

MARIE JAMES

REDEMPTION

Refused



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Redemption Refused
A Mission Mercenary Novel
Marie James

Copyright

Redemption Refused: A Mission Mercenary Novel

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Synopsis

Walking away from my family at eighteen, letting them believe I died a fiery death in a car accident, was easy.

Hooking up with the college freshman I was supposed to keep an eye on was easier than tracking her.

Kidnapping her after that first night was easier than following her around campus.

I'm massive, scarred, and tattooed. I don't exactly fit in with her crowd.

After the job was done, cutting her loose was the hard part.

Making it through the day without seeing her became impossible.

She seems invested in this game of cat and mouse we're playing, but she's mistaken.

I'm not a toy she can discard when she's bored.

Trying to get her out of my system may leave us both in pieces.

Prologue

Elio

I know how cruel it is to squeeze my eyes closed at the sound of her screams. If I could cover my ears and block it all out, I would. I should be stronger for her, but I'm a coward.

I want to look in her eyes and promise her that I'll find a way to save us both, that I'll devise a way to put an end to the pain he's caused her—we've—we've caused her.

We were careful, so careful, sneaking around. I'd keep my eyes lowered at school, would go above and beyond not to draw any attention to her. I could love her in the darkness. Despite it causing so many fights between us, I did it to keep her safe.

Until my initiation, I didn't heed many of the rumors about how we were required to prove our loyalty to the Severino family. Killing someone, especially a girl, we knew, was absurd. No one was that cruel. At least that's what I thought until Alessio, the oldest Severino brother, whispered in my ear and told me to pick one while I stood on the edge of the dance floor at mine and his younger brother Marcello's senior prom less than six months ago.

The quiet is so loud it forces my eyes open. Her chest rises and falls, telling me Maya's still alive, but it doesn't bring the relief it should. I know how this night ends. I know I'll never be the same, and with that comes a swarm of guilt and a burn behind my eyes.

I shouldn't have gotten involved with her. I shouldn't have thought I could have something of my own. That loving her was worth the risk of losing her. Her love, that peace I sought, comes at a price, and I wasn't even man enough to warn her. Instead, I made promises of a future, whispered in her ear all the things we would do together in the lifetime I knew I couldn't give her. Each word was a lie, a fantasy of my creation.

I want to beg for mercy, to plead with Marcello to just get it over with because I know begging for her life to be spared would be a waste of breath. I know he feels betrayed. We aren't supposed to love. We aren't supposed to make connections with anyone outside of the family. When it's time for us to settle down and marry, their father is the one responsible for telling us who that is. I haven't gotten my orders, despite my sister being almost a year younger and already being promised to the man that's placing a soft hand on Maya's subtly swollen belly.

I choke back a sob, the first one I let escape since all of this started.

He knows, I realize when I lock eyes with him.

"Please," I beg.

The word is broken. I'm broken.

As he presses his knife to her flesh, I can only fucking pray he kills me next. Living without her is a torture I'll never survive.

The only way to endure any of it is to never love again.

By the time I reopen my eyes, I've managed to shut all of it down. The pain, the self-hatred, the need for vengeance, all of it is gone. I'm blank. The part of me that had the ability to give a shit about anything is gone.

Numbness is all that's left, and as her heart stops beating and Marcello smiles at me, I realize he was successful. His plan worked.

He turned me into the monster I pretended to be for so long.

Chapter 1

Alani

I tilt my head back, my eyes closed, but my nose pointed to the ceiling. Pretending to have a good time doesn't make it happen, and waiting for the alcohol to take over and dull the edges of boredom frustrates the hell out of me. I don't need to be drunk to have fun, but it sure does help.

College is supposed to be a blast. I'm supposed to live life and celebrate the new freedom I have, but it feels more like torture. I don't even want to be here, and I'm regretting my decision to attend Lindell University. I wanted to put some distance between my sister and myself. I wanted to get far enough away that she couldn't just pop up and surprise me. I got my wish and then some because I haven't seen Ayla since she dropped me off in the fall. Hell, I spent the Thanksgiving and Christmas holidays with my roommate's family because Ayla took a job out of the country. It seems she couldn't wait to get away from me either.

I feel orphaned, abandoned. I never confess those things on our weekly calls. The woman had to put her own life on pause to take care of me after our parents' tragic deaths. I fought against her parenting, at times because as a teen it's the instinctual thing to do, at other times because I wanted to punish her because of the role she had to take. It wasn't fair, and I knew it at the time. Maybe her silence is her vengeance.

The music surrounds me, swirls like a living thing against my skin, but even as much as I want it to, it doesn't settle inside of me the way I need it to. It isn't threatening to take over, to become the escape I need like it normally does.

Shaking out my arms, I feel a heated sense of awareness, the odd sense that someone's watching me. The thrill of having someone's attention lights my skin on fire.

