



reckless
gather

EVA SIMMONS



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Author's Note

Reckless Games is an extra spicy, extremely explicit, kinky billionaire romance. The characters make morally gray decisions that are not always redeemable. There is graphic on page content that may be sensitive for some readers. Trigger warnings (which contain spoilers) can be found on my website.



For the ladies with their sights on the naughty list...

I've got you covered.

The safe word is midnight.

Enjoy.

Lakeyn

IF IT WASN'T FOR the snow painting an ethereal scene, I'd swear this manor is haunted. The moon hangs low over the tree line, casting a cool glow on the gothic façade. It's more of a monument than a home, which I suppose is fitting considering the instructions on the crimson invitation in my hand.

Every year on Christmas Day, the Midnight Manor opens its doors for the rich and elite to indulge their fantasies. And once you step through the gate, there's no leaving until the clock strikes midnight on New Year's Eve.

And here I stand, a fraud. Holding an invite not meant for me and accepting the challenge to be reckless for once in my life.

I'm not sure how I let Ivy talk me into this. She's the exciting twin, the globe-trotter. She knows how to mingle with billionaires and party with actresses. Ivy is spontaneous, while I prefer my small town, scheduled events, and going places where I know what to expect.

I should never have let her convince me to take her place at this week-long escape when her invitation landed on my doorstep by accident.

“What’s the Midnight Manor, and why does it sound like you just got invited to a holiday sex party?”

Ivy laughs on the other end of the line. “I didn’t think that was real. The Midnight Manor is like the Bermuda Triangle. No one knows where it is or what really happens there. I always figured it was a rumor.”

“Well, this rumor is not only real, but your invite just landed on my doorstep.” I flip the invitation over, where there’s a silver foil “I” scrawled in beautiful calligraphy.

I balance my phone between my ear and shoulder to open the invitation again. “I’ve never even heard of the Midnight Manor.”

“That’s why it’s so exclusive,” Ivy says, and even if I can’t see her, I sense her eyes rolling from her tone.

“Well, you got invited, so I guess you’re exclusive,” I say. “But I’m not sure how they mixed up our addresses.”

We might look identical, but we couldn’t lead more different lives.

I run my fingers over the silver lettering on the red velvet invitation. Everything about it screams money, status—all the things important to my sister—things I’ve never bothered with.

“Too bad I’m in Ibiza this Christmas, so I’m not going to be able to make it.” She hums, and I sense her disappointment, even if she’s probably going to have just as much fun and debauchery there. “But...”

She drags out the word, and it might be a twin thing or a sister thing, but I can imagine the devious smile lighting her face without having to see her.

“What are you thinking? And don’t lie and try to tell me it’s nothing.”

“You could go.” Ivy practically squeals in excitement.

“To some billionaire’s holiday sex retreat? Pass.”

“Oh, come on, Lake.” Ivy huffs. “When’s the last time you did something for you?”

Never.

“Never, exactly,” she says, and sometimes I swear she reads my mind. “Your shop closes for two weeks at Christmas, so you can’t even lie to me and tell me you need to work. It’s perfect. Besides, we both know you don’t have Christmas or New Year’s plans.”

“I might,” I lie, as if she’ll believe me.

“Binging Hallmark movies and drowning in ice cream doesn’t count. If you stay there, you’ll just sit around wallowing over your breakup with Josh.”

“It’s fresh.”

“It’s been a year.”

“We were together for four.”

I pull my phone away from my ear and put the call on speaker so I can close my apps. Like somehow Ivy will sense how pathetic I am for having his Instagram account open because I was obsessing over him and his perfect new girlfriend right before she called.

“Lake.” Ivy’s tone is stern. “You need this. Live a little for once in your life.”

As if she doesn’t already do enough of that for both of us.

“You’re the one who got the invite, not me,” I point out.

“So? We’re twins.”

I don’t like where this is going.

“No one would know.” She claps in excitement on the other end of the line.

“Ivy, We’re nothing alike.”

“We’re identical.”

“We were until you went and got your boobs done.”

“Then wear a push-up bra.”

I sink onto the couch and pinch the bridge of my nose.

“You’re considering it.” Her tone is lit with the smile I just know she’s wearing.

“Am not.” I tip my head back and close my eyes.

I’m not, I can’t. This invitation is so far outside of my comfort zone; I’m not sure why I’m even entertaining the idea

right now.

Once more I open my Instagram and a picture of Josh fills the screen. I hate the algorithm. As if I need a reminder that he's the first thing I log in and search. He's moved on, why can't I?

And why does Ivy have to be right?

"Okay, let's just say, for argument's sake, I went..." I groan.

"Yes!" Ivy releases a high-pitched scream. "You need this, Lake. So, so bad. Go, have fun. It's only seven days, then you can go back to your normal, boring life."

"Thanks."

"I'm just saying."

Ivy might love me, but she thinks I'm the most boring person on the planet. I suppose, compared to her, I am.

"What is the Midnight Manor anyway? What would I be walking into?"

"I'm not entirely sure, all the rumors are different, which adds to the mystery. And no one talks about the guy who runs it. All I know is he's got a ridiculous amount of money and apparently knows how to host the hottest holiday party on the planet. I've heard it gets wild."

"How wild?" I bite my lip, not sure why this is so appealing to me right now. Nothing in my life up to this point can be classified as wild.

“Don’t know.” Ivy clicks her tongue. “Guess you’ll have to go and find out.”

“Invitation, miss.” The man at the door looks down at where I’m gripping the red velvet envelope in my hand.

My entrance fee with no escape. This whole scene feels like I’m willingly handing myself over to be held hostage.

All the guests were chauffeured to the property in private cars with blacked-out windows and my cell phone was taken by the driver for privacy reasons. We drove so far that I’m not sure if we’re still in Colorado where my plane landed or another state.

Whoever runs this charade takes privacy to a whole other level.

“Your name, miss?”

I blink up at him, considering running back to the car. “Ivy Aster.”

He scans the list in his hands, and for a moment, he hits the bottom and pauses. His eyes lift, and he looks like he’s going to deny me before something stops him. He places a finger over his earpiece and nods at whatever someone must be saying to him.

“Very well.” I’m not sure if he’s talking to me or the person in his ear, but he reaches a hand out for my invitation, and I give it to him.

His dark eyes skim over me once as I make my way in, adjusting my mask as I do.

As per the instructions on the invitation, the first night is a masquerade. A chance to get to know fellow guests and casually mingle without identities or reservations getting in the way. Supposedly who you are doesn't matter when you step through these doors.

It's a load of crap given the fact that everyone here is clearly rich, powerful, and full of themselves.

I try to bury those thoughts. These are the kind of people Ivy enjoys spending time with, and for the next week, I'm her.

I smooth my fingers over my black silk dress. It cuts low in the front, accentuating my minimal curves, and it dips all the way down in the back, revealing the full length of my spine. My blonde hair is down and curly, just beneath my shoulders, doing barely anything to hide me.

This dress seemed over the top when Ivy sent it to me and suggested I wear it the first night, but looking around at the other women in their floor-length gowns, I'm not out of place at all. And I'm secretly thankful Ivy shipped me an entire wardrobe to wear this week because my jeans and T-shirts would have had me sent home.

Taking in a deep breath, I follow a path of white poinsettias leading the group from the foyer, down a grand hallway. The manor is just as ominous on the inside as it was when I arrived in the car. Everything is large and overly decorated. Dark walls frame cold floors.

It's decorated for Christmas, and yet, doesn't feel holiday-like at all. There's no red or green in sight. Everything is white, blue, silver, and gold. Even the Christmas lights have a warm glow.

I'm not sure if it's the manor, or the fact that I'm well aware I'm entirely out of place here, but I swear I feel eyes on me as I follow the crowd down a long marble hall.

People are mostly quiet, and I can't help hoping I'm not the only one here who's nervous. The men are in perfectly tailored suits, and the women are in dresses similar to mine. Simple, tasteful, but sexy.

"You look nervous." A voice pops up beside me, and I jump, turning to see a redhead wearing a green and gold masquerade mask with a smile so big it's almost enough to light up the dim hallway. "Sorry, didn't mean to scare you."

"It's okay." I shake my head and continue walking, but she keeps pace with me, not leaving my side.

"I'm Stella." She waves her dress out in a quick curtsy as we walk.

"L—" I stop myself, realizing I'm not allowed to be me right now. "I'm Ivy."

"Nice to meet you, Ivy." Stella nods, not noticing my stumble. "Is this your first time?"

"Is it that obvious?"

Stella's blue gaze drops to my mouth, and I realize I'm biting my lower lip.

“Don’t worry, it’s not a bad thing.” She nudges me. “I’m also a newbie. Although, I’ve heard no one is invited here twice, so it makes sense. Rumor is if there are no repeat guests, it’ll help maintain the anonymity of the event.”

It’s the same thing Ivy told me, further confirming the rumors are true.

“So, what made you decide to come?”

“The truth—my sister made me.” I can’t help but laugh, and Stella giggles in return. “She said I need to live a little.”

“I get that.”

I’m not sure she does, seeing as Stella reminds me a lot of Ivy with her bubbly personality and outgoing demeanor.

“What about you?”

“Curiosity.” She winks. “Figured if I was lucky enough to snag an invite, I’d be an idiot to turn it down. Besides, it’s not like I had better plans.”

“Same.”

Although, I’m not sure my life is the same as Stella’s at all. While I look glamorous right now because of my perfectly curled hair and expensive dress, she exudes beauty. Her cheeks glow and her smile is bright. She’s probably around my age. But even if I’m only twenty-five, something about Stella is brighter—shinier.

When the group reaches the end of the long hall, we’re met with double doors that open to a ballroom. And even if the

manor was grand on the outside, I didn't anticipate what I'm met with. A ceiling so high it might as well reach the sky. Chandeliers dripping like falling stars. Walls of poinsettias painting a cool scene that matches the snowy landscape, framed by the large windows stretching two sides of the room.

"Wow." My eyes widen as I take it in.

Stella giggles beside me, and I try to compose myself, realizing I'm giving myself away with my reactions.

"I know right." Stella nudges me sweetly. "This place is out of this world. I'm going to go mingle. But I'll catch you later."

She spins in front of me and winks.

"Nice to meet you, Ivy."

Ivy.

My sister's name spins in my gut as I watch Stella disappear. Knowing Ivy and being her are two different things, and I'm not sure I'm cut out for the challenge.

Running my hands down my sides, I'm reminded I have no pockets. No phone. No Instagram app to obsess over Josh and his girlfriend. It's just me here. And I'm pretending to be another person.

Adjusting my black and gold mask once more, I take in a deep breath to calm my nerves.

Ivy could do this—*I can do this.*

I deserve it. I'm twenty-five and single. I can't spend another three hundred and sixty-five days drowning in boredom and

loneliness. I'm making a change.

Rolling my shoulders back, I make my way through the room, and once again the familiar tingle creeps my spine like there are eyes on me, even if everyone seems lost in conversation.

I should probably take Stella's lead and mingle, but it's not something I'm good at when I'm used to a small town where everyone knows everyone else, and everyone here is a stranger. At least the mask gives me something to hide behind. My shield as I nervously scan the room.

Making my way to the bar, I'm thankful it's stocked with a row of pre-poured glasses of champagne. Maybe the bubbles can get me out of my head. Picking one up, I take a sip to dull my nerves.

I need this. I want this.

After another sip, my confidence rises back up to the surface, and I know it's time to mingle.

I spin around, ready to face my fears, but my view of the room is blocked by a brick wall of a man standing directly in front of me in his perfectly fitted black suit. He's paired it with a black dress shirt, dark gray tie, and simple black mask, like an omen of danger.

With the mask covering half his face, he's partially hidden, but what little I can see leaves a lump in my throat.

He's tall, and the way his suit hugs his lean body and thick shoulders tells me he's likely solid muscle. His square jaw

ticks, and the soft stubble dusting it is somehow perfectly trimmed while giving his polished appearance an edge. His dark hair is styled, but long enough to be tousled, a rogue piece hanging over his forehead as he dips his chin down to look at me.

And those eyes—gray as a stormy sea. A ship's reckoning. They pull me under.

“Hi,” I choke out.

Awkward as ever, I say *hi* to the most gorgeous, masked man I've ever been face to face with. Not that I'm well-versed in masked men, or gorgeous men. Or men in general, seeing as I've only been in one relationship my entire life, and that went down like a sinking ship.

“Good to see you made it.” The man says, tilting his head ever so slightly.

My stomach flips at his attention. His stormy eyes. His words.

He knows my sister well enough to recognize me under the mask, and he was hoping she'd be here.

“Of course.” I take another sip of champagne.

This was a terrible idea. The worst I've ever had. Pretending to be Ivy in a room of strangers is one thing. But she knows this man. And I'm not sure if I'm nervous or jealous as he seems happy to see me—her.

He dips his chin down further, stepping in. Close enough to drown my senses in his rich cinnamon scent.

“Enjoying my party?”

Lakeyn

“THIS IS *your* party?”

I should have guessed.

Unlike the rest of the men here, slightly nervous, not knowing what to expect, the one standing in front of me is completely relaxed. His shoulders are pulled back and something about the wicked dark smile he offers at my question feels ominous.

He nods, not taking his gray eyes off me.

“And you know who I am?”

“I know everyone here.” He tilts his chin down once more, bringing his mouth near my ear as he trails his fingers gently down my arm, leaving a path of goosebumps in their wake.

“But you... I’ve been keeping an eye out for.”

That would explain why I’ve felt eyes on me since the moment I stepped through the doors.

His fingers pause at the back of my hand before pulling it away, sending a shiver skittering up my spine. Every hair on the back of my neck stands tall, and for a moment I forget he's looking at me like I'm my sister—saying things to me because he thinks I'm her.

I've never wished so much to be myself and for this stranger to be speaking to me.

He pulls back, and I straighten, hoping he didn't catch the disappointed frown that probably just ghosted my face, as I slip back into my sister's façade.

"I'm not sure I remember you," I say, secretly hoping they don't know each other well enough for him to think it's an odd statement.

The man smirks.

Wicked. Devious.

His head once more ticks to the side as he takes me in.

"Adam Kingsley," he says, seemingly unfazed by my statement. "We bumped shoulders once in LA."

I nod, not sure what to make of the fact that he saw my sister once and decided to invite her to his getaway. It's either flattering or slightly stalkerish, but this entire event is borderline twisted, so who am I to judge?

"Well, it's nice to meet you. *Officially.*" I take a sip of champagne like he's the kind of man you need to chase with something—anything—to survive the chaos he'll wreck inside. "I'm Ivy."

His expression pinches, so fleeting I almost miss it. And I'm not sure why he flinched at my sister's name, but he just nods, not saying anything.

Licking the champagne from my lips, Adam's gaze drops to them. And I can't help but wonder if this is how men always look at my sister. With fascination. With interest. The way his eyes light turns my core molten, and I can barely contain the flutters that kick up as an amused smirk climbs his cheeks.

It's almost as if he can see me squirm under his stare. Because I do, I can't help it. Ivy might be used to men like him—rich, powerful, confident—but inside I shrink. And the smallest part of me is jealous. Knowing he's only interested in me because he thinks I'm her.

I take a step back to make some space. I can barely breathe between Adam's closeness, his cinnamon cologne, and the champagne going straight to my head.

He opens his mouth to say something, but a man comes up to his left, and he pauses. The man leans in and whispers something to Adam. But even if he's listening, Adam doesn't take his eyes off me. Of all the men in the room, I had to draw the attention of the one I sense I shouldn't. The man hosting this madness.

But while I should be scared, instead, I'm curious.

Who is the man behind the Midnight Manor and why can't he take his eyes off me?

“I’ll be right there.” Adam nods at whatever the man in the suit says, holding up his hand and waving him off.

Alone again, Adam steps toward me, and I can’t help but retreat a step, like it’ll save me from this magnetic pull I feel drawing me to him. But there’s nowhere to go, and with one more step, my legs strike the table behind me, and I’m trapped.

“Nervous?” Adam looks almost amused as he adjusts his cufflinks.

Even those are gold and expensive, like everything in this room.

With Adam this close, I get a better look at the black mask framing his stormy gray eyes. It’s more intricate than I initially realized, with a design weaved into it. Everything about him feels like a secret I want to uncover.

“A little,” I admit since he doesn’t seem like a man who misses any of my tells as I shift from one foot to the other and fidget. “What is all this?”

Adam smirks, so close to a smile I’m tempted to capture it to hold the warmth it draws inside me.

“The party?”

“This whole week. The party. The getaway. The invitation. What is it?” We’re all here on blind faith, and I can’t be the only one wondering, even if everyone else in the room probably knows better than to ask.

“It’s whatever you want it to be.” Adam drops his hands to his sides, even though there’s nothing relaxed about him. “Stay and find out for yourself.”

“I thought there was no leaving.” It’s what the invite said.

Not until the clock strikes midnight on New Year’s Eve and the cars arrive once more to whisk us away.

“Technically, you could try.” Adam reaches for my hair, brushing my curls behind my ear, before trailing his fingers down my neck. And I swear I’ve never been touched by a man with the way it lights my skin on fire because Adam makes my past year of celibacy feel like a lifetime. “But I might be tempted to chase you if you did.”

Heat pools in my belly as his fingers brush down my throat, my shoulder, my arm. A path that might as well be gasoline, and his devious stare is the match to ignite it.

I’m fighting for air, frozen with my empty champagne glass on the verge of shattering from my grip. And as Adam pulls back and smirks, there’s no doubt he’s relishing in the blush burning my cheeks.

“I have to attend to some things.” He straightens his suit jacket. “But tonight, you’re mine, unless you’ve already decided to run.”

He smirks, turning and walking away without so much as glancing back.

You’re mine.

I'm not sure what that means. But as my eyes follow Adam, disappearing through the crowd, and I take in the slowly evolving scene, I'm positive I'm in over my head.

People are already getting handsy and comfortable. And the silence from the hallway, when we all arrived, is now being filled with giggles and conversation.

"Welcome," Adam's voice echoes through the room, and I nearly jump.

I'm not sure a voice has ever been a turn-on before, but everything about the man now standing at the base of the staircase makes my head swim.

Adam rubs his palms together in front of him, facing the room. And we all fall silent for him.

"Thank you all for coming to my little party."

Little is the last word I'd use to describe it. And from his amused smile, I'm sure he knows that.

"For the next week, I want you to feel free to make my home, your home. Everywhere you can access is within limits. And beyond that, there are none apart from the code you agreed to before arriving."

Code is a loose word for the paragraph at the end of the waiver I signed in the car. It boiled down to *consent is required*, but past that, anything agreed upon is fair game. And while I wasn't sure why that was necessary, it's quickly becoming clear.

“If you need anything, my staff is on hand twenty-four seven to assist.” He claps his hands, and I jump, drawing the attention of the few people around me. “Other than that, enjoy. And happy holidays.”

I’m not sure a holiday greeting has ever been masked in the kind of wickedness his statement bleeds. But two words and I’ve never craved the holidays more.

Claps and a few whistles come from the crowd as Adam disappears with two men in suits, and I turn back to the bar to replace my empty champagne glass with a full one.

The invite and rumors might have suggested this holiday retreat is for indulging fantasies, but I assumed it was exaggerated. This kind of thing is for movies, not the real world.

Holiday parties are for dinner, dancing, fancy reindeer games, or something equally ridiculous. But as the room loosens and the evening progresses, I realize any rumors might be truer than I thought.

And I’ve never been so far from home.

Digging in my purse, I fish out the card I was handed when I turned over my invitation. It’s a small key card with a room number on the back.

“Already leaving?” A man’s voice comes up beside me, and I tuck my card away.

Spinning around, I’m faced with someone a little taller than me, and clearly muscular from how his shoulders barely fit in

his suit jacket. His navy-blue mask matches his suit, and it's only a shade darker than his blue eyes.

"It's been a long night." I nod politely and try to step around him, but he shifts to block my path.

"Want some company?" His eyes dip to where my dress cuts low in the front. "We could ring in the celebrations."

I shake my head. "I think I'm going to find my room."

"Maybe tomorrow then?" His eyes are still fixed on me as he once more shifts when I try to move around him.

"She'll be busy." A familiar voice coming from behind me sends my heart racing.

The man in blue's eyes move over my shoulder and widen. I don't have to turn to know it's Adam. I smell him, hear him, feel him. A part of me even fears him. Yet somehow, I suddenly feel safe.

"Of course." The man in blue nods once, taking an immediate step back. "Enjoy your night."

He disappears so fast I barely have time to blink before Adam is the one in front of me instead.

Adam's stormy eyes are focused on something over my shoulder, and he tips his chin up, having a silent conversation with someone at a distance before his attention is back on me.

"Are you okay?" he asks.

"I—" I don't know anymore. I want to run, and I want to indulge. I'm so far in over my head; I'm getting offers from

random men. Yet, as Adam stands in front of me, my resistance falters. “What is this, Adam?”

My question forces his eyebrows into a pinch as he examines me closer, but I’m not sure what he’s looking for.

“Clarify.”

I roll my shoulders back, trying my best to find my composure around a man who seems to make me lose it.

“Well... I thought this was a holiday retreat.”

“It is.”

“Then why does it feel like more?”

My question hangs heavy between us, and even in a room full of people, all I feel is the attention of the man standing in front of me.

“Tell me something.” He tilts his head, looking me over. “What are you most afraid of?”

“You’re avoiding my question.”

And I’m avoiding his. I don’t like to think about my fears. That would require giving them validation when I came here for an escape.

“Humor me.” Adam watches me shuffle from one foot to the other but stands unmoving.

“I don’t know.” I shrug. “I guess the unknown.”

He nods his head, accepting my response. “Why?”

“Why?” I breathe out a nervous chuckle, repeating his question. “Because I like knowing what to expect. Is there something wrong with that?”

“No.”

I’m not sure how one word, delivered with such certainty, can be instantly calming, but it is. I stop shifting and freeze in place.

I’ve been told by everyone in my life how annoying it is that I’m a planner. That I want to know exactly what to expect in any given situation. And even if I have my reasons, they guilt me for it.

But here Adam is, saying the one word I didn’t know I was desperate to hear until it left his lips.

No... there’s nothing wrong with me.

“I understand the need for control.” Adam’s voice drops like it’s a secret between the two of us. “But that’s why I’ve gifted you this week.”

“Me?”

“Yes, you.” He nods once, before lifting his gaze to quickly sweep the room. “And everyone else.”

My heart sinks, even if it shouldn’t, because this retreat is obviously not just about me. It’s technically not about me at all. Ivy was the one he invited.

“The pressure can be overwhelming sometimes, can’t it?” he asks, once more pulling my attention. “Too much, almost?”

My answer chokes in my throat and all I can do is nod in response.

“So let go.” His expression softens, and an almost uninhibited smile ghosts his cheeks. “You asked me what this week is, and that’s your answer. It’s an escape. It’s freedom. Tell me, what’s your fantasy, baby girl?”

Baby girl.

