I want to help people, all right?"

"It's going to break you," he tells me quietly. "And I know you see it too." He tries to reach out for me, but I shove his hand away, glaring at him balefully.

"Tell me where the tracker is in my car," I demand, getting the same rueful look in reply.

"No. You'll take it out." He seems affronted by the idea, but a grin crosses his features. "Absolutely not."

"Tell me about dream psychology and why you like it so much."

That gives him pause. He looks down at his hands, tapping his hands on the smooth top of the fake wood table. "I like things that aren't as rational as our waking time," he says finally. "I like to take the puzzle our dreams present and work out the *why*. And I enjoy hearing about people's fucked up

dreams.” He rewards me with a smile that makes my breath catch in my throat.

“And here I thought you just had a fetish for sleeping people,” I say finally, unsure of what to ask.

“Well, that too. I definitely have some sleep related kinks. Any dreams you want to talk about?”

“Yeah, but I’m kind of stuck on your ‘sleep kinks,’” I admit, glancing up to make sure no one else is around. As I do, his foot strokes my ankle, pushing the fabric of my legging up slightly so his boot touches skin.

It shouldn’t affect me as much as it does, but that seems to be the story of my life when Gabriel is involved.

“They’ll scare you,” he assures me, though the look on his face doesn’t match his words. He *wants* me to ask. More than that, he really wants to tell me.

“Maybe. But I did let you, *you know*, with a knife,” I point out sweetly.

He thinks about it, mulling it over in his head before nodding once as if agreeing with himself. “Do you know what somnophilia is?” he asks, leaning close once more.

I wrack my brain for the word, and shake my head.

“It means I’d love to fuck you while you sleep. I want to wreck you while you’re still out of it. Breed that pussy all night long and make sure you enjoy every second of it, even though you aren’t awake for some of it. Then you’d wake up in the morning oh so thoroughly *fucked* and beg me for more.”

“You...” I trail off and run my tongue along my bottom lip, thinking. By his soft, husky tone and the detail of his explanation, it’s clear he’s thought a lot about this. And if I’m honest with myself, it doesn’t exactly scare me. “Have you done it before?” I ask finally. “You seem to have a pretty clear plan for what you want.”

He shakes his head before I’m done. “This may come as a shock, but most women want to be fucked while they’re awake. Not while they’re out of it.”

“Well, how ‘out of it’ are we talking? I like to enjoy sex, and I like to think I’d need to be somewhat awake for that to happen. But I see the appeal of what you’re talking about.”

His brows climb in surprise, making a break for his bangs. I stop talking, wondering suddenly if this is the first time I’ve truly surprised him. “Sell me on it,” I urge, hooking my foot around *his* ankle for a change. “What makes you think I won’t wake up the moment you touch me?”

“I’d give you a sedative,” he replies without needing to think about it. “Not something that would have you out cold. Something to give me a little bit of time to play with you, that’s all.”

“And you wouldn’t stop when I wake up?”

He shakes his head, still looking like he doesn’t quite believe me.

“I’d let you,” I reply at last. “Call me fucked up, but it sounds exciting. It sounds different. I don’t know.” Then I shrug when his eyes narrow like he thinks I’m going to suddenly tell him I’m lying and cackle at getting his hopes up. “I like to try new things.”

“You’d *actually* do it? Knowing what I want to do? Knowing you’ll wake up with cum dripping out of you?” he specifies, as if some part of his earlier discussion was unclear.

I tap my knuckles on the table and nod.

“I don’t believe you.”

“And I don’t believe you like me as much as you say.” I shrug. “So, there’s that.”

“You don’t?” It’s his turn to look confused, more so than he had. “Why?”

“What do you mean, *why*? This is kind of crazy. You explode into my dorm and announce I’m yours after years of maybe stalking me. Please, don’t comment on that. Then you follow me here, because there’s a tracker in my car, and tell me how I’m *yours*. But what does that mean, exactly?” It’s apparently my turn for speeches, and I hate how

uncomfortable I am with them. How every word makes me more and more unsure of my convictions. “Until you get bored? Until you get what you want?”

“Until both of us are dead and reunite in whatever’s waiting for us afterward,” he clarifies, slipping the words in when breathing becomes a necessity. “Did you really think this was temporary, Quinn?”

“Uh, yeah. Kind of thought you were going to kill me, not fuck me.” The waitress walks in, thankfully smiling blithely between us, so cluelessly, that I know she hasn’t heard a thing. Naturally, she refills Gabriel’s drink first, then mine as an afterthought. But I don’t mind. Not right now, when there are much more important things to deal with. Things that have my heart pounding like... like I’m afraid.

Like I can’t handle hearing the words that Gabriel really *has* just been treating me like a Christmas puppy who will get dropped off at the shelter in four months.

“Quinn...” He leans forward and catches my hands before I can pull away, dragging them across the table as he hooks his foot around my ankle once more. I’m trapped, unless I want to throw myself off my chair. “This isn’t temporary. I wouldn’t have been following you all this time if it was. When I say you’re mine, I mean that in the permanent sense. I mean, *you’re mine*, and there’s no changing that. Even if you didn’t like me. Even if you begged me to leave. I don’t think I could. There’s no other option for me. You’re it.”

“That sounds like a love declaration,” I choke weakly. “Like you’re trying to say something else with those words.”

“Love is too healthy of a word for what we have, darling. Love is for people who aren’t like us.” I don’t need to know what he means. I get the picture.

Tentatively, I turn my hands, curling them around his wrists. “What if I’m awful, and you don’t know it? You barely know me. Maybe I snore, or I chew with my mouth open.”

“Maybe I leave my socks everywhere,” he counters.

“That’s a killing offense.”

He snorts and drags me closer to him, until we're barely a foot apart, lips parting to speak.

Only this time, I beat him to it. "You're going to do the whole 'mine' thing again, aren't you?" I ask dryly, and this close I see the spark of amusement in his gaze.

"Maybe," he admits. "I'm so *sorry* that repeating myself is boring. I'll have to find some new material."

"Maybe Clara will help you out," I suggest wickedly as he lets go, though his foot stays pressed to mine.

"*Clara* is a means to an end, Quinn," he admonishes. "I needed an ally in your office, and it sure as hell wasn't you in the beginning." He breaks off as, again, our waitress comes back. This time, it's with our two steaming plates of food that she sets in front of us. For him, it's the too-thick pork chop. For me, it's chicken smothered in cheese sauce and a loaded baked potato.

"If you need anything else, let me know," the waitress offers, checking our glasses one more time before leaving again.

I pick up my fork, staring at my food, before setting it down again to look up at the man across from me. "Gabriel?" I ask, and he raises a brow as he assesses his food. "Where did we smell chlorine last? I keep thinking that it was recent. But maybe I'm just going crazy."

He thinks about the answer, and when his words aren't immediate, I know it's not going to be him telling me *nowhere*. He appears to struggle with the words, unsure of what to say, before saying, "At the Birkins' house. Their kitchen smelled a bit like chlorine or bleach. It has the same smell."

"That's right," I murmur, stabbing my potato. "Whatever. It's probably nothing. Thanks, though."

He stares at me, as if sure it's not *nothing*. "Did you mean it?" he asks at last, prompting me to glance up.

"Mean what?"

“That you’d be into my somno plan?”

“Oh, yeah. Why wouldn’t I be?” The words are brave, gallant even. I *am* into it, but it also makes me nervously excited. It’s terrifying in a way. In a lot of ways. But then again, the idea of it hasn’t left my mind since he’d brought it up, so maybe he’s not the only messed up one here.

Before I can get into my car, Gabriel pushes me up against it, his large body pinning mine there. My brows raise as I look around pointedly, even as he just looks at me.

“There are people here,” I point out, fighting the urge to grip his tee and choke him with it. I like the idea too much for it to be from anger. But this really isn’t the place to do it.

“I know. And I’m not doing anything. I just want to know if you mean it, or you’re just humoring me.”

So we’re back to this.

“I... I mean it,” I say, thinking about my words. “As long as you promise you won’t hurt me. Like, *really* hurt me. I like what we do. But I want to be able to choose how far you go with me.”

“I wouldn’t go further than what we’ve done.”

“Well, again, you’ve fucked me with a knife hilt, so that’s a pretty shitty argument,” I point out dryly, one hand wandering up to tangle in his shirt. I watch him as he reaches into his back pocket until he’s holding up a small, orange pill bottle. My heart nearly combusts, and I stare at it, suddenly terrified.

“You don’t have to,” he says, shaking it to show me the two pills in it. “And no, I don’t have them for some nefarious purpose. Sometimes *I* need them.”

“Guilty conscience?”

“Lifelong insomnia. They’ll make you drowsy. You’ll be harder to wake up, but that’s it. If you don’t take them, then you don’t take them. I won’t think less of you or leave just because you’re not into—”

It feels like a challenge, and I love a challenge. I swipe the bottle out of his hands and shake it, my eyes never leaving his as I yank him down to me, mouth brushing his. “If I do this, then I get to use a knife on *you*,” I bargain, kissing the chuckle from his lips.

“I’d let you do that anyway, my vicious little darling.” He kisses me again, harder, and it’s him that pulls away first, clearing his throat as he regains his composure. “I’ll call you later,” he offers, and it’s clear he wants to kiss me again as I pocket the bottle of pills.

But that’s okay, because he’s not the only one.

“I might answer,” I shrug, loving the look of irritated amusement on his face. “If I’m not busy.” In the back of my mind, the thought of chlorine and bleach spins, not leaving me alone. But that’s a *me* thing, and not for him. “Thanks for dinner. It was...” I look over the restaurant, brows rising. “The most interesting place I’ve ever eaten.”

“I feel like the bar was low,” he points out, but he’s already walking away, his hand sliding down my arm. “Have a good night, Quinn.”

I salute in response, trying to be as contrary as possible, as he shakes his head and opens his car door to go home.

How long do they take to kick in? Sitting on my bed, I stare down at the message I've typed out, consider it, and press send. The pills sit ominously in their small bottle on my knee, and I can't begin to control how rapidly my heart pounds in my chest.

I'm terrified, excited, and I feel like I can't breathe. If I do this, it will be hard to go back. I'm committing to the long haul, to the whole thing. At least until I wake up.

He doesn't text back.

Instead, my phone rings, surprising me, and I answer it a second before putting it on speaker. "I wasn't expecting you to call," I admit awkwardly.

"You haven't taken them, have you?" There's a breathless kind of excitement in his voice, and I look out the window at the lightning that occasionally brightens my room.

"No," I say slowly, my heart skipping a beat and launching to my throat. "Do you not want me to anymore?"

"I just want to talk to you first. I want to make sure you're in a good headspace for this." His words are soothing, kind, and so patient I could chew off my own tongue in frustration.

"You think I'll chicken out."

"I think I want to make sure you're in for the good kind of surprise."

"Won't it ruin the surprise if you lay out the whole plan for me?" I argue, not sure how I feel about knowing *everything* he

has planned.

“They’ll take about an hour to kick in. Maybe a little less. You’ll get drowsy, and you’ll simply fall asleep. The dose is low enough that it’ll just be there to help you stay asleep.” He can’t hide the way his voice hitches with anticipation, and my ribs unclench a little. *“Don’t leave your door unlocked. I know where your spare key is. I’ll come pick you up and bring you back here again.”*

“I could just drive over before taking them?” It sort of seems like the easier route.

But he just scoffs, the sound disdainful even on speakerphone. *“No. I want to come get you. I like it, Quinn.”*

“Because you’re a kidnapper?”

“Because I said so. I meant what I said. That I want to fuck you while you’re asleep. I don’t know how long it’ll take you to wake up. You might be scared when you do. I’ll stop, make sure you’re okay, and see what you want to do. But you’ll be asleep for a little while. You sure you want to do this?”

“If you keep asking me, I’m going to say no just to spite you.” I don’t really mean it. It’s the nerves, and the excitement. I take a deep breath, close my eyes, and count to ten before speaking again. “Yes. I really want to do this. I know you won’t hurt me.”

“You trust me?”

“Well, you’ve literally drugged me once already and kidnapped me twice. So, yeah. At this point, this kind of feels like child’s play.” It doesn’t. How could it ever? But I’m afraid to tell him that.

“If at any time you say ‘red’ I’ll stop. If I think you aren’t enjoying it, I’ll stop. You have my word on that.”

“Thanks,” I whisper, meaning to say it louder and failing. “So... an hour and a half?”

“You have tomorrow off, right?”

“The whole damn weekend.” I pop the cap off of the pill bottle. “And you want me to do this? You’re really into it?”

“More than you could ever know.”

“Because I’m about to take them.”

“I’ll stay on the phone with you while you do.”

His words are a comfort that I don’t expect. I flip the pills into my hand, staring at them, and take a breath. “Now or never,” I mutter, tipping them into my mouth. There’s a bottle of water beside me that I uncap, and seconds later, the pills have been swallowed.

“Okay, umm. I did it.” It’s too late now to feel this nervous, or be this shaky. “I’ll see you later?”

“I’ll take care of you, Quinn,” Gabriel purrs, sending shivers down my body. *“Just go to sleep, princess. I promise I’ll take care of you.”*

“Just...” I don’t know what I want to say, and for a moment I feel nauseous. I’m so nervous, more than I thought I’d be, as I curl up on my side under my blanket. “Promise me it’ll be okay?” I hope more than anything that I don’t dream of my old home, or of the face that keeps popping into my dreams, only to fade away as soon as I open my eyes before I can properly remember what I’m seeing.

“It’ll be more than okay. Just trust me.”

“We’ll see.” I close my eyes and let out a long breath. “Good night, Gabriel.”

“See you soon, Quinn.”

The first thing that my mind focuses on is the heat between my thighs. The next is the way my whole body trembles, muscles aching like I’ve been working out.

Teeth graze my neck, and Gabriel’s warm palm massages my breast as he fucks me. His strokes are slow and relaxed. Easy, like he has all night. And maybe he does.

“Are you really waking up this time, my perfect girl?” he purrs in my ear. “Want to see the wreck I’ve made of you?”

I can’t open my eyes or move, though he isn’t holding me down whatsoever. I’m so close to coming that I can barely

breathe right, though the ache in my body makes me think this isn't the first time.

“No, I don't think you are. Not yet. Go back to sleep, gorgeous girl. Let me play with you a while longer.”

“Gabriel...” The word is slurred and hard to say. The only thing I can do is nuzzle his jaw, his stubble scraping my skin. I murmur his name once more, prompting a soft laugh from him.

“I know, baby. But I'm not done. Go back to sleep for me. Like I said, I want to play with you a while longer.” When I try to say something else, he shushes me with a kiss. “Do you want to come first? I bet it'll put you right back out, won't it?”

He moves his hand to my clit, rubbing it with his fingers and drawing a surprised whimper from me. It's sensitive too, like he really has been playing with me for longer than I think. Then again, I have no idea what time it is, or even if it's still storming outside.

All I know is how I feel. How the heat and need build in my body, prompting a soft whine to escape my lips.

His teeth close over my neck, the pain sparking more awareness from me as he picks up the pace. He's saying something, though I don't know what. All I know is that it's easy for him to move me as he wants, my leg going over his shoulder so he can fuck me more deeply.

My release takes me by surprise, my lips parting in a gasp that he catches on his tongue. He's not far behind, and I feel him slam into me one last time, coming inside me as he whispers possessive promises in my ears.