I imagine the danger of it, that the electric charge is coming from someone dangerous, someone who's willing to hurt me, to take what they need. My heart pounds in my chest,

the rhythm not too different from the beat of the music swirling around the party.

I don't open my eyes to search the crowd because it will only lead to disappointment. I never find what I truly need because this is a college party not far from campus in a one-horse town, not some dangerous rave deep in the belly of an abandoned building.

“Hey.”

I growl deep in my chest at the interruption but calm myself before opening my eyes to the man who thought now of all times would be a great time to interrupt me.

“More?” Blaine asks, holding up the matte-black flask.

His smile is wide, unassuming. He's handsome by all standards, a real catch if he were the type of man I was attracted to.

I take the flask, lifting it to my lips.

Ayla would warn me against the glint in his eyes. She'd tell me to be cautious of any man pushing me to get drunk, but this isn't the first time I've been in this situation with Blaine. Despite the fact that he's a senior to my freshman, his end goal is taking care of me at the end of the night as if his chivalry would make me more likely to want to date him.

He wouldn't have the stomach for doing what I desire most. He'd have more of a chance with me if he did.

My nose scrunches as the alcohol burns its way down my throat. I hate the taste, but know it's just part of it if I want to get where it eventually takes me.

Blaine's smile is bright and hopeful, his body moving to the music as he waits for me to have my fill of the whiskey in his flask. He's classically handsome with blond hair and bright unassuming eyes. A real catch honestly if I were attracted to the boy next door who doesn't have an ounce of mischief in his body. Providing this liquor to a minor will probably be the scintillating tale he'll try to avoid when telling stories later in life, with his equally perfect wife and their equally perfect two-point-three kids.

I wish I found the guy attractive. It would make my life much easier. It would make the disappointment that seems to follow me around non-existent.

Wanting to get away from Ayla because she was smothering me ended up being the worst decision possible. I hate it here. I hate the perfection everyone seems to carry around with them. I hate the white-toothed smiles and the control everyone seems to have. I hate the excuses everyone uses to keep from going wild because they have practice the next day or an exam coming up.

I hate my parents for dying and I hate my sister for stepping into the role of parent so seamlessly. I hate that I feel like the only one who struggles with knowing how my life will end up.

“Are you having a good time?” Blaine asks, his smile still wide even when I hand him back an empty flask.

“The best!” I lie with mock enthusiasm.

Disappointment swirls deeper when he grins, not catching the sarcasm in my voice.

I scan the room, my body still moving to the music despite this need inside of me to leave. It'll pass—that desperation for danger. I just need to give the alcohol enough time to work.

Landon and his husband, Rick, friends of Blaine, stand across the room, looking just as bored as I feel. I see the questions in their eyes as they also scan the room. I can tell they're wondering why they even showed up at a college party in the first place. Landon, the guy who Blaine described as a hell of a baseball player, looks even less impressed. I was told during our introductions that he's in the Marine Corps and on break before getting his first set of orders. It seems as if he's realizing he should've decided to go anywhere but here.

I make a mental note to never come back to campus. I refuse to be the girl who graduates and comes back as if I need to relive my glory days. I can only pray these are far from my glory days. If they are, what a damned shame.

“I brought a second one,” Blaine says, producing another flask.

I give him a genuine smile, grateful for his thoughtfulness. I’m safe with the man, and I hide that disappointment with another tilt of the flask to my lips.

That’s when I see him. Dark eyes lock on me as I drink, and I know he’s the cause of the way I felt earlier. Danger seeps off of him, becoming a tangible thing between us despite him being across the room.

He doesn’t even attempt to fit in with the smiling and laughing kids around him. His dark presence makes everyone close to him seem like toddlers. His lips form a flat line as I drain the second flask, his eyes on my skin burning more than the whiskey in my throat.

I break eye contact with him long enough to hand Blaine back the empty flask. Disappointment flashes in his eyes when he shakes it.

“Sorry.” The apology falls from my lips naturally, a trained response to the discontent in his eyes.

“I’ll go get a refill,” he says.

Relief washes over me as he walks away. The guy is a good friend for the most part, but there are times he’s more than a little smothering. I don’t know why he nominated himself as my protector. On one hand, he tries to act like the older brother I never wanted, but then in the next breath, he hints at wanting to be more. I know it’s messed up that I haven’t told him I don’t want either from him. It makes me a user, an ungrateful asshole honestly, but I don’t want him gone either. The attention he gives gets on my nerves, but it also feeds that narcissistic part of me that craves his undivided attention. The problem with Blaine is that he’s too nice. He’s everything I could never want in a man. I realize how messed up it is, how the things I crave would probably make any sane person call the people in white coats to drag me away for evaluation. I’m well aware that the things I read about are fiction. That wanting a man who’s willing to hurt me is as crazy as the plotlines in the books I devour.