I’m pretty sure he just answered his own question.

“I—” But I’m not sure what to say because I’ve never wasted time with fantasies. I don’t entertain dreams or focus on unattainable things. “I don’t know.”

Adam leans down to my ear once more, his body heat lighting me up in flames. “Then spend the night with me and let me help you figure it out.”

Lakeyn

I KNOW BETTER THAN to accept the offer of a one-night stand from a stranger. I'm smart enough to know nothing good comes from uninhibited indulgence.

But as Adam follows me to my room, I don't care what warnings echo loudly in my head. All I want is whatever escape he's offering. Blindly trusting the feeling of this moment.

The hallway leading to my room is endless, like the rest of the manor. It's dark and dimly lit with outdated gold sconces. The wallpaper is similar to Adam's mask. Nearly black, with a pattern almost the same color, so you'd have to get really close to make out the design.

It's a maze, and every step takes me deeper with a man I probably shouldn't trust myself with.

We turn another corner, and Adam steps ahead of me, leading the way as we continue down a hallway that requires another swipe of my card to access.

What kind of person lives in a place like this?

What kind of man throws annual sex parties for the rich, powerful, and famous?

What kind of girl follows him to indulge her own curiosities?

Finally, Adam stops us at a large door at the end of the hall. *One-hundred thirty-three* is carved in the thick mahogany. *My room.*

Apart from us, the hallway is empty with no other guests in sight. The manor must be massive to keep us spaced this far apart.

“May I?” Adam takes out his own key card, which is black instead of gold like mine. He swipes it once and the door swings open.

I shouldn’t be surprised he has access to every room, and it should be unsettling. But all it does is make me curious how he uses that to his advantage.

“Do you do this often?” I walk past him when he steps aside, waving a hand out to guide me through.

Adam smirks but doesn’t answer, and it’s probably for the best. I don’t need to know what number I am on his list. Holiday party or not.

He flicks on a light as I step through the door, and I’m met with a large space. More modern than I expected. The walls are a cool gray, and on one side is a king-size four-poster bed. There’s a simple desk and couch. No clutter. Nothing framed to decorate the walls. Clean, simple, classic.

Like the man who walks past me, stripping off his tie and jacket as he does.

When he reaches the bed, he pauses, turning to face me.

“Shy?” He smirks darkly, and it’s enough to ruin a girl for life.

I’m frozen just inside the door to the room. Survival instincts begging me to retreat, while Adam’s gaze is magnetic and drawing me toward him. The pull of a man who wouldn’t give me the time of day if he knew who I really was. But tonight, it doesn’t matter. I’m my sister, and she’s spontaneous enough to not pass up this opportunity.

“No.” I hope he doesn’t notice it catches in my throat.

Digging deep, I focus on the sliver of confidence I normally bury. I hold tight and let it fuel me as I take a step forward. Then another one.

I smooth my hands over my belly to calm my nerves and appreciate how Adam’s eyes linger on the dip in my dress for only a moment before finding my gaze again. How he doesn’t break his stare as he watches me walk to him.

We both know where this is headed. Full speed. And I need it.

Stopping in front of him, I reach for his shirt, but he catches my wrists before I make contact. He holds my hands an inch away from touching him. Behind his mask, his stormy eyes brew with something I can’t define. It hauls me out to sea with him, and there’s no coast in sight.

Adam tugs my wrists to pull me closer while maintaining the gap my body is desperate to close. “Tell me what you want, baby girl.”

Like he senses my need. His gaze drops to my throat, and I swear my heartbeat echoes in this quiet room. My pulse thunders and my breaths run wild. Adam’s grip is firm on my wrists, and I’ve never wanted anyone to take control more than I want it from him. I want to hand him the reins I’m used to holding so I don’t have to right now.

Even if it’s just for a moment.

“I want you to touch me.”

I’ve never needed a man’s touch more.

“*Touch* you? Are you sure that’s all you want?” Adam’s lips tilt in a devilish smile. He steps closer, until my hands are trapped between our bodies and his face hovers over my own. “Or do you want me to pin you face-down on the bed with your perfect ass in the air while I fuck you until your legs can’t move and your throat is raw from screaming for mercy? Which is it?”

The second one. Definitely the second one.

“Maybe what you said.” It’s barely a whisper.

“I don’t work with maybes, baby girl.” Adam’s tone is firm. “What I have planned for you requires a yes or no.”

I swallow hard at the breath catching in my throat. “Yes.”

He releases my wrists, brushing a rogue hair off my face. “You like control. I understand that. And I can tell you struggle with the thought of relinquishing your power to me, even if deep down you want to. But you need to understand that if we do this, that’s exactly what I’m going to expect.”

He cups my jaw with one hand. “I’ll give you everything you don’t realize you so desperately need if you let me. I’ll fuck you so hard, you won’t have to think anymore. And you’ll trust me because there will be no other option. Is that what you want?”

I nod slowly, falling into his gravity as I do.

“Use your words.”

“Yes.”

“Perfect.” He brushes the back of his fingers across my jaw, and I don’t know if he’s referring to my answer or to me, but either way, it wraps me like a warm blanket. “Tell me, baby girl, what is your limit?”

“I don’t know.”

All I know is that I haven’t come close to reaching it.

“So sweet.” He grabs my waist and spins me around, pulling my back to his chest, before turning us both so I’m pinned between him and the bed. “So innocent.”

His touch is firm without being aggressive. His hold precise. I’ve never been touched like this, held like this, treated like this. Like he can see I’m capable of handling more. While Josh always treated me like I was fragile, Adam touches me like

I'm the embodiment of strength. And even with all his power, he asked me to hand it over.

He's giving me permission to let go. To trust him.

Adam's fingers trail my spine with gentle purpose and my entire body tingles. Touch on the verge of sweetness. A holiday devil toying with his prize.

"You don't know your limits." His fingers pause on my zipper, before slowly dragging it down over my ass. "Then let's see if we can find them."

He reaches up and brushes the straps from my shoulders in a swift move that puddles my dress at my feet and leaves me exposed. And even if my back is to him, he sees all of me. His hands roam *all* of me. Grazing a vulnerability I've never trusted with anyone.

I don't hand over my power. I don't lose control or let go. But that's all Adam makes me want to do.

"I'm a man with very specific tastes." Adam's lips graze the shell of my ear. "You run, I'll chase. You beg, I'll give you more than you realize you can handle. I will meet your limits every time. And together, we will push them. So do me a favor and remember something."

"What?" I choke on the word as he plants a kiss on my neck.

"*Midnight.*" He trails lower, brushing his lips along my throat. "It's the only word that will stop me."

His game. *His rules.*

And my god, he makes me want to play.

His mouth runs the length of my neck, and back up again, until his mouth is at my ear.

“Midnight is your safe word. If you use it, I will stop. So engrain it in that beautiful brain of yours. Because I lose myself at the sight of you.”

I wish he was talking about me, Lakeyn. Not my sister.

I wish I was brave enough to tell him right now that I’m not who he thinks I am. I’m a fraud trying to escape my pathetic life for one holiday. Instead, I stay silent, not ready to let this go.

“Are you ready to play?”

Adam presses his palm flat on the center of my back, pressing my chest down to fold me over the bed.

“Yes,” I choke out, gripping the comforter as he forces me into it.

“Yes, sir.” A sharp sting comes with the connection of his palm on my bare ass, and I can’t help but jump from the shock of it.

The energy in the room shifts with Adam’s changing demeanor, and the need for a safe word is suddenly clear, even if I’m nowhere near using it.

“Yes, sir,” I whisper.

He flattens his palm on my ass, where he just spanked me, rubbing gently. “You’re so receptive, baby girl. So perfect. I’m

going to enjoy trying to break you.”

I should be offended or attempting to escape. Instead, I find myself moaning at his soothing touch. At how the sting of his palm erases all thoughts, and for once, all I do is feel.

“Too much?” he asks, rubbing his palm over my ass.

I shake my head. It’s not, I want more. A masked man has me naked, bent over the bed. He’s still fully clothed, and I’ve never even seen his full face. Still, I find myself pressing back toward his touch, needing everything he has to offer.

A cool breeze is all the warning I get before his hand lands on my other ass cheek, harder this time. I can’t help but jump at the contact, but his hold on the center of my back keeps me in place.

“So good at taking your punishment.” He spanks my ass again, before soothing me with the graze of his palm over my tender flesh.

“What are you punishing me for?” I try to turn and look at him over my shoulder, but he stops me with his hand in my hair, wrapping the blonde strands around his fist and tugging at it as he bends down to me.

“For driving me fucking insane.” He pulls back, still not releasing my hair as his hand spanks my ass again.

This is sick, wrong. A stranger is spanking me in his sex manor, and I’ve never been more turned on in my life. My thighs clench as I soak through my thong.

I consider burying my face in the mattress like it could be enough, but as I hear the unbuckling of his belt, followed by the familiar sound of a zipper, my stomach flutters.

Adam releases me, and there's a rustling of a wrapper, before his hand is once more on the small of my back, pressing me down. He runs a finger over my ass, through my thong, pulling it to the side instead of taking it off.

“What's your safe word, baby girl?” He presses his hips forward and his thick cock slides between my legs.

“Midnight.”

“Correct. And do you need to use it?”

“No.”

“Good girl.” Two words and he drives his hips forward, forcing the breath from my chest.

My fingers dig into the bedsheet as he grips the mounds of my ass cheeks.

“Fuck.” Adam holds my hips against him. “Your pussy is choking my cock.”

I take a deep breath, trying to adjust to the feel of him—the size of him. He's too large. Too much. Everything I've never known I needed.

Slowly, he pulls back, before brutally thrusting forward again. The scream that rips from my throat is half pleasure, half pain.

But he doesn't slow down. He drives into me from behind with such force I can barely breathe, pressing his palm on my back and shoving me into the mattress.

The wooden edge of the footboard digs into my thighs with every thrust, and I'm sure he'll leave bruises, but I don't want him to stop. I don't want him to ever stop as he grips my hair with his free hand and tugs it. One hand still holding me down, I arch for him. Screaming, begging, praying.

Pressure building with every hard thrust.

He fucks me like he hates me and wants to work me out of his system. It's not gentle or sweet. It's mean. Harsh. Something I didn't know I wanted and now I'm living for it.

Building for it.

He wraps an arm around my waist at the same time as he tugs my hair, lifting me up off the bed. He pulls my back to his still fully clothed chest, and I'm forced to balance on my tip toes to keep from falling over as he continues to thrust in.

Reaching behind me, I wrap my arms up and around his neck to hold on.

"You're everything I thought you would be," he whispers in my ear, releasing my hair to snake his hand around my chest and grab my breast, palming it with his large hand. "Everything I dreamed you'd be."

I imagine his words are for me. That in this moment he knows who I really am, and he wants this as much as I want him.

“Adam,” I moan.

“Yes, baby girl?” He holds me tightly, one arm around my chest and the other around my waist as he fucks me.

“I—” My breath hitches. It stutters. “I need...”

But I can’t finish a coherent thought. I can’t think for the first time in years.

“You want to come for me?” He reads my mind, his hand slipping down between my legs, and his finger runs circles over my clit.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, sir.”

I’m breathless. Thoughtless. Empty and full at the same time. I’m clay he’s molding with his hands.

“Then come on my cock.” He bites my neck hard enough that I know he’ll leave a mark. “Chase what you need. Come for *me*.”

He thrusts in again, and I start to shake.

Erupt.

I might have never had a real orgasm before in my life because what shudders through me is an explosion. Flutters from my core to my toes.

Adam thrusts in hard and his whole body tenses. But instead of letting go, he bends me back over the bed, my orgasm still shaking through me.

He presses me to the mattress with my ass high in the air for him, and in a swift movement, he pulls out. Something snaps, and before I can process it's the condom coming off, the first warm hit of his release paints my ass. He shoots himself all over my back and grunts through it. One spurt after another coating me.

Marking me.

Only once he relaxes his grip does he slow. He sweeps his hand over me, through his release, dragging it down with his fingers and wiping it between my ass cheeks.

I look over my shoulder, and he's painting my ass with his cum. A satisfied smirk spreads across his face, as his dark-gray eyes flick upward, catching me staring. Only then does he pull back, wiping his hand over my ass.

"You need to get some sleep." His expression slips, even if he doesn't take his eyes off me. He's still masked and fully clothed, and I realize this stranger I've barely gotten a glimpse of just fucked me in the dirtiest way I've ever been taken.

"Sleep," I repeat, trying to process what he's saying as I'm still bent over the bed with his cum painting my back.

He nods. "It's going to be a long week."

Adam tucks his shirt in and zips his pants up. An unrecognizable hesitation as he looks me over. And when he takes another step back, the distance feels even greater. Then he takes another, slowly walking away.

“You’re leaving?” It’s mumbled, sad. I hope he doesn’t hear it because of course he’s leaving. He got what he wanted. And so did I.

Why am I still disappointed?

Adam freezes, looking back at me, standing there for a moment, before walking back toward the bed. He grips my elbow and helps me up, turning me to stand, facing him. The softest expression I’ve seen yet colors his face as he reaches up and peels my mask off, before stripping off his own, and putting the full force of his chiseled features on display.

I’m not sure how a face can take my breath away, but his does. It’s familiar yet foreign. And something about him feels like we’ve met, even if it’s impossible.

“I was grabbing something to clean up.” He brushes my curls from my eyes, and cups my jaw with his hand, my heart fluttering in response. “Don’t worry. I’m not leaving you, baby girl. You’re mine now.”

Lakeyn

WHEN A MAN SAYS he isn't leaving but still disappears before you wake up, it should be a warning. But if I was looking for a red flag, those were waving long before I woke up alone in my bed this morning.

Somewhere between letting a man who thinks I'm my sister fuck me, and not minding that he spanked me before painting me in his release, I lost sight of right and wrong. And as I came down from the most intense orgasm of my life, one thing was clear—I don't care.

This week I'm going to do exactly what I set out to do. I'm going to free myself from the pressures of my day-to-day routine. And when I leave and return to my perfectly planned out life, it will be with the knowledge I did something for myself. Even if it was just for seven days.

It doesn't matter if Adam went back on what he said, even if my night with him was freeing—intense—orgasmic. There's plenty of fun to be had here with or without him. I'm going to enjoy myself as much as everyone else.

“Someone looks like they had a good night.” Stella slides up beside me and knocks my shoulder with her own.

Her red hair is up in a messy bun on the top of her head, and she’s wearing blue silk pajamas. Without her mask, she looks younger, barely twenty-one. And her freckle-spotted cheeks draw out her innocence.

This morning, everyone is more relaxed, stripped of the evening gowns. And even if their pajamas are probably just as expensive as their suits and dresses, they’re less intimidating.

The majority of the guests are filtering into the dining hall for breakfast, so it’s easier to get a sense of the group. If I had to guess, there are around fifty people here in total, with an almost even split between men and women. And right now, the majority are wearing nothing more than pajamas. Which is why I don’t feel ashamed or out of place that I forgot my bra when I slipped into a pair of black silk pajama pants and a pale pink tank top. My nipples peeking through is nothing compared to some of the lace.

Unlike last night, when people kept an appropriate amount of distance, this morning people are pairing off—sometimes grouping off. They’re handsy, comfortable, some nearly fucking on top of their pancakes.

The scene is quickly changing, and I can only imagine what another six days will bring.

“You’re zoned out girl.” Stella pops a piece of bacon in her mouth, and her eyes roll back like she’s mid-orgasm at the taste of it. “I’m taking that as a yes.”

“Sorry.” I spin around and add another pancake to the stack on my plate, unable to get enough of anything this morning after what happened last night. “Yes, I had a good night. You?”

“*Good* would be an understatement.” Stella leans her hip against the table and winks. “More like a dream come true—if it was the dirtiest dream there is.”

At least that’s something we can agree on. Dirty dreams don’t come close to what Adam did to me. The invitations might as well say to leave morals and inhibitions at the door.

“It’s not what I was expecting, that’s for sure.” I drown my pancakes in syrup and follow Stella to an empty table at the edge of the room. “Although, I guess I should have.”

“Same. I can see why no one is invited to this thing twice. If I was here long enough, I’d never leave.” Stella drops down into the seat beside me and starts chewing another piece of bacon. “Not to mention that hunk-of-sin who runs this thing. I swear I almost melted at the sight of him. Did you see him last night?”

See him.

Feel him.

Let him use me like his plaything.

I nod and stuff my mouth with pancakes before I say any of that.

“He’s something unholy, that’s for sure.” Stella picks at her food, clearly not as hungry as I am because I can’t stop eating.

“Too bad he mostly keeps to himself. I heard he doesn’t even actually live here. He’s from LA or something.”

It would make sense, given that’s where he ran into my sister.

“What does he do?” I probably shouldn’t sound too curious, but I can’t help myself.

“Not sure.” Stella shrugs. “Helps run the family business, whatever that means. You know rich businessmen. No one actually knows what they do. Besides, he doesn’t need money to be hot. I’d fuck him even if he didn’t have a penny to his name.”

I shouldn’t care that Stella thinks Adam is attractive. It’s an observation probably shared by every woman in this room. But it doesn’t stop my stomach from twisting at the thought of him tiring of me after last night and moving on to any one of them.

“You okay?” Stella’s eyebrows pinch in concern, and I realize I’ve stopped eating. “You just got a little pale.”

“I’m fine,” I lie.

She doesn’t look like she believes me, but we aren’t close enough that she’ll push the subject.

“Anyway, let me know if you see him around.” Stella’s gaze skims the crowd, before landing back on me. “I heard he doesn’t usually play at these things, but that’s probably just a rumor started by some girl trying to keep others away from him. The man runs a week-long holiday sex party every year. I

don't believe for a second that he doesn't enjoy the perks of it."

She cocks an eyebrow, and I feel the heat rushing to my cheeks, knowing the answer she's looking for.

Adam definitely enjoys these holiday retreats, and I know how much.

Luckily, she ignores my reaction to her statement when she's distracted by something across the room. A devious smile ticks in the corner of Stella's mouth, and she sets her napkin on the table.

"Speaking of something hot that needs enjoyment." She pushes her chair out and stands up. "I'll catch you later, okay?"

I follow her gaze and it lands on a man who just walked through the door wearing nothing but a pair of blue sweatpants. Not even socks. His gaze heats as it connects with Stella, and I can guess why she's in such a good mood this morning.

"Enjoy," I say as she walks away.

I'm not used to this kind of sexual freedom—or general freedom—for that matter. But as I watch Stella practically skip to the man in the doorway and jump into his arms when she reaches him, I wonder what it is about the Midnight Manor that makes people want to indulge.

Picking up my fork, I stab another bite of pancakes, but even if I'm starving, I can't seem to enjoy them after what Stella

said. It's not like I expected Adam to be chaste given he's the host of these events. But I don't like the idea that I'm just another woman he'll use until midnight comes and reality whisks me away.

"You need to eat more than that if you're going to keep your energy up." Adam's voice tickles my spine at the same time as his cinnamon scent floods the air around me.

Fingers graze the peak of my shoulder, before trailing my arm, and I feel his body heat even with the gap of space he maintains between himself and the back of my chair.

"I'm not hungry anymore." I set down my fork.

He hums, brushing my hair aside. "Guess I underestimated your stamina, baby girl."

My heart is racing as his fingers trail my throat, pausing at my pulse, giving me away like the traitor it is.

"Guess we have that in common." It comes out snappier than intended, but I'm finding it impossible to simmer my irritation.

Adam presses closer, leaning down to bring his mouth by my ear. "Something bothering you this morning?"

"No."

It's a lie so big it might as well fill the room.

"Your heartbeat says otherwise." He presses his fingers firmly on my pulse, reading me so well for someone who doesn't know me at all. "Come with me."

A command.

An order.

He doesn't give me a chance to deny him before standing up and grabbing onto my chair, helping me scoot it out before offering me his hand.

It's borderline gentlemanly if I didn't know what this devilish man is capable of.

I accept, and he pulls me to stand in front of him. With daylight casting a bright glow into the room, Adam almost appears approachable. His hair is a lighter shade of brown with coppery streaks, and the scruff on his jaw is more pronounced.

But his stoic expression and clothes give him away.

Adam is wearing dress slacks and a button-up shirt even though it's barely seven in the morning. I can't help but wonder if he's dressed down a day in his life, or if it's that important for him to always maintain appearances. And even if the top two buttons are popped and his sleeves are rolled up to reveal his thick forearms, everything about him exudes the power he refuses to hand over in any situation.

Adam guides us along the edge of the room, sticking to the side with fewer people. And I can't help but think about what Stella said. Why host these events if you're only going to participate in secret?

When he reaches a doorway tucked beside the same one the staff has been using, he swipes his card and pulls it open. Stepping aside, he holds it for me, waiting until I'm through before shutting it behind us.

We're in another hallway, unsurprisingly. Midnight Manor is a maze built to get lost in. This particular hallway must connect with the kitchen because there are carts filled with fresh trays of fruit, waiting to refill the buffet when needed.

But right now, there's no staff in sight. It's just me and Adam.

"Talk to me." He steps back, crossing his arms across his chest.

While he always seems completely relaxed and in control, I feel the opposite standing in front of him. Shifting from foot to foot, rubbing my arms with my hands.

"There's nothing to talk about." I shrug, rubbing my arms once more.

He narrows his gaze and his eyes skim from where I'm biting my lower lip to my chest. His full focus is on my nipples, and I can't help that the hallway is just cool enough, and his attention makes me just excited enough that they're hard at the sight of him.

"I could have brought you breakfast." His jaw clenches as his gaze slides back to mine and he takes a step forward.

"I didn't need you to." I shrug again, more nervous with every step he closes the distance. "Besides you weren't there, so how would I have asked you to?"

"I had to step away and take care of some business. But my staff could have come to get me."

“Your staff?” I almost laugh because I can’t tell if he’s actually being serious suggesting I would have asked his staff to summon him.

“That’s what they’re here for.” He steps closer.

I cross my arms over my chest. “Right. Available twenty-four seven.”

“Exactly.” He ignores the sarcasm dripping from my tone. “You’re upset I left you.”

“No, I’m not.” It would be ridiculous. Obsessive. Absurd. I just met him, and I’m still getting over Josh. Adam can come and go as he pleases.

“You are.” He brushes the back of his hand over my jaw, reading me. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. Business, right?” I narrow my eyes and try my best to seem unaffected, even if I feel myself failing miserably. “What kind of work do you do anyway?”

My question shifts Adam’s expression, and he drops his hand. “We don’t need to talk about me.”

Interesting.

“Why?”

“Because I’d rather talk about you.” He plants his hand on the wall beside my head, leaning in close.

After dating someone who lied to me for half of our relationship, I’m well aware of what it looks like when a man is hiding something.

“So that’s it then? You can fuck me, but I don’t get to know anything about you?”

Adam tilts his head to the side, and I’m not sure what he’s reading on my expression, but he looks puzzled. “It’s irrelevant to what we’re doing here.”