I can barely hear them, though. My consciousness fades as he pulls out, and the last thing my brain registers is the soft sound of satisfaction against my ear and his words as I go out again.

“I'm nowhere near done with you, Quinn.”

The next time consciousness finds me, I'm somewhat disappointed that he's not fucking me.

The feeling only lasts a few moments, though. Three fingers press inside me, dragging a moan from my lips that causes Gabriel to pause.

“Is the fourth time the charm, princess?” he goads, thrusting his fingers deep. “I think it should be. I want you to wake up and see what you look like. For you to tell me how you feel.”

I writhe under him, feeling sore and completely wrecked. My body is achy, like my muscles have been working overtime, and even him fingering me makes me let out a soft sound of disagreement.

“It’s too much,” I whimper, trying to open my eyes. They flutter open, then close, and I find I don’t have the strength to do it again. “Gabriel—”

“It’s been over twenty minutes since you last came, Quinn,” he taunts, his thumb stroking over my clit. I try to pull away from him, but he pins me down. With his other hand on my stomach as he slides his fingers free and brushes them lightly against my entrance. “Can you tell me how you feel? Do you want to use the safe word I gave you?”

I have to think about it, and thinking is hard just now. I take a couple of deep breaths and take stock of myself. There’s nothing wrong with me. Except that I’m sweaty and exhausted, with a body that feels absolutely wrecked and brought to the edge and back.

But there’s nothing *wrong*.

“I’m fine,” I say, finally opening my eyes. “I mean, I don’t want to use it. Okay?” I look down at him, like it’s somehow his decision, and he studies my face for a few moments before his lips curve into a grin.

“Good girl,” he praises, his fingers sliding into me again. He adds another, and I nearly choke at the feeling of *four* fingers in my body, pressing deep. “So good for me. You look so good like this, and you’re so full of my cum. I thought maybe I’d slide a toy into this pretty pussy, keep you nice and

full for me until I'm ready to play with you again. Doesn't that sound perfect?"

The best I can do is whine. Especially with how full his fingers make me feel, and the way my thighs tremble and tense in anticipation. "Fuck me," I mumble, when I can sort out the words. "Please."

"Why?" Gabriel taunts, pressing my knees wider so he can kneel over me. When I crack my eyes open, the first thing I see is his face, and I don't want to look anywhere else.

Maybe it's a testament to how I've always seemed to feel around him that I'm never able to look away. His tousled hair is swept back from his angular face, and his warm brown eyes are intent on mine. The shadow of a beard is more noticeable today. More pronounced, like he forgot to shave or just didn't want to. Is that the rasping, almost burning feeling I can only slightly recall on my thighs?

"Because I said so," I reply, mouth falling into an easy smile.

"Because it'll feel so good when you're sloppy and loose? When you can barely move? You're such a good little toy for me, aren't you? You *love* that I've been using you all night however I want." He pulls his fingers out of me and pushes up one of my knees until it's nearly against my chest. "You're leaking my cum, but you just want more. What a selfish, vicious thing."

When he slides into me, I cry out more sharply than I'd intended. The world snaps into focus, and my head spins at the intensity of the feeling. For me to feel like this just from his cock, he really must have been doing this for the last couple of hours. "Wait," I grit out, one hand trying to find his hair. It's still so hard to focus. So hard to do anything but take whatever he wants. "*Wait.*"

"No," he purrs, and nips lightly at my bruised throat. "No, baby. You told me to fuck you. You were so sure, even though I was being *nice*." His thrusts are anything but, and I squeeze my eyes closed at how the feeling tips between pleasure and pain. Without me realizing what it is, I feel burning wetness

trail down my face, and it isn't until Gabriel's tongue laps up the tears that I realize I'm crying from overstimulation.

"One more," he purrs. "One more, Quinn. I just want you to come one more time for me, okay?"

"Do you promise?" I whine, finally able to hitch my arms around his neck.

"Sure, baby." He fucks me just as languidly as I remember from the last time I woke up. Long, deep thrusts that leave me breathless and dizzy. It doesn't take long, not when every thrust slides over a spot inside of my body that makes me see stars. I'm panting, begging, with my head tipped back so he can mark up my neck and shoulders at his leisure.

My body trembles, arms tightening around his shoulders as I come. It's different from what I'm used to, the pleasure of it mingling with the feeling of my orgasm being wrung from my body. This time I whimper against his neck as he leans over me, clutching him tight as he continues to fuck me to his own completion.

It isn't long. A soft curse lands against my ear, and his hands on my hips tighten, dragging me up to him so he can bury his length in my willing cunt. "You're so good at taking this. So good at letting me play with you," he murmurs against my jaw. Before I can formulate a reply, he's pulled away, sitting up between my thighs and holding my hips to stare down at me.

"What are you doing?" I ask, perplexed and missing him just a little. "Gabriel?"

"Watching my cum leak out of your sweet little pussy," he replies, leaning down to kiss my stomach. I watch him, bemused, and my breath catches in my chest when his tongue licks a stripe up my clit.

"I can't," I say, trying to sit up, but still too dizzy to do it well. "Gabriel—" A hand on my stomach pushes me back down, and his eyes find mine as he licks me again.

"Yeah, you can," he argues, a cruel grin on his face. "Just one more. I know you can for me."

“I really can’t,” I breathe, air filling my lungs sharply as I feel his fingers at my opening. “Gabriel, *please*—” He isn’t listening, or he doesn’t believe me. I feel his fingers on my inner thighs, skimming along my skin, before two of them are shoved into my entrance deeply, then pulled out again.

“What are you doing?” I demand, staring at the still-spinning ceiling.

“Putting all of my cum back where it belongs. I’ve worked too hard for it to go to waste so soon. And do you know how *hot* you are right now? You can’t see yourself, but I’ll paint a picture for you. Trembling and fucking ruined in my bed, with my cum leaking out of your cunt. Next time, I’m going to fill up both your holes and I really will keep a toy in you until I’m ready to play again. I want to see you begging and needy, so full you can’t walk straight. I want to see you too afraid to get out of bed because you know my cum will trickle down your thighs.”

“It won’t stay,” I whine, my pussy clenching around his fingers again. “Gravity is a fucking thing, and you’re just doing that to be mean.”

“If I were doing it to be mean, you’d know,” he assures me. “But if you’re worried about gravity...” He sits up and jerks me into his lap, my hips tilted upward so he can grab a pillow and stuff it under me. “Now I can keep you like this as long as I like. And I think I want to see you cum without my cock this time.” His fingers come back, and he leans over me enough that his fingers can tease my too-sensitive body. I shudder under his touch, his fingers relentless as he teases my nipples into stiff peaks once more.

“I can’t,” I whisper, throwing my head back against the bed. He presses three fingers into me, then another, until I’m nearly sobbing at the feel of them. “I *can’t*,” I say again, my voice hoarse as more tears run down my face. “Please, I can’t ___”

“You can, my gorgeous little toy. You can come for me if I want you to. On my fingers, just like this. Let me feel your

pussy flutter around my fingers. I know you're tired, but I just want one more."

"But you promised, you said—"

"I lied," he interrupts sharply, picking up the movements of his fingers. "I lied to you. Because I'm just so greedy for this. You can't blame me when you look like *that*, can you? How was I supposed to keep my word?"

My hips arch weakly into his hands as my muscles tense. Against my will, my thighs are trembling, clenching, and my body fights the arousal and exhaustion. "I really, really can't," I promise, the words too loud and too high. I sound like I'm crying, and maybe I am.

"You really, *really* can. You're so close, Quinn. So *fucking close*. Come on my fingers. You don't have a choice, baby. Come for me." His thumb finds my clit and rubs it harshly, the feeling sending me into a shrieking mess. "Yeah, you fucking love that. I know it's too much, so *fucking come for me*, princess. Right now. Come on my fingers—" He breaks off when I *scream*, my body finally giving up the fight as a last orgasm tears through me.

"Just. Like. That." His fingers thrust into me on every word, and he forces my orgasm to go as long as it can before finally, *finally*, his fingers slide free and he watches me shake myself into a million pieces on the bed.

With my consciousness still trying to piece itself back together and my heart beating out a racing rhythm, I don't expect anything from him except to watch me.

I don't expect him to get up off of the bed, though I barely notice when he walks into his ensuite bathroom. My eyes close hard, and I bury my face in my palm, trying to stop the world from spinning.

More than anything, I don't expect it when he comes back to kneel beside me, pulling my hand from my face so he can murmur comforting praises against my skin and kiss me sweetly on the lips and nose. "Good girl. You were so good for me. Let me take care of you, sweet girl. Perfect Quinn."

There's a damp rag in his hand, and he uses it to gently swipe over my skin, cleaning me up from his cum and the sticky sweat that's making me uncomfortably cold.

It doesn't take long, though he doesn't hurry. He never leaves me, his words soft in my ears as he cleans me up and finally helps me sit up, knees braced under me. "Here." He holds out an oversized tee, a crooked smile on his face. "I wasn't sure if you'd want to sleep in anything that fit snugly, so I got you this."

When I don't complain, Gabriel helps me into the shirt, and I find he's right. I don't want to wear anything else.

"What are you going to do?" I ask, getting a good look at him for the first time as he pulls on a pair of lightweight sleep pants. "Are you going to stay?"

"Am I going to stay?" he repeats, kneeling back onto the bed with me. "You couldn't chase me away with a broom." There's something different about him tonight. Something I usually see flashes of, but never full-on moments.

He's acting so sweet. Caring, even. Like he's worried about me.

Like he wants to take care of me.

"Oh," I say, blinking at him like an idiot. "Umm. Good. I want you to stay. I want you to—" I'm cut off when he drags me down under the blankets with him, and the warmth triggers my sleepiness once again.

"You were so good," he says, like he wants me to absorb the meaning into my bones. An arm curls around me, and when he pulls me close, it's just so he can press as much of me as he can against him. "Thank you."

"For what?"

"For giving me this. Did you enjoy it too?"

I think about it as I turn myself over to face him, unsurprised that I can't read his expression in the dark room. The storms have passed, though I'm not sure how long they've

been gone, and it's still dark enough that it could be anywhere from three to five am.

“Way more than I thought I would,” I admit, snuggling as close to him as I can. “I *suppose* I would be willing to open negotiations to do it again sometime. But mostly because it's the best sleep I've ever had in my life.”

He laughs, the sound loud and sudden enough that it seems like I've surprised him. “I would love to hear what your opening negotiations are,” he agrees, tucking my head under his chin. “Another day. Go to sleep, sweet girl. I'll take care of you as long as you want me to.”

I want to reply with something sharp and witty. To tell him to be careful what he promises, or I'll have him serving me hand and foot for the next decade. But I'm too far gone. Too groggy, and too eager to get back to sleep to do anything more and press my nose against his chest and inhale the dangerous, musky scent I can't get enough of.

The weather reports hadn't been accurate when they'd mentioned tonight would be one of the worst storms in recent Springwood, IL history. They should've said it was biblical flood proportions instead.

I look up through the trees, my heart beating fast in my chest. It slams against my chest, over and over again, trying to force my ribs to bend and break for it to escape. But I stand my ground, staring up at the dizzying, sleeting rain.

Thunder sounds like a rumble that permeates my body, running up and down my bones as something itches at the back of my neck, setting me on edge.

Turn around.

Turn around, Quinn.

I turn, pivoting on one foot, and my heart jolts upward to lodge in my throat. Billy Owens is just as pissed off as he had been at the party I never should've gone to. Only now, there's no one around to shove a drink into his hand or tell him to chill out, that I'm just that freaky girl with no home and no manners.

There's nothing to do except look at him. My lips parted as rain cascades over my cold, clammy skin. "Go away," I say, my voice torn away by the wind. "Leave me alone." I say the second part louder, though he acts as if he hasn't heard me.

"Go away," I repeat, my words pleading. "Please, I don't want—" He strides forward and grabs my arm, yanking me to him. I'm scrawny for eighteen, and my head barely reaches his

shoulder. His fingers encircle my wrist easily, with room to spare, and he grips so tight that I feel the bones in my wrist grinding together.

I cry out and the dream-memory flickers, melting around the edges. There's a flurry of movement around me, and the crack of lightning blinds me against my surroundings just in time for my hand to curl around something cold and slick—

When I look down, Billy is on the ground, his eyes wide and accusatory. There's someone else here, and the object in my hand is a phone, not what it might have been before.

"Help me," I whisper, staring at the figure in the rain. "Please, please help me. I didn't mean to—"

Gabriel reaches out much as Billy had, but he grips my shoulder instead of my bruised wrist. His mouth opens as he watches me with cold, dark eyes, but instead of words, a ringing noise fills my ears.

He speaks again, but another harsh, grating ring finds my ears instead. The rain picks up against my face, but seconds later I'm numb. The dream fades, darkening, but not before I hear Gabriel's voice instead of the ringing phone.

"You'll tell them it was an accident."

I jerk upward from my desk, face burning where it's been pressed awkwardly on the edge of my laptop. The world around me spins, the thunder from my dreams causing my bones to vibrate and my head to spin.

My cell phone rings on my desk, the noise earsplitting and irritating. Though in this case, it saved me from an unfortunate dream, so I guess I should be kind of grateful.

It takes a few moments for me to realize where I am, and then to appreciate that no one else is in the office while I took my unplanned nap.

The storm outside rages, and I can't remember if the weather channel had said anything about thunder loud enough to shake a small building. The lightning that hits next is brighter than before and causes me to go momentarily blind in the dark office.

Dark.

There should be lights on, but I'm in the near-pitch black. I've missed the call by now, but when I check it and see a number I don't know, I immediately push any concern to the side. Instead, I use my phone as a flashlight, getting up and going to the light switch panel on the wall.

They're all turned on, cementing my belief that the power is off. The only light in the office comes from the windows, and from Melinda's office.

I blink stupidly, wondering if she's on some kind of generator that she keeps from us peasants, and decide that since no one is here, I shouldn't be *that* worried about going into where my boss works.

I need light, after all. Maybe there's something in there to help.

As I walk in, I find her number in my phone and call it. At the very least, I should report a power outage, though I'll have to lie about how long it's been out. I have no way of knowing, though I hope it hasn't been long. Maybe this is just a really long flicker, instead of an actual outage.

The phone rings once, then again as I circle her desk to look for the source of the light, though it goes off as soon as I start to really look for it. Another ring echoes through the office when I put my phone on speaker, my hand traveling to her desk and all the files on top of it. When did she get this unorganized? Normally when I'm in here, Melinda is the epitome of tidiness.

"This is Melinda Wilkes; please leave a message. If you need the social services office, please call..." her voice trails off as she cites the office number, and for a moment, I consider leaving a message. Until it comes time, and I chicken out, hanging up instead. She'll know I called, and I can just text her if I want to, instead of talking to her about the outage.

You should've left a message, I berate myself, knowing it'll look suspicious when I call back and do it. A text feels like the

wrong choice here. If I call again, maybe she'll know it's urgent and actually pick up.

My fingers close around an old flip phone just as her voicemail triggers again, inviting me to leave a message or call the office where I'm currently standing.

"Hey, Melinda," I say, then pause to let a peal of thunder stop echoing throughout the room. "I'm at the office and, umm. Could you give me a call? The electric—" My phone vibrates to alert me to another call coming in, and I move it so I can see the screen, half-expecting it to be my boss calling while I'm leaving a message.