My eyes scan the room, an ache I can't explain tugging down the corners of my mouth when I can't find the man I saw just moments ago.

Warmth spreads through me as I continue to dance, my eyes constantly searching the room. Either he's watching from the shadows or my mind is playing tricks on me because I can feel his attention on my skin. It's an electric current tugging at every hair and making them stand on end. I close my eyes, swimming in the idea of him dragging me into the darkness, of him refusing to stop even when I beg him to.

"This is the last one."

My jaw aches with the pressure from clenching it as I open my eyes to find Blaine once again standing in front of me.

"Thanks," I tell him, taking the refilled flask and walking toward the far wall.

I'm covered in sweat, the cool winter air outside no competition for the swarm of warm bodies in the house.

Landon and Rick join us, both looking like they're ready to make their excuses and bolt.

"This is different from what I remember," Rick says, his eyes scanning the crowd.

"Yeah," Landon says.

"It's fun, right?" Blaine says, reaching for the flask as I raise it to my lips again. I hate the judgment in his eyes.

Landon tilts his head, his lips a flat line.

"Maybe we're just that old married couple who would rather be in bed," Rick says, his eyes shrinking as he smiles.

Landon licks his lips in a way that tells me he'd rather be alone with his husband, but sleep is the farthest thing from his mind.

I look past all of them, yearning to feel the same energy I felt earlier.

“Do you know him?” Landon asks. “He’s been circling and watching you all night.”

I dart my eyes faster, still not finding the mystery man.

“Nine o’clock,” he says when I come up empty. “That’s three. Your nine.”

I look in the opposite direction, that very same giddiness wrapped in mystery I felt earlier hitting me when I lock eyes with him.

There’s no way the man is a college student, and it’s not even the full beard and experience in his dark eyes. He carries himself like a man. There’s a danger rolling off him that interests me.

“Yeah,” Rick says, looking over his shoulder before looking back at me. “I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

I lick at my suddenly dry lips.

“Alani?” Blaine says, a hurt in his voice that’s misplaced.

I know a conversation with my friend is coming, and the disappointing part is that we’ve had the conversation several times before. Tonight it will fall on deaf ears once again. I seriously need to tell him I’m not interested in him that way when I haven’t been drinking, but sober me is too scared of losing his friendship despite drunk me wanting to shove him away. It’s selfish and makes me a total asshole, but we don’t always get to pick the roles forced upon us.

“Hey,” Blaine says, grabbing at my arm when I start to walk in the man’s direction.

I shrug him off. “I’ll be fine.”

Famous last words.

Chapter 2

Donavan

When one more drunken college kid bumps into me, I have to remind myself why I'm here. It's the only thing keeping these assholes alive. If I were in a bar in Mexico and someone jostled me, I'd likely slit their throat and dare anyone to say a fucking thing about it.

I might as well be standing in the middle of fucking Mayberry for how prim and proper all these fucking people are. Sure, they're drinking underage, but that's about the extent of their rule breaking. I haven't smelled the acrid scent of pot. I haven't seen anyone shoving a handful of pills into their mouths before taking a long pull from their red party cups. I didn't even see the hint of cocaine on the bathroom counter when I took a piss a few minutes ago.

They think they're all badasses, breaking a few rules, drinking a little too much. I'm surrounded by a group of pussies, and the longer I stay in this fucking too-stuffy house, the more my fingers twitch to thin the world of a few collar-popped douchebags.

She doesn't seem any different from any of the other girls here trying to pretend to be a woman. I don't care how many times she lifts the flask to her lips. I don't care how bored her eyes are with this entire scene. She's no different from any of the others. She's just cattle, unassuming and willing to be guided around without asking questions. She wouldn't survive a day of what her sister had endured the last six months.

I move after she locks eyes with me. I've never been good at being incognito. I'm a massive motherfucker, and too old not to stand out in this type of crowd. It's life experiences rather than my age that make me older. I've seen a lifetime of shit in my nearly twenty-three years, so much that there are days I feel a hundred.

She's a paycheck, literally money in the bank, but as boredom grows, I consider it not even worth it. I still haven't figured out why the cash even matters to me. It's not like I spend much money. There aren't material things that keep me working. The things I long for can't be purchased.

She's too young to be drinking. Hell, if I saw her on the street, I'd think she was a high school student, not college-aged, but they all started looking too young years ago. She's no different at eighteen than I imagine she was at fifteen. I have no doubt she's been sheltered. As a matter of fact, I know she has been.

Nash, one of the men who works for Angel, is the one who requested this favor. Unbeknownst to the girl searching the room for me, her sister was abducted, and despite having numerous opportunities over the last six months with weekly phone calls, she hasn't once confessed that she's been held in a sex den, forced to perform all sorts of depraved things. They allowed her to call weekly, and Ayla never opened her mouth to warn her