“Which is what exactly?” I roll my shoulders back and drop my hands to the sides. “I’m sorry, Adam, are my questions ruining your little sex party? You’d rather the women here be too busy screwing around to ask questions. It’s not like I’m asking for your life story. But the basics would be nice.”

“Fiery this morning.” He ignores my irritation, seeming amused by it instead. “You make quite a few assumptions in that busy mind of yours.”

“That’s what happens when I’m left to fill in the blanks.”

“I’m not trying to upset you.” He looks me over, his eyes pinching. “But I’m not nearly as interesting as you are, baby girl. So I’d rather keep this about you.”

I hate that my stomach flutters at his comment. It’s easier to stay angry with him than to hold onto whatever this is.

“What do you need?” Adam lifts a hand to my jaw, grazing his thumb over my cheek. “Clearly, I missed something.”

“Why do you care?”

“Because...” He trails his fingers along my jaw like he’s tracing me—memorizing me. “You’re mine.”

“I’m not anyone’s.”

“Whatever you say.” He smirks, definitely amused now and not believing me. “You need to shut that beautiful mind of yours off for a moment and trust me.”

“Because God forbid, I overanalyze this and ruin your fun?” Now I am being fiery. I feel it in my bones. Every instinct of mine pushing back against what Adam’s presence makes me want to do—submit.

“No.” He shakes his head. “Because you spend your whole life thinking. This week, you deserve not to.”

He says it like he knows me when he doesn’t.

“Turn off this beautiful mind for me. Let me spend the week thinking for you. Promise, I’ll make it worth your while.”

Adam drops his hand and takes a step back, the distance cool and endless as he does. I’m tempted to grab his shirt and pull him to me, but my cautious side makes me pause. He’s answered every question with a question. I know nothing real about this man except what he’s capable of doing to my body. Still, I can’t turn away.

“I’m sorry for leaving this morning without letting you know where I was going.”

His apology is sincere enough that I don’t know what to make of it. I’m overreacting for no reason. I have no claim over this man. But he doesn’t seem affected by the fact that I’m upset. Instead, he sounds genuinely sorry.

“Go, enjoy your breakfast, and I’ll find you later.” He grabs a strawberry off the fruit tray in the hallway beside us.

Bringing it to my mouth. He must will me to open it because I do it without thinking, and he slides the strawberry in, running his thumb over my bottom lip. “Eat something substantial. Big day ahead. You’re going to need it.”

At that, he winks and walks away.

Adam

“QUITE THE GIRL YOU’VE got there.” Cillian stands tall with his arms crossed over his chest as I walk into the room. “Good to know someone is capable of ruffling your feathers.”

“What am I? A fucking bird?”

Cillian just chuckles, dropping into the chair on the other side of my desk, while I sit facing him. The irritating smirk still present as he stares at me because he’s not an idiot.

I’m royally fucked.

Inviting her here was a mistake, but I couldn’t help it. And now that she’s walked through the doors, I’m tempted to chain her up in the basement so I’ll never have to watch her walk away again.

A thought that makes me sound unhinged, if not a little psychotic. But this girl drives me insane. Ever since the first time I saw her six months ago, I haven’t been able to get the image of her sweet eyes and white-blonde hair out of my mind.

I'm not the kind of man who gets attached—especially when it comes to women. I don't obsess about them. I don't get hung up on simple nonsense like her distinct vanilla scent.

She breaks every fucking rule and then some.

The reason I invited her to my ridiculous holiday gathering was to fuck her out of my system. I assumed if I could just get a taste I'd be over her as quickly as I am anything else. If only it didn't do the exact opposite.

The way she moaned for me.

Came for me.

Submitted to me.

The way she looked with her perfect ass in the air and the way she sounded with my name ripping from her lungs. I had no other choice but to pull out and mark her with my cum. And fuck if the sight of claiming her didn't stir up something foreign.

“You're fucked, man.” Cillian chuckles, raking his short, brown hair back.

“What would you know?”

Cillian's worse than me when it comes to women.

At least I've had a brief relationship or two. While he's never spent more than a few nights with the same person. Not that his lifestyle makes commitment easy to come by. Between working as my bodyguard and his own family ties he's been avoiding, he doesn't stay in one place long. That and the fact

that he's only twenty-seven and enjoying his last bit of freedom until his father inevitably summons him to his obligations; Cillian has no interest in settling down.

"I know how I saw you look at her." Cillian rests one ankle on the opposite knee and leans back. "Does she even know?"

"No."

She doesn't need to.

Lake introduced herself as Ivy, so clearly, she's pretending to be her sister for one reason or another. I need to hold off to see how that plays out. Besides, if she thinks I'm only fucking her because she's pretending to be her socialite twin, she won't know the real reason.

Cillian drops his feet to the floor and leans forward, elbows on his knees. "I'm going to enjoy this, boss."

"What?"

"Watching some chick ruin the future head of the Kingsley empire."

"Not sure what you're talking about."

"I think you do."

I stand up, pushing away from my desk. "I don't pay you to think."

Cillian stays seated, shaking his head and watching me walk over to the bar in the corner. I pour myself a drink, knowing it's too early but not giving a shit. This is the only week of the year I've got free reign to not think about all the crap back in

LA. And even if these weeklong escapes are designed for specific reasons, it's the only seven days of the year I'm free from the constant demands of my position.

As the face of the Kingsley Corporation, one of the largest real estate empires on the West Coast, there are always eyes on me. I never let my guard down, no matter the situation. The last thing I need is someone using my own discretions as cannon fodder.

That's my job.

What began as a legitimate house-flipping business quickly grew to a multi-billion-dollar empire. And somehow, the more money you have the more money you need. The bigger you grow, the dirtier your hands.

While Dad maintains the legitimate side of the business, I'm the one who actually makes us money. I sort out the deals with the Manzanettis and Romanovs, and somehow keep us out of the crosshairs. I keep people in line and weed out our enemies.

After all, that's why I'm here.

Inviting Lake into this is a distraction when I know better. Still, nothing could have stopped me from ensuring an invite landed on her doorstep. Even if I wasn't sure she'd accept the offer.

Lake lives a monotonous life. She's routine in every sense. All I could do was hope deep down she yearned for more. So I gave her a nudge in my direction.

Something my girl accepted.

And now I have her.

“How’s the retrieval going?” I ask Cillian, changing the subject.

Lake sends my brain spiraling even when she’s not around.

“Good.” Cillian stands, pulling out his phone and flipping through it. “This is just last night.”

He turns his phone so I can examine the image on the screen.

The wonderful thing about the holidays is everyone gets too comfortable. They let their guards down and allow the excuse to have a little fun get them into trouble. They’re too trusting when you dangle just enough freedom in front of them.

“Perfect.” I nod, and Cillian tucks his phone away.

“Want me to send it to your father?”

I can’t help but chuckle. It doesn’t matter that I’m thirty-five, something about that statement makes me sound like an infant who needs watching after.

“No. I’ll report back at the end of the week.”

Cillian nods.

One of the downsides of using my father’s security company is they assume he’s in charge. While he might be the backbone of the Kingsley empire, I’m the one who maintains it. I keep him profitable and powerful. I’m the face.

At least lately he’s too focused on my brother Rhett, and whatever damage the two of them are causing the religious circuit to care what I’m up to.

Leaving me with the perfect opportunity to invite my little obsession to Midnight Manor. Mixing business with pleasure like this won't end horribly.

“Did you take care of the favor I asked you last night?” I turn to Cillian, taking a healthy sip of my drink.

Cillian nods. “He’s gone.”

“Good.”

Technically, the rules state no one leaves the manor until midnight on New Year’s Eve. But this is my game. And Connor had the nerve to look at Lake like he wanted to do things only I’m allowed to—granting him his early exit.

My phone rings.

“Yes?”

“We’re ready,” Cherry says, and I can’t help but grin.

I’ve been hosting these events for the past seven years, and not once has any part of them captured my interest. But that was when Lake wasn’t here. Dressed up, dressed down, desperate to come beneath me.

“Good, I’ll be right out.” I hang up the call.

Cillian smirks, breathing out a laugh.

“What?”

“Participating again?”

“Like you never have.” It doesn’t matter if he’s a friend, I don’t want his judgments. “Get back to work.”

Cillian thinks I'm having my fun. I wish that were all.

She's been my sick obsession from the moment I saw her. The vision I've been unable to shake for the past six months. And now she's here.

I'm going to break her before she breaks me.

"Fair enough, boss." Cillian walks to the door, pausing with his grip on the handle, turning to look at me over his shoulder. "Hope you know what you're doing."

He walks out, shutting the door behind him, and I drop into my leather chair at my desk, raking my fingers through my hair.

My knee knocks the wood, and my computer screen lights up, kicking me in the chest with an image of her at a distance.

Blonde hair whipping in the wind. Her fingers gripping her white sweater, holding it closed on a stormy day. And even if the shot is too far away to see her eyes, I know the color. It's burned in my brain. Gold, the color of honey.

Sweet. Innocent.

Mine.

Lakeyn

“WARM ENOUGH, BABY GIRL?” Hands find my arms, and I spin to find Adam towering over me.

It should be illegal to look like him. Taking my breath away at every turn. And here, with the snowy backdrop and a simple black winter coat on, he melts my insides while my skin is rosy and frozen.

I’ve never liked nicknames, but I don’t mind it from him. Especially considering the alternative. If Adam calls me Ivy, it might officially break me.

I spent all day trying to stay irritated with him. But something about his broken apology this morning, and the way he holds me now, I can’t deny I’m falling so fast and hard for this man.

“You’re here.”

His eyebrow’s pinch at my comment, before the smallest smile ticks up his cheeks. “Did you think I wouldn’t be?”

“I didn’t know.”

I haven't seen him in hours. Adam might run these games, but he's rarely around for them. After he disappeared at breakfast, he's been nonexistent at anything since.

"Did you enjoy lunch?" Adam asks, brushing past wherever he spent his day.

"It was perfect. Grilled cheese is my favorite."

"Is it?" He smiles so big for a second it looks like he knew that when there's no way he could.

"It is." I nod. "You can't beat the simplicity of bread, cheese, and butter. There's this deli in my town that makes the most incredible grilled cheese. Four different cheeses. And then they sprinkle this—"

I stop, realizing I'm babbling on about nothing. There's no way a man like Adam cares about things like grilled cheese sandwiches.

"What do they sprinkle?" He squeezes my arms.

"Italian seasoning," I mumble, trying not to sound like a total idiot. "Sorry. I'm rambling."

"I like it when you ramble."

"Even when it's about nothing?"

He pulls me in closer so his mouth is by my ear. "If it's about you, it could never be *nothing* to me."

My cheeks heat at his words. At his touch. The way this man makes every little thing about me feel like the most important thing he's ever learned knocks me in the heart.

Adam pulls back as the wind kicks up. Snow shakes off the trees and it looks like it's falling around us. Since there's not a cloud in sight, the bright blue sky reflects off each flake, making them nearly iridescent and sparkling. But nothing captures my attention like the man in front of me.

Adam is an enigma.

On the outside, he's cold and closed off. He refuses to talk about himself or answer my questions. In bed, he's a man in complete control. Unwavering and demanding. But standing here in the snow, with the whispers of mid-winter around us, something in his eyes edges on vulnerability. And I can't figure out how it's possible for his roughness to coexist with the hint of gentleness.

"Come on." He laces his fingers through mine and pulls me along beside him.

From the corner of my eye, a flash of red catches my attention, and I look to see Stella in the arms of her boy toy, watching me with wide eyes.

She mouths *What?* But I just shake my head and keep walking.

While Adam was busy with work, I've been hanging out with Stella, and I still haven't mentioned Adam. Disappearing with him into the woods now, I know there's no more avoiding it. The next time I see her I'm going to have to explain everything.

Most of the people out here don't notice as he pulls me away. They're too distracted with whatever they're doing. But as we pass a man in a gray snowsuit, I feel his attention focused on me and Adam, and I wonder if Adam notices.

Something about Adam feels forbidden. It's bad enough to play his holiday games without handing over complete control of myself and my body to him. But I can't help it.

"Where are you taking me?" I ask as he pulls me into the tree line.

Something between a snowball fight and a party rages on in the clearing behind us, slowly fading in the distance as Adam pulls me into the cover of the forest. The pine trees cloak us from the sun, hiding us like the walls of Midnight Manor hide our sins.

And I aimlessly follow a man who could be the end of me into the depths of a dark forest.

When we reach a break in the trees, Adam spins me until he has me pinned against one of them.

His lips find the pulse at my throat, pushing the line of where my white winter coat has me bundled up. I try to grab at his jacket with my hands, but my gloves get in the way of my ability to handle his zipper.

Everything is in the way in this frozen forest.

But the heat of his mouth on my skin lights a campfire of warmth in the pit of me.

"Adam."

“Yes, baby girl?” He continues kissing the path of my neck, his body pinning me against the tree.

His teeth nip at the soft skin between my neck and jaw, and I can’t help but moan. “I need you.”

A chuckle that tickles my neck escapes his lips as he drags them over me. The scruff on his jaw raking my bare skin and making me shiver.

“Such a naughty fucking girl beneath your sweetness.” He pulls back and spins me around until I’m facing the tree, pinning me against it.

My fingers dig against the tree trunk, fighting to find their grip. The roughness presses my cheek as Adam holds me in place.

“You’d like me to strip you naked right here and fuck you in the snow, wouldn’t you?” Adam runs his lips over the shell of my ear. “You’d like to come on my cock right now, even if you’d freeze to death in the process.”

I moan as his mouth grazes over my neck again. “Yes.”

“Then too bad, I’m not ready to let you go yet.”

I’m not sure what he’s holding onto. My body, my weakness for him, my vulnerability. Here in the silence of the snowy forest, I hand him all of it. And yet, he still holds me a fraction away.

“Spread your legs, baby girl.”

“But you said—”

“I’m not going to fuck you right now.” Adam trails his hands to my hips. “As much as I’d love to, I’m not joking. You’d freeze to death out here. And I can’t allow that to happen. But it doesn’t mean I can’t give you a little gift.”

He skims his hands down further, tapping my legs.

“Wider.”

I step my feet apart more, and Adam reaches around me, undoing the button on my snow pants.

“What are you doing?”

“I already told you. I’m giving you a gift.” He kisses my temple. “Tis the season and all.”

“Didn’t know you had so much holiday spirit,” I tease.

He presses his hips against my ass, and I feel the hard length of him grind against me. “I don’t. You bring it out of me.”

“How sweet.”

Adam chuckles, slipping a hand around my front and into my pants. He slips my panties aside and slides his fingers through me.

“I’m not sweet, baby girl. Need I remind you?”

He grabs my pussy, hard, the heel of his hand grinding over my clit, making me squirm. The pressure of it all is nearly enough to make me come.

“But you like that, don’t you?” He releases his grip and gently glides his fingers up and down my slickness, balancing the pain with a soft touch.

“Yes.” There’s no point lying.

The way Adam takes me like he wants to break me only makes me want him more. The rougher he is, the less I think.

He hums in my ear, playing with my clit. And I can’t help but grind myself against his hand, desperate for the friction.

“Such a dirty little angel, pretending to be so sweet.” He brushes my hair to the side and rubs my clit harder. “You make me want to fuck you senseless.”

“Then do it.”

Adam pulls his hand out instead, denying me. “I have a better idea. Let’s see how close to your limit you can get without going over it.”

Behind me, I feel him reach in his pocket, and then he’s slipping his hand back into my underwear, only this time, there’s something in it. He reaches my entrance, and something puts pressure on me.

“Do you trust me to make you feel good, baby girl?”

I nod. “Always.”

It’s the only thing I should trust him with because he’s proven capable. Instead, I find myself unintentionally handing him so much more.

Adam pushes something inside me, and I moan at the pressure of it. The other end reaches my clit, hooking around me like a U. Once it’s in place, he slides my panties back over me and buttons up my pants.

“What is that?”

“A gift for tonight,” he whispers in my ear.

“You want me to keep this inside me all night?” My eyes widen. Even if there’s no way anyone can see it, I feel it, sitting there, putting pressure on me. Rubbing me.

“Yes.” Adam spins me around, and his gray gaze drops to my cheeks. “I want this inside you until it’s me buried deep. You wouldn’t disobey an order, would you, baby girl?”

“No, sir.” I’m not sure if I’m supposed to fight this, but it would be absolutely no use to try. I can barely breathe, much less argue.

“So good at following my directions.” He smirks, stepping back and tucking his hands in his pockets. “On that note, I have one more.”

I push off the tree and have to adjust to the feel of the toy he placed between my legs. The contact of it rubs against me with just a couple of steps, warming me from my core.

“What?”

“No coming without me.”

“I’m not sure how—” my sentence is cut off by a sudden buzzing, forcing me to bend forward at the hips. Slow vibrations rock my center, and I realize Adam’s hands are in his pockets because he’s remote-controlling it.

“Adam.” I stand up, trying to catch my breath as the vibrations intensify.

“Yes, baby girl?” He takes a step forward, stopping in front of me, smirking.

“You can’t do that all night.”

“Can’t I?” He tilts his head. “I’m in control here, remember?”

“Yes but—”

“No buts.” His voice is firm as he kicks the vibrations up another level, and I have to hold on to the tree behind me so I don’t collapse. “Who’s in control of you here?”

My breath stutters. “Y-you.”

“Correct. And who will decide what you need?”

“You.” The word barely comes out as spots cloud my vision and my fingernails dig into the tree bark.

“And what’s the rule you need to follow today?” He steps forward, hands in his pockets, not touching me because he doesn’t need to. The remote control is doing his job for him as he kicks it up another level and my vision goes black.

“No coming.”

“Exactly.”

At my answer, the vibration stops, and I let out something between a moan and an exhale. I’m on the brink, but he’s not letting me past it.

“You’re evil.” I push past him and lay down in the snow.

Adam stands over me, grinning. “Now you’re getting it. Not a sweet bone in this body.”

“Clearly.”

I lay in the snow and soak in the coolness of it melting against my neck. Adam hovers over me, framed by the branches above. And if I wasn't so frustrated and desperate to come, I'd almost think looking at him like this could make me fall for him.

“You're going to catch a cold if you stay like that.” His smile falters.

“Just cooling off. And you're to blame for it, so I don't need your comments.”

Adam shakes his head, watching me.

I stretch my arms out, floating in this snowy forest the same way Adam makes me float above my thoughts.

The pressures I've felt since I was twelve are so far away here. The urge to keep it together gets further in the distance with each step. And for once, I'm actually just enjoying a moment.

I close my eyes and take a deep breath, and when I open them, Adam is reaching a hand out for me. The chill on my neck is already ice cold, so I accept, and he pulls me up off the ground.

“We don't know each other very well,” I say, as he brushes the snow off me.

Adam shakes his head. “No, not exactly.”

After all, the girl he thinks I am isn't me at all.

He presses the wet strands between his fingers before letting it go. And when I reach for his chest, he doesn't stop me as I lay my hands on him. One touch and it occurs to me he's never let me touch him before, even when we had sex. And he's never kissed me.

There's a distance I'm only just now becoming aware of.

"Tell me one thing." I look up at him, and his hand running through my hair pauses.

He looks down between us, to where my hands rest on his chest, and I swear his breath hitches. He grabs my wrists like he did last night, but instead of moving me off him, he holds me in place.

Something secret might as well brew hot between our gloved hands. Protection not even our clothes offer our souls when his gaze lifts to meet mine.

"Just one thing about you." It's nearly a whisper.

I expect him to deny me, but his expression softens the slightest.

"I'm a Capricorn."

"A Capricorn?" My whole face pinches. Of all the things he could have said, his zodiac sign is the absolute last thing I expected.

"Yes."

I shake my head and can't help the laugh that explodes out of me. My entire body shakes with it, and it's enough to draw a

real, genuine smile from Adam as he watches me lose it over the scrap of trivial information he offered.

“That’s so random.” I laugh again, gripping his jacket in my hands and holding him like that.

Adam shrugs. “You asked for anything. Next time, be more specific.”

“That’s assuming you’d answer something specific.”

He smirks because he probably wouldn’t.

“Didn’t take you for believing in signs, being a *Capricorn* and all.” I shake my head and can’t help the smile stretching my cheeks so wide they hurt.

“I don’t.” He pulls my hands from his chest but keeps one laced in mine as he starts to walk us back toward the manor. “But it seemed like something you’d appreciate.”

I’m not sure how he would know that. Or maybe he just assumed given the small Taurus tattoo I have on the inside of my ankle. But what he probably doesn’t realize is how that piece of information fills a hole inside me. Gives me a glimpse of a man so good at hiding himself.

“It’s perfect.” I squeeze his hand, looking up at him, even if he’s now avoiding my gaze.

He nods, keeping quiet on the walk back to the manor. The clearing is emptying now that the sun is getting lower on the horizon. Everyone slowly filters inside with the chill.

“Where are they going?” I ask when I notice the majority of the group heading down a hall that leads the opposite direction from our rooms.

Adam tips his chin down and offers a devious smirk. “Want to see, baby girl?”

I nod, barely able to get my breath past the knot in my throat, as he tugs my hand for us to follow them.

Adam

LAKE PEELS OFF HER winter coat when we step inside the manor, looking too sweet in her pale blue, long-sleeve flannel that hugs her tits perfectly. Her white-blond hair is wild and curly from where it got wet in the snow, and this might be my favorite look on her.

Angelic.

Pure.

Blind to the fact that she's holding hands with the devil.

Her baggy snow pants swish in the quiet hallway. Everything about her, down to her simple steps, brings life to these walls.

To my bones.

She pumps blood to my heart.

When the group stops at a pair of double doors, she looks up at me in fear and anticipation, and I want to drown in the softness of her expression. Every emotion swirls in her big eyes. A rosy blush paints her cheeks, as her pillowy lips part.

Kissing her would be heaven. Or hell. Whichever one is more difficult to escape.

The doors swing open, revealing a large room. When we were kids, my brother Crew used to call it the blue room because everything inside is a shade of blue or gray. I stopped trying to name the rooms because there were too many and none of them actually meant anything.

Lake's breath hitches as she steps through the doorway.

In the candlelight, there's a golden glow encompassing her. Warmth in the tint of her eyes. And when she gazes up to the ceiling, her whole face brightens.

"It's beautiful."

The ceiling is lined with Christmas lights. Their shine reflects in her stare, making it a golden universe I could lose myself in.

Lake nudges me in the arm, snapping me out of my trance on her. "So festive once again. Not what I'd expect from you."

"All the credit goes to my staff, and I pay them well."

I might be in charge of these events, but I don't bother with the trivial details like the menu or the decorations. My only concern is the events. Specifically structured to make people feel safe enough to explore what I need them to.

"I'm sure you do." She rolls her eyes, wrapping her arms around one of mine. And once more, I make the mistake of not pulling away. Like in the forest, when I let her put her hands on me as if they'd found their place.

She melts to me. Fitting right at my side. Beaming and taking in every small decoration like it's the most beautiful thing she's seen. Not realizing that everything in this room pales in comparison to her.