Instead, it's the same unknown number as before.

"The power is out," I say, continuing my message to Melinda as I wonder if I want to pick up the call. "It's been out for a bit, and I didn't know if there was something I should do. Somewhere I should call?" The other call cuts out, signaling it's gone to my voicemail.

"Call me back. I'll be here for a few minutes, but I'm probably going to lock up and go home since there's no power." It's already ten, and with no one coming in until Monday, I'm the last one in the office all weekend. If Melinda doesn't come check on things, it'll be days until we know if the power is back on.

But checking the power, or staying any longer, is way above my pay grade. My night now consists of figuring out if the storm is bad enough that I won't be able to make it home safely.

Hanging up, I glance at the flip phone in my hand. It's battered and dull silver, like something out of the early 2010s. I haven't seen a phone like this in years. I look it over, knowing I should leave it alone. It isn't mine, after all. I don't have any right to go through Melinda's things. Or at least what's on her desk.

Absently, my eyes flick back to my phone, looking at the two calls from the same local number. I *am* the one on call, and it's not unheard of for my colleagues to get calls on their

cell phones. Especially if this is Melinda's husband, or her calling from another phone.

With that thought in mind, I call the number back, half-expecting it to go to voicemail.

Instead, my call is picked up on the second ring, and my ears are assaulted by the sound of panting, frantic breaths. "*Make her stop,*" Mr. Durham snarls in my ear. "*I did what you said. Make her stop.*"

The words send a jolt of surprise up my spine and I look at my phone as if it can give me the answer to what the hell is going on, just as the other phone in my hand lights up with a message.

"Make who stop?" I ask, my voice soft. "Where are you?"

"*It's because I mentioned the Birkins, isn't it? Tell her I won't tell anyone—*" he breaks off with a curse, and it sounds as if he's running or tripping through the underbrush.

"Where are you?" I ask, thoughts spinning. Flipping open the old phone, I look at the cracked screen and press the button to read the message. I have no right doing this. None at all. But now I can't help myself.

"*The woods of Ridgeback Marina. Tell her whatever you need in order to get her to stop. Whatever you want me to do —*" he breaks off again, and I swear I hear a woman's voice from somewhere much further away, though I can't make out the exact tone or what's said. "*Help me!*" he hisses, then the call is dropped

I wouldn't know what to say, anyway. I'm too busy staring at the message on the other phone, which causes my stomach to twist into knots.

Get rid of her.

Now I'm starting to think this phone *isn't* my boss's. The words are ominous, sent from a number that's not saved in the phone. Though when I check the address book, I find there are no saved numbers at all.

“Shit,” I mutter, pocketing the phone and back out of the room. Is my boss in danger? Is she at the marina, and the calls I’m getting from Mr. Durham are connected to whatever this message is? That’s definitely a stretch, but with the way my dream has me worked up and everything that’s happened in the last ten minutes, I’m willing to go out on this limb.

As I put my phone to my ear again, I let out a breath when the person I’ve called picks up after one ring. “Hi,” I say, my shoulders dropping as some of the tension in them eases. At least he’s fine, and I haven’t gone to voicemail. Though in reality, Gabriel is the person whose safety I need to worry about the least.

“*Are you finally off work?*” he drawls, the sound of his tv in the background coming in on every third word. “*Do you want to come over?*”

“The power’s out,” I say, my words leaving me in a panicked jumble as I grab my jacket and my keys before heading for the door. “I don’t know what’s going on. Mr. Durham called, and I found this phone—”

“*Quinn—*”

“I’m worried that my boss is in trouble. I don’t know, something’s wrong. And I’ve been dreaming, but it’s worse now. I didn’t tell you before; sometimes I barely remember.” I’m rambling as I jog to my car, and when I’m finally in with cool air blasting me in the face, I shiver in all of my rain-soaked glory.

“I always mean to tell you. Well, sort of. It’s my thing, and I need to figure out—”

“*What are you dreaming about?*”

“Billy,” I say, the word falling like a missile between us.

He’s quiet at first. The noise of his television is the only thing I hear apart from the sound of my car’s engine and the windshield wipers that squeak against the window.

“*I think you should come over,*” he says at last, his voice oh so careful and controlled. “*I think we should talk about this.*”

We'll figure out where Melinda is, and why Mr. Durham is calling."

"I don't think I need to," I argue, eyes narrowed. "I'm going to go find him. Them. I have this phone. I think she's in trouble, and—"

"Do you know what you sound like right now? Do you know who it feels like I'm talking to?" Gabriel snaps, his patience evaporating. *"We're not in Springwood, Quinn. Things don't work the same here."* Is there a touch of worry in his voice? Concern for me? Though I don't know why.

"I don't know what you mean." I close my eyes hard, as the events of my dream run through my head. My other hand closes hard on what I'm holding, and I let out a long, even breath. "I'm fine."

"You sound like the girl who called me five years ago. The one who just stabbed the town's favorite college athlete." A door slams, and I can hear rain on his side of the phone as I stare at the ground in front of me, lit up by my headlights.

"Don't," I whisper, feeling frozen. "Don't you fucking dare—"

"Then don't move. Don't go anywhere. Let me come find you first, Quinn. Don't do whatever it is you're trying to do."

"I'm just going to help. I want to find my boss and Mr. Durham. It's not my case. I know it's technically my boss's, but what if they need help?" My grip flexes around the coolness of the handle, and I look down in surprise at the knife I'm holding in my lap.

Where did this come from?

It's the knife from the break room, but I'm not sure I remember going to get it. *Do I?*

"You're not in a place to help. Not alone. Just stay in that parking lot, Quinn. Let me come get you so I can help."

"It's selfish of me to always ask for your help when things get bloody," I mutter, not pushing away the memory of what he'd looked like that night when he'd stood in the diner.

He'd killed them.

He'd killed Billy's parents for me, and posed their son's body in the diner for the cops to assume was a part of the crime.

But he hadn't been.

"It's what I'm here for. I'll find you even if you hang up on me, you know." God, I need to get the tracker out of my car. I can't be this easy for him to find all the time.

"Yeah," I sigh, leaning back as I lay the knife in the passenger seat and shove the car into gear. "I know."

I don't know what's wrong with me.

Something has to be, because now that the dreams of Billy Owens have started, I can't push the memories out of my mind.

I killed him.

My hands tighten on the steering wheel as I drag in deep breaths. For weeks now, I've known I can't keep going like this without something changing. My dreams have been getting worse, and though I haven't wanted to admit that to anyone, even myself, I can't help but wonder if this could have been prevented if I'd just taken things more slowly.

If I'd listened to my body, my brain, and my dreams, would I be here now? Half-frenzied and panicking as I try not to drive off the road?

I take a deep breath and fight back the nausea that's clawing at my throat, unable to close my eyes while I'm driving through the pouring rain. It's impossible not to let the thoughts take over, to expand from the locked box in the back of my brain that I've been keeping them in for so long.

I killed Billy Owens.

I stabbed him with a knife I'd taken from the party, because I was afraid of him when he'd grabbed my wrists and asked why I was leaving so soon. Later, I'd wondered if he was just teasing. Just playing and being over the top, like so many of his friends always accused him of being.

Sometimes you just have to make him believe you really don't want it, I remember a girl telling me before that night. He just has a hard time hearing what you're saying when he's drunk. It isn't an excuse. Or if it is, it's a poor one. But I can't help but wonder if I could've ended the night without the blood and death of him and his parents.

They would've had me absolutely crucified. I'd known that the moment Billy had died and I'd been standing over him covered in his blood. I'd sobbed on the phone to my therapist, the one person in life who had given me a chance and actually sat down to listen to me.

Are you sorry you killed him? The words echoed around between my ears when Gabriel had asked them, standing on the other side of Billy's body in the park.

I'd been a lot more honest with myself, and with him, back then. I'd looked into his face and instead of saying the right thing. Instead of lying and telling him how bad I felt, I just shook my head, opened my mouth, and told him *no*.

I hadn't felt bad for Billy at all.

I'd only been upset for myself.

Gabriel had offered to help. Had told me that he'd take care of it. He'd convinced me to go home and wait, but I hadn't done that. I'd gone to the diner, for some reason. To apologize. To tell them what I'd done.

To kill them too? The thought is an unpleasant one, and my stomach twists harshly. It's easy to think I'm sane enough to *not* have wanted to kill Billy's parents just to try to circumvent them finding out what I'd done.

It's easy to think that now, when I'm feeling only an echo of what I'd felt that night.

I saw a girl planning a murder.

That's what Gabriel said to me, but he'd been talking about when we'd first met. When I'd been the angry, abused foster kid with no one to talk to.

But had he meant it about that night as well?

Would I have killed them?

“Stop.” My voice is loud in my car, even though it competes with the pounding rain. “*Stop, Quinn.*” It was too long ago. Too far in the past for me to have an existential crisis in my car today instead of all those years ago. If I’ve lived with myself this long, I’m sure as hell going to make it for another eighty years.

The sign for Ridgeback Marina comes into view, lit up by my brights on the empty, rural road. This late at night and in this weather, I haven’t passed a single soul. Even when I slow down and make my way into the parking lot of the marina, that’s surrounded by forest, I don’t see anyone else.

Except for two cars, anyway. One of them I don’t recognize, but the other makes my breath catch in my throat. It’s Melinda’s car, and my worry for her cements in my chest. Is someone trying to kill my boss? I’d thought Mr. Durham was in distress when he’d called me, but maybe that’s what he’d wanted me to think. I’ve heard the rare story of a person getting mad or violent with their case worker when things aren’t going their way.

Is that what’s happening here? Mr. Durham is technically one of Melinda’s cases, just like the Birkins were. One she’d started putting off in the same way she had them. Maybe she’s getting lax, complacent, or lazy enough for her clients to start despising her and wanting revenge.

It wouldn’t be more fucked up than other things I’ve witnessed in my life.

I park on the other side of Melinda’s car, needing a moment to calm myself down. I press myself against the seat, flush with it and tilting my head back against the headrest. With my eyes closed, I watch the lightning from behind my lids and suck in a few breaths.

If I’m going to be here doing something stupid, the least I can do is not do it while panicking.

When I open my eyes and look out my window, I nearly die on the spot. A soft shriek leaves my lips, followed by a

hysterical giggle as Gabriel, looking like a drowned, pissed off cat, stares at me. I clap a hand to my mouth as I giggle at his appearance once again.

He doesn't wait for me to figure him out, though. Gabriel yanks open the door of the car, taking advantage of it being unlocked, unbuckles my seatbelt, and drags me out into the rain. Thankfully, from what I can tell, the rain is starting to lessen. At least, it doesn't seem as bad as it had been while I'd been driving here from the middle of town.

"You're reckless!" he snaps, grabbing my upper arms. "What are you even *doing* out here?" His eyes catch on something as he looks past me into the car, and I know what he sees.

"I didn't mean to bring it, I don't think," I admit, my voice barely loud enough to be heard over the rain.

"Yes, you did." He leans past me and grabs the knife, jamming it into his jeans and covering it with his shirt and jacket. Gabriel glares down at me, though I can see a hint of amusement behind the exasperation on his face. "You're a monster," he tells me, not letting go.

"Sorry?"

"I just wish you'd *listen* to me once in a while." He leans forward, and my body tenses, ready for whatever he's planning on doing. Gabriel is irritated at best. Frustrated, angry even, at worst. If he wants to throw me over his shoulder and put me in his trunk, there's not a lot I can do about it.

I'm not expecting him to kiss me. His wet mouth slides, slick against mine, and I wrap an arm around his shoulders to pull him down for a quick, filthy kiss.

It's him that pulls away first, brows raised. The rain is definitely letting up now, though both of us are soaked and I can feel the rain trickling down my scalp uncomfortably.

"Well, let's go then," he sighs, shoving his wet hair back from his face. From his other pocket comes a small flashlight, and I see the flash of something metallic against his skin.

Does he have a weapon other than my stolen knife?

“I don’t even know where we’re going,” I admit, putting my phone to my ear as I try Melinda for a third time. She doesn’t pick up, not that I expect her to, and I follow him toward the marina, where he’s walking with a purpose in mind.

“Call your boss,” he orders over the rain. “See if she’s here.”

“I just did,” I argue, catching up to him and pointing at her car. “She’s here somewhere. And Mr. Durham has to be as well. I think he’s going to hurt her!” I lift my voice to be heard over the thunder, needing to lengthen my stride and nearly jog to keep up with him.

But he barely seems to notice. He looks around constantly, as if worried about what we’re going into. As if there’s something more to be worried about than what I’ve counted on.

And really, he’s the expert, isn’t he? If someone is going to know what to worry about, it’s him.

The marina shop is locked, and the only lights on inside are the ones from a vending machine that cast a blue light over the inside of the building. The rain continues, sounding against the tin roof above us as I walk away from the building to the dock instead.

The lake is creepy in the dark, in the rain. I look out across it with my hands shoved into my pockets as if that can cut the snapping cold that’s bringing the occasional shiver down my spine. Boats rock in their spots, bumping lightly against the dock as the water churns and the wind blows white caps into existence.

“Fuck,” I murmur, unable to *not* think about how questionable this whole trip is. “I’m really not looking to solve a murder case,” I admit as Gabriel stops on the dock beside me. “I don’t feel very Scooby-gang, if I’m being honest.”

“Me neither,” he shrugs. “But I’m not the one with the mysterious phone, a knife, and a guy calling you who may or may not be a murderer. Come on.” He walks away from me,

heading for the woods nearest the marina. I follow. It's a good idea, since this is where I've gotten called from tonight. But still, a chill crawls up my spine that has nothing to do with the rain.

Gabriel, however, stops at the edge of the woods to turn and raise a brow. He gestures onward, as if in invitation, and I stop beside him, my own eyes wide in surprise at his movements. "What?" I ask, not needing to talk so loudly here. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he assures me. "I'm not the one doing stupid shit. You're the savior of the day, so *you* lead."

"Then give me my knife," I reply, crossing my arms over my chest and trying not to look like I'm shivering. "So I can defend myself if I need to."

He eyes me up and down thoughtfully, meeting my eyes before speaking. "I don't know," he says at last. "I can protect you, you know."

"I can protect myself!" I snap back, holding my hand out for the weapon. "That's why I brought the damn knife."

He hands it to me without another word, though I swear I see the hint of a grin on his lips as the darkness of his eyes deepens.

Does he *want* me to have the knife? Was there some point in making me demand it, instead of just letting me keep it from the start?

I meet his gaze as I tuck it into my sleeve. The cuffs of my hoodie are tight enough that I can easily keep it there, though once it's there and I'm walking down the small trail that winds through the woods, I realize that I have another problem.

I have no idea what I'm doing or where I should go. I try Melinda again on my phone, frowning at the ground as I look around me for signs of something. A struggle, maybe? Or a sign painted in blood to show me where to go?

Melinda doesn't pick up, and neither does Mr. Durham. Gabriel follows me, his off-key whistling the soundtrack to my

night. Too bad he's not more help than that. Every time I look back at him, all I get is a baleful stare in reply.

"You're no help," I say finally, stomping up a small incline. "Literally none at all."

"What would you like me to do, exactly?" he drawls, fingers catching at my hood just long enough to make me notice. "I have no idea where you're trying to go. I don't know this place, Quinn."

"If it were me that was lost, and you thought I was about to die, would you do more?" I ask in irritation, wishing he could give me an idea of how to track people down in the rain at night.

"No."

The word brings me to a quick halt, stopping so fast that he nearly runs into me. My heart stutters in my chest at the unexpected answer, and I look up at him in surprise when he prowls around to stand at my side, trying not to look absolutely devastated.

"No," he says again, pushing my wet hair back from my face. "Because I'd never let you get so far that I would have to worry." He cups my cheek in his large hand, melting some of the cold that's frozen me to the core. "I'll always protect you, Quinn," he purrs, face close to mine. "Even if that means tossing you in my trunk if you ever try to do stupid shit like this again."

"That sounds uncomfortable," I admit, distracted from my current problems.

"Very," he agrees. "So behave."

Before I can reply, a scream breaks through the storm. I pull away from him, eyes scanning the darkness of the woods as I tighten my fingers around my too-long sleeve that hides my knife. Movement finally draws my attention, and I take a few steps forward as Mr. Durham sprints toward me, tripping and falling flat on his face on the trail before pushing himself back to his feet, clothes covered in mud.

“Well, that’s... not what I was expecting,” Gabriel admits at my side. “Are you sure you know what’s going on here?”

I shake my head, eyes narrowed. Durham sees me a second later and reaches out to me like I’m going to take his hand and yank him free of the situation. I don’t, however. I let him come to me until Gabriel steps between us and puts a warning hand up against his chest to stop Durham from crashing into me.

“Did you tell her?” he huffs, reaching out and snagging the edge of Gabriel’s jacket. “She’s still following me. She won’t *stop*. Just tell her I won’t tell anyone. I’m just trying to get my son back.” He turns pleading eyes on Gabriel. “You understand me. You know I’ll do whatever I need to. No more drinking or violence. No more talking about things I don’t know, I *swear*.”

“I’m... confused,” I admit, drawing his attention back to me. “Mr. Durham.” I blink and shove my hair away from my face. “What’s going on here?” I don’t want to say that I’d expected *him* to be the danger, not the one *in* danger. “Who are you afraid of?”

He stares at me, surprise warring with disbelief on his thin face. “You’re joking,” he whispers finally. “Tell me you’re joking.”

I shake my head and shrug. “No jokes here. I don’t know what’s going on.”

“I thought you’d come here to help me. I thought that was the point of this.” He looks behind him and around us, searching for someone that isn’t here. “I thought you were telling her to stop.” I can see him getting angry, getting upset. His face reddens and when he whirls on me again, there’s hate in his dark eyes. “You stupid bitch. What are you doing here if you aren’t here to tell her to fucking stop?”

“Telling *who* to stop *what*?” I snap, losing my patience and a little flabbergasted at the sudden change in his demeanor. “Mr. Durham, tell us what’s going on so that we can actually *help you*, instead of standing here in the rain.”

He sucks in a breath, then another. I see him trying to calm down, just as well as I can see that it's barely working. He's furious with *me*, though I haven't done anything wrong. "I want your help. I thought you understood. You talked to me, and you didn't seem mad like she is. I thought that's why you were on my case now, because I'm not in trouble anymore."

"*Who?*" I demand, stepping forward to grab his jacket and shake him by it. "What's going on? Who are you running from?"

"Your boss!" he yells, loudly enough that his voice echoes. "Let go, damn it! If you're not here to help me, then I need to get away from here."

"My *boss*? Why is she chasing you?" I repeat. My head is spinning, and I can see Gabriel shifting from the corner of my eye, like something has occurred to him and makes him uncomfortable with the situation at hand.

Like he knows something I don't.

"Quinn, why don't you step back?" he murmurs in my ear, moving to grip my shoulder. "Step back *now*."

"Why?" I demand, turning to look at him. "What's going on here?"

"Why don't you ask your boss and find out?" Drawing my attention with the words, he waits for me to look at him and points up the trail, where a woman in a rain jacket is striding down the path like she comes here all the time.

There's a smile on Melinda's face that reminds me of the first time I'd met her. All kindness and understanding, without a bit of impatience. The rain doesn't seem to bother her, from what I can tell. But then again, the thing that I can't stop fixating on is the gun in her gloved hand that she holds with a comfortable ease.

"What a surprise, seeing you out here," my boss greets when she's only ten feet away from us. "I thought the weather would be bad enough to keep everyone away. Do you two come here often?"

“Do we... come here often?” I repeat, a little confused. “Is that what you just asked?”

Melinda nods, the gun still held at her side in a relaxed grip. “My husband and I come here quite a bit. We like the trails and watching the boats. No boats tonight, of course. But I could see the appeal if the two of you are going off on a secret, clandestine hike.” She wiggles her brows at the two of us, and it only deepens my confusion.

“Us?” I repeat, gesturing first at myself, then at Gabriel. I’m not afraid of her like I should be, and like Durham clearly is, as he grips my arm and looks like he’s searching for a way to escape. “Like, you mean *us*?”

“The two of you are dreadful at keeping your feelings hidden. I’ve known for weeks. Don’t worry, Quinn. I’m not about to discipline you for your distinguished gentlemen friend,” she chuckles, waving her free hand at me.

Something has to be missing. My fear, for one. I’ve never been afraid of my boss in my life. She’s so unthreatening that the idea of it seems ridiculous. Not to mention I still have no clue what’s going on here.

“Mr. Durham called me,” I admit, pointing at Durham. “He told me... well, I don’t know what he told me. He was kind of frantic, umm...” I look at him, then back at Melinda. “Can you explain to me what’s going on? I found a phone on your desk. I thought you were in danger, actually. Are you, maybe, not in danger?”

“I don’t think she’s in danger,” Gabriel admits from my other side. “Not in the least.”

“Yeah, I’m starting to get that,” I mutter back.

“Did I leave my phone?” Melinda pats the pockets of her jacket, looking distressed. When I hold my hand up with the old flip phone in it, however, realization dawns on her face. “It was in the finished case pile, wasn’t it? I laid it there when Clara came to talk to me. That’s so sweet of you to worry about me. I’m sorry you had to come all this way.” She lifts the gun suddenly, and cocks it, just as Durham darts behind me to use me as a human shield.

Gabriel’s reaction is instant. He moves to stand in front of me, gripping my arm, and meets Melinda’s eyes with a shake of his head. “Don’t,” he states, and she only frowns in irritation at him, her features drawn on her pale, moon-shaped face.

“I wouldn’t shoot Quinn,” she informs him. “Once he’s dead, we can chat about this. See if we can come to an understanding. I should think this is nothing new to you, Dr. Brooks.” When he doesn’t reply, she goes on. “You’re quite famous in some circles. We’re not *that* far from Springwood, after all.”

“You have a fan,” I mutter, earning the ire of his glare. I roll my eyes when his irritation deepens, and I move to grab Durham’s arm to jerk him out from behind me. “Why is she trying to kill you?” I snap, hoping to God that she’s telling the truth and not going to shoot me or Gabriel.

He doesn’t answer. He’s too busy trying to get away from me, and I drag him to the ground, pinning him there with one knee. “Tell me!” I snap, feeling wired. “Why does she want to *shoot you*, Mr. Durham? What did you do?”

“I didn’t do anything!” he yells, frantic in his words and his attempts to get away from me. I hear the gun safety clicked back on, and Melinda appears near me, gazing down at him with contempt. Gabriel isn’t far either, and I see the glimmer of metal in his hand as he watches Melinda, seemingly uncaring for what Mr. Durham has to say. “I did what you

asked,” he goes on, eyes rolling wildly to find Melinda above him. “I’ve stopped drinking. Worked to get better at everything else. I did what you said, so that I can get my son back.”

“Well, that’s not precisely true.” Melinda kneels down, wincing, and I wonder if she’ll be able to get back up. “I *told* you to stop, didn’t I? Stop *trying*. I told you that your son wouldn’t be coming back to you, no matter what the courts said. I told you that I would transfer you case workers, and you’d just stay on the path you were on. But that’s not what you did, is it? The moment the case wasn’t on my desk anymore, you sauntered in and threatened my employee. You’re lucky he didn’t kill you.” She nods at Gabriel, then meets my wide, surprised gaze.

“How did you—”

“Security cameras, Quinn dear. They’re all over the building, inside and out. Don’t worry. I respect your privacy. When things with Mr. Durham wrapped up, I stopped watching.” My face burns with embarrassment when I realize what she means, but she isn’t done speaking. “So then you tried to win her sympathy. You told her about Ashwick to see what she knew about the murders. You tried to get her thinking. Was your plan to turn her against me?”

“No!” He fights desperately under me, but I’m stronger than him when he’s so worn out. “I just want my son back. Please, I promise I’ll do better this time. I’ll do whatever you say. Whatever you want. I just want *my son*.”

“Then let me cut off the hand you hurt him with,” Melinda agrees enthusiastically, like she’s on board with the plan.

“Cut off his—” I break off, swallowing the word. She wants to *cut off his hand*? Surely that’s a joke.

“You’re crazy,” Durham hisses, renewing his efforts. “You crazy, fucked up bitch!” He suddenly breaks free, throwing me into Gabriel as he gets to his feet and lunges forward. I expect him to run. I expect him to try to escape, so when he instead tackles Melinda and sends her to her back on the trail, I’m surprised.

I don't stop to think. I lurch forward and with Gabriel's help, I drag him back, kicking and screaming, so that Melinda can get to her feet and dust off her jeans. The disgust and dismissal in her eyes are easily visible, and she looks at us with a tight smile.

"I'm sorry to drag you into this," she tells both of us, looking around for the gun that should be on the ground. "It wasn't my intention—"

The gun clicks and I look down, realizing that it's in Durham's hand. There's a desperate light in his eyes as he looks at me, along with an apologetic, grimacing grin. "I can't help it," he says, the words for me as time seems to slow around us. "She doesn't get that I just can't help it. I love my son, but I just get *so angry*. I just need a chance to say I'm sorry. He'll understand." His arm comes up slowly, the gun pointing at my boss.

"He'll love me again. I just need him to have a chance."

The muscles in his arm clench, and I know in a second he's going to shoot. He's too close to miss, and by the resigned look on Melinda's face, she knows it too.

But somehow, as if I've been expecting this, my knife is already in my hand and free from my sleeve. I plunge it into the space between his neck and shoulder, causing him to let out a grunt of surprise as his body jolts where he's pressed against me.

His movements are slow as he looks at me, the gun dropping a few inches before moving in my direction. Blood spurts as he shifts, and another jolt coupled with a soft exhalation of breath is my only indicator that he's been hurt again, until Gabriel pulls away and comes back to slam his metal claws through Durham's throat.

Blood sprays on my face as he removes them, and Durham just... gurgles. The gun falls, clattering to the floor, and he just seems to sit down. There's no death rattle. No climactic last declaration of future vengeance.

He just sits down, then falls onto his back. His eyes never close as the blood pours out of him, and after a few dizzying moments of my heart pounding in my ears and my hands half up, shaking in the empty air, he's done. Breath no longer moves his chest up and down. The blood bubbling at his lips comes to a stop, and his eyes turn glassy.

He's *dead*.

"Hell's bells," Melinda announces, the first one to break the silence. "What a nuisance. Had to be a problem to the very end, didn't he?" She bustles around with Gabriel watching, though I can't stop staring at the dead body in front of me. "Could I have my other phone, Quinn?" she asks, her hand out in front of me. Numbly, I hand it to her, eyes still fixed on his.

"I'm so sorry you two had to be a part of this." She gently wipes off my hands and pushes my sleeves back to my elbows, searching my skin for blood. It's almost motherly, the way she helps me clean up, and I finally blink up at her in absolute surprise.

"You were going to kill him?" I ask, still not able to wrap my head around everything. "Why?"

"Because he was on the road to getting his son back," she replies, her words sour. "Our justice system is imperfect, Quinn." She rips the blade free of his neck and looks up at Gabriel. "You'll keep yours, I assume?"

He nods, flexing the fingers of his clawed glove. "I know how to clean up," he assures her, and the two share a moment, like they're cut from the same cloth.

Hell, maybe they are.

"He hurt his son. Badly. Not to mention his son is terrified of him. It would've ended poorly. I've learned that from experience. I warned him. Over and over again, I told him to stop. He knew what happened to the Birkins when they tried to push getting custody back after what they did. He knew the same thing would happen to him. I *warned* him." She shakes her head at his body and I straighten, arms wrapped around myself, since I don't know where to put them.

“You’ve killed people before. And you sent me there to find their bodies,” I assume quietly. “Why?”

“I needed our county to find them. The police and I have an understanding. No one in this county will stand child abusers for long.”

“Why was there a message on the phone on your desk? I thought it was a threat against you. I thought it was *him*,” I admit, nodding at the body between us.

“That’s my husband,” she laughs. “He helps me with cleanup if I need it. Or fixing a scene for the cops.” Finally she stands, a plastic bag at her side containing the gun and my knife. “He’ll be out here soon,” she adds, looking away from Mr. Durham like he’s just a pile of trash. “Are you all right, Quinn? You look like you’re in shock. I know killing someone is hard. Everyone’s first time is difficult. But he deserved it. The world is a better place for what you did, and I’m fairly grateful to you myself.”

“It’s not my first,” I murmur, unable to stop myself. “I need to go home.” I take a few steps back, unwilling to look at either of them. “I just need to go. I won’t tell anyone. I’m not.” Then I bite my lip and take a breath. “I’m not upset or about to spill your secrets. Okay?” I ask, looking up at my boss and trying to maintain my last bit of self-control as my heart pounds a sharp beat in my ears that shakes my entire being.

“I know you won’t. But are you sure you’re alright, Quinn?” She trades a look with Gabriel, who’s been eyeing me silently for over a minute. “Whatever it is, you can talk to us.”

Us. My murdering therapist boyfriend and my murderous boss. I shake my head, the movements sharp. “I just need to go,” I say again, taking a few steps back. “I’ll be fine. I’ll see you... soon.”

“This Sunday?” Melinda is quick to suggest. “The husband and I are having a pool party. It’s taken us long enough. This Sunday, one to six. Stop by for the pool, stay for the food. Can we count you both in?”

I don't understand what she's asking. Or rather, how in the hell she's asking it. She's talking about a *pool party* while we're standing over a dead body.

I just nod a few times and smile tightly at both of them. "Sunday," I agree, but it's the only thing I can manage before my feet are taking me away, back down the trail, and toward the open parking lot. I try not to break into a run, but it's nearly impossible.

Especially when I hear my name on Gabriel's lips the moment I hit the pavement. I sprint toward my car, trying to get to it before he can catch me, only to be caught and shoved into the side of Melinda's SUV instead.

"Quinn!" Gabriel snaps, searching my face as I cover my mouth with my hands. "Quinn, stop. Talk to me. Tell me what's going on in your head and how I can help."

"*Help?*" I half laugh, half-sob. "You want to *help me?*"

He nods once, then again, more slowly as he takes in my expression. "Just tell me what's going on, okay? Let me help you."

"I don't think you can," I whisper from behind my fingers. "I really don't think you can."

"Why's that, my darling girl?" he murmurs, trapping me against the SUV, his body a line of solid warmth as his arms bracket me in. "Because you're afraid?"

I shake my head.

"Then tell me what's going on."

"I'm terrified," I admit, finally dragging my hands away from my mouth. "I'm so, so *fucking terrified*. Scared is such an understatement."

"Of killing someone."