Lake sinks against me, and I wish more than anything I could keep her.

But as she rubs my arm and I tense at her touch, I can't help that my eyes scan the room for threats. For eyes on us. I'm not the only rich and powerful man here, and any of them could see her as an opening to use against me.

There's a reason I usually stay cloaked in the darkness at these parties. I stay on the sidelines and keep to myself. I don't put myself in vulnerable situations.

And that's what Lake is quickly becoming. A vulnerability.

Even if I don't spot anyone watching, I pull us off to the side of the group, to where the room is darker, and guide her to a couch in a corner where we're mostly cloaked and secluded.

"What is this? Another game?"

It's all a game, but she's too innocent to realize that.

"It's a chance to let go and explore." I turn her so she's sitting on the couch facing me. Her back is against one of the armrests, as I pull her legs into my lap. "May I?"

I pause my hands at the waistband of her baggy snow pants, and she swallows hard, glancing around the room.

"No one can see you here."

While she doesn't pay attention, I made sure to sit her where everyone is at her back. No one can see her in this particular spot besides me.

Lake nods, and I unbutton her snow pants, before dragging them down. Leaving her underwear in place, knowing my little present is slowly torturing her with each rub of her thighs.

Setting her snow pants aside, I reach for the silver tray on the coffee table and peel off the lid. In the background, a few couples sound like they're already taking their fun a little farther, but that's not my intention right now.

I'll take Lake later when she's needy and begging for me to finally grant her a release. But not right now. If she wants to test her limits, I'm going to push until I find every one of hers.

Some people bend with pain, others with overstimulation. Lake comes apart with a balance between the two. Tonight, I'm going to tease her with both until there's not one thought left in her pretty head.

Lake's eyes widen as I peel the lid off the tray on the table beside us, picking up the candle and a pack of matches.

"You're cold." My gaze drops to her bare, goosebump-prickled legs. "I think it's time we warm you up."

She grips the sides of the cushion and bites her puffy lip.

"What's your safe word, baby girl?"

"Midnight."

I nod, loving the sound of it on her lips. Someday we'll get to the point where she'll need to use it. But not right now. I'm too in tune, too desperate to figure out what makes her tick. This week, all I care about is learning everything there is to know about her and her body.

I light a match, and she jumps ever so slightly as I bring the flame to the candle. "Spread your legs, baby girl."

Even if she's nervous, she does as she's told. Strong as her will is, she's secretly desperate to submit to me.

Her feet stay planted on the couch as she tips her knees open. Her pussy is barely covered in lace, and through it, I can make out the shape of the vibrator sitting inside her.

Blowing out the match, I wait for the candle to melt. For streaks of wax to slowly bubble and run in hot rivers down the stick.

"I never decorated trees as a kid," I tell her. "Did you?"

Lake's nose scrunches at what must seem like a ridiculous question, before she slowly nods her head.

"Did you have a favorite ornament?"

"Yes." The faintest smile ticks in the corner of her mouth.

It's beautiful, like her. And if her appearance was all that drew me to her, I wouldn't be in so much trouble. But it's not.

I'm fascinated with how grilled cheese can be her favorite meal. How she finds importance in the most insignificant things.

My whole life I've been raised to believe money and power are what define what is worthy of my interest. But Lake doesn't care how much something costs or how important someone is. What interests her can't be defined by money or status.

I need to know why.

What makes her care and what's drawing her to me?

"Tell me about the ornament." I tip the candle and watch the wax continue to melt.

"My sister and I used to fight over this reindeer." She shifts in anticipation, knowing what's coming. "It was missing an antler, and its fake fur was matted from Dad accidentally spilling eggnog on it. But it was our favorite."

She shakes her head, something edging heartbreak and happy memories filling her face.

"It's silly."

"It's not."

It might be my favorite thing I've learned about her. She cares even if it's broken and worthless. I want to know what it is that makes something important to her.

"It is." She nudges my leg with her foot. "But it doesn't matter. It's still my favorite."

"Do you still hang it up every year? Or does your sister have it?"

She shakes her head, and something darker fills her expression. “I lost it when I was twelve. But it’s the memories that count, right?”

Her entire demeanor shifts, and I’ve never needed to know so badly what could cause it. But I know better than to push. It’s a game. One wrong move and I’ll send her running.

“Enough about me, what about you?” She buries her sadness with a forced smile. “Did you do anything to celebrate the holidays when you were younger? Or were you always a Grinch?”

“Grinch?” I cock an eyebrow. “I’m the one hosting a holiday party if you didn’t notice.”

“How giving of you.” She bites her lip, just as a woman across the room screams out in pleasure. “Very Christmassy.”

“My family wasn’t big on the holidays.” Leaning forward, I hold the candle up over her thigh, and she swallows hard as she watches. “Then again, maybe I just hadn’t found anything worth celebrating—worth decorating—yet.”

Tipping the candle, the wax drips onto her bare thigh, and Lake jumps at the sudden burn of the wax on her flesh. I hold her thigh in place as it dribbles over her. Forcing her to feel every drop as it hits her skin. She knows the word to stop me, but she doesn’t use it.

“You’re more beautiful than any Christmas tree. I could spend all night painting you every color.”

Tipping the candle again, a hot streak drips over her bare flesh. But instead of flinching this time, she moans, tipping her head back. With her senses in overdrive and her eyes diverted, I reach into my pocket and once more switch on the vibrator.

Lake's eyes snap to mine at the soft buzz. It's on the lowest setting. Just enough to soak her through, but not enough to get her where she needs.

“Adam.”

I pour more wax over her and grip her thigh tighter at the sight of it streaking her body. “Yes, baby girl?”

“Please.”

She wants to come.

I kick the vibrator up another notch as I tip the candle again, and her pelvis hitches off the couch with her moan. She's on the verge. Her lips part; she's desperate to chase the feelings I'm giving her. The sight is almost enough to make me relent.

She bites her lip and squeezes her eyes shut. Once more her head tips back, riding the wave. She's chasing her pleasure the same way I'd like to chase her through these halls. And just as her lips part again, I turn off the vibrator and blow out the candle.

“No.” She slaps her palm over her face.

“I already told you, baby girl.” I set the candle down and reach for her snow pants, slowly peeling them up her legs, over the dried wax. “No coming until it's me inside you.”

“This is a sick form of torture.” She groans, looking up at me with a flushed expression.

She has no idea. What she sees is only a fraction of it. The things I’ve spent months picturing in my head before she even knew I existed are much sicker.

She lifts her hips so I can slide her snow pants on the rest of the way, and groans as I button them up. But like the good girl she is, she doesn’t argue or fight me for control. Instead, she takes my hand as I pull us from the couch to standing.

This time, when she wraps herself around my arm, it’s because her legs are shaking. And something about her vulnerability makes me insanely protective over her.

“Come on. I have some business to get to.”

“Business,” she grumbles. “Of course you do.”

Why do I love that she’s frustrated by my comment? No one cares where I am or if I’m busy. I don’t get close enough for them to.

When we reach the door, I pause, spinning Lake to face me and catching her chin between my thumb and forefinger.

“I left a present for you in your room.”

“Another one?” She squirms, likely still trying to adjust to the feel of the vibrator.

I love that I do that to her without even needing to touch her. I want to explore every fantasy she’s never dared to voice—to think. I want to crack her open until all she can do is *feel*.

“Yes. Another one.” I’d give her everything if I could.

“What is it?”

I brush my thumb across her cheek, tracing her. Every inch the most perfect sculpture. “It’s a surprise. But don’t worry. You’ll enjoy it. See you at the show tonight, baby girl.”

Lakeyn

THE SHOW.

When Adam mentioned it, I had no idea what he was talking about. But after dinner, all the guests are ushered to another room, and I'm not prepared for what meets me.

I grip the dress Adam left for me on my bed like it has the power to calm my racing heart. His gift is tight but fits me perfectly. My exact size, and I'm not sure how he managed it when we've barely spent any time together.

The dress is gorgeous navy silk, so dark it's nearly black. It's fitted around my chest, tied up in a halter at my neck, leaving my back completely exposed. And there's a high slit that goes all the way up one side.

"Holy shit." Stella's eyes go wide as she stops next to me, and for the first time since dinner started, she's stunned silent.

After seeing me with Adam earlier, Stella had a lot to say about the fact that I've been keeping my playtime with him a secret. But there was no denying it when she saw us disappear

into the forest. So even if I tried to keep the filthiest details to myself, she dragged what she could out of me. At least, as much as I was willing to offer in front of Evan, her boy toy of the night.

“Now this is what I call a show.” She grins.

Stella and I pause, taking in the full scene in front of us. It’s the same ballroom the opening night masquerade was held in, but it’s been transformed.

The staff is wearing next to nothing. Lingerie, garters, thongs, even on the men. But that’s not what has my attention. It’s the large stage in the center of the room, where two women and two men are doing something between stripping and fucking. They’re dancing. And while there’s technically no penetration yet, they don’t seem far from it. Clothes are coming off and they’re using each other’s bodies like poles.

“Fuck.” I breathe out, turning to Stella. But she’s already slipped away, giggling in a corner with Evan.

I’m not sure what she sees in him. He’s almost double her age, and I’ve yet to see him smile. But she explained it as something about checking off options on her bucket list or working out daddy issues. I can’t remember which category he fell into.

People shuffle around me, and I’m suddenly aware I’ve stopped in the center of the doorway, blocking the entrance to the room, so I step aside.

The movement rubs the vibrator over my clit, and I try not to moan out loud at the contact. At first, I was able to ignore it. But the longer it's been inside me, the more sensitive I'm becoming. The only way I made it through dinner was to sit still with my legs crossed, praying Adam would finally show up and fuck me.

No such luck.

Now, as the vibrator shifts inside me with each step, and I take in the sight in the center of the room, I'm once more on edge. Exactly how Adam wants me.

By the time I see him tonight, one touch might be enough to set me off.

A couple walks by, and I don't miss the man's eyes lingering in my direction. Not that the woman he's with seems to mind, as her gaze finds me as well.

I make my way to an empty booth in the corner. It's the darkest spot in the room, and something about slipping into the hidden alcove feels safer.

Others find their own booths, and I appreciate that even if we're all in the same room, once we're settled, we're somewhat secluded.

There are empty champagne glasses waiting at the table, and almost as soon as I take my seat, a staff member comes by with a bottle and fills the one sitting in front of me. He doesn't stare as he pours my drink, but offers a brief smile, nodding once before disappearing.

The lights lower even more, and I'm cloaked in darkness. I can barely make out more than the shadows of heads in nearby booths. Everything but the display in the center of the room is hidden.

I take a sip of my champagne. There's no shortage, but at the same time, I get the impression it's monitored. You're given enough to feel a nice buzz, but no one gets drunk. The staff seems acutely aware of how much each person drinks.

Another thing about this week that feels like Adam. Freedom with an invisible protective veil of control in place.

The music changes and one of the women walks off the stage, leaving the other with the two men. She stands in the center in nothing more than a thong, as their hands find her chest, her back, her hips. They're all over her skin.

They wrap around her, touching her and each other in an erotic display that has my core throbbing.

One man kneels, reaching up and peeling the final scrap of remaining fabric from her. And as it hits the floor, I feel it. A vibration deep inside me. The hum can't be heard with the music in the room, but the slow intensity of the vibrator starts to build.

I set down my champagne before I drop it and grip the edge of the booth. My eyes are on the man who is now kissing the woman on stage between her legs, but my attention is elsewhere. It's on my center. On the eyes I feel watching me, even if I can't see him.

Adam is somewhere in this room, knowing I'm getting flushed. A sheen of sweat from spending the evening on edge dampens the back of my neck. The vibrations go up another level, but it might as well be ten because I have to clench my thighs to fight the pressure starting to build.

One of the men on stage strips down to nothing and forces the woman to her knees in front of him. And as he shoves his dick to the back of her throat, the vibrations intensify.

I've watched porn. But in person, watching the woman gag around his dick, I can't help but question myself.

Is it wrong to be enjoying this?

Is it bad that I can't look away?

The other man grabs the woman's hair and holds her head still so his partner can fuck her face. And even if they know we're here watching them, they don't care. They're genuinely enjoying each other while being on display for us.

When Adam said there would be a post-dinner show, I'm not sure what I expected. But it wasn't this.

The man fucking the woman's mouth jerks and then her eyes water as she must be swallowing him down.

It's filthy.

Wrong.

Captivating.

When he pulls back, the vibrations stop, and I didn't realize how close I was to the brink until I lose all sensation.

A frustrated moan slips out as I tip my head back against the booth.

“You know the rules, baby girl.” Adam suddenly appears in front of me.

He slips from the darkness like the devil he is and slides beside me in the booth. Nudging until we’re both at the back of it, facing the show in the center of the room. The woman is bent over now, and I’m pretty sure they’re both about to fuck her, but all I can focus on is Adam.

Once more, he’s in slacks and a dress shirt. But tonight, he has the sleeves rolled up, showing off his corded forearms.

I want to see more of him. The man who has bent me over and fucked me in the dirtiest way, but I’ve yet to see his body.

Adam wraps an arm around the back of the booth, and the temperature in the room kicks up ten degrees.

“Enjoying the show?” He tips his chin up to the stage as one of the men buries himself inside the woman. She screams, but the other man uses the opportunity to shove his fingers in her mouth.

“It’s not what I expected.”

“That’s not an answer.” He shifts toward me and slips a hand up the slit of my dress.

His fingers brush my panties, and they’re soaking. I’m throbbing as he strokes the back of his fingers against me.

“That’s the answer I was looking for.” He pulls my panties aside, and the moment his fingers touch my pussy, my body shivers.

I have to fight back the pressure that’s ready to burst.

“This dress looks stunning on you.”

“It’s beautiful.” I nearly choke on the words as he continues to toy with me. “Thank you.”

“The vision of you is thanks enough.”

Adam pulls the vibrator out of me, and I immediately miss it, even if it’s been driving me insane.

He pulls his hand away and tucks it in his pocket.

“You’re keeping it?”

“What else would I do with it?” He grazes my neck with his nose. “It’s my keepsake of our time together.”

It’s perverted. Twisted. But all I can focus on is the fact that it also means this will all end. We’re a clock ticking down, and I wish there were more hours on it.

He rakes his teeth over my neck, and I moan.

“How badly do you need to come right now, baby girl?”

I tip my head back and groan at the feel of him gripping my bare thigh as his other hand plays in my hair. On stage, the three people are forcefully fucking now. Or maybe that’s the next booth over. It’s all the same in this dark manor.

Sin and seduction bleeding together.

“More than anything.” I tip my face to him, feeling the flushness on my cheeks and the blush crawling down my chest.

Adam pulls back, his jaw grinding at the sight of me needy in front of him, and I wait for him to grab my hand and pull me from the room so I can get what I’ve needed all afternoon. Instead, he reaches down and undoes his pants.

“Here?” My eyes widen.

Adam smirks. “You said more than anything. It would be rude of me to hold you off even longer.”

“But—”

“Who is in control right now?” He cuts me off with his question.

I swallow hard, knowing the answer he’s looking for is officially going to push my limits.

“You.”

“Yes, me.” He unzips his pants and pushes them just enough in front to release himself.

His hand wraps his hard cock and my heartbeat hammers. It doesn’t matter if I’ve taken him before. He’s large enough that the sight makes me instantly nervous.

“Fuck me.” He runs his palm over his length. “Be a good girl and make me come. And I promise to do the same.”

With his cock in his hand, he looks back up to the stage, and my eyes follow. The woman is between both men now, one

fucking her mouth, while the other is buried deep between her legs. My core tightens.

I could say *no*. Better yet, I could say *midnight*.

I could pull the plug on this entire thing.

Instead, I find myself widening the slit of my dress and lifting my hips to peel my underwear down my legs. Once I do, Adam takes them and adds them to his pocket of trophies.

Breaking my gaze from the show, I return my focus once more to Adam, who is sexier than I've ever seen him. His square jaw's tight as he rubs his firm cock and jacks off to me getting flushed from the scene around us.

Lifting up, I spin and climb onto his lap, straddling him, and he releases himself to make room for me.

The slit of my dress is stretched to its limits. And even if we're both exposed to each other, the fabric shields us from view if anyone were to walk by.

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out a condom, slipping it on, before rubbing the head of his cock over me. And I have to get up on my knees to hover over his full length.

"Hands on the table, baby girl."

I reach behind me and grip it, knowing it's just another way for him to keep his distance. He might have let me touch him in the forest, but that was different.

Adam grabs my hips, and before I can so much as blink, he shoves me down onto him. Impaling me with every inch. He

hits me deep, and after spending the entire day turned on, that's all it takes for me to almost come.

Gripping me tighter, he circles my hips in his lap, and he might as well be hitting every spot inside me.

“So fucking beautiful.” He sweeps one hand up my stomach, between my breasts, all the way to my neck, wrapping it around the front. “Doing exactly what I tell you to do like a good girl. Taking my cock in this room full of people and showing them who you belong to.”

His grip on my throat tightens, and he pushes me backward, bending me until I'm lying on the table, my back arching. From this angle, he's holding me tight in his lap, and I have an upside-down view of the stage. The woman's screaming is muffled by the cock down her throat, and I have to bite back my own sounds trying to escape.

“You like that?” Adam finds my clit with his fingers, while the other hand maintains his grip on my hip, forcing me in slow circles.

I hold the table tighter, my back arched, my pussy riding every sensation he offers.

“You like hearing her scream for their cocks while you take mine?” He picks up his pace on my clit, and I'm close to blacking out from sensation overload.

He mutters something else that sounds almost like my real name, but my brain is foggy from the sights and sounds. From Adam rotating my hips on his cock. And I burst from every

seam. I convulse and squeeze his dick so hard with my pussy, he grunts.

I'm still mid-orgasm as Adam stands, still inside me. He thrusts in harder, fucking me against the table so I'm no longer arching. I wrap my legs around his hips to hold on—or let go.

I need it all.

Adam's grip tightens on my thighs as he fucks me ruthlessly. And as my lips part with the start of a scream, he covers my mouth and forces me to swallow it. Brutally fucking me. Muting me. Taking me.

With a final thrust, he jerks, and his fingers grab my face as he comes. Darkness cloaking his expression, but I don't need to see him to know what he's doing to me. Breaking me apart piece by piece and uncovering every fantasy I didn't know I had.

Adam leans forward, kissing my neck through the final pulses of his release.

I wish he'd kiss my lips instead of peppering my collarbone. But it's for the best. I'm falling for a ruthless Christmas devil, and if he kissed me, there really would be no turning back.

Adam

“THIS ISN’T A *room*.” Lake’s eyes are wide as she looks around. “My entire apartment could fit in here.”

The moment the words come out, she clamps her mouth shut and her eyes dart to me. She’s getting worse about burying her true identity. Something I might not notice if I didn’t already know she’s not her sister.

And if she’d been paying attention tonight, she might have learned that fact when I accidentally called her by her real name as I fucked her on the table at the show.

The show.

I go to them some years, others I don’t. Watching people fuck isn’t nearly as interesting as doing it. But something about watching Lake take it all in. Her innocence painted her cheeks with the prettiest blush. It made me want to defile her just to see if she trusted me enough to let me.

Not sure what it says about either of us that she did.

But she was beautiful spread out on the table with my cock buried deep inside her. Drenched from me teasing her all day with that vibrator. Turned on from what was happening onstage. Shaking from me fucking her.

Absolute perfection.

“It’s fine.” I watch her circle the room.

“Fine.” She scoffs. “You and I have very different definitions of the word *fine*.”

I’m sure we do, seeing as I grew up around this shit, and it means nothing to me anymore. Possessions are just that. One of the many ways Lake’s and my worlds are so far apart.

My stomach twists, and I close the door behind me, trying to bury the knot forming.

Lake stops at one end of the room and leans against the dresser, once more scanning my bedroom with wide eyes. I’d like to see the world like she does. With honesty, purity. With a heart beating in my chest.

She shouldn’t be here.

In the manor or in my room.

Mixing her into my life is nothing but trouble when I should be getting her out of my system. But every moment I spend with her makes me hope for things not possible when you come from a family like mine.

“Here.” I walk past her and try to ignore the vanilla scent that clouds her very existence.

Sweetness. Sex.

One inhale drags me to a hell there's no escaping.

Walking into the bathroom, I turn on the faucet and start filling the bathtub. I've fucked her twice in the past twenty-four hours, and I haven't gone easy on her. Not to mention torturing her with a vibrator. The least I can do is draw her a bath so she can relax.

Lake follows me into the bathroom, her eyes moving from me to the tub.

Once it's full, I turn off the faucet and light a couple of candles, tempted to drip these over her bare breasts. But this isn't about me. This is for her.

I walk up to her and plant a kiss on her temple. Her soft skin makes me weak, and it's not a feeling that settles easily with me, so I pull back.

"Get in. Relax. You deserve it."

"Wait." She catches my hand in hers as I try to walk past her. "You aren't joining me?"

I look over her shoulder at the steaming bathtub and can't help the knot that forms in my throat at her question. People don't ask me to let my walls down because they know better. But Lake, with all her innocence, stands here thinking I'm a man I'm not.

She steps into me and grabs my belt, pausing like I might stop her.

I consider it.

After all, I rarely let people touch me. I prefer to be the one with the upper hand. I don't let people in. I don't often fuck with my clothes off. And even in those situations, I'm almost positive I kept my socks on. But here she stands, looking at me like she wants to strip us down to see what's left of me.

Lake doesn't see me as the ruthless son of an evil man, who built an empire burning other people's dreams to the ground. She doesn't look at me like a man who will break her, not caring if she finds her way back together again.

Her gaze offers me something much more dangerous.

Hope.

Heart.

I grab her wrists as her hands work to undo my belt, and she stops, tipping her chin up to face me. The honey gold is warm with the candlelight, and the steam from the tub makes the air muggy, curling her hair even more.

Every situation brings this girl to life. Chilled snow paints a pink blush on her cheeks. A warm bath makes her hair wild. Every time I think I've seen every side of her, the dice is turned.

"Adam." My name sounds so good how she says it. I'd be tempted to kiss it from her lips if I didn't know that kind of intimacy is off-limits.

Her eyes beg me from where she stands, so tiny with bare feet. I'm towering over her and all it makes me want to do is

protect her from whatever in her life made her feel like she had to maintain her hard exterior.

I don't release her wrists, but she starts on my belt again, slowly pulling it from the loop and releasing it. Once free, she works on my zipper. Her small fingers tug it down. And she slowly sinks to her knees in front of me, pulling my slacks down with her.

It's impossible to fight my thickening cock at the sight of her kneeling on the cold tile. Her chin tipped up, elongating her neck as she looks up with her wide eyes. Her white-blond hair is darker in the candlelight and fuzzy from the humidity. Her lips are plump and her chest blushes with her heavy breaths.

She reaches up and takes my cock in her hand. Her touch is pure heaven.