"No." I take a breath and press my head back against the car. "Because of how much I fucking enjoyed it."

He stares at me as I gasp for air on the side of Melinda's SUV. I can't tell what he's thinking behind his calculating expression. I couldn't even begin to guess, which doesn't happen as often anymore.

One hand trails up my arm to cup my jaw in his long fingers. He teases his thumb over my bottom lip, and finally a soft smile breaks across his mouth. "My little monster," he purrs finally, the sound sending heat straight to my core. "My vicious, darling girl. Can you drive?"

I nod once. It had been my intention, after all.

"Get in your car and drive to my house, as long as you feel safe doing so. You're not light-headed or nauseous?"

I shake my head slowly, eyes narrowing. "You're going home, right?"

"In a minute." He glances back toward the woods, where Durham's body is. "I just want to make sure your boss can handle everything. Do as I say, won't you?" He slips a key between my fingers, pushing it against my palm.

I could *not*. I could just go to my own house, shower, and go to sleep.

But I don't want to. Resisting the pull to him that feels like a constant magnet dragging me into Gabriel's orbit is difficult. Impossible, even, for all the times I've secretly wished him dead.

In fact, it seems like I've hated him for so long that I can't even tell when that hate became something else that's just as searing and intense, with a different four-letter name.

Shit.

"Okay," I say, leaning up on my toes for another kiss. He evades me, smirking as he does, and pulls just out of reach when I try again, only to lean close so he can nip my bottom lip. "Go home. Take a shower. Whatever you need to do, Quinn. I'll be there soon, I swear."

He makes a good argument just by using his mouth to tease mine. I nod and lean back, allowing him to disentangle himself from me so he can step away. "I won't be long," he promises, and gestures to my car.

I give him a mocking, two-fingered salute and walk quickly to my car, getting inside and turning on the engine while he saunters into the woods once more.

When I get into his house, the first thing I do is look around. I haven't been here enough to get the full layout. Plus, if he's going to get mad about it, I'd rather do it when I'm covered in blood and look somewhat scary.

Or sexy, depending on the audience.

I poke around the three-bedroom house with curiosity, finding that the other two upstairs bedrooms are vacant and one is home to a few boxes, the second has nothing at all. The other bathroom, too, looks unused. Though his ensuite is packed with things from body washes to shaving cream, and outfitted with a shower with a head that can be taken off the wall to reach those hard to get places.

Though my only experience with those is from porn I'd watched to get me through college all-night study sessions in my dorm.

A shower is non-negotiable. The blood that's dried on my face and chest is gross and sticky. It's hardening like paint and no matter how much I might enjoy looking at it in the mirror as my heart speeds up at the memory of killing Mr. Durham, it's getting uncomfortable.

He'd deserved it, I tell myself, as if my brain needs a reason. I step into the shower, feeling guilty for *not* feeling guilty, and talk myself into the explanation I barely need.

He hurt his son. Over and over again, I remind myself firmly as the hot water sprays against my chest and face. He'd done more than hurt him. I've seen the files. The reports.

The pictures.

He'd done terrible things to his son, and I'd been stupid for thinking he regretted it when he'd come into my office and been nicer to me. I remember thinking he was there because he cared and was remorseful. Not because he was trying to get away from Melinda's threats.

Then I can't help but wonder how many people she's killed. As the blood from my body stains the water in the shower, I stare at it in the dim light from the bedroom. I hadn't turned on the bathroom lights, not yet, and I can barely see the hint of red in the dirty water that swirls around my feet and disappears down the drain.

While I stare, I take my time. I wash my hair with slow, deliberate touches and work Gabriel's conditioner through it slowly. The blood is well and truly gone by the time I'm done, but I run a washcloth over my skin anyway, half-wishing Gabriel was here to see the blood before it disappears.

I hope he's all right, and that Melinda hasn't ended him too. Though, to be fair, I doubt she could take him on if he really wanted to leave.

Finally, when I have no more reason to stay in the still-hot shower, I turn off the water and step out onto the towel on the tile floor. Shivering in the cold air that flits across my skin, I grab one of his oversized, extra-fluffy towels and wrap it around my body so that I can clear the steamy mirror with one hand.

I look... normal. With no blood and no mud on my skin, I look just like I did this morning. Normal Quinn Riley, with her normal job in Eddyville, Kentucky.

I don't look like someone who just killed a man and enjoyed every second of it.

My fingers clench around nothing, trying to remember how it felt to have the knife in my hand. It had felt so good to fight the resistance of Durham's flesh. To plunge it into his throat as far as it would go.

Would it have felt just as good with Gabriel's claws? If I'd slit his throat instead of stabbing him, would I have gotten the same enjoyment?

When I pick up my clothes, intending to put them back on, I pause with a frown on my lips. They're full of mud and dirt, and enough blood stains them in ways that make me worry I'll have to throw them away. I don't have enough money to keep replacing clothes, that's for sure. But I can't just walk around town with blood all over me, either.

I drop them back to the bathroom floor when I decide not to put them back on, and wrap the towel around me more securely. It's not perfect, but it's something. And I'm just looking for *something* right now until Gabriel gets home and I can hopefully borrow something of his.

With a sigh I flop over onto his bed, groaning my exhaustion and how much I love the comfort of his mattress. It's sure as hell better than the one I have, and I'm going to make the most of it while I wait.

Knowing he'll wake me up when he gets home, I curl up in Gabriel's bed, drag the blankets over myself, and barely manage to take a deep breath of his scent that lingers in his pillows before I'm completely asleep.

Instead of dreams, the feelings that rush through me drag me out of a comfortable, cool blackness. Dreamless sleep has been a stranger to me lately, so I try as hard as I can to hold on to it, instead of waking up.

"Lemme sleep," I murmur to the feeling of hands on my body and heat between my thighs.

"Always," the voice close to my ear purrs. "Sleep as much as you want, Quinn."

His words have the effect of dragging out how long it takes for me to wake up. My brain is sluggish to respond to all the perfect, delicious things happening to it. Slow to really come to full wakefulness as Gabriel lazily thrusts into me.

“Gabriel,” I murmur, the sound almost as soft as my normal breathing. I can feel more of what’s going on this time around. I’m still on my stomach, face against his pillows where I’d fallen asleep. One of my knees has been pushed to the side, and between my thighs I can feel him, warm against my skin while he slides in and out of me.

“Such a heavy sleeper,” he purrs, and it sounds like a compliment. “Or maybe you just sleep better when you’re in my bed. You’re awake just in time, Quinn. Just in time to feel me fill you up again.”

I whimper, still half asleep. It’s easier now, to just feel him inside me, than to confront the things that I’ll have to once I’m awake.

“Relax,” he purrs, running a hand down my spine. “You’re fine, darling. Right where you are.” I can feel his movements speeding up, and with a jolt I realize I’m incredibly close, like he’s been working me up to my release for a while.

He moves to lean over me, dragging my hips up to his so he can sink deeper between my folds, while one hand comes around to play with my clit, begging me to go over this cliff with him.

“Come on my cock while I fill that sweet cunt,” he murmurs, and it’s all I need to be convinced. I gasp, my orgasm rolling through me so hard that my toes curl. My body shakes, clenching him as he presses into me one more time, his muscles tense as he comes inside of me.

My head spins, drinking in the feeling, and when he slides out of me, I jolt into full wakefulness, a disappointed sigh on my lips.

“I didn’t mean to be so asleep,” I murmur, sitting up and turning to look at him. “How long have you been back?”

While I speak, I rub my eyes with my palms, trying to get my bearings.

“About thirty minutes,” he admits, watching me. He’s not dressed either, and I pause to admire his body, his face, and everything there is to look at when it comes to Gabriel. “I just couldn’t help myself. Do you want to talk about what happened?”

“Sure, *Dr. Brooks*,” I yawn, looking for my towel, finally finding it halfway across the room on the floor. “I don’t have any clothes,” I admit, looking back at him instead.

“I won’t hold it against you,” Gabriel assures me, a shadow of a grin on his lips.

“I dreamed of Billy earlier tonight. Before Durham called me at the office,” I tell him, leaning back against the headboard. He surprises me by following my movement and draping his body over mine, bracketing me on the bed. “I mean, over the past few weeks I’ve been dreaming of Billy in flashes, but I don’t always remember. I think...” Looking away, I frown and some of the trepidation from before comes back. “I think I just killed a man, and I don’t feel bad about it. Just like I didn’t feel bad about Billy,” I say finally, my voice hard-edged. “And I don’t know what to do.”

He sighs against my throat, kissing the skin there sweetly before biting down. I let him, only letting out a soft sound of enjoyment as he presses my knees open so he can slide between them, bringing his body flush with mine.

“You let me take care of it. Of you,” he murmurs. “I’ve always known you liked killing. I remember Billy. I remember the look on your face, and what you said to me. Do you?”

I think back, dredging up memories I’ve worked so hard to bury.

“Help me,” I repeat, closing my eyes to remember the scene in all its clarity. The darkness had lain so heavily around me back then, and Billy’s body hadn’t looked real. “Help me, because I’m not sorry.”

“And I helped you. Just like I’ll *always* help you. There’s nothing wrong with not being sorry. Not for you, or me. Not for people like us.” He drags me down away from the headboard until I’m flat on the bed again. “And you should stop running away from what you are. Stop pretending to be something you aren’t.”

“What aren’t I?” I whisper in the darkness, the moonlight from the finally clear sky outside illuminating his features harshly. My stomach twists, little butterflies taking off to scramble my insides. I feel almost nauseous, almost dizzy. Yet I’ve never felt more present.

“You’re not *prey*,” he growls against my ear. “And you should never act like it again. Do you hear me?” His nails sink into my sides, pulling a hiss from my lips as his mouth works down my neck, to my collarbone.

“You could kill them. Any of them. And you shouldn’t feel bad about it. Does the wolf feel bad for the sheep in the field?”

“People aren’t sheep,” I protest, reaching a hand up to grip his hair when he licks over my nipple.

“Yes, they are, little wolf. They’re sheep just waiting for your fangs.” He bites down, as if making his point, his other hand coming up to tease and toy with my other nipple. “And you’re *mine*.”

“You’ve said that before,” I point out, my head spinning as I jerk his head up so I can meet his eyes. “You keep saying that.”

“Well, it wasn’t always this true,” he taunts, lips inches from mine. “But now you’ve killed with me. You’ve *enjoyed* it. You’re mine, just as much as I’m yours. And next time we do it, we’ll fuck in the blood of our sheep to show everyone else the kind of monsters we are.”

“You make us sound awful,” I point out dryly. “Like we really are monsters.”

Gabriel laughs, though it isn’t a happy sound. It’s cruel and filled with dark promise, and if I didn’t know any better, I’d think he was crazy.

But I know *exactly* what he is.

“We *are* monsters, Quinn,” he informs me, nudging my thigh until my leg wraps around his waist and he can rock against my body perfectly. “No matter what we look like to anyone else, we’ll always be the monsters that people fear.”

I don’t know if I believe him. I don’t know if I can be the kind of monster he thinks I am. Though when I come again and he drinks in the sound between his lips like a prayer, I start to think that maybe, just possibly, he’s right about me.

That he was right all along, and the little lost girl he met in his office was born with murder in her eyes and her heart.

“This is weird,” I mutter, letting Gabriel drag me out onto Melinda’s patio. “Tell me this isn’t weird?”

“It’s not weird,” he argues. “Come on, how is this weird? Your boss likes you, her husband makes good burgers.” He lifts up the burger he’s eating and waves to Melinda’s husband, who beams and salutes back with the spatula in hand.

“This is weird,” I argue, leaning against the tall, sturdy privacy fence as Gabriel joins me. “Are you sure you don’t want to, I don’t know, go somewhere else?”

“Like my house?”

“Maybe I mean my house,” I retort. “You never want to come to my house and have sex. Or shower. Or hang out.”

Gabriel rolls his eyes and finishes his burger before turning on me and gently pressing me back into the fence, his body shielding us from Melinda’s other guests. His hand slides up my shoulder until he can press his fingers to the base of my throat. “Your house sucks,” he tells me sweetly. “It’s awful, and that furniture has probably been through six different owners. All my stuff is new. Excuse me if I don’t want to get infected by whatever’s living under your bed.”

“Well, excuse me for *breathing*,” I reply, only a little bit offended as my brows jerk upward. “We can’t all be world renowned, award-winning sleep psychologists with fancy degrees and a ton of debt.”

“Half a ton of debt,” he argues. “Closer to a third. You should live with me.”

“Yeah? Like your live-in fuck buddy?” I agree, a little aggressively. “The girl you tie to your bed so you can fuck her whenever you want?”

“Like the girl I love,” he corrects.

“That’s a strong word.”

“Only to you. It’s the *right* word for me, even though I thought it didn’t quite fit before. I was wrong. Come on, Quinn. Don’t squirm about it. Just because I haven’t said it out loud, are you really so shocked?” He leans in to brush his lips to mine, though I turn my face away, unimpressed.

“You taste like ketchup,” I tell him, sneering.

“Then make me taste like *you*,” he purrs, and pulls my face back to kill me again with more demand. I give in with a pleased sigh, my tongue finding his before I pull away just enough to nip him.

“Move in because I like you,” he insists. “You could just be my sexy roommate if you wanted. I’ll make you pay rent and utilities to make you feel better about it.”

I scoff and open my mouth, just as a delicate sound of a throat being cleared makes both of us look around.

Melinda stands behind us, beaming, her sister beside her. “I’m so glad the two of you could make it,” she announces, handing both of us a glass of wine. “I thought you might not come.”

Gabriel and I separate, each of us taking a glass of wine as Marian, Melinda’s sister, looks him over.

“It’s so nice to see you in the daylight,” she tells him shrewdly. “Instead of stalking around her place. He’s a good catch,” she adds, looking at me and winking. I look away, grimacing in embarrassment at her words.

“Sorry if I’ve ever bothered you,” Gabriel apologizes, having the decency to look sheepish. “It wasn’t my intention. Quinn and I just—”

“Say no more,” Marian interrupts, flapping her hand at him. “We all have our games, don’t we?” She winks at me

before walking away to greet someone else, as Melinda stays and sips her wine.

“You’ll stay, won’t you?” she asks, surprising me with the question.

I look at Gabriel, perplexed, then back at her. “At your party? Not forever, but I doubt he’ll let me run away just yet,” I reply, putting a small laugh into the words.

But Melinda shakes her head. “Here. In Eddyville. I’m sure the two of you won’t stay forever; I’m not asking that. But you’re good at your job. You’re good at helping, and you know that sometimes help can be unpleasant. I don’t want to lose the best social worker I’ve hired in years.”

The praise is unexpected, and I shift uncomfortably on my feet as the feeling goes through me. I don’t know how to respond. I’m barely sure what she’s asking, and I hope it’s not to have a murder buddy going forward.

After all, I’d rather kill people with Gabriel, or not at all.

“I’ll stick around for a while, I think,” I tell her, a small smile finally curving over my lips. “At least until I’ve saved enough to buy a better house than his.”

“So, forever?” Gabriel murmurs, taking a long drink of his wine while I stare at him flatly. “I keep telling her she could just move in with me,” he tells Melinda, who looks impressed. “Then she wouldn’t have to spend anything on renting and can save up for a new car.”

“My car is fine,” I snap, rolling my eyes in his direction.

“Your car has nearly broken down *twice* since you’ve moved here,” he argues, but I shake my head. “You need a new one.”

Melinda leaves with a chuckle and a wish for us to have a good weekend, following after her sister as she walks around the pool to talk to the people who have just come in.

“I don’t need a new car,” I tell Gabriel, sidling closer to him again. “And I don’t know if I want to stay here. This place is... weird.”

“Not as weird as Springwood.” He throws an arm over my shoulders. “I’ll do whatever you want to do, Quinn. Stay or go, it’s up to you.”

“What if I go?” I ask, walking around to the other side of the pool with his body against mine as he falls into step with me. “What if I leave?”

“Then I’ll go with you,” he murmurs in my ear, kissing me before I can take another step. “That’s not a question or a concern, Quinn. It never will be.”

I don’t reply for a few moments. Instead, I settle against him and take a breath of his sharp, musky scent that I couldn’t stand a few months ago.

How things change, I think silently, and drag him down to kiss him once more before we have to go be social.

When Gabriel walks out of his bathroom with only a towel wrapped around his waist and sees what I’m doing, he spares me a glance before he goes to his closet.

“What are you doing?” he asks, looking through a few piles of clothes.

I haven’t bothered putting my clothes on. With my knees curled under me, I hold his clawed glove in my hand, running my fingers down one of the blades.

“Thinking,” I admit, looking up to watch him drop the towel and drag on a pair of black, loose sweatpants. He sinks down onto the bed, crawling forward until he’s right in front of me. “What if I left?” I ask, repeating my question from earlier.

“I already told you, I’ll go with you,” he replies, reaching out to tug the glove out of my hands so he can use my lap as a pillow instead. He turns his face to kiss my inner thigh, my breath hitching when he does. “I’ll go anywhere with you.”

“What if...” I trail off, my fingers itching to run through his soft hair. I give in, tugging on it and listening to the soft hiss he makes as the pain catches up to him from my grip. “What if I left without telling you? In my shitty car that you’re always complaining about?”

He doesn't respond immediately. He takes a minute to nose my thigh again before sitting up and turning to face me, his body nearly against mine.

"In your shitty car, where I've placed a tracker?" he clarifies, reaching up to wrap his fingers lightly around my throat. His fingers slot under my jaw and he pushes me back, forcing me to sink down onto his bed.

"Yeah," I agree, a grin quick to curl over my features. "That car."

"I'd follow you," he promises, one knee between mine as his grip tightens. "I'd be right on your trail, waiting for you to stop. Waiting to play whatever game you're going for."

He forces my thighs apart around his knee and runs his free hand through my hair.

"Maybe I'll go on a killing spree," I tease, not meaning it. For all I'd enjoyed what I'd done to Durham, and originally what I'd done to Billy, I don't have an itch to kill anyone else.

I just know I could do it again without hesitation.

"Maybe I'll clean it all up for you." He leans forward to kiss me, his teeth and lips insistent against mine.

"Maybe I'll let you come with me," I sigh finally, trying to hide my gasps for air after our kiss.

"You're really asking for me to keep you here," Gabriel chuckles, letting me wrap my arms around his shoulders. "You know that?"

"Yeah? Am I?" I taunt, dragging him down to me with my fingers in his hair. "I'd just love to see you *try*." I act like I'm going to kiss him, only to lash out and grip his lower lip between my teeth, a small growl traveling from my lips to his.

He snarls in reply, pulling away just enough to get his mouth free before he licks a line up my jaw. "Poor, sweet, *confused* girl," he taunts, his eyes deepening to a dark, cruel and playful hue. "This is a game you're going to lose, you know."

“Then let’s find out,” I challenge, pushing against him so I can sit up. “Let’s see if you can *make me*.”

His next kiss is sweet, the one after it is punishing, and before long I find myself on my back again, with his hands dragging down my body like lines of fire as I close my eyes hard against his enthusiasm.

“I’ll never let you go, Quinn,” he promises in his soft, rough voice. “Not even in your dreams.”

EPILOGUE

“That’s never going to happen,” I assure Gabriel, leaning back in the large, comfortable chair across from him. He sits at his desk with his glasses on, thumbing through papers like I’m not glowering at him with everything I’m worth.

But then again, he’s always so good at ignoring me when I’m trying to get a rise out of him. Today I’m clearly not trying hard enough, because he still barely looks my way.

“It would be good for you,” Gabriel points out with a sigh, leaning back in his chair. “And I have some things to pick up from my house there. I don’t intend to move back, but I want to grab anything of mine that I could use here.” He flicks his fingers into the air as if ‘here’ is just a convenient term for whatever our current location is, not specifically our current home of Eddyville, KY.

“Then go back yourself. I’m an adult.”

“You’re having nightmares again,” Gabriel argues. “I think facing the root of those is—”

“Pretty sure it’s unethical to be my therapist and date me,” I interrupt him, intent on not allowing him to have the last word or finish his argument as to why I should go back to where I grew up with him.

“*Pretty sure* it’s unethical to murder the people you don’t like. And to help your boss clean up her murders,” Gabriel

points out. “But I don’t begrudge you your hobbies, do I?”

“You stalk me through my hobbies. I think that counts.”

“I stalk you no matter what you’re doing. Don’t be coy, Quinn.” His gaze flicks up to mine, then back down. “But don’t use the unethical argument on me when you are the epitome of it as well, even without me.” He has a point, but my jaw ticks with irritation so I down the rest of my iced tea, then slam the cup down onto the coaster.

“I’m not going back,” I tell him flatly. “And that’s final, Gabriel.”

“Hmmm...” He doesn’t say more than that. He doesn’t give any other answer as he marks down his notes from his other cases. When my hand inches toward a closed file, he presses down on it before I can open the file, but still doesn’t look at me even when I give a small tug. “No, Quinn. That’s not going to work. But I’ll tell you what.” He sits back smoothly and his eyes meet mine, dark as he surveys me. “I’ll make a wager with you. How does that sound?”

“It sounds like you’re trying to trick me into doing whatever it is you think is ‘good’ for me,” I shoot back, though I can’t lie and say I’m not intrigued. “But I’m incredibly gullible. Hit me.”

“You’re not gullible. You’re just open to ideas, and I like that about you. Even though you don’t give yourself enough credit in that regard.” He grins, his eyes lighting up as the affection he feels for me is suddenly evident in his expression and the way he touches his fingers to mine wrapped around my empty glass. “A bet. If I win, then you come with me to Springwood. If you win, you can have anything you want from me.”

“Will you teach me how to throw knives?” I ask quickly, wanting the one thing he’s told me he’ll eventually teach me. His skill with most bladed weapons is impressive. From the claws that are way too unwieldy for me, to the knives he can throw with scary precision. “Now, I mean. Not in ten years.”

“Yes. I’ll teach you to throw knives and give you some. If you win,” Gabriel reminds me coolly. “Want to hear the rules of the bet?”

“Are you going to *follow* the rules?” I can’t help but ask, my eyes narrowing at him. Gabriel isn’t exactly one to play fair at the best of times.

“Always,” he assures me, in a way that makes me not believe it. “And this is a fun one, I promise. If you agree to it, which you have every right not to do...” There’s the therapist part of him, reminding me I always have options. It makes me smile, just a little, but I see the answering twitch of his lips that shows me he knows what I’m feeling. “All you have to do is not sleep with me for three days. All *I* have to do is get you in my bed to play with you. What do you think?”

I mull it over thoughtfully, twisting the empty glass in my fingers. He’s right. It is a fun one, and something I’m interested in. “I need more information. What’s allowed, and what isn’t? I could just take a seventy-two hour shift, or you could just pick me up and carry me there.”

“No, seventy-two-hour shifts. You need too much sleep for that. And I can’t just manhandle you to my room. I either drug you or convince you. You can do whatever you want, as long as you’re home as much as you normally are.” As of the last four months, *home* is here with him. In a spare bedroom with its own attached ensuite that contains the best bathtub I’ve ever laid eyes on.

“Deal,” I say, not minding the whole *drugging* thing. Some of our best sex has been while I was drugged and groggy. Plus, the way he goes feral for his kink is hot as hell. I watch him as he pulls out another glass bottle of the unsweetened black tea we both prefer from the small fridge built into his desk, and he pours both of us another glass before replacing the now half empty bottle. “But I really. Don’t get why you want me to go to Springwood so badly. I could just schedule an extra midnight therapy session with you and talk through it like normal, right?”

I pick up the glass and take a drink, chugging half of it before putting it back on his desk. He watches me, head tilted to the side, and a smile tugs at his lips as he answers. “It’s not the same. We’ve tried talking about it, and you need more than that this time. It won’t be such a big deal, Quinn. I promise I won’t let anything hurt you.”

“If you win,” I point out, tipping the glass at him before setting it back down after a last drink. “I’m about to go put on the unsexiest movie and dress in *layers*. All I have to do is wait out seventy-two hours, and if you don’t think I can, you underestimate my self control.

“I would never underestimate your self control,” Gabriel assures me, leaning back in his chair like he’s completely abandoned his work for the day. “What I *do* think needs work, however, are your observation skills.”

That sounds like an insult, and I narrow my eyes, brows pulling together. “Observation skills?”

“I just told you that I could get you into bed with me through persuasion or knocking you out,” Gabriel reminds me. “Remember?”

“Yeah,” I say slowly, unsure of what he’s getting at. “So what?”

“Right before I poured you another glass of tea.”

My heart seems to stop as I look at him. My eyes dart to my mostly empty glass, then land on his that he hasn’t touched.

Which hasn’t touched since he poured us both new drinks. “You *jerk*,” I whisper, tilting my head up to his. “That’s not fair. You—”

“It’s not cheating, and it’s more than fair,” Gabriel admonishes, unable to hide his small, pleased grin. When I jump to my feet, he shakes his head, not bothering to do the same. “You have a few minutes, though, if you want to get anything off your chest.”

“You’re a dick,” I fire off, though I’m not *mad* so much as grudgingly impressed with his tactics. What an absolutely

incredibly sexy, and cunning jerk.

“You’re lucky you’re hot,” I tell him, slamming back down in my seat. “I’ll remember this.”

“Oh, I’m counting on it,” he promises, grin turning wolfish at the yawn I try to cover with my hand. “Time to say good night, Quinn. We’re going to have so much fun today.” My stomach twists in anticipation at his words because even though I don’t want to go to Springwood, I can’t help the anticipation of knowing what Gabriel wants to do to me.

And the excitement of knowing I’ll love all of it.

One of my favorite things about doing this is how I don’t wake up properly the first time, or the second. At least, that’s how it’s been in the past. And this time, I find, is no different.

The first time I wake up, I can feel his hands on me, on the bare skin of my thighs and tracing circles over my hip bones. All I can manage, however, as his tongue licks up my slit, is a soft, low moan as lucidity teases at me, dancing at the edges of my senses as I try to wake up and actually get to enjoy the moment.

But all I can do is focus on Gabriel’s chuckle as he sits up, his hand smoothing up my body. “You always do this,” I hear him say, though the words sound muffled and wobbly to my ears. “You try to wake up so soon, even though we both know you have another hour or so before you really shake it off. Quinn, you don’t need to be so impatient. I have all night to enjoy you, awake or asleep.” His words fade as my consciousness does, though I still whimper when I feel his lips on mine, teeth nipping at my lower lip as I sink back into sleep.

The second time, I’m a little more there. A little more able to recognize what’s going on around me, and *to* me. I’m lucid enough to groan at how easily he’d won the bet he’d proposed, and to silently call him ten kinds of jerk.

But when he sinks into me for what’s probably not the first time and nips my jaw, all of my insulting thoughts vanish as pleasure crawls up my spine. He’s always so good at this. I’d

originally thought that I wouldn't get anything out of this particular kink of his. That it would be something I wouldn't feel strongly about one way or the other.

God, was I wrong.

"You're still not quite here, are you darling?" Gabriel's voice in my ear is soft, and he tucks my hair behind my ear, cupping my jaw in his hand. "But I bet you can feel all of this. You're so wet for me. Your body loves this whether you're awake or asleep, and it's so fucking sexy, Quinn." He thrusts into me harshly, and this time I manage a soft whine as my head falls back against the pillow. Gabriel takes advantage of that to bite down on the juncture of my neck and shoulder, teeth sinking in and holding me with a growl as he fucks me.

But he's right. I'm still not quite conscious, not quite waking up. All I manage is a quiet murmur of, "*such a jerk*," before I'm being swallowed up by the black silence of sleep once more.

But the third time, as usual, is the charm. I can feel the difference as soon as I can move my fingers, and my eyes open just in time to catch sight of Gabriel, who grins the moment he catches sight of me.

"There's my girl," he purrs, not stopping the movements of his hands as he strokes himself loosely. "You're just in time. I thought maybe this time I'd get to fuck you awake, so this is just perfect."

"You don't play fair," I murmur, still slow with sleep. But my body is loose and pliant as he leans over me, one hand running up my side until he can grip my jaw.

"I play fair. I just don't play how you think I should," he corrects, eyes on mine. But he doesn't pin me down and fuck me, as I thought he would. Instead, he cups my chin in his hand, sitting back and drawing me into his lap. It's not difficult for him, though this is a new position for doing this, so I'm happy to go along with it and see where this goes.

Not that it's much of a surprise when he drags my knees over his thighs, letting me lean against him as my still heavy

arms automatically encircle his neck. I press my face into Gabriel's chest, breathing in the scent of sex and what makes him *Gabriel*. Fuck, this is always so much hotter than it should be, and I'm pretty sure he's converting me to be just as obsessed with his kinks as he is.

Not that I mind whatsoever, I've discovered. Not even this time, when it definitely feels to me like he played dirty to get here.

"Could've told me we were starting," I mumble, turning my face to his so I can nip at his jaw, my teeth not sinking in like his do but still giving him small marks that will fade within a few hours.

"But you see, Quinn, not telling you was the point." His hands on my hips urge me downward, and I feel his length brush my folds a few moments later. It sends a shiver up my spine, and even though I'm worn out for what has to have been hours of this, I'm so ready and willing to beg for Gabriel's cock. "I want to make you better at playing these games. So you'll never lose against anyone else if it comes down to life or death, prison or not."

"And at what point do I win against you?" I ask, looking up at him to catch his dark gaze with mine. His smile is crooked, and just a little bit wicked as he moves me where he wants me. Then he takes my breath away when he simultaneously pushes me down and thrusts up into me.

The result is me nearly blacking back out as his cock is buried deep in my body, and I groan at the too much, yet perfect, feeling of it. "*Fuck,*" I can't help but whisper, tilting my head forward to rest against his chest. "*Fuck,* Gabriel. You can't just—"

"You'll have to come up with some tricks of your own if you want to surprise me," Gabriel chuckles, one hand leaving my waist to tangle in my hair. "Move your hips a little for me, darling." I can't help but do what he says, letting him urge me into what he wants until I'm rocking into his thrusts as he fucks me, barely able to breathe at the raw pleasure that's so close to overstimulated pain I could blink and cross that line.

“And I have every faith that you will. I just have a little more practice than you.”

“Because you’re old,” I mutter, going for any jab at him that I can now that the indignation of being so easily outwitted is sinking into my bones uncomfortably.

He snorts, unperturbed, and bites my shoulder harshly until I yelp a protest. “Don’t be a brat just because you lost. I would’ve talked you into Springwood one way or another. This just means we don’t have to fight about it. And...” He pulls away enough to look at me, stilling as he holds me with his hands on my hips and mine on his shoulders. “I’ll still teach you how to throw knives. I’m not heartless.”