I should stop her. Handing Lake a weakness is dangerous when she already is one. But I find myself wrapping my palm over hers and squeezing hard, not sure what the fuck I'm after as her lips part in a beautiful exhale.

"You asked me to trust you," she says, her pretty eyes begging me. "I need you to trust me too."

It's not that simple. It requires relinquishing control, and I don't do that. But the way Lake licks her lips has me breaking.

"Please... Sir."

"Fuck." I swear this girl was made by the devil himself just to tempt me.

I release her hand and hold mine at my sides, watching her run her palm over my shaft. A fantasy at my feet.

“Open that mouth.” I cup her jaw, tipping her face to me. “I’m going to fuck it until you stop asking for things you won’t know what to do with.”

Lake should pull back at my words. They’re rude and demanding. Instead, she follows my orders like the good girl she is. She wants me to hurt her because something inside her thinks she deserves it, and I don’t know what it says that I continue to feed that insecurity.

Her lips part, and she runs her tongue in a sweet circle around the tip of my dick. So wet and slow, I nearly blow all over her perfect face. Nothing between me and the feel of her. Just her on my skin. Her tongue dragging the length of my dick.

I can’t remember the last time I’ve let anyone touch me like this as I lace my fingers in her hair, and she opens for me. Slamming my cock to the back of her throat, she gags. A sound so beautiful, I’m not sure why I fought her on this.

Her touch. Her tears.

I need every bit I shouldn’t.

Lake breathes through her nose before taking me deeper. Her makeup runs down her cheeks as she fights her reflexes. The most perfect picture as I stretch her lips with my cock and her raspberry lipstick smears down it.

“You’re so fucking perfect. An angel.”

Each word of praise makes her suck harder. She hollows her cheeks, and she takes me down like she's chasing her own pleasure from it.

One hand works what doesn't fit in her mouth as I hit the back of her throat. Again and again. It's harder to contain my thrusts as I grip her hair and her tears stain her cheeks.

“Such a beautiful fucking mess for me, baby girl.” I grab the back of her head tight in my grip, the tension too much to bear. “Now swallow me like you need it.”

My balls pull tight and pressure builds at the base of my spine as my release shoots down Lake's throat. And she swallows every drop like I'm giving her something more meaningful than whatever this is. And when I'm done and pull her off me, she takes a deep breath that floods my veins with life.

I wipe her lips with my thumb.

If this girl has a breaking point, I'm not sure where it is, only that she might find mine first.

Lake stands on shaky legs, glancing from me to the tub. “Join me, Adam. Please?”

“Ulterior motives.” I smirk.

She shrugs, offering me a smile edging between wicked and sweet.

“Only for you, baby girl.”

If only she knew how true that statement is.

I spin her around, releasing the clasp on the dress I had custom-made for her, watching it flutter to her feet. If I hadn't just come, I'd be tempted to fold her over the tub and fuck her instead.

Lake climbs in, watching me as I undo the buttons on my shirt, stripping it off. It's been years since I've been undressed around someone. Not because I'm shy about my body. But because the last person I'll be vulnerable with is a woman I'm fucking.

But with Lake's honey eyes on me, she's already seeing straight through, so there's no use hiding.

Just a few more days, then I'll be done with her.

At some point, I hope I start believing it.

"Men shouldn't be allowed to look like you," she says, watching me climb into the oversized tub opposite her.

I can't help but chuckle as I grab her foot and pull it into my lap so I can rub it. "Why?"

She moans at the pressure from my thumbs digging into the arch and bites her lip. "It's sinful."

"Guess it's a good thing I've found an angel like you to keep me pure then."

If only she didn't make me want to absolutely ruin her.

Lakeyn

WATCHING ADAM SITTING IN the tub across from me, I'm sure I must be dreaming. Men with bodies like that are made for movies. They date heiresses and actresses. Not small-town girls who live in an apartment that could fit in this bathroom.

They don't look at me like Adam is watching me now as he rubs my feet. With purpose, focusing on every reaction.

"You don't like people touching you, do you?" I should probably keep my mouth shut but he's given me an opening by climbing in the tub, and I can't seem to help trying to nudge the door wider.

"It's not touch exactly," Adam says, digging his thumbs into that spot on my arch that makes my eyes roll back. "I just prefer to be the one in control."

Once more he rubs my foot, and I really shouldn't mind given the attention he shows me with his own touch, but I

continue to want more of this man, even if it is against my best interests.

“And letting someone touch you means you’re not in control?”

He shrugs. “It’s close enough.”

“So that...” I tip my head to the doorway and glance over, still feeling the burning of the hard tile on my knees.

“Isn’t something I normally allow.”

I try to bury the triumphant smile fighting to break free. With all the walls around Adam’s heart, I’ve scaled one. Found a way through a crack in his shell. Somehow, I’ve managed to reach the Capricorn enigma I can’t wrap my head around.

“Well, thank you then.” I nod my head once.

“Thank you?” He tips his head back and laughs.

Actually laughs.

Wild, free.

I don’t think I’ve ever heard Adam come close to laughing before, and it’s a soul-shattering sound. I’d like to bottle it up so I don’t have to spend the rest of my life missing it.

“I should be thanking you, baby girl. You’re the one who swallowed my cum as I recall.”

Biting my lip, I can still feel him in my mouth. I can still taste him. And his filthy words only make me want him more.

People tend to see my small-town, simple life and treat me like I’m sweet and can’t handle things. Not Adam.

Adam doesn't make love to me, he fucks me.

And when he opens his mouth, he has no problem saying the crudest comments, almost as if he knows I love that side of him.

He chuckles, reaching for my other foot and working on the toes before moving to the arch.

“Why do you host these events anyway?” I sink lower into the warmth of the water. “I'm sure you have no problem getting laid.”

The man is chiseled. A walking distraction without his clothes. And even if I was desperate to get a look at his body, now that I have, he might as well have ruined me with the sight of him.

Fully naked, his chest dewy from the steam. Shoulders mountainous to climb. Every perfectly carved inch of him is on display. I'm not sure there's any getting over seeing a body like that.

“These parties aren't about getting laid,” he says. “At least, not for me.”

I'm tempted to ask him what they could possibly be about then, but he looks away, effectively shutting me down. And I know better than to fully ruin this moment, so I shift gears.

“I guess you have to do something when you have a place like this all to yourself. These parties are as fitting as anything else.”

Adam looks around the room, humming, but not really responding. So I sit quietly and sink into his touch.

He rubs my feet, and I tip my head back to close my eyes. My throat is sore from how roughly he fucked it, and my body is easing with the warmth of the water. It's clear this is the first time in my life I've been fucked properly because I've never felt like this after sex.

Adam releases my foot into the water, and I look up to see him stretching his arms out along the sides of the tub, watching me.

“Are you just going to sit there staring at me?”

“Best view in the room.” He smirks.

I shake my head but can't fight back my smile. His comments teeter on the line between sweet and dirty, and I want both.

“Laugh all you want, I'm not joking.” He shrugs.

He scoops up a handful of water and rakes it through his hair. It's darker wet. Rivers run over his strong jawline, and he drags his palms over the faint scruff dusting it.

“So why Christmas?” I ask. “Why not a summer getaway when it's actually warm and people could use the outdoor pool?”

“Holidays seem to be when people would rather escape.”

“Why?”

“You're here, aren't you? Why don't you tell me.”

I chew the inside of my cheek, suddenly nervous about where this is going. I've managed to not think about Josh much since arriving, but Adam's question has my insecurities flooding back.

Adam leans forward, the water in the tub moving in waves with him as he reaches out a hand and rakes my wet hair off my shoulder. "What just went through that beautiful mind?"

"It's just, my ex."

His hand pauses on my shoulder, and he pulls his arm back. "Elaborate."

"We broke up a year ago this Christmas. He cheated on me with one of my friends. It's hard enough still seeing him in town. But to be alone at Christmas, knowing he's with her..." I'm not sure what compels me to answer Adam honestly because there's no way he wants to hear about my ex, but it spills out.

Adam's jaw is tightly clenched as his eyes watch me, and I blink back the burning behind mine.

"It doesn't matter. He's a jerk." If only breakups were that simple, and my statement could be true.

If only I wasn't still cut open by a man I spent four years with. Who threw me away like garbage after all we'd been through.

"I have no doubt he's worse things than that." Adam brushes the point of my knee peeking out of the water from my legs being bent and my thighs folded to my chest.

I nod, swallowing at the lump in my throat.

“There’s more you’re not saying.” Adam reads me like I’m exposed completely.

I pull my knees tighter to my chest, but it does nothing to free me from my thoughts. “There is.”

“You can tell me.”

“I know.” I just don’t know how to say some things out loud. Things even Ivy doesn’t know. “At one point I thought we’d get married. When you’re with someone for a certain amount of time, it’s just expected of you. But I didn’t know if that’s what I wanted. And when he found out I didn’t want kids...”

I shake my head, remembering the fight a little too clearly.

“He just assumed I was broken. Women should want to give their man certain things, and I didn’t. So he found someone who would.”

“His words?” Adam asks, venom lacing his tone.

“More or less.”

Adam watches me, and as much as I want to look away in embarrassment from everything I just told him, I can’t break his stare. No judgment, just understanding, wherever it comes from.

“It’s okay to not want certain things,” he says after a long moment.

“Not everyone feels that way.”

Adam shakes his head. “Anyone who cares about you should accept you as you are, for exactly what you’re willing to offer. Nothing more or less. We all have our limits. You just need someone willing to respect them.”

Limits, when all we’ve been doing this week is testing mine. But with Adam, I don’t feel the same boundaries I have in past relationships. He offers me the freedom to explore exactly what I’m comfortable with, knowing where and when to draw the line.

“What’s your limit?” I ask.

Adam leans back against the other side of the tub and drags his hands down his face. “I don’t know anymore.”

When he looks back at me, I’m not sure why there’s a broken shard in his stare, but the gray glass cracks somewhere deep inside.

The trouble with limits is we all have them, and we all push them. But sometimes, they push back.

Josh could never love me like I needed him to because our limits didn’t align. And Adam can’t give me what I want because his limits put an end to this at midnight on New Year’s.

“I hope you know you deserve better than that asshole,” Adam says, shifting the conversation back to me like he’s so good at. “I’ll tell him that myself if you’d like.”

I can’t help but smirk because I’m sure he probably would, in not so nice of words. “I appreciate it. But he’s the past.”

“And what’s your future, Lake?”

The smile on my face falls and my stomach drops.

Lake.

My name, from his lips. Not Ivy. Not baby girl. But my name—my real name.

Adam’s eyes widen, realizing what just slipped out, and as he tries to lean toward me, I pull back.

“You know I’m not my sister?”

His jaw clenches. “Of course I do.”

“But—” I shake my head, trying to process what’s happening. “You invited her here.”

“No, I didn’t.”

“The invite was addressed to her; it had an *I* on the front.”

Adam’s eyebrows pinch. “It was an L.”

“No.” I shake my head, raking my fingers into my hair and feeling myself spinning. “You sent it to *me*?”

He nods.

This whole time I’ve been operating with the understanding that Adam was fascinated with Ivy.

He knows her. He said so.

Unless...

“On the first night, why did you say you were hoping I’d be here? That we’d met once before?” I climb out of the tub and almost slip as my wet foot hits the tile.

Luckily Adam's already standing, and he catches me.

I shake free from his hold and grab a robe hanging on one of the hooks on the wall. It's his size, so I'm swimming in it as I wrap it around my body.

"We've never met." I turn to face him, and he's wrapping a towel around his waist.

He comes toward me, but I take a step back, which makes him pause.

"We've never met," I repeat, shaking my head this time.

How can a man I've never seen be expecting me? Not Ivy. *Me.*

"Not exactly," Adam says, staying firmly in place and not coming closer.

Water beads over his chest, and if my vision wasn't playing tricks on me from the overload of information, I'd probably be tempted to bow down to him when he looks like this.

"I saw you once."

"When?"

"Six months ago."

My stomach sinks. "Six months ago was..."

"Your aunt's funeral in LA." Adam finishes the sentence for me. "I know."

"How?"

“My brother Rhett works for the church. I was meeting with him and my father regarding a business expansion, and my meeting ran a little long. I was leaving as you were arriving.”

I don't remember passing him, and I feel like I'd remember a man like Adam. But I was so overwhelmed with grief I couldn't think straight.

“We didn't even talk.” I shake my head, raking my wet hair from my face. “How did you find me?”

“I have my ways.”

I can't help the dark laugh that finds its way out. “*Ways*. Of course. Like money.”

Adam doesn't respond, he just stands there watching me fall apart for him. Watches me break, just like he promised.

“So what, you tracked me down?”

He nods. “I tried to stay away.”

“Wait, what do you mean, stay away?” It was just the one time. “You saw me again after that?”

“More or less.”

My insides plummet. “Which one, Adam? More or less?”

“More.” He takes a step forward now, but I'm too frozen to move. “I couldn't get you off my fucking mind, Lake. I had to find you. So I did. But I knew I didn't fit in your life. It's too fucking good, and I'm just... bad.”

He dips his chin and lets out a long breath before looking back up at me.

“But I couldn’t get you out of my system.”

“So you’ve been watching me?”

He nods once, and my stomach flutters in warning. He’s been watching me—stalking me—for six months. The times when I’ve had that tingle run my spine or felt some strange need to look over my shoulder at the grocery store. It wasn’t me being paranoid.

“So the dress in my size. Seeing me at the masquerade. The invite.” All the pieces click into place.

“It wasn’t a mistake,” he says, firmly. “My guards told me you introduced yourself as Ivy, and I figured you had your reasons for pretending to be your sister. You assumed that’s why I knew you, and it sounded less insane—”

“Than what, Adam?” I cut him off. “Less insane than the fact that you’ve been stalking me for six months before inviting me to your holiday sex party?”

“That’s not all this is.”

“I don’t care what this is.” I’m practically yelling, barely able to hold my composure. “I shouldn’t even be here.”

“This is exactly where you belong.” Adam’s voice cracks. The first chink in a steel man, and it almost breaks me. “I thought inviting you here would help me get over whatever has you occupying my brain, but all you seem to do is carve yourself deeper.”

He freezes, and I don’t think he meant to say that last part. But it slipped out anyway.

“Well, let me make it simple then. I’m leaving.” I take a step back.

It’s either I walk away or throw myself at him, and I need a moment to digest the things that make me feel like I’m sinking.

“Lake.”

“I need to go right now, Adam. I just need to think.”

He clamps his mouth shut, his jaw tight, and I sense him wanting to fight me on it, but he doesn’t. He’s silent as I walk away. As I leave his room in nothing but a robe, not caring who I cross paths with on my way back to my own.

And when I make it there, I lean against the closed door inside for what feels like hours. Because Adam’s been watching me. He’s always known who I am. And everything I thought I wanted has just been twisted into something sick that I can’t deny.

Lakeyn

“THAT’S A LOT OF information.” Stella stares at me with wide eyes, processing everything I just told her.

It’s impossible to keep it to myself, and since my phone was confiscated before I arrived at Midnight Manor, I can’t talk through my feelings with Ivy like I normally would.

Stella, being my closest friend here, was the next best option.

“And your name is actually Lakeyn, not Ivy?” Her eyebrows pinch in confusion.

“Ivy is my twin sister.”

“Okay, let me wrap my brain around this.” Stella pinches the bridge of her nose. “You’re telling me, you showed up thinking you were taking Ivy’s place. But really, Adam invited you on purpose because he’s been watching you for the last six months?”

“Basically.” Hearing my story boiled down makes it sound even worse. Especially considering it’s all true.

Stella laces her arm through mine. “All right. I think I get it now, and I see the dilemma. It’s a little stalkerish.”

She holds her thumb and forefinger an inch apart and scrunches her nose.

“A little?”

“Okay, maybe more than a little.” She shrugs. “But you’ve got to give the man some credit for knowing what he wanted. I mean, it’s not like he kidnapped you and forced you to be here. He sent you an invitation.”

“To his holiday sex party.”

“Which you accepted.”

She’s right. And I’m not sure where that puts me on this moral barometer of all things twisted.

“I mean, he *is* the host of these things. And you knew that when you first met him, right?”

I nod.

“Exactly.” Stella squeezes my arm. “When you fell into bed with the man who runs the show, did you really expect whatever dirty kinks he enjoys there to be the extent of his dark side?”

“I don’t know, maybe?”

Stella ticks an eyebrow up at me.

“Okay, no, I didn’t,” I admit. “But that doesn’t mean I thought he was the kind of person who would spend six months stalking me before secretly luring me in.”

“Fair point. It’s definitely not the traditional meet cute.”

“Understatement of the century.”

“But Lake, you also haven’t left yet.” Stella spins me to face her, pausing. “If you’re really that freaked out, then tell me why you’re still here. Because I get it, the invite says no one leaves until New Year’s, but we’re not actually being held hostage. If you wanted to go, I’m sure he’d let you. Yet you haven’t tried.”

“What’s wrong with me?” I bury my face in my hands because she’s right.

Stella loops her arm through mine and continues to tug me along with the rest of the group, as we’re ushered to one of the many unseen living rooms.

“Nothing is *wrong* with you.” She pats my arm. “That’s the whole point of this. It’s okay to indulge your desires sometimes. And if Adam is the man who made you finally accept that, then this can’t be all bad.”

“I guess not.”

Adam makes me want to unleash things I never imagined. But more than that, he accepts every part of me. He breaks me out of my shell and puts words to the desires I’m too scared to voice on my own.

On top of that, he opened up to me in ways I sense he doesn’t often.

Adam is unconventional, but he’s never forced me to do anything I don’t want to. If I asked to leave now, he’d

probably let me. He would respect the limit if I vocalized it.

Regardless of what he's done, he's proven that much.

The longer the realization settles, I'm not sure what to do with it. I should be disgusted by what he's done behind my back. But I didn't walk into this under the illusion he's Prince Charming. I was attempting to deceive him myself, pretending to be my sister.

But he wants me—Lakeyn.

Not Ivy. Not whatever girl Josh wanted me to be.

Me.

Adam wants a girl he knows hides darkness in her. Pain that I still haven't been brave enough to share with him. Without conditions and without judgment.

“I'm so fucked.”

Stella laughs. “Girl, at this point in the week, if you aren't thoroughly fucked, you're doing something wrong.”

I can't help but smile at the truth lacing her comment. I might have only known Stella for a few days, but it already feels like years.

“Enough boy talk,” I say, straightening up. “This afternoon is for us ladies, so that's what we're going to focus on. Where are they taking us, anyway?”

Shortly after I woke up this morning, there was a knock at the door, and when I opened it, a letter was taped to the

surface. All it said was the manor was hosting a girls' day, and all interested should attend.

After my evening with Adam, some space from the opposite sex is exactly what I need.

"I know as much as you do," Stella says, fanning herself dramatically. "But given last night's show, I doubt we'll be disappointed."

We follow the group of girls into a living room. It's out of date, like most of the manor, but still grand and dripping in money. And it makes me curious why Adam has renovated his room to be completely modern but has left the rest of this place the same. I have no doubt he has the money to do whatever he wants.

"Welcome." A woman at the far end of the room smiles wide at our arrival.

At first, I can't see what's on the table in front of her because a herd of women are blocking my view. But as they fan out and it becomes clear, my cheeks instantly heat.

"Well, this afternoon just got interesting." Stella stops us at the table and picks up a thick neon pink vibrator. "At least if you decide you can't forgive him, your vagina won't get lonely."

"Stella." I grab it out of her hand and must hit a button because it starts vibrating. "Crap."

I search for the off switch but can't find it. Looking like a fool fumbling around with a neon pink silicone dick.

“Girl.” Stella snatches it from me and turns it off. “If you can’t even find the on and off switch, then I’m glad that man lured you into his bed and opened your eyes to a few things.”

I’d like to tell her she’s wrong, but she isn’t. This is the most relaxed I’ve ever been. The most out of my head. And it’s all thanks to Adam, his magic hands, and his magic dick.

Did I really just think of his dick as magic?

I’m so fucked.

“Ooh what about this one?” Stella holds up a black U-shaped toy that makes my stomach sink because it reminds me of what Adam stuck inside me.

“It’s good.”

“Okay...” she drags the word out, looking me over. “Not as inexperienced as I thought. You go, girl.”

Little does she know I’m only familiar with it because this week has been an eye-opening experience. I’d never used a vibrator before this trip.

Stella flips it over in her hand, using the remote to turn it on, and the familiar sound of it is enough to make me miss him. It’s depressing—pathetic even.

“You’re not even looking.” Stella frowns.

“I am.” Kind of.

I’m at least glancing things over. But every toy reminds me there’s something much more real I’d rather have inside me.

“You’re a terrible liar, but I’ll let it go under the circumstances. Either way, you have to pick something. Forget Adam for a minute and think about you. Find one thing that helps you step outside the box. Live a little. This is girls’ day for a reason. He doesn’t even need to know about it.”

“That’s assuming the room isn’t wired.”

Stella looks up at the ceiling. I was joking, but as she looks around, I can’t help but wonder how accurate my comment is. If there’s one thing I’ve learned about Adam in the past twenty-four hours, it’s that he likes to watch.

My eyes move upward.

If he is watching—fine. Today is about me.

I skim my fingers over the toys, picking them up and feeling them out. One looks like an octopus. I’m not sure what’s up, what’s down, and what goes where, so I pass by it quickly. But as we reach the end of the table, something small and gold catches my attention.

“Didn’t see that coming,” Stella says, spotting what’s in my hand.

The small golden plug isn’t something I would have considered before this trip. I’d probably have run in the opposite direction if anyone so much as suggested using it. But Adam has awakened something. And now that I’ve had a taste of what it feels like to live out a fantasy, I can’t seem to stop.

“Do you think he’d use it on me?” I ask Stella. “Assuming I’d forgive him.”

“Lakeyn...” Stella rolls her eyes and leans in close. “I think that man wants to do terrible, unspeakable things to you. Things that would probably terrify you, if not turn you on. So yes, I think he’d use anything here on you if you wanted.”

“That should scare me, right?”

Stella looks at the small golden object in my hand and shrugs. “Depends on if you’re into that kind of thing.”

She continues down the table in the other direction, but I stand frozen in place, holding the gold toy in my hand and questioning what I really want.

I thought I knew.

I was certain until I came here.

But all it took was Adam skating through my life to stir everything up.

A shiver runs the length of my spine, and I swear I feel him watching me. I look around the room, and he’s not here. But then my eyes dart to the ceiling once more. To a dark corner. And it might be my mind playing tricks on me, but I swear I feel him.

Watching.

Waiting.

Wondering if I’ll run or meet his challenge.

He invited me here to work me out of his system. To absolve himself of his obsession. Too bad all he’s done is feed my own.

Adam

LAKE CAN RUN FROM me, but she can't hide.

Not here.

Not when I have every inch of this manor wired with cameras.

They weren't intended for her, as they serve other motives, but I don't mind the dual purpose as I watch her and her red-haired friend peruse sex toys.

If Lake knew I was watching her, it would probably be another reason on her long list of reasons I'm sick.