But when my eyes drop away from his and I curl my hands over his shoulders, half of me wants to lose myself in pleasure so that I don’t have to deal with the feelings his declaration brings up, he doesn’t oblige. Instead, he keeps us where we are, and my body aches with the need for *more*, even though I’m sure by how everything in my body feels, he did not go easy on me while I was asleep.

His hand on my face, fingers gently stroking my cheek, are my first reminder of how perceptive he is. How *good* he is at knowing when something is wrong with me. He’s a good therapist. A great therapist, even, and it’s so irritating when he uses those skills against me.

“I didn’t think you’d be this worried,” he murmurs finally, moving to press me back down into the bed and sliding between my thighs once more. It doesn’t help. If anything, the sudden emptiness makes everything ten times worse. “What are you so afraid of, Quinn?”

“The nightmares,” I whisper, without meaning to. He leans over me and absently I reach up to him, something in me warming when he presses his jaw into my hand so I can touch him. “I haven’t been back since...well you know. And I’m so afraid of everything in my nightmares coming true. Maybe I’m building it up too much in my head, but...” I smooth my fingers along his cheek, tracing his temple as I meet his eyes.

“If you liked me, you wouldn’t make me go,” I tell him slyly, a small smile flickering at the edge of my lips.

“Well, it’s too bad for both of us that I not only like you, but I am absolutely in love with you. So I’m more interested in doing what I can to help you, not placate you, Quinn.”

It’s not the first time he’s said it. In fact, it’s the fourth. But those words still drag the breath from my lungs and leave me a wide-eyed, emotional mess, no matter where we are. But this time, he has the benefit of me on my back, already about to beg for his cock again, and now completely stunned at his words.

“I see we’re still hung up on that, aren’t we?” His grin is sharp as he sinks into me once more, and for a few moments my brain is focused only on the pleasure of his movements, of how good he makes me feel, to worry more about Springwood just now. “*I love you, Quinn,*” he growls in my ear, his thrusts becoming deeper. More insistent. “I love you more than you could ever possibly fathom.”

“Oh, yeah?” I wrap my arms around his shoulders to pull him down to me, causing him to thrust deeper into me. “Fuck, it’s so unfair how good you feel,” I tell him, the words falling from my mouth without me trying to stop them. “And what if I love you just as much, huh?”

“You’re not there yet. But it’s okay, Quinn. I’m not asking you to be. It’s enough that I know how you feel about me, and how I feel about you.” His hand moves between us as he sits up, pressing against my hip so he can stare down at me, a sweaty, ruined mess in his sheets as he fucks into me again. “I can wait for as long as you need, as long as we’re together.”

“That’s so permanent of you,” is the only response I can think of, especially as I can feel myself nearing the cliff of achieving my release, and I am more than ready to dive right off. Judging by the mess, he’s gotten his satisfaction multiple times. But I haven’t yet since I’ve been awake.

I’m overdue, that’s for sure.

“Because I *am* permanent, darling. At least where you’re concerned. I’m pretty sure we’ve been over this. But just in case you need a reminder?” He grips my throat, thumbs slipping under my jaw to press in exactly the right place for my vision to darken deliciously at the edges. Even though I know I’m safe, my hands automatically come up to grip his wrist, and I can’t take my eyes from his wicked grin.

“You’re *mine*, Quinn. For as long as we’re alive, and then even after that. You’ve always been mine, remember? Since I killed in Springwood for you so long ago. You are…” He leans down until he’s close enough that I can feel his hot breath on my lips, and I open my mouth, expecting his harsh kiss. “*My vicious little thing.*” He growls the words into my mouth before he kisses me. When he does, it’s all teeth and tongue, all demand as he picks up the pace of his hips and braces himself with one hand on the bed, the other still around my throat.

And God, it’s *perfect*. I writhe under him as everything in my body feels like it’s trying to catch fire. One of my hands still grips his wrist, but the other I move to twine in his hair, gripping the coarse strands tightly between my fingers as he moves against me. My knees press to his thighs, one leg hooking over his hips to beg him for more as he devours my mouth, not content even when my lungs scream for air.

Finally, when I feel like I’m on the verge of passing out, he rips free with a quick bite to my lower lip, only to growl against my ear, “*Fuck*, Quinn. I want to feel you come around my cock. You’re always so tight when I fuck you like this, when you’re still not quite all the way awake. Come for me, darling. I want to feel you.”

I want to do more than whimper. I want to bite back verbally or physically, but with his hand still making me see stars and his cock driving out any rational thought from my brain, a soft growl is all I can muster, and even that sounds mostly like a whine. “*Fuck*,” I finally manage to whisper, eyes closing hard against the avalanche of my orgasm that’s tumbling toward me. “*Fuck*. Gabriel—” He crushes his mouth

to mine again and slams into me, his encouragements against my tongue are a purr that seeps into my core.

And that's more than enough to kick me right over the edge I was clinging to out of desperation. My entire body lights up with pleasure, my toes curling and my eyes slamming shut. He doesn't stop, but only changes his grip on my throat to make it easier to scream his name, all the while whispering his own filthy endearments against my skin.

Finally, I distantly register that he's losing his rhythm, his composure, and with a few murmured curses, Gabriel buries himself inside me one last time as he comes, my body begging for it the entire time. When he relaxes against me, it's easier for me to wrap my arms around him, my knees locked against his sides as I ride out the last of my orgasm while he enjoys his buried deep inside of my body.

And I wouldn't have it any other way.

Before he can move, however, I jerk us to the side, forcing him onto his back so that I can straddle him, my hands bracing myself against his chest. "If I'm going to Springwood with you," I pant, surprised at how much effort it took, especially since I'm sure Gabriel helped me by rolling over mostly himself. "Then I have a few ground rules."

His grin is sharp and angular, his eyes dark as he grips my hips and replies, "Since you look so good right where you are, I suppose I'll hear them."

"Great," I reply, blinking away the last of my sleepiness and the remains of my orgasm that beg me to curl up on his chest and head right back to sleep with his arms around me.

"But you'd better hurry." His thumbs are back to drawing circles on my hips, and I tilt my head at his words, confused. Gabriel takes pity on me and answers with a smirk. "Because once I'm ready to fuck you again, the conversation's over."

"I can talk and have sex," I point out, bemused.

"Not if your mouth is full, darling."

It's quiet in his car as I open and close the knife in my hand, dragging the tip against my finger absently. For most of the

ride I've watched out the window as the landscape slowly changed, though not significantly enough to show we're no longer in Kentucky.

"I've been thinking," I say finally, shifting my legs and resting my feet against the dashboard. His admonishing glare is quick to find my face, but I don't change how I'm sitting. Instead, I raise a brow at him, daring him to do something other than glare.

"Should I be worried?" His tone is definitely anything but concerned, and I crack a smile at the irony of that.

"Maybe. It'll probably involve you, since I know you aren't going to let me off my leash once you hear what I've been thinking," I tell him, shrugging one shoulder innocently.

"Then hit me with it. I'll prepare myself and plan for the fallout accordingly." His sigh is all for show. I can feel his interest from my side of the car.

"Springwood thinks I'm a killer. Well, they think I had something to do with everything at the diner. They came around the house a few times, and the only reason they never did more to investigate what happened with you-know-who is because, well, you were the better option." I'm quick to smile at the roll of his eyes and the way his fingers tap against the steering wheel.

"Thanks for that. Go on? I'm curious to see where exactly this is going to lead," he prompts, now glancing my way with interest as he drives along the empty interstate.

"They think I'm a killer," I repeat, tucking the knife downward to the closed position once more.

"We've established that."

"Maybe I should do something to earn their opinions of me." My words are soft. Neutral. I don't want him thinking I'm desperate for the idea, or that I'll be crushed if he doesn't agree.

"You know what I think?" Gabriel asks finally, and from his pause, I know he's about to give me all the reasons that would be a bad idea.

“That I’m insane?” I ask, trying to lighten the impact of his oncoming lecture.

“No, Quinn.” He chuckles, reaching out to twine his fingers with mine. “I think that’s such a good idea that I would love to help you. If you’d have me, that is. What was that girl’s name who bullied you in high school? Nina?”

I look at his hand for a few seconds, his fingers so much longer than mine, before I smile, my fingers curling with his and holding onto him tight. “Nancy,” I say, after a few more seconds of silence. “Her name is *Nancy*.”

CORRUPT

He looks...

Perfect.

But then again, he always looks perfect.

He doesn't see me, because he never sees me. *Not once.* Not since I showed up in Woodsboro a month ago and he stumbled into me on my first trip to my new favorite coffee shop.

I wonder if he even remembers.

It wasn't memorable to him, I'm sure. His blue eyes had been fixed over my shoulder, and the steadying hand that had laid splayed on my chest for only a few heartbeats was quick to be snatched back before I could have done a thing. All in all, it had only been a few seconds of my time, a few distracted moments of his.

But it was enough.

"Do you even know his name?" Kat's voice from the passenger seat is bored on the surface. She doesn't care who I stalk or what I intend to do with them. Not considering she's the one who taught me how to do this and so much *worse*.

But I can hear the undercurrent of concern, carefully masked by the boredom, and I slide my gaze in her direction for a few precious seconds before it snaps back, almost against my will, to the retreating figure of *him* making his way down

the sidewalk, away from the closest academic building at Woodsboro University.

Fennec. His name is Fennec, I remind myself, and wonder how the sound would taste on my teeth and tongue. Unconsciously, I stroke my tongue over my teeth, trying to push away thoughts of them sinking to pale, freckled skin—

“Ransom?” Kat is unimpressed. Concerned, sure, but she’d taken one look at Fennec and known he wasn’t her type. But God, he’s *mine*.

“Fennec,” I tell her smoothly, eyes firmly back on what she’s so affectionately labeled my newest obsession.

“Last name?”

“Matthew.”

I can hear her thinking. I know she’s rolling around that information in her brain, picking apart what I know and what she thinks my intentions are. But she has no say over my prey, my kills, or Fennec. This isn’t her home, or her territory, as far as I’m concerned.

I love my sister to death, but the sooner she stops hiding out and goes back to Akron to be with her friends, the better. They can stand her better than I’ve ever been able to; for all that she is my big sister.

And the person who knows me best.

“You haven’t killed him.” She flicks open the switchblade that she’s produced from somewhere on her body and then closes it, her eyes on the shiny metal as we just sit, headlights of my car off, so I can watch Fennec leave the building where he works as a teaching assistant for one of the biology professors.

He must be so smart, or so desperate.

I can’t wait to figure out which one.

“So?” My fingers tap against the steering wheel, in a rhythm of threes that sound like drumbeats in the silent car. “Are you timing me?” I turn to grin at her, but her eyes are already there, waiting to pin me in my seat.

“You haven’t *killed him*,” she says again. “And you’ve never been patient, Ransom.” When she uses my name in that tone of voice, it’s a warning that I’m about to be in trouble.

But I still grin in the face of danger and reach up to rake long fingers through my coarse black hair that’s already mussed and standing from this particular habit of mine. “Maybe I’ve changed.”

“You’ve been following him for weeks.”

“You play with men for months sometimes.” But I know what she’s getting at. She’s not exactly being subtle.

“He’s never going to feel the same way you feel about him, little brother,” she reminds me carefully, her eyes that are just as blue as mine, somehow bright even in the mostly dark car. “He *can’t*. Not when he’s not like us.”

“A psychopath?” I tilt my head to the side, staring at her while I say it. “Is that what I am? And what you are?”

She doesn’t grace me with a reply to that. She doesn’t need to when Katarina and I both know exactly what we are. Just as clearly as she and I know I don’t love him. I *can’t* love him.

Because what we feel is never love. Not like other people feel.

“Maybe he’s different,” I say finally, rolling my shoulders in a shrug. “Maybe my feelings are infectious.”

“Does he even know you exist?”

My lips curl up at that, and I tap my fingers against the steering wheel once more, still able to just see Fennec at the edge of the parking lot, fumbling with the contents of his hoodie pockets as he searches for his keys, just like he does every night.

And just like every night, he realizes a moment later that they’re in his backpack, not his pockets. I could help him with that. I could help him remember where he’s put his keys, his phone, whatever else he loses. Because, based on what I’ve seen, Fennec Matthew is surprisingly adept at misplacing just about everything he gets his hands on.

But I could help him with that.

I could help him with so many things.

“I’m serious, Ransom.” Kat’s hand catches my wrist as my fingers track for my hair once more. And she pulls until I look at her, my focus finally fully on my sister instead of the boy I’ve been stalking for weeks. “Kill him,” Kat advises, when she’s sure she has all of me. “Kill him before things get complicated.”

“Dear sister,” I coo, placating and sarcastic all at once. “Whatever you’re worrying about? You can stop it. I’ve killed plenty of pretty men and women without you, and it’s never been complicated. This one won’t be either.” But I can *feel* the lie in my throat, clawing its way toward my lips. “He’ll probably be dead before you land in Akron tomorrow. Maybe a little later.” I twitch my lips into a smirk, and belatedly, she returns it. “Have I ever fucked up even half as bad as your friends?”

“Just make it soon, Ransom,” Kat sighs, letting go and sitting back to flick the switchblade open once more. “I don’t like it when you start doing new things.”

With a snort, I throw my car into gear, lights flaring in the darkness now that Fennec is well and truly gone. “I’m surprised you’re not bitching about me getting you to the airport late,” I point out with a glance at the time at the top of my car’s nav screen. “Since you’re normally there, what, four hours early?”

She doesn’t grace me with an answer.

But seeing as we make it to the airport without her stabbing me, I’ll count it as a win, even if she pins me with her icy blue eyes once she’s outside of the car and tilts her head just slightly, in a move I know well.

I only crack a grin and wave my fingers before she walks toward her ticket counter, carry-on bag over her shoulder as she *finally* prepares to get on a flight back to Akron and the friends that will want to know why she’s been gone longer than normal.

And while part of me wonders if she'll lie to them—if she'll hide the fact she was almost killed during her last hunt—the bigger part of me is straining to head back to Woodsboro, to the subdivision where Fennec lives alone, in a small apartment on the first floor of his building.

With a door that hasn't locked right in years.

All I want is to run my tongue along his skin to see how he tastes.

More than that, I want to pin him down and fuck him until he can't see straight and definitely can't walk.

He doesn't know I'm here. He never does, and with one upstairs neighbor working the night shift, a single mom in the other upstairs unit who's usually in bed by eleven, and a vacant unit next to him, I could stand pressed against the glass and it's likely no one would ever notice me.

But I'm not that crass, and I won't spoil the game.

Not yet.

Not until I know exactly what I want to do with him.

The first thing I'll do, though, is teach him to close his curtains. He's too trusting. Too open. Too oblivious.

Too perfect, part of my mind crows softly. *Too fucking perfect*. But that's what makes it so hard to imagine following Kat's advice and killing him now.

I can't. Not quite yet.

Not until this game is done and I've gotten all the satisfaction from it I can.

With a sigh, I shift my weight from one side to the other, pulling one leg up so I can rest my elbow on it as my toes curl in my shoes. It's not cold enough to be a bother, and this tree is large, so it's as comfortable as I need it to be while I'm here.

It's easy to forget the itchy bark and knots stabbing into my lower back when Fennec walks back into the kitchen. The sight of him makes me do a double take.