She'd be right.

I've never cared about anyone other than myself, so what's conventional—or healthy—isn't something I considered as I planned how to approach her.

I don't fucking care.

Lake breaks all the limits I set for myself. She steps over the line like it doesn't exist. What's worse, I want her there.

Regardless of the fact that she's becoming my weakness. A soft spot my enemies could use against me.

The more I'm around her, the less I'm willing to let her go. Even now, as I give her space to think over what she needs to, this isn't over. She's lying to herself if she thinks it is. If there's faith to be had in zodiac signs or the universe, it's that Lake was always meant to have my attention.

Cillian walks into the room, and I lock my computer screen. I don't need to explain myself or hide what I'm doing, but I'm not prepared for anyone to get a glimpse of the depth of my obsession.

Not yet.

Not when I still don't know how to protect her when all my world inevitably brings is blood and revenge.

"He's ready." Cillian nods, holding the door to my office open.

I stand and roll my sleeves up my forearms. These kinds of things have a way of getting messy, and I'm not in the mood to pick out another shirt before hunting Lake down later.

Walking over to Cillian, he steps aside so I can walk past.

"The guys are keeping an eye on her." He follows me down the hallway. "She's fine."

"I know." I know everything that happens between these walls. That's the point of this place. And when it comes to Lake, I don't miss a thing.

“She’s with her friend.”

“I’m aware.”

Cillian drops his chin and shakes his head. “I’m sure you are, boss. But you’re still worried.”

“I’m never worried.”

It’s usually the truth. I usually mean it.

I always have the upper hand, and I always know my opponent’s moves before they do. It’s the upside of crafting this carefully veiled lie I show the world. But Lakeyn isn’t one of my enemies. She isn’t a pawn. She’s my queen and all I want to do is protect her. If this is a game of chess, she steals my focus.

“What’s the plan for after New Year’s?” Cillian asks, not letting this go.

He never lets anything go, which is why he’s good at his job. But right now, it’s fucking irritating.

“Do you want them to keep watching her?”

Up until Christmas, Cillian didn’t know why I had his men in some middle-of-nowhere small town keeping tabs on her. All it took was her walking through the doors of Midnight Manor and me letting her pass with a fake name for him to see my hand.

Not that he’ll judge me for it. Doesn’t matter how sick I am, Cillian’s done worse. For my family and his. Even if he’s doing his best to avoid his own blood ties at the moment, it

doesn't wipe his slate clean. He takes care of things others get squeamish about.

Torture, kill... follow my blonde obsession to the ends of the earth.

I trust Cillian with my life, and hers.

"I'll let you know when we get there." New Year's is still a few days away, and I'm not ready to think about what the end of the week will bring.

Before inviting her here, I still hadn't decided what my intentions were. There was no countdown ticking. There was no line drawn where I'd have to make a decision.

With her newfound awareness of the situation, I fully understand things have changed. I can't go back to watching her from afar.

I've had her.

She's mine now.

If she thinks I was obsessed before, she underestimates what she does to me. Lake is under my skin and in my blood. The way she submits and responds. How she's the first person I've felt safe enough to let my guard down for.

The trouble isn't that she's here or that she figured out I've been watching her. It's that she cracked me open in the process. Now there's a countdown ticking, and I can't get enough when she could end this whole thing.

I respect limits and, even if I'll push her to them, if she calls *midnight* and walks away, there's nothing I can do about it.

Cillian punches in the code that opens the doors to the North wing of the manor. Just because I give free rein to my guests while they're here, doesn't mean there aren't areas off-limits. This wing is one of them, along with the hallway leading to Lake's room. She hasn't seemed to notice she's the only one with access to that area, but I wasn't going to put her with the other guests. The last thing I want is anyone watching her come and go from her room and getting any ideas.

We make our way to one of the offices, and Evan is sitting in the center with two of Cillian's men flanking him. His wide hips barely fit in the narrow leather seat, and his salt-and-pepper hair is rustled. He didn't come willingly.

"What the fuck is this about, Adam?"

He's annoyed.

Irritated I'm ruining his party given the fact he's been enjoying a few of the women here while his wife and kids visit her sister for New Year's.

His entertainment is about to become the least of his concerns.

"You know what this is about." I stop in front of him.

He shakes his head and chuckles, starting to stand, but Cillian plants a hand on Evan's shoulder and pushes him back down into the chair.

"We aren't done yet." I cross my arms over my chest.

Evan focuses his rage in his narrow gaze, pretending he's the ruthless CEO he wants people to see. But the little things give away his weaknesses. The sheen of sweat on his forehead, his fingers white from gripping the arms of the chair. The tick of his jaw. I'm good at reading my enemies because I have to be.

Evan is scared, and he should be.

"Is this why you invited me here?" He grits his teeth. "For some sick ulterior motive?"

"Finally catching on."

There's a reason I never invite anyone to these holiday events twice. If they've only been once, they can't get too close a look. Midnight Manor stays a mystery. A myth. A story people tell of debauchery and fun.

I give them something better to focus on so they don't see through to the real reason I host these parties.

Everyone here is someone of my choosing, carefully selected to ensure things go exactly to plan. All but one of them is invited solely for the purpose of them enjoying themselves. *All but one*. And this year, that *one* is Evan Michaelson.

Cillian walks around the desk and opens the laptop sitting on it, typing something and getting to work. But I don't take my eyes off Evan as his stare darts between me, Cillian, and the guards at his sides.

There's something satisfying about watching a powerful man squirm, knowing I'm going to ruin him and there's nothing he can do about it.

Cillian stops typing and spins the laptop around. On the screen is a video of Evan tied to a bed while some woman rides him. Cillian reaches over and hits a button that moves to another video of Evan bent over a table while a different woman spansks him with a paddle.

The wonderful thing about rich and powerful men is they usually have kinky tastes. Things they hide with their money or influence, while I offer them the perfect setting to explore them.

Midnight Manor is the apple tempting them to their own demise.

Evan's jaw clenches as he watches the videos, not asking again what this is because he's not an idiot. He's just any other rich, kinky asshole who's been caught in the compromising situation he put himself in.

Cillian flips through a few more video clips I'd rather not watch—but this is business. Finally, he lands on the most interesting one and turns the sound all the way up. In this video, Evan is sitting at the edge of his bed and talking on a phone he thinks he snuck in.

He's a fool if he thinks my men would overlook something so crucial. I wanted him to have it, just to see what he would do. And like the perfect pawn Evan is, he played right into my plan.

“Of course they don't know about the merger. Why would they?”

He pauses for the person on the other end of the line to respond.

“I don’t care.” Evan shakes his head. “I’m going to rip Tygart Industries apart from the inside, and there’s nothing they can do about it.”

Cillian slaps the laptop shut and sits back, watching Evan, who has lost the color in his already pale face.

“Let’s start again.” I walk around Evan’s chair and lean against the desk with one ankle crossed over the other. “How much for the sale of your company?”

My father’s been after Evan’s family business for years, but they’ve continually refused to sell. We offer, they turn us down. Over and over. Both families continue to amass fortunes and run in the same familiar circle.

Until we received word Evan’s next takeover will impact one of our upcoming business ventures.

That’s when I was given the order.

Dad doesn’t actually do the dirty work. He uses his sons for that. And since I handle the family business, I was tasked with Evan Michaelson’s fall from grace.

“We aren’t selling.”

“But you are.” I tip my head toward the laptop on the desk. “You can either lose a little credibility with the enormous discount you’re going to give us and retire peacefully with your family somewhere far away. Or I can send your wife and

board of directors a little present, seeing as you so kindly fucked them all over this weekend.”

I was fortunate enough that Evan is not only a cheating bastard, but also planning to dismantle his own company from the inside out. Sometimes, the universe works in your favor.

“So this is what you do?” Evan huffs.

I lean in, the stale smell of cigarettes stronger the closer I get. “You’re *lucky* if this is all I do. Try to fight this, and I promise it will get worse.”

This close, Evan turns to look at me, an evil grin stretching his cheeks. “The unbeatable Adam Kingsley. You’d like to think that, wouldn’t you? But you forget, I’m not the only one who has been enjoying myself this week.”

My blood turns molten. Of all the things this vile piece of shit could use against me, he went after Lakeyn.

I reach my hand out, and Dante, one of the guards, hands me a gun. I wrap my hand around Evan’s throat and his eyes go wide, as I press the barrel to the center of his forehead.

“What were you saying?” I ask him.

Evan sees me the way I want him to. Rich, business savvy. He thinks he can threaten me, and I won’t make him pay for it. I will, especially when he’s threatening Lake.

He fights for breath, but he doesn’t move as his eyes focus on the gun to his head.

“Nothing.”

“That’s what I thought.” I tighten my grip. “I’ll say it again, clearer this time in case you missed it. You’re *lucky* if this is all I do. Test me and find out.”

Rearing my hand back, I backhand him with the gun, splitting open a nasty gash on his eyebrow. Blood spills as I take a step back, and he grabs his face, wincing in pain.

He’s a rat.

A piece of trash.

And he isn’t worth my time now that he understands the threat. But I still need him around long enough to sign his company over to me or I’d be tempted to end him right now.

“Cillian will help you sort out the details.” I hand the gun back to Dante. “Nice doing business with you, Evan. I expect you’ll make the right decision.”

I glance at Cillian. The sick smirk on his face is why we get along so well. Morals aren’t something you should have if you want to spend too much time around a Kingsley. Blackmail is the gentlest of my family’s methods.

“I’m heading to dinner,” I say to Cillian. “We’ll talk tomorrow.”

“And what about me?” Evan snips from his chair, looking like a child about to have a tantrum. Delusional enough to think I won’t cut his tongue out if he keeps talking.

“You’ll be going home.” I narrow my gaze. “After all, I’m sure there’s no place you’d rather spend your New Year’s than with your wife and children.”

There's nothing I find more disgusting than people who aren't loyal. Why make the commitment if you're going to betray it?

If anything, I'm the opposite, willing to go to any extreme to prove my devotion. In business, I'll burn their empires to secure my own. And with Lake, I'll do much worse. In the six months I've been focused on her, my attention hasn't once been diverted. There's no woman in this universe worth looking at when she's the center of it.

Turning my back on Evan, I make my way to the door, an unsettling feeling in my gut. I need to find Lake. She's had all day to think, and after Evan's comment, I don't like that I'm not near her. I might be a patient man, but her time is up.

I've given Lake the afternoon. I've gifted her the space she said she needed. But the countdown is done. I promised I'd see this through with her until New Year's, and I don't go back on my word.

Lakeyn

PEACE SWEEPS OVER ME as I walk into the dining hall.

Acceptance.

Adam is not a conventional man. I'd be lying if I tried to convince myself he is. I knew from the beginning he was someone with darkness inside him. Someone with unique tastes in bed. A man who hosts week-long sex-filled getaways for the rich and elite. A man who isn't just powerful because of his money, but because something about his presence demands it.

I fell for a man who is challenging. Who looks at me like I don't have to be the perfect cookie-cutter version of whatever Josh expected. Adam accepted me with holes ripped through me, half-broken. He saw the beauty in me anyway.

Acceptance.

All afternoon I struggled with his methods of pursuing me. How he watched me from afar. How he lured me in.

I should be sickened by it. Or at the very least, afraid. And maybe it's wrong that I came to the opposite realization. But Adam saw me for exactly who I am—boring, ordinary, small-town—and still, not once has he tried to make me change.

He'd rather I embrace my interests, test my limits, and explore than reduce myself.

So if I only have a few days before reality inevitably crashes down on us, I want to spend them with him. Whatever risk he'll work me out of his system is worth it. I'd rather believe in us now than give us up forever.

He promised to test me, to push me, to break me. And I'm not calling *midnight* yet.

I run my hands down the front of my beaded dress. It's black and silver, and expensive. It molds to my body just like the last dress Adam gifted me. But while that one had room to move, this one hugs every curve. As if he memorized my exact measurements with his touch.

Two thin straps hold it on my shoulders, and the neckline dips like a heart, showing off curves that are otherwise unimpressive.

“You feeling better?” Stella asks.

Her red hair is pulled up in a tight ponytail, showing off every inch of her bare arms in her strapless green gown.

“Much.” I can't help but smile.

“Then go find your man and make him grovel.” Winking at me, she dips away.

Stella has been spending the week playing my opposite. While I can't peel my attention from Adam, she's having fun with a variety of options. I'm sure that's the safer route in the long run. But as the crowd parts and my eyes connect with Adam's, it doesn't matter. My heart's going to be branded with him by the time this week is done.

Adam's stare is a gravitational pull I can't resist. All I can do is stare back. Watch him from across the room like it will solve the mess this is going to leave once it's over. And when he can't resist any longer, he starts in my direction.

The universe tilts on its axis. The room flips, and my insides flutter. We're surrounded by sex, money, opulence. But it all fades away.

When he stops in front of me looking sinful in his sharp black suit, my heart might as well cave in on itself at the tick of a smile he offers me.

"May I have this dance?" Adam holds out his hand, static electricity sparking when I take it and he guides me to the center of the room.

My mind is a captive as he tugs my body to his. One hand rests gently on the small of my back, while his other is laced through mine. His eyes never leaving me, no matter how beautiful, rich, or famous the women around us are.

I swallow hard as he leans in, his lips tickling the shell of my ear before he plants a gentle kiss on my temple. Sweetness he balances with control. Adam is the center of the room, and I can't get enough.

“You were watching me,” he whispers. “I spotted you ten minutes ago.”

I almost tell him it’s because the sight of him froze me in place, but instead, I smirk when he pulls back. “It’s only fair, seeing as you were watching me first.”

The hint of his smile is beautiful. Contrasting with the wickedness in his gaze.

“I make no apologies. You’re a sight to behold.”

I nod, taking a deep breath. His fingers skate my spine, and I appreciate he was patient in his approach.

“I need some answers, Adam,” I say, finally. As much as my body begs me to just forgive him, we need to have this conversation.

“I thought you might.”

“Did you invite me here just to fuck me? You said you thought you could work me out of your system.”

“That was poor phrasing.” Adam’s eyebrows pinch as he looks down at me. “I invited you here to understand why I couldn’t take my mind off you.”

I narrow my eyes.

“Fucking you is a bonus.” He smirks, reading the disbelief on my face. “Not the purpose. You have to understand, not many things fascinate me.”

“But I did?”

“You *do*.” He presses his hand to my back and squeezes me to him.

“Is that why you host these parties?” My eyes dart around the room, and I can’t help but notice the crowd of beautiful women.

I’m not the only person here because of his invitation. And while he’s chosen me for this particular week, he doesn’t seem like the kind of man who gets lonely often.

“Do you use these events to curb your curiosities?”

Adam releases my back, lifting his hand to my face. “I only have one curiosity, Lake.”

“But you’ve been hosting these for years.”

“Yes.” He nods. “And I don’t participate.”

A knot forms in my throat. Hope, intrigue, and nerves all clotted together.

“Never?” The word is almost a whisper, so quiet I’m not sure how he hears it.

But he leans in close and cups my jaw in his hand. “Never.”

He could be lying. These weeks are designed to tap into every dark fantasy, and to resist would take a strong will. But something about his tone, his eyes; I believe him.

“But this week you have?”

“For you, yes. Even if I shouldn’t.”

“Why shouldn’t you?”

“These events are business for me, baby girl.” Adam drops his voice so no one can hear us. “They serve a purpose that has nothing to do with sex, regardless of how they seem.”

My stare moves around the room. Some people I recognize, others I don't. Politicians, business moguls. Everyone here has an excess of money and power. And with what I've seen some of them do, I'm sure they wouldn't want anyone on the outside finding out about it.

“You're blackmailing them?” My gaze moves back to Adam, who is watching me intently. “You invite them here to use it against them in the future?”

“Not everyone is here for that reason. But yes. People come here to let go. To indulge their darkest fantasies. And if that happens to also align with my need to pursue a business opportunity...”

There's no lying to myself as he admits his truth. He's ruthless in every form. In life, in business, in bed.

“And that's why you don't participate, so they can't catch you in the same position?”

He nods, the unspoken truth of that fact sitting between us. Because this week he did participate, in public where he could be seen. He poured candle wax on me in a room of people and fucked me at a live sex show.

He indulged for me.

My fingers grip his tighter as my heart starts to race.

“You need to know I’m not a good man, Lakeyn.” He reaches once more for my face. “Which is why this is all I can offer you. This week. It’s already dangerous enough as it is.”

For his business, probably. But in his words, I sense something deeper he’s still not saying.

Either way, he’s right. Our lives are worlds apart. This is the tip of the iceberg and there’s no reality in which we’d make sense outside these walls.

“I understand,” I say, knowing I need to.

“I stayed away from you as long as I could.” He rakes his fingers through my hair, pulling it back off my face. “No matter how much I wanted you, I knew you were better than all of this.”

“I don’t know about that.”

“I do.”

“How?” Deep down, I want to believe him. I want to think I deserve more than whatever Adam can offer me outside of here. But if my relationship with Josh taught me anything, it’s that I’m not easy to love because of my own limits.

“The first time I saw you was at your aunt’s funeral.”

The reminder turns my stomach.

“You walked past me, but you didn’t see me. Your eyes were in the distance, and I’m not sure where that beautiful mind of yours was.”

Drowning in grief.

“Probably distracted,” I say instead.

Adam nods, seeing straight through it like he does everything.

“Your sister was beside you, talking to someone as you walked up the steps to the church, but when she went inside, you didn’t follow her right away. You stopped at a display of flowers.”

The day was so foggy, I barely remember it, but the moment he’s referring to is as clear as if it were happening right before me.

“The roses.”

“The roses.” He nods. “You leaned in and smelled them. And when you pulled back, the distant look in your eyes was gone, and something else took its place. You almost smiled, even though I could tell from your eyes you’d probably been crying all morning.”

I blink back the tears that want to fight free with Adam’s retelling. What he saw mixes with the memory of what happened.

“My aunt used to wear a rose perfume. And I never really liked it. It was too strong, and she always wore too much of it. But that day, it felt like her. And that’s what I needed.”

Adam brushes a tear that breaks free.

“Why do you remember that?” It’s insignificant, and to anyone else, it would mean nothing.

“Because that’s what drew me to you.” He wraps both arms around me. “All my life I’ve been surrounded by people who need more and more. They’re never satisfied and they’re never happy. Nothing is ever expensive enough or special enough. But there you were, your entire demeanor shifted over a simple rose. You like things that are seemingly insignificant, but to you, they might as well be the most special thing you’ve ever seen. You’d rather have grilled cheese than caviar. You’d rather spend time with people like Stella, who makes you laugh, than people who can advance your social status or career. You care about things I never understood until you helped me see it.”

The vision of myself through Adam’s eyes nearly shatters me.

“I won’t be ready to say goodbye to you at the end of the week,” he says, holding me close. “But I will. Because the things you deserve are bigger than all the money in my bank account could buy you.”

“I—” I don’t know what to say.

A man who doesn’t show people his vulnerabilities splits himself open for me. I wrap my arms around his neck, and to my surprise, he lets me. He doesn’t stop my fingers roaming his hair or how we’re so close our noses brush.

“All I can give you is this week,” he says again, looking almost broken at his confession.

I tip up on my toes to bring my mouth to his. “Then let’s both not think about it.”

The corner of his mouth ticks up. “What’s your limit, Lake?”

I’ve never loved my name as much as I do hearing it from Adam’s lips.

“You still haven’t reached it,” I whisper. “What’s yours, Adam?”

He scans my face, focusing on my lips parting as I try to steady my racing heart. Knowing it’s an impossible task in his arms.

“You are.” His lips crash to mine.

His fingers tighten on my back, and he pulls me close. He holds me to him like he’s fighting for survival.

I wrap my arms tighter and seal us together. I hand him my heart with my kiss. A man who no doubt hurts most things he touches.

Adam’s kiss shouldn’t feel like a promise when a future can’t exist. But as he melts his lips to mine, I’m lost in the possibility of what this can never be. I hold a man who doesn’t want to love, and I give him a piece of me anyway.

He pulls back and the distance is endless. I can’t catch my breath as I stare into his stormy eyes, wrecking me. And as they do, something shifts in his expression that makes me wonder if I’m also breaking him.

A man who doesn’t want to be touched, in my hands.

“Take me to your room, Adam.” I rake my fingers through the short hair on the back of his head. “I don’t want to think

anymore.”

No good comes from it anyway.

Lakeyn

ADAM'S ROOM IS DIMLY lit when we arrive. The curtains are drawn to reveal the snowy forest, lit with a full moon in the sky. Adam strips himself of his jacket and tie, hanging them on the back of a chair as I make my way toward his bed.

“What is that?” I point to the small black box sitting on the blanket.

Adam stops beside me, leaning against one of the bedposts. “Open it and find out.”

It's small, and when I pick up the box, it's smooth like velvet, similar to the invitation I received on my doorstep. Popping open the lid, a familiar gold object inside sends a shiver down my spine.

“How did you know?”

When Stella and I were perusing sex toys earlier, I picked up this anal plug, but I wasn't brave enough to actually take it back to my room with me. I've never used toys with a partner before Adam, and I've never done anything back there.

“I know everything that happens in these walls, Lake.” Adam moves behind me, skimming the pads of his fingers down my bare arms. “You were curious.”

“You were watching.” It’s a fact, not an accusation.

While it should bother me—or scare me—all the thought does is send my stomach spinning with excitement. Because Adam can’t take his eyes off me, and right now I don’t want him to.

“Why didn’t you keep it?” Adam asks, rubbing his hands up and down my arms. “You wanted to.”

“I don’t know.”

It’s a lie. I was scared. I don’t know how to explore things in the bedroom or how to voice my interest. But Adam already knows that, hence the gift. He’s the voice I’m terrified to use. My safe space free of judgment.

“The sight of it got you wet just now.” He nips at my ear, planting a kiss on the side of my neck. “Didn’t it?”

“Maybe.”

“What did I say about maybes?” He nips at my ear again.

“Yes.” I tip my head back against him and can’t help but moan at his lips running the length of my neck. “Yes, it did.”

“You want me to stick that in your ass while I fuck your perfect cunt. Don’t you?”

I swallow hard, biting my lower lip.

I want all those things, but it's wrong. Dirty. Disgusting. I shouldn't.

"It's okay, Lake. I'll never judge you for sharing your fantasies with me." He slips his hands under my thin dress straps and peels them from my shoulders. "I'd much rather help you explore them."

My grip on the gold toy tightens as I drop the black box to the bed.

Adam reaches for my zipper and pulls it down my back. The beaded fabric loosens on my curves as he peels it down. Once it's past my hips, the entire dress puddles at my feet, leaving me in nothing but a barely-existent black thong.

"You're absolutely perfect, do you realize that, Lake?" Adam runs the back of his knuckles along my spine, down over my ass.

I shake my head.

"Well, you should." He grips my hips and runs his palms over my curves. "You're a work of art. I can't decide if God made you as a blessing, or if the devil carved you himself just to tempt me."

No one's ever talked to me the way Adam does. Unafraid of how I'll react to his crude comments. He puts a voice to his filthiest fantasies, knowing I share them.

"Do you trust me to make you feel good, baby girl?" Adam's thumbs slip into the band of my underwear as he slowly strips them down until they also flutter to my feet.

“Yes.” I might as well choke on the word as he presses close.

I’m stripped, and he’s still fully clothed. And even if his chiseled body is a sight to behold, something about the vulnerability of us like this turns me on even more. My thighs clench, and my core is begging for his touch.

“Good.” He brushes my hair over my shoulder and kisses the side of my neck as he reaches for the golden plug.

With his hand flat on my back, he presses my chest forward until I’m bent over his bed. And unlike the first time we did this, when he spanked me until I screamed, his touch is gentle and soothing tonight. Anticipation hums through me as he leaves me in place, shuffling across the room to retrieve something, before pressing close behind me once more.

Adam palms my ass, slowly rubbing along it, inching closer and closer to my untouched hole. He may not participate at these parties, but I’m not naïve enough to think he’s inexperienced. Every touch he offers has specific precision, knowing exactly how to make me feel good.

Something pops open, and the sudden click in this quiet room makes me flinch.

“I’ve got you, baby girl.” He rubs his palm over me again. “This will be a little cold.”

I don’t have time to digest the warning before a slippery liquid trickles over my ass. He rubs his fingers through it, my skin painted with his cool touch. Inching once more and toying with the line I’m begging him to cross.

It's probably going to hurt, but my body aches for it. I want to give this man everything I've never considered. And even then, I want him to have more.

Adam presses a finger against me, and the pressure makes me tense.

“Relax, baby girl.” He soothes me with a hand running over my lower back. “Trust me.”

Trust.

The word fills my lungs, balloons hope, warms my heart. I trust him with more than I should, and that knowledge has me unclenching my fingers on the bed.

I will my body to relax, and Adam hums in approval before his finger is replaced with something cool.

He runs the toy up and down me, through the lube. It drips down my pussy and onto the bed. When he reaches me again, this time he adds more pressure.

“Breathe for me, Lake.”

That's all it takes—my name from his lips is all I need to do exactly what I'm asked. The comfort in knowing he wants to make my fantasies come true.

Adam holds the toy on me with one hand, and dips the other down, playing with my pussy as a distraction. He gathers the lube and runs it over my clit, before shoving two fingers inside me.

It's already almost too much as he hits the spot that causes near instant detonation.

I let out a breath, and at that, Adam pushes the plug in. It stings. A ring of fire as it pushes past the resistance, and I can't help but let out a moan. But once it settles and I relax again, the burn subsides, and I'm full in a way that I never imagined.

Adam's fingers are still inside me as he presses against the toy, and the pressure from both places floods my chest with warmth.

"Good girl." Adam pulls his hand away, but I still feel the foreign object inside me, leaving me unbearably close to exploding.

Behind me, Adam rustles with his pants, the teeth of his zipper almost silenced with how loud my heart hammers between my temples.

He rips open a condom wrapper and then his dick is pressing against me. "This is going to feel like a lot at first."

Adam shoves his hips forward and the scream that releases is silent. The double penetration is more than a lot. I'm full in ways I never thought possible as he stretches me with his cock. He buries himself to the hilt and the pressure of his hips against my ass makes the plug press deeper.

Adam's hands glide over my ass as he slowly pulls himself out, only for a moment, before thrusting his hips forward again.

“I can feel this in your ass.” He grazes the plug with his fingers and pushes, shoving the toy harder against his dick.

“Adam.”

“Yes, Lake?” He pushes again, and I grip the comforter. “Do you like that?”

I’m nodding my head as I bury my face in the comforter, unable to form words as he pulls out and thrusts in at a steady pace.

“That’s because you’re a dirty fucking girl for me.” He buries himself as deep as he can get. “Maybe next time I’ll shove my cock in your ass instead. See how loud I can make you scream.”

“Fuck.” I groan as Adam fucks me harder.

When he’s inside me, every primal instinct of his kicks in. His tone turns filthy, and his movements are merciless.

“Damn, baby girl.” He grips my hips and pulls me to him. “You feel so good wrapped around my dick. I’m going to fuck every one of your holes, and you’re going to love it.”

It’s nasty, and it sends me over the edge. The toy inside me and Adam hammering into me. My entire body shakes as my pleasure rocks me over and over again.

I’m sure I’m hurting him with how hard my pussy squeezes at my climax because Adam groans. But I can’t help it. I’m outside my body and floating among the stars.

“Damn, Lake. You’re going to make me come if you keep squeezing my cock like that.” He pulls out, and the suddenness of it makes me gasp. But then he’s spinning me around and picking me up, wrapping my legs around his hips as he carries me to the closest wall and slams me against it. He shoves himself back in, pinning me so he can fuck me harder.

His mouth is on my neck. Sucking, biting. While I rip at his shirt, desperate to feel his skin.

When I fumble at a button, I give up and tear it open. Ripping his shirt from his chest and loving how he lets me roam every carved inch with my fingers.

From this angle, his thrusts put more pressure on the plug. And I’m either coming again or I never stopped as my legs shake around his hips.

Adam sweeps my hair off my face. I’m sweating and a mess. But under his gaze, I’ve never felt sexier. He palms my cheek, before bringing his fingers to my mouth and shoving two of them in.

“That’s it.” He thrusts, and I wrap my legs tighter. “Taking me like you know who every part of you belongs to.”

His fingers toy with my tongue while he thrusts in hard enough to put more pressure on the plug. I’m on the verge of blacking out from the overstimulation, but right as my vision darkens, my pussy squeezes, and I’m coming again.

Pulling his fingers out, he grips my chin hard and stamps his lips over mine. He seals us together as he fucks me, and I hold

him like I'll shatter if he's not there to keep me together. His pace picks up until it almost hurts, and as his body starts to jerk, his teeth sink into my lower lip.

He holds me tightly wrapped around him. His knees shaking as he pins me to the wall. My entire body shivers and my nails dig into his flesh.

Adam kisses the spot he bit on my lip. He kisses the corner of my mouth, my cheek, my jaw. He kisses everywhere he can reach before burying his face in the crook of my neck. And for a man who always feels so far away, right now we connect.

“Adam?”

He hums his response.

“Thank you.”

Pulling back, he cups my jaw and looks at me. Something edging on pain in his eyes.

“I needed that,” I explain.

He brushes my cheek with his fingers, and once more it's soft enough that he might as well be memorizing me. “And I need you.”

If only that were possible.

Adam

“HOW ARE THERE STILL entire wings in this manor I haven’t seen?” Lake squeezes my hand, her eyes wide as I open the door that leads to a hallway she’s never been down. “This place could have its own zip code.”

Her innocence shouldn’t be allowed here. Her blonde hair bright enough to light these dimly lit halls. Her smile, a torch guiding me out of a darkness I didn’t know existed.

“It’s big.”

“Big?” She playfully shoves at my arm. “Your dick is big. This manor could be its own country.”

“I’m not sure if I should be flattered or offended by that comment.”

Lake shakes her head and laughs. “Definitely flattered.”

I spin her to face me and catch her lips with my own as she crumples in my arms. Kissing isn’t usually a boundary I’m willing to cross, but now that I’ve felt her lips on mine, I can’t get enough of them. The way her little moans make her mouth

vibrate. How my hips pressing against her body quickens her breath.

While she thinks the Midnight Manor is a maze, it's nothing compared to her. She's endless, and I'm lost.

Lake groans against my mouth, and I have to peel us apart before I fuck her against the wall. There are cameras in this hall, and I can't risk anyone seeing her like that. Which is why, anytime I've fucked her I've been careful about where and how it happened.

My room is safe, and so is hers. As much as I'd like to watch her in her own space, there are certain boundaries I won't cross for her privacy. And when I fucked her at the show, I made sure the cameras normally pointed in that direction were aimed elsewhere.

I'll make her come anywhere and everywhere, as long as I'm the only one who sees it.

Pulling back, it takes a moment for her honey eyes to flutter open as she catches her breath. I'm not sure there's anything more satisfying than the fraction of a second where she's completely at peace and lost with me.

She smiles, stepping back, keeping a tight hold on my hand. "Where are we going?"

"You'll see."

I lead us around another corner. Lake is right, this manor is ridiculous. It makes my house in LA seem like a tool shed in

comparison. But at least that feels like home. This place is too grand to feel like anything more than a means to an end.

Stopping us in front of wide-set double doors, I don't miss that her breath hitches in anticipation. She experiences every moment like it's the greatest event in all of history. Tiny things she grants every ounce of her appreciation. Which is why, even if this room wouldn't be considered anything special to most guests here, I know she'll love it.

I open the double doors and they hit the wall with a hollow thud. The hinges squeak from lack of use, and the room is mildly dusty, but none of it matters. All that does is the light that brightens Lake's eyes as she absorbs the sight in front of her.

Compared to most other rooms at Midnight Manor, this one is fairly small. There are bookshelves on either wall and a long, oversized couch facing floor-to-ceiling windows. The room overlooks the backyard, and since it's on the third story, we're just above the tree line. Through the windows is an endless snowy forest, and Lake's eyes glisten as she takes in the scene.

"Adam." I'd like to think it's my name taking her breath away, even if I know it's actually the sight ahead of her.

She releases my hand and walks around me into the room. The sun is setting, and at dusk, a warm glow cascades off the snow and strikes her features. Lake stands in front of the windows basking in the glow, like an angel I should have left where I found her.

Instead, I circle the room until I'm directly behind her, wrapping her in my arms like it could be enough to keep her here. Our time is running out, and even if we spend every free moment of my day together, it's not enough.

I'm so far from working her out of my system that the mere thought I ever could is a sick joke.

"It's beautiful." She tips her head back against my shoulder, looking up at me.

Doesn't matter how many filthy things I do to her, the innocence that bleeds from her expression doesn't dull.

"Not as beautiful as you."

She shakes her head and laughs.

I'm not joking, but she'll never look at herself the way I see her. Absolute perfection that doesn't need altering. The fact that her ex made her feel like less of herself for wanting different things than him tempts me to track him down just to make him regret ever making Lake feel like less.

She shouldn't have to give up a fraction of herself for a man. Even if that man is me. Which is why on New Year's, I'll let her go, even if I'm never going to recover.

Lake is the vault my heart is trapped in.

"This manor used to belong to my mom's family," I say, sharing a piece I don't usually share with anyone.

At least with her, I know she'll keep these secrets safe.

Lake looks up at me at my comment, confusion painting her beautiful face. Probably surprised I'm sharing things with her unprompted since I've been hesitant to do this so far.

"After she died, my father didn't want anything to do with it. So when I was eighteen, he signed the deed over to me."

"I'm sorry." Lake spins in my arms, and I guide her to the couch, where she sits facing me. "I didn't know you lost your mom."

I nod. It's not something I've talked about since it happened. Not even when Dad forced me into therapy after the incident.

Lake must sense the darkness brewing, because she stays silent, watching whatever emotion crosses my face.

"My brothers were little, so I don't think they remember as much as I do. But I was fifteen, and I'm the one who found her."

"Found her?" The words hit like a gavel.

Her eyebrows pinch as her voice turns to a whisper.

"She was murdered." Somehow twenty years later it still feels almost impossible to say out loud. "My dad made a number of enemies building his empire, and she paid the price."

Lake swallows hard, her grip on my hands tightening. "Is that why you don't let anyone in?"

"Probably."

It's the best guess, and likely what my therapist would have told me if I'd given her a chance. After Mom died, I haven't let anyone close.

Not until Lakeyn.

"I'm sorry, Adam. That's terrible." Her thumbs brush the backs of my hands.

And even if I normally hate when people say they're sorry about my mom's death, I don't mind it from Lake. From her, it's genuine.

"I forgot what it was like to see past the anger and revenge." I reach up and cup her jaw. "You're the first thing I've felt in years. And from the first moment I saw you, I couldn't let go of the girl who made me feel alive, no matter how sick it made me."

A tear puddles at her lashes, running a beautiful river down her cheek that catches on my hand.

"My aunt was like a mother to me and Ivy," Lake says, suddenly fidgeting her hands in her lap. "Our parents died in a house fire when we were twelve, and she took us in after that. But I don't think I ever really got past losing my parents. I grew up that day. While Ivy drowned herself in distractions and chaos, I was the opposite. I needed order. Control."

"I understand that."

We both shut ourselves off from the world after facing the harsh reality of it at too young of an age.

“I didn’t realize it until I met you,” she says. “You’re the first person I’ve *felt* in years. You woke up parts of myself I didn’t know existed. Or if I did, I was too scared to acknowledge them.”

I hold her face in my hands, and she crawls into my lap, straddling me, her red dress bunching at her thighs. Her mouth dips to mine, and I’m gone. My soul leaves my body in favor of drowning in hers.

Lake wraps her arms around me, and I can’t hold her close enough. Everything is too far, and every moment is too short.

I drop my hands to her bare thighs, and I’m desperate to hand this girl everything I have to give. It’s not much when power and money mean nothing to her. But I can hand her myself and hope she carries me in her heart when she leaves here.

She unwinds just enough to move for the button on my pants, dragging my zipper down so she can pull me out. She steals my groan with her mouth as her hands wrap my hard shaft. Her palms run up and down the length. Pure heaven on earth.

Sliding my hands under her dress, she lifts so I can push her panties aside before she’s hovering her pussy over me. It’s pure torture feeling how wet she is against my bare dick.

“Fuck me like this, Adam.” She pulls back enough to whisper against my lips. “I need to *feel* you.”

Her hips shift and the pressure of her pressing over the head of my dick makes my vision darken.

I don't fuck women bare. I barely let them touch me. But with Lake, I want all of it and more.

“Do you trust me?” she whispers against my mouth, blinking open her eyes and watching me with such focus, I swear she sees every secret I've hidden.

“Of course I do.”

The smile that ticks up in the corner of her mouth is so sweet, I capture it. I kiss it like I can keep it. And as I tighten my grip on her hips, I shove her onto my bare cock with such force her breath catches.

Nothing between us, her body on mine, I nearly black out. It's too much, like everything I've ever needed in a person.

“Baby girl, you feel so fucking good.” I roll her hips and my dick rides every corner of her as she circles. “The only gift I've ever needed.”

She smiles against my mouth, circling her hips and holding me tight. She rides my lap, and I chase the waves like she's a siren hauling me out to sea. She could sing her song and lure me to hell. It makes no difference. I'll be there the moment I lose her.

Lake quivers, her body shaking as I take control of her hips. The feel of her wet, tight pussy on my bare dick has spots clouding my vision.

Dots. And angels. And her.

She's the moon shining through the window and the heart beating in my chest.

Her head tips back with her moan, and I kiss the center of her throat. Her air is my air, and her pleasure is all I'm chasing.

Rolling her hips faster, her breath begins to race. And when she buries herself against me, I hold her body up to thrust in and send her over the edge. I hit her where she'll feel me so deep there's no digging me out. I thrust until her pussy is so tight, she drags my cum out of me. I bury myself inside her.

The only place I'm safe.

When I finally let up, she relaxes over me, my dick still twitching. My cum and hers hot and filling her up. She lifts to look me in the eyes, and I lift her up, so I can watch my cock slide from her pussy.

It's the most beautiful sight.

She stays hovering as my release drips out of her. But she doesn't try to hide it. The girl who arrived here would have been embarrassed, but she knows better now. I'll never judge her. And the sight of me dripping from her pussy has me animalistic and possessive.

"I'll never get tired of watching you," I say, and Lake's gaze lifts to mine.

She should run before I chain her to my bed and never let her escape. Before I decide I'm too obsessed to let her walk away. She should get out of here while she still has a chance.

Instead, she leans in, sinks down onto my lap, and plants me in place with her kiss. She embeds herself like I did with her. Only the place she hides inside me is much more permanent. And for the first time in my life, something beats in my cold, empty chest.

Lakeyn

I'VE NEVER PAID ATTENTION to fairy tales, but as I step through the doors to the ballroom and adjust the mask over my face, I understand Cinderella more.

Not only because of the shimmery pale blue dress I'm wearing—sparkling and flowing out at my waist—but because of the anticipation. Midnight on the horizon, not knowing how I'll feel when the clock strikes twelve, and wanting to hold every last moment that remains tightly.

Tonight, the guests are taken to a large room that overlooks the snowy forest, much like the private office Adam showed me. The night sky is clear, and the serene white blanket on the forest hides us for one final night.

The darkness of the manor is brightened with the Christmas lights lining the ceiling and walls. Much like the man I've gotten to know here. Once cold and empty, it came to life as the week progressed.

Another step and I might as well be floating among the stars. The music is soft—gentle. It contrasts with the excitement spilling out from the crowd around me.

This week was meant to be a taste. A quick escape from the monotony of my daily life. With each passing moment, it became more. *I* became more.

I'm no longer the girl who walked through these doors seven days ago. A girl who couldn't escape the pressure weighing her down since her parents died. A girl who spent too many years watching her sister live, afraid to do the same.

One moment, one decision, one envelope—everything has changed.

I watch the crowd of now-familiar faces, even if most people are wearing masquerade masks to ring in the new year. I didn't get to know many of them, but I got to know myself this week.

Stella sits at a table at the far side of the room laughing. Her wild red hair is pulled up in a curly bun. The last thing I expected to find was a new friend, but that's what she is. Our lives are worlds apart, and it doesn't matter. She's been there through every challenge this week has forced me to face.

My skin prickles with excitement, and even if I don't see him, I feel Adam's eyes on me. He could be watching me through the cameras he has installed in every corner of the manor, or he could be watching me from across the room. Either way, his focus sends a shiver up my spine.

I want his eyes on me until the clock strikes midnight.

Making my way down the winding steps into the room below, I take a deep breath. Tonight is all we have left, and the hours are already too short.

A few eyes follow me as I make my way into the room, but the back of my neck prickles when Adam presses behind me. His fingers sweeping my arm in the softest graze that puts me completely at ease, and him in total control. I melt at the softest touch and trust him with the harder ones.

Tonight, my blonde hair is pulled back in a low ponytail, and he uses that to his advantage, sweeping it aside for access to my neck. His nose tickling me as he skims his mouth and takes in a deep breath.

“Have I told you that you smell like vanilla?” he whispers, his hands finding my hips and pulling my back to his chest.

“It’s the perfume.”

“No.” He shakes his head. “It’s you. Making any other holiday insignificant. I’d rather celebrate you every year than anything else.”

“I wish you could.”

More than anything.

Adam’s life outside these walls might make it impossible for us to exist beyond Midnight Manor, but it doesn’t stop me from wishing for things I can’t have.

As if Adam reads my mind, he softens his hold on me. All we have is tonight, and I’m not ready to think about our time limit.

“Dance with me, baby girl.” He steps back, straightening up and holding out my hand. “Give me this one last gift.”

Then he tugs my wrist, spinning me around and pulling me in, releasing a genuine laugh I’ll hold in my heart forever.



We’ve been dancing for hours. My legs are wobbly and pieces of my ponytail fall around my face.

I had no idea Adam could dance. But he’s spun me around like he isn’t the cold-hearted, closed-off man I met in this very room a week ago.

Another song finishes, and Adam wraps his hands around my body, pulling me to him. My heart floods my veins at his touch.

I lift onto my toes, but just before my lips meet his, a loud pop makes me jump.

Adam holds me close and chuckles. “It’s okay, Lake.”

He tips my chin up to the windows and a streak shoots up into the night sky before exploding in a beautiful sparkling burst that lights up the darkness. One firework after another paints a picture in the night.

Around us, the crowd begins to shift, gathering at the tall windows to watch the show. But Adam holds me in place in the center of the room. It might as well be the center of the earth. A harp strums softly and glittering gold and silver firecrackers brighten the sky.

“I’m not ready for this,” I admit, knowing the fireworks mean it’s almost midnight.

Midnight.

The thought edges on ironic given it’s the safe word I’ve yet to use, and the universe is about to call it for us.

How do you voluntarily let go of the only person who has ever made you feel complete? Even if it’s what I need to do, and what he wants. Adam brought me here knowing the real world isn’t where we belong together.

“Try not to think about it.” Adam holds me close, but his grip tenses.

And even if his words say one thing, his body tells me a different story. He clings like he’s not prepared to give this up any more than I am.

We stand in the darkness, watching the fireworks in silence, until the last burst of them fades from the sky. And all that’s left is smoke blowing away in the breeze. The memory of something beautiful that can’t last forever.

“One minute.” Someone cheers, and claps ring out in the room.

A countdown I’m not prepared to face as I spin in Adam’s arms.

He cups my jaw in his hand like he’s done a hundred times this past week. “I want to look at you.”

“You do.” I tip up on my toes to bring me closer to his lips.
“You *see* me. You’re the only one who has ever *seen* me.”

Adam pulls my face to his. He catches my lips like he catches my heart jumping to my throat. His teeth nip at my lower lip, and it draws out the sharpest inhale. But he doesn’t pull back, he claims it all. He kisses me fully, his tongue tangling with mine. His thumb on my chin tipping me open to him.

He kisses me like nothing else matters, and even if this is the extent of what he can offer, he hands me all of it. A cold man in his dark manor, who came to life just for me. He let me touch him, see him. Understand him.

Ten.

Nine.

The countdown hurts my ears. My heart. Adam’s grip tightens and his lips don’t let me go.

Eight.

Seven.

I wrap my arms around his shoulders like it’s enough.

Six.

Five.

Adam skims his hands from my face, down my sides, and holds me flush to his body. Our kiss, a paused breath as we hold each other and soak in this moment.

Four.

Three.

Time is almost up. I feel it like static in the air, tickling the back of my neck. An ending, when we've just begun.

Two.

One.

And then there's only silence. Even if I know people celebrate and cheer around us, there's only him and me in this moment.

His lips on my lips.

My heart in his hands.

His chest open.

Finally, I pull back and watch his gaze shift like the turning of the clock at midnight.

Wishing he wouldn't release me, even after he does.

"Happy New Year," I whisper, tugging myself from his grasp.

He catches my wrist when I take another step backward, but I shake my head. Choking on the words that want to get out.

We can't keep this. And anything past this minute will bring the kind of pain there's no healing from. If I don't walk away now, I'll never be able to.

Adam releases my wrist, and I take another step. I breathe out a suffocating breath and blink back the tears trying to break free. Then I turn and walk away, feeling his eyes on me every step I ascend on the staircase.

I can't move quickly enough as I head for the front door to the manor. But I need to because I can't let myself cry here. These walls are for good memories, not sad ones.

When I make it to the door, a line of cars is idled in the large driveway. The same way they were when we arrived, they wait for us now. And while everyone else is still inside celebrating, I climb into the nearest one and slam the door before I can second-guess my decision.

This is the end of our story.

The car pulls away, and I don't look back, even when I swear I see a figure off in the shadows. Figments of my imagination I'm creating like maybe they could be a reason to stay here. Monsters Adam was afraid would catch me if I got too close, and now I'm materializing them with my thoughts.