He's shirtless, with a small red towel in his hands that he's using to run through his hair in order to dry it from his shower. A towel hangs from his hips, and part of me begs for it to give into gravity and fall, so I can see more than the sharp V of his hips, his flawless skin, and his now-damp curls.

But then he turns, and my breath hitches at the scar that runs from his left hip up to his right shoulder, bisecting the pale skin of his back and twisting around his shoulder muscles. "Well, aren't you just full of surprising mysteries?" I murmur, my fingers digging into my pocket and pulling out a blade much like Kat's, but darker. Murder isn't the only habit of hers I'd picked up. I flick the blade open to run my fingers along it, barely noticing when I nick my finger on the edge.

He'd look so pretty with this pressed lightly to his skin, his body still as he tried not to move, not to breathe, not to do anything that might make me cut him.

But I don't want to cut him, and that's the problem with all of this. I've been fixated before. But never like this. While Kat teases me about how I go through obsessions quickly, I've never been obsessed quite like *this*. Like the sun rises and sets at Fennec's will.

Like my whole being is in orbit of his, and always will be.

It isn't love; I know that.

But maybe it's the next best thing.

He tosses the red towel to the cabinet and finger combs his hair absently, checking that the oven's on before pulling a covered container of leftovers from his fridge. It's Chinese food from two nights ago, I know. Orange chicken and chow mein, with a side of cream cheese Rangoon.

From what I've gathered, poor Fennec can't cook. Hell, I'm starting to think he'd burn water, given a chance. Lucky for him, I'm not looking for someone good at domestic duties. The clutter of his apartment that I can see from here hints he's probably not too good at keeping things clean, either, and part of me itches to fix that tonight, instead of watching him from my favorite perch.

He's never boring. How could he be, when his face is so expressive, even when he's alone? Every emotion he feels flits across it, from irritation at the food being a little burned when he pulls it out, to relief when he stuffs a bite in his mouth and finds it's just surface-level singed instead of actually ruined. I want to do more than watch. I've wanted to do more than watch for a week now, and every time I come here, it feels like I'm putting myself through the best, most delicious frustration possible.

Because watching him is my favorite hobby, and every minute I watch him, I *itch* to do more than sit here. But I know better. Kat has taught me better, and that there's a time and place for everything. Unfortunately, it's not time yet.

And that thought has my insides burning and twisting. I have to shift on my branch once more, the blade of my knife digging into my palm as I force myself to do what I should and just *watch*.

Tonight isn't the night for Fennec to learn I'm watching him.

It's my good luck that he leaves so early for a morning run, and to get an iced tea latte from the coffee shop nearest the university. Even luckier is that his door really does need to be fixed. It's the first thing I'll do once he knows about me.

Because no one else gets to touch what's mine.

But for now the door is my greatest fortune, and I'm casual in my actions as I jerk the door toward me, twist the handle hard, and I hear the lock reluctantly give up its position. It falls open just as easily as it had every other time.

My lips part in a smile and I saunter in, closing the door behind me so the single mother who's never at her door anyway doesn't know that I'm here. His other neighbor is sleeping, and it's not like either of them have a great view of Fennec's door. Certainly not good enough to know how many times I've been here.

But this morning is different. There's a feeling in my bones, a vibration low in my stomach, that I can't stop from

overtaking my thoughts while I look through Fennec's apartment, scanning for anything that's changed. This isn't a new game for me, either. But Fennec's home is more entertaining than the others had been in the past.

Not to mention, I normally do this once. Maybe twice. I take something that I'll keep, and make sure there's nothing in the house that will make my plans harder when the time comes.

But I've been here four times now. *Four times*, and yet Fennec has no idea. Hell, he doesn't even know I exist, let alone that one of my favorite activities is going through his things.

My mind conjures up his reaction when I tell him, when I let him know that I've looked through *everything*. The notebooks he'd left behind one day, his laptop that he doesn't have password protected, and most of his drawers.

Usually, when he's gone, I look for things he's left behind. I look for anything that's new or interesting before moving to another room. But this morning, with the sun still trembling under the tree line and his apartment shrouded in darkness, I don't hesitate to walk past the living room, past the kitchen, and down the short hallway into the only bedroom of the apartment. It had surprised me how big it was the first time I'd come here, but now I relish the space, and the sight of his messy, queen size bed that sits on top of its box spring on the carpet, instead of any kind of frame. Blankets are twisted and tangled on top, and pillows are scattered, half on the bed itself and the other half on the floor on either side.

He's so *messy*. But I can't find it in me to mind. Though, part of me does itch to clean up, or at least throw his dirty laundry in the empty hamper.

"Oh, Fennec," I sigh, shaking my head as I look at the mess. "I'll have to teach you to put things where they belong, won't I?" The idea sends a shiver up my spine. I would love to teach Fennec *so many things*.

Against my better judgment, I bend down just enough to snag the tee he'd been wearing last night, hooking it over one

finger and pulling it up to ball it in my hand. I don't know what I'm doing with it...nor do I know what I'm doing when I walk over to stand at the foot of his bed, surveying the mess of blankets and pillows there.

Fuck it.

Kat's right about one thing, and that's that I should stop watching Fennec and actually do something. At least, I hope she's right. But she doesn't know that I don't intend on killing him. At least not yet.

My knees hit his mattress with a soft *thump*, and it takes me a few seconds to crawl up to the head of the bed and throw myself down onto the slightly concave spot on the mattress where I know Fennec sleeps, curled onto his side with the cutest frown on his face and a pillow wrapped in his arms like he needs it for security.

Would he wrap his arms around me like that if I snuck into bed with him one night? It's so easy to roll onto my back, Fennec's shirt balled in my hand as my head sinks into one of his pillows. I kick off my shoes without really thinking about it, determined not to track dirt into Fennec's bed. But then my eyes close, and I bring the shirt to my face, pressing it to my nose as I inhale a combination of Fennec's cologne and his natural scent.

He smells like vanilla. Soft and sweet; impossible to hide under the musky cologne he tries to mask it with.

My free hand fumbles at my jeans, finally getting the button open and the zipper down as my lungs fill with Fennec's scent again, eyes still closed. It's only seconds before my hand slides down, under the rough denim and the softer fabric of my boxers, until I can curl my fingers around my length that pulses with interest.

He smells so delicate. Like he might break if I push too hard. Like it will be easy to mark up his pale, freckled skin to show anyone that looks at him that he's *mine*. My mind takes the reins and runs, conjuring up a picture of Fennec with dark bruises—from both my fingers and my teeth—mottling his

throat, and a lip swollen from the slide of my teeth and the worrying of my lips.

I think of his hips, just visible over his loose towel last night, and the sharp V that points to exactly what I want. But right now I'm more interested in knowing what my fingerprints will look like in the divots of his hip bones when I pin him under me and wreck him until his voice is hoarse and ruined from begging.

A rolling growl leaves my throat, mouth opening against his shirt as my hips buck into my hand. It's just too easy to imagine my hand as his, and easier still to imagine his wide, nervous gaze as I pull him into my lap and urge him onward, my hand wrapped around his as I show him what I want from him.

He'll look his best when I've ruined him for anyone but me. When he's a shivering, crying mess from too many orgasms and too much overstimulation, curled up in this bed and begging me to let him rest first.

I wonder how many times I can make him come before he cries. The thought of that, of his tears on my tongue and the tracks they'll leave on his face, has my breath hitching in my chest. Has me moaning with need into his shirt that I'm leaving my own scent on. But he won't notice. Not when he barely notices anything in his room, considering the way he trips over things he's just put down.

Fuck, but I can't help but wonder how many times I can do this. How many times can I come here during the day and roll around in his bed, imagining him under me, before he finally catches on? If he ever does at all, that is. *My Fennec* isn't exactly the most observant.

My brain catches on to that. On the fact that I'm already referring to him as *mine*. I know Kat's right. This is going to get messy. Problematic.

I know he can't love me, or feel the same thing for me that I do for him already. "Oh fuck," I breathe against his shirt. My hips move faster, bucking up into my harsh grip, but I already

know I won't last that much longer. Not with Fennec's scent in my lungs and the rest of me in his bed.

If I wanted to do the right thing, I wouldn't make a mess for him. I'd keep this clean and discreet, and I'd leave his room just as I'd found it.

But fuck doing the right thing. A curse snaps free of my lips, and my body jerks once more as I come. The pleasure spreads like rushing water up my spine and sinks into every part of me as I breathe in against his shirt once more before dragging it lower, using it to catch the ropes of cum before they can stain my clothes.

But even when I'm spent, when my cum on his shirt is drying and I'm holding it at my side, unsure what I want to do with it yet, I don't move. I take a few moments to enjoy the afterglow, and gently palm my cock as I relish being in Fennec's bed without him knowing I'm here.

Then, finally, I slide the shirt into his pillowcase, wondering how long it'll take him to notice.

How many nights he'll sleep with his nose pressed against *this* pillow, where I've laid and where my cum-stained t-shirt of his I'd used is so fucking close to him.

I wonder what other marks I can leave, that he'll have no choice but to touch without even knowing I was here.

I'll change that soon.

Slowly I get to my feet, tucking my cock away and fixing my clothes before sliding on my shoes so I can stare down at his bed.

The messiness is endearing, rather than annoying. More proof that Fennec is frenetically creative, and not really a shining example of housekeeping. It's adorable. A smile twitches at my lips as I remember the look on his face when he'd murmured his apology.

I wonder if I can make him do it again.

By the time I leave with the door locked behind me and head back to my car, I do so with another of Fennec's dirty t-

shirts in my hand, and the knowledge that with how long I'd stayed in his bed, rubbing my face on his pillows and finding a few more shirts to use as *inspiration*, there's no way he'll be able to find or avoid all of it.

He's mine already. Especially after he sleeps in his room tonight.

Especially when I get my hands on him, my new toy, and have my fun for as long as I want to before getting rid of him.

And if that thought twists something in my stomach into painful, dreading knots, then I ignore it in favor of smiling at his landlady, who I've met twice now, and press the ignition button of my car for the engine to purr to life.

It's such a shame that Fennec has such naive neighbors and a door that doesn't lock properly.

Such a fucking shame.

Everything in me knows this is a bad idea. If Kat were here, she'd stab me, drag me away, and keep me in a coma for a few days if it were in her power. Which, given her expertise in poisons and drugging people, is absolutely something she could and would do.

But thankfully she's now a thousand miles away in Ohio, leaving me here, with Fennec, to play however I want. Even if this particular decision of mine isn't the smartest I've made in the last decade.

I know my timing, and I know how perfect that timing needs to be. Fennec is always distracted by his coffee or his phone, and when he comes out of the coffee shop, he's always carrying both. Together, they're a death trap that'll get him hit by traffic one day, but I'll work on that too.

After he knows who I am.

Sure enough, when he leaves the counter and heads for the door, his eyes are fixed on his phone. He's clumsily trying to drink his coffee while he texts, head tilting back so he can take a long swallow of his iced cold brew with three pumps of hazelnut and extra cream while he walks.

Oh, Fennec.

It's so easy to angle this just right when he's so oblivious; so embarrassingly simple to move in his way while looking like I'm just trying to leave. When he inevitably runs into me, legs knocking into mine as his elbow makes contact with my chest, it's the most natural thing in the world to spin around, faux surprise on my face as I catch his coffee before it can spill all over both of us. My other hand flashes forward as my blue eyes land on his, the surprise in them sending a thrill through me as my fingers find his hip to steady him.

"I'm so sorry," the younger man breathes, taking in a sharp breath as he tries to stumble back and realizes that I'm keeping both his coffee and his hip in my hands.

But he doesn't mind as much as I'd thought he would.

"It's no problem." He's shorter than me by an inch, two at most, and with our comparable heights I can catch and hold his gaze with ease. "Are you okay?" My voice is soft in the din of the coffee shop, full of concern. But I don't try to move away from him, even with the line of his thigh pressed to mine. We're not in anyone's way. I'd made sure we wouldn't be when I'd started this. I can keep him here as long as he'll stay without fear of anyone needing to get by.

"I'm fine." He huffs out the words as a light flush colors his cheeks. "Didn't I...do this to you before?"

Yes, you did, gorgeous boy. I want so badly to let the words fall from my lips, to pull him closer and taste the coffee on his chapped, full lips and on his tongue. But instead, I look thoughtful for him, brows curving downward and coming almost together as I think about it. As if I *need* to think about it. "Did you?" I ask, a small smile on my lips. "I don't remember, if you did. Do you run into people here often?"

The first time had been an accident, sure. But while I'm insinuating this one is his fault as well, I know very well that it's mine. I *made* him run into me so I could do exactly this.

And God, I am not disappointed. My fingers on his cup slip just a little, just enough to rub against the pale skin of his

thumb where he holds it as well. Then, as if I've just realized I'm still holding it, I let go of his coffee, though my light grip on his hip remains.

It's so hard not to think of what he looks like under his clothes. He's wearing a dark red hoodie today, half-zipped over a black tee that holds the remains of some graphic that's long since washed away. His jeans fit snugly, showing off his long legs and his ass that I'd give a kidney to grip in my hands so I can drag him closer to me and taste him.

All of him.

"No." But the answer is too defensive, and he won't look at me. I know my baby boy *does* run into people more than he'd like to admit, because I've seen him. He's a dreamer, a thinker, and so easily distracted by anything that catches his eye that he can't help but be adorable.

"Sure you don't," I chuckle, finally releasing his hip from my grasp. "Maybe be careful, though?" I know how to keep my eyes kind, my smile playful, so he can't see what I am, or what I'm hiding underneath my grin. "Someone else might actually mind you nearly spilling coffee all over them."

His blush comes back in force, and he looks away from me, a bratty edge to the movement that I'm dying to explore. *Fuck*, I need to leave. If I don't, then I'm going to touch him again, and he's going to get skittish, like a wild animal caught in the trap I've so carefully put out for him.

"See you later," I tell him with another soft smile, moving away from his sweetness and warmth.

"Okay, but I definitely ran into you before," he calls after me, pulling just a shrug from me as a neutral response. "Don't you remember?"

I'm close to the door when I stop, looking over my shoulder to see his eyes glued on me...but he's not looking at my face. Not until he notices me looking, anyway. Then his eyes snap up, and I wonder just how far that flush goes under his shirt.

“Yeah,” I tell him, a small laugh in my voice as I flash a slightly darker grin his way. “I remember now.” I don’t give him a chance to say anything else. Instead, I pull the door open, exiting the coffee shop before he realizes I don’t have any coffee of my own, or before I do something even more stupid, like admit I have one of his shirts in my backpack that I’m going to keep, no matter how this goes.

But even as I walk, I realize I can’t keep doing this. I can’t keep playing with him, when every inch of me needs *more* from him. From this.

I won’t kill him. Not yet. But if I’m going to play with him, I’ll have to find someone else for now. Someone to sate the urges that’ll scare him away.

I’m going to kill someone this week, and when I’m done, Fennec will have all of my attention.

Whether he wants it or not.

ABOUT AJ MERLIN

AJ Merlin would rather write epic love stories than live them. I mean, who wants to limit themselves to only falling in love once? She is obsessed with dark fantasy, true crime, and also dogs. From serial killers to voyeurs all the way down to the devil himself, AJ's specialty is in writing irredeemable heroes who somehow still manage to captivate their heroines (and her readers).