I bury my face in my hands and try to hide from this moment. From the chaos tugging me in every direction. It isn't until we reach the exterior gate that I do look up from where my hands grip my dress in my lap. The trees are cloaked in darkness, and even if the snow brightens the forest, it's nothing like it looked from inside Midnight Manor.

Out here winter is cold, merciless. An empty chill that will follow me home.

Home.

Is that even what my small town is?

There's nothing there for me anymore—not even myself. The girl who will return won't fit in the same way as the one

who left.

Adam cracked me open, and even if he tried to fight it, I think I did the same to him.

But I'm running. Like he is, we're so quick to escape the only thing that's made us feel—anything.

What am I doing?

“Excuse me.” I lean forward in my seat and grab the back of the one in front of me.

I need to get back there. I need to understand why we can't find a way to make this work. If he's the only person I've felt safe to be myself around, and I'm the only one he's shown his true self to, why are we fighting this?

“Yes, miss?” The driver tips his chin up but keeps his focus on the wintry road.

“Is there any way we can turn around? I forgot something.”

My heart.

My hope.

It's all in that dark manor with a man who is as inevitable as midnight itself.

“Of course, miss.” The driver nods and starts to slow the car, but just as he does, we round a corner, and a pair of headlights are coming directly at us.

Two beams brighter than any firework in the night sky.

And then it all goes dark.

Adam

“CILLIAN.” I STORM OUT of the ballroom, ignoring anyone who tries to stop me.

I don't need their thanks for inviting them. Nothing matters except finding Lakeyn before she gets away. I was stupid enough to release her wrist when she shook her head. My tongue froze when I should have told her to stay. Paralyzed by the fear of holding on, knowing all that does is lead to pain.

In my life—in my business—it's not safe to fall in love. It's not safe to have a weakness. Those can be exposed, and the thought that someone could use Lakeyn against me had my mind in a black hole.

But as I watched her disappear up the staircase, none of it mattered. Because I'd rather fight protecting her than let her go.

“Boss.” Cillian stops in front of me, his arms crossed.

“Where is she?”

“She left.”

“Left?” I thought she’d head to her room first. I didn’t expect her to just walk away.

The walls close in, and somehow the manor feels emptier at the realization. She’s the warmth in these walls—in the cavity of my chest. And I need her heat again.

“What do you want to do?” Cillian’s eyes narrow, and his mouth ticks up in the smallest smirk.

He knows I’m about to reveal all my cards, but it doesn’t matter. I need to get to her.

“Get the car.”

“Yes, sir.” Cillian drops his hands and walks toward the far hall, chuckling under his breath.

“Something you’d like to say?” I challenge him as I follow him to the private garage.

“Nope.”

But his eyebrows lift, and we both know exactly what he’s thinking.

I let her in. I’ve never let anyone close enough to hint at my secrets. Yet, I showed her all of them. The things I said and did should have made her fear me or hate me. But Lakeyn’s darkness and mine found a home in each other. And like an idiot, I still let her go.

“They’ve got a five-minute head start,” Cillian says, climbing into the driver’s seat as I get in the passenger side.

“Then drive faster.”

“As fast as I can, boss.” Cillian tips his chin up at the driveway as the garage door opens, pulling out into the cold forest. “Roads are a mess. There was another storm last night.”

Something about his comment settles wrong, but I can’t put words to it. An icy chill climbs my spine as Cillian drives us down the road.

The roads are slick. Nearly solid ice. And I don’t like the fact that Lake is out here without me. She should have waited until morning with the rest of the guests.

It’s my fault. I know she runs from what scares her, and I saw it in her eyes. She’s falling just like I am, and the reality of us is terrifying.

Too bad I’m going to make her face it anyway.

I need her, and I know, deep down, she needs me too. I see her for all she is—broken and perfect. A shard that fits with me like a puzzle piece.

Gripping the seat, I try not to spiral—not to think of the fact that she shouldn’t be out in this wintery mess.

“Boss.” Cillian’s voice snaps my vision back to focus, from where I’ve been drifting off, staring at the dark tree line.

He starts to slow the car, and I’m about to ask him what the fuck he’s doing when my gaze slides to the road directly ahead. Two cars are in the middle of it, headlights lighting the scene. A mess of metal being slowly blanketed in falling snow.

My stomach drops, and Cillian barely has time to stop the car before I’m climbing out.

There's a body in my path. His blood splatters starkly against the snow-covered road. He clearly went through the windshield, and he's too mangled to tell if it's one of my drivers or whoever ran into them.

Whatever happened isn't good. Doors and frames are twisted. Smoke billows from one of the cars, but nothing will keep me back. I'll go up in flames before I lose her.

I run to the first car, and in the darkness, it's hard to make out anything inside, except for the faint sparkle of a pale blue dress.

"Lake." I grab at the door handle, but it doesn't budge.

Cillian runs around the car for the other side, where the door is slightly bent, and starts pulling. I head to him and help, and between the two of us, we barely get it open.

Climbing into the bent car isn't easy, and I can hardly maneuver between the seats with my large frame.

"Lakeyn." Her eyes are closed, and her dress is stained with blood. All I can do is hope it's not hers.

It can't be hers.

Her blonde hair is falling from where it was tied off her face earlier.

"Lake." I finally reach her, wiping her hair from her cheeks and searching her for a breath.

I swear I lose my own looking her over. Holding my fingers on her pulse.

The faintest heartbeat floods me with relief as her eyes flutter open.

“Adam.” My name makes her wince—or it might be the pain.

Her fingers clench on the seat beside her, and I lay mine over them.

“I’m here, Lake. It’s going to be okay.” I rub the backs of her hands, hoping I’m right. “I’m going to get you out of here.”

“Adam,” she says my name again, blinking the scene into focus. “You’re here.”

“Of course, baby girl.” I lift her hand to kiss the back of it. “You’re mine. I’m never letting you go.”

Tears puddle in her beautiful honey eyes. “We were turning around. I asked him to... and then... I don’t remember.”

“It’s okay, you don’t need to right now.”

Outside, Cillian yells something about smoke, and my awareness of the situation forces me to focus.

“We need to get you out of here, okay, Lake? Can you move for me?”

I’m not sure if she should be moved, but she can’t stay here. If the car goes up in flames, there’ll be no getting out.

I reach for her seatbelt and slowly peel it off her. Once I do, she leans forward, wincing.

“Careful.”

“I’m fine,” she says, taking a deep breath. “Just a little sore. And unsteady.”

I wrap my arm around her. “Cillian, door.”

He manages to peel it open a little bit further, and I help Lake climb forward to get through it. She’s clearly in pain, but nothing is as important as getting her out of the car. And only once Cillian takes hold of her, do I finally relax my shoulders.

Climbing out of the car after them, I move to where Lake is lying in the snow. Cillian has his jacket spread out to keep her from the cold, and he’s on the phone giving directions.

I peel my own jacket off and cover her.

Her cheeks are rosy and her lips quiver with the snow falling overhead. I need to get her in the car, at the very least, out of the cold.

She blinks up at me and curls into my jacket.

“I shouldn’t have left,” she says, teeth chattering.

I shake my head. “I shouldn’t have let you go.”

“Guess we aren’t good at this.” The softest smile ticks her lips, and it’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen.

If I spend the rest of my life drowning in the sight of her, it still won’t be enough.

“I’ll be better for you.” I brush the side of her ice-cold cheek with the back of my hand. “I love you, Lake. And I promise to love you better from here on out.”

Tears once more pool in her eyes, and I brush a rogue one from her cheek.

“I love you too, Adam.” Her voice quivers. “Even if it’s too soon. I love you, and I love the person you make me.”

Her face winces.

“Careful, baby girl.” I tuck my jacket over her as much as I can to warm her. “Help is on its way.”

“How sweet.” A voice comes up behind me, and my back stiffens at the familiar tone.

Lake’s eyes widen as she glances past me, and the entire forest might as well shift with the fear that claims her face.

“The devil fell in love.”

Cillian stops pacing, tucking his phone in his pocket as he looks at the man behind me.

Slowly holding my hands at my sides, I turn, and in the snow, stands Evan Michaelson with a gun pointed directly at me. His face is bloody from the impact of the crash, and his right shoulder hangs lower than his left.

“You did this.”

It’s not a question, the entire scene is clear now. The crash wasn’t an accident. He’s making good on what I assumed was an empty threat. A mistake I won’t make again.

“You think you’re the only one who can take things from people?” Evan steps forward, and I feel Cillian shift, but I hold

up a hand to stop him before this escalates, and Lake accidentally ends up in the crossfire.

“What do you want, Evan?”

“You know what I want.”

“I can’t give that to you.”

His business is already mine; we signed the papers last night. And anything else he might ask for, I’d never consider handing him anyway. Not after what he’s done.

He went after my one weakness, and he’s going to pay in blood.

“You really want to play like that?” Evan lowers the gun and now it’s pointed at Lakeyn.

I hear her breath hitch behind me, and I step to the side, blocking Evan’s view.

“I have more than one bullet, and I have no problem going through you first.” Evan laughs.

“You’re not going to do this,” I say, my blood running hot through my veins.

“I’m not?” He chuckles.

I shake my head, slowly watching him. Evan doesn’t take me seriously, and that’s fine. His underestimating me is for the best. It’s why I keep my nose clean in public and let my father and brothers handle the rest.

But it doesn’t mean I won’t do what needs to be done when cornered.

Evan's gaze narrows, and he's gripping the gun tightly, raising it once more.

"You don't get to ruin my life and live happily ever after, Adam. Everyone has a price to pay."

And I pay mine, every day. Not that he realizes it.

He lets out an exhale, blinking just long enough that I feel Cillian shift behind me. The sudden movement captures Evan's attention, and he spins to point the gun at Cillian.

It's too late.

I get to him before he has a chance to pull the trigger, knocking him into the snow. My hand finds his throat, slamming the back of his head to the ground as I land my other fist on the side of his face.

He's still disoriented from the crash, and he loses his grip on the gun from the force of my hit.

Kneeling over him, I grab his gun. The shot rings out in the otherwise silent forest. An echo that makes Lake yelp. This isn't the first time I've killed a man, but I was hoping to break that to her in a gentler manner.

It's all in the open now.

I'm not a good man, and that's what it will take to protect her.

I look over my shoulder and Cillian nods, tucking his own gun away. Once more, he picks up his phone and starts directing the scene.

Climbing up, I walk back over to Lake and kneel beside her. Her eyes are saucers filled with an emotion I can't name.

"I'm sorry you had to see that."

She glances in Evan's direction.

"Don't look at that, baby girl."

"He's dead." She's in shock. Her chattering paused and her knuckles white with how hard she's clenching my jacket.

"Yes."

"He tried to kill me." Her gaze darts to mine, quick, focused.

"He did."

It makes me sick because it's my fault. And as much as I'd like to think Evan's death solves that problem, I know it's not the case.

"This is what—"

"Stop." Lake reaches out and takes my hand in hers. "Don't you dare try to use this to back out of us. I already know who you are, Adam. You don't scare me."

"And I appreciate that, baby girl." Bending down, I fight my smile and plant a kiss on her forehead. "But I wasn't going to try to back out."

"You weren't?"

"No." I shake my head. "I was going to say—this is what follows me. It's messy, complicated. My life is so far from your small town, I can't even connect them. But I can't lose

you. I won't survive it. So if you run, I'll chase. Every time. And from here on out, I promise I'm going to keep you safe."

Lake blinks back tears, tightening her fingers' grip on mine. "I know, Adam. And I trust you to do that."

It's reckless. Naïve. But I need her more than the air in my lungs. Her trust fuels the pulse in my veins.

In the distance, headlights approach, and I breathe a sigh of relief. We'll get through this, no matter what I have to do to ensure that's going to happen.

"Adam," Lake whispers.

I brush her cheek. "Yes, baby girl?"

"Kiss me."

I lean in without hesitation, taking her lips. Sealing mine to hers in a promise.

"Happy New Year," she mutters against my mouth.

I breathe out a chuckle and hold her hands tighter. "Happy new life, baby girl. This is just the beginning."

Epilogue

Lakeyn

One Year Later

“AND HERE I THOUGHT people didn’t get invited twice.” Stella stops in front of me, her red hair shorter than it was last year but with the same bright smile as always. “You’re already making Adam a better man.”

“I’m sure he agrees with you.” I wink. While I once thought it was impossible to reach his heart, it’s where I live now. “I’m so happy you made it.”

I wrap Stella in a hug.

“Of course.” She pulls back and smiles, squeezing my arms. “Happiness looks good on you. Or is that just the post-fuck glow keeping you perma-happy.”

“Both?” I can’t bury the smile that breaks free.

“Well tell him to keep it up.”

“I will.” Except I don’t have to. Adam knows what I need. He reads my body like he reads my mind. And I’ve never been more at peace.

“There you are.” Ivy stops beside us, wrapping her arm through Stella’s. “Stella, we’ve got two mountains of muscle to climb, and you’re coming with me.”

Stella and Ivy met at my wedding to Adam, and they became fast friends, which made it an easy decision to invite them both here this holiday season.

“Lake, go find your man and let him do unspeakable things to you.” Ivy nudges my arm.

I can’t help the blush that climbs my neck. Adam might have tested every limit I can imagine in bed, but standing in front of my sister and friend, I still can’t help that my cheeks heat with the reminder.

“We’ll catch you tomorrow.” Ivy tugs Stella’s arm. “Stella and I have some needs of our own to attend to.”

“Hey, Ivy.” I stop her as she turns to walk away. “Thank you.”

If it wasn’t for my sister pushing me to accept Adam’s invitation last year, my life wouldn’t be what it is now.

After everything settled from the accident, Adam refused to wait an appropriate amount of time to propose. Impulsive as ever, we got married after only a few months of dating. To anyone else, it might seem rushed, but when the heart knows what it wants, sometimes you have to listen.

We both understand that life can take a turn at any moment, and we’re not going to waste any of it.

Ivy smiles. “You know I’ve always got your back, sis.”

With a final wink, the two of them disappear into the crowd.

Adam almost cancelled the Midnight Manor festivities this year, but I convinced him not to. His business is dangerous, but it’s his life. I understand and support him unconditionally.

I didn't fall for a prince; I fell for a ruthless man. And I wouldn't want him any other way.

We did make a few changes to the party though.

This year is not about business, it's a celebration. A few of the invites went to friends who won't judge our unique kinky interests, and the rest are people who deserve a little break from the monotony of the day-to-day. And for the first time since Adam started these parties, only the security cameras are turned on.

No blackmail. No work. Just me and my husband ready to enjoy our time.

Adam seems in agreement as he walks toward me wearing the same black mask I met him in.

"The girls released you." He takes my hands and plants a kiss on my temple.

"They got distracted."

"Thought they might."

My husband has a way of reading people, and I have no doubt he invited a few of the men knowing they'd be the perfect distraction for Stella and Ivy. It would be sweet if I didn't know it's only so he can have me all to himself.

"And what about you?" I step in closer. "Are you mine now, or are you and Cillian still working?"

"I'm always yours," Adam says, peppering a kiss on my lips. "Besides, I have a special surprise for you. It's technically

Christmas, after all.”

“Technically.” I smile, shaking my head.

It doesn’t matter what day it is; he loves giving me gifts. And I can’t say I mind.

Adam leads us out of the room and down a hallway that’s blocked off to the other guests. I’m still not overly familiar with the manor, since we spend the majority of the year in LA. But I’m starting to learn its secret passages.

“Where are you taking me, Mr. Kingsley?”

“Hmm... Mr. Kingsley” He pulls me to his side. “I like the sound of that.”

“Better than sir?” I grin.

“Maybe.” He leans down. “I’d like to hear it in a few different decibels as you scream it for me. Then I’ll make a decision, *Mrs.* Kingsley.”

Heat floods my core at his comment, and he bites his lip, his gaze dropping to the blush climbing my cheeks.

Adam stops and punches his code into a keypad, before opening a door and guiding me into a dark room.

“Where are we?”

“Wherever you imagine, baby girl.” He steps behind me and peels off my masquerade mask. He reaches in his pocket, before lifting his hands once more and wrapping something else over my eyes.

Now my vision is blacked out, as he ties the blindfold around the back of my head.

“No thinking tonight, Lake. Only feeling.”

Adam guides me into the room until my thighs hit something, stopping me.

He trails his fingers down my neck, undoing the clasp on my black halter dress and releasing it. The entire dress falls to the floor, and I’m left completely naked for him.

“No panties?” He hums, running his hands over my hips. “Is my wife trying to tempt her husband so he’ll fuck her like the dirty girl she is?”

He grips my hair and pushes my chest forward until I’m bent over a hard surface. A breeze is the only warning I get before his palm smacks my ass—hard.

“You like being bad for me.” He rubs my cheek where he just spanked me, to soothe it, before dragging his fingers down between my legs and driving two fingers in.

“Yes.”

Adam pulls his fingers out and smears my wetness over me, slowly running a figure eight over my clit.

“Bad girls get punished, Lakeyn.” He drives three fingers in this time. “So tell me, baby girl, what’s the only word that will stop me?”

“Midnight.” I can barely get it out as he curls his fingers and my body throbs.

Without my vision, every feeling is more intense.

“That’s right.” Adam pulls his hand out again, and then his palm connects with my bare skin.

A sharp sting that edges on painful, while also slowly building me up.

The clatter of Adam’s belt buckle releasing echoes in the quiet room. Darkness makes every sound precise. And once the final clink of his belt releases, he grabs my arms and pulls them behind my back, pushing my chest harder to the cool surface.

“Who is in control of your limits tonight, Lakeyn?” Adam wraps his belt around my arms, tight enough that I can’t move, but not so hard he’s cutting off my circulation.

“You are, Mr. Kingsley.” I bite my lip at the growl that hums from his chest.

“I am.” Adam agrees, securing the belt and running his hands down my lower back, gripping my ass.

My shoulders are pulled back with my arms secured, and it’s edging the line between uncomfortable and downright hot.

The heat of him fades, and I’m not sure what he’s doing until his mouth is on my pussy and the surprise mixed with the pleasure makes me scream.

He shoves his tongue inside me, and at that exact moment, his palm connects once more with my ass.

“That’s right, baby girl.” He pulls back, running his fingers through the mess coating my inner thighs. “I want your pussy to fuck my tongue.”

He dives back in, driving his tongue further into me as his fingers roll over my clit. And even if I wasn’t blindfolded, I don’t think I’d be able to see anything with the darkness clouding my vision. Between the sting still fresh on my ass, the restriction of my arms, and the unrelenting stimulation between my legs, I’m on the brink of blacking out.

His fingers pull away, but he continues the work with his tongue, pushing me closer and closer until I’m shaking from the ledge he’s holding me on. On the verge and about to come, as he pulls away, refusing me.

“Adam.” I practically grunt, as I press my face against the surface I’m pinned to.

He chuckles darkly. My husband loves driving me to the edge before granting my release. Like he wants me to be an absolute mess for him.

And I am.

“I don’t respond to that name here.” He pulls back, and I feel him stand, swiftly connecting his palm on my already stinging ass cheek before he rubs his hand over it gently.

“Mr. Kingsley,” I say, and the growl that makes my veins hot ripples through him.

“Yes, baby girl?”

He runs his hands over my ass, pressing my tight hole and then skating his fingers down, between my legs.

“Please let me come.”

“Such a good girl asking politely.” He pushes his fingers in and then pulls them out, sliding my wetness over my tight hole.

Only once my ass is slippery with my excitement does he press something cool against it. I had a feeling this was coming. Adam knows how much I enjoy being filled in every way by him.

“Breathe, baby.”

I exhale and he presses a plug in. This one is slightly larger than anything else he’s used, and stings as I try to adjust to the size. It verges on uncomfortable until a slow buzzing starts.

The plug is vibrating intensely enough that the dull shockwaves make my walls clench.

“You like your new present?” Adam asks, kicking the vibrations up another notch.

He loves using toys on me, reading how I react to each one.

“Yes,” I whimper.

“Good.” He grabs my hips and lifts me, spinning me around and sitting me down on the surface now with my legs spread around his hips.

He peels the blindfold off, and I can see the room more clearly now that my eyes have been cloaked in darkness. My

focus finds my husband, standing in front of me still fully dressed in a suit, while my arms are bound behind my back, and I'm naked at his mercy.

“Spread those knees for me, Lake. Show your husband what a dirty girl you are.”

I widen as far as I can, and Adam's gaze drops to my pussy spread before him. The plug still vibrating in my ass. The sensation making me a dripping mess.

“Fucking beautiful.” He drags his hand down between my breasts, to my thighs, before reaching for his pants and undoing them.

He pulls them down in front just enough to grip his hard cock in his hand and stroke it. And as much as I love his body, I love seeing him like this more. With total power, ready to fuck me like I'm his plaything.

Adam rubs his cock over me, and I shake as he puts on the pressure. My fingers grip the surface behind me to steady myself with my limited movement.

He leans in, rubbing himself over me again and catching my moan with his lips.

“Merry Christmas, baby girl.” He grins against my mouth as he drives himself home.

And he fucks me so hard, he hands me the only gift I've ever needed from him. He sets me free—from my thoughts, from myself.

I'm his.



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Her.

Acknowledgements

As a Hallmark Christmas movie junkie, it was only a matter of time before I put a spicy twist on my favorite time of year. And I had so much fun writing Adam and Lakeyn's story.

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Chris, my biggest supporter and love of my life. The best Christmas present was marrying you on that day nearly a decade ago. Happy Christmasversary now and always.

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For my readers, I can't properly express what it means that you take the time to read my books. From billionaires, to rockstars, to tattoo parlors. From enemies to lovers, to second

chances, to exploring kinks. We're experiencing it all. Thank you for being on this journey with me. You breathe life into my books and I'm endlessly grateful.

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Seattle Singles

Miss Matched

(Matchmaker meets Billionaire)

Miss Behaved

(Second Chance, Friends to Lovers)

Miss Understood

(Enemies to Lovers, Fake Relationship)



Enemy Muse (Rock Star Romance)

Heart Break Her

(Celebrity Crush)

Forever and Ever

(Opposites Attract)

Heart of a Rebel

(Second Chance)

Worth the Trouble

(Forbidden Love)



Twisted Roses (Dark, Taboo Romance)

Lies Like Love

(Stepsiblings)

Heart Sick Hate

(Boyfriend's Brother)

Cold Hard Truth

(Her captor)



Reckless (Kinky, Dark, Billionaire Romance)

Reckless Games

(Hot, Holiday with a Billionaire)

Reckless Promises

(Mafia heir, forced marriage)

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About the Author

Eva Simmons writes hot, heartbreaking romance with complex heroines, and broken, dirty-talking bad boys who fall hard for them.

When Eva isn't dreaming up new worlds or devouring every book she can get her hands on, she can be found spending time with her family, painting a fresh canvas, or playing an elf in World of Warcraft.

Eva is currently living out her own happily ever after in Nevada with her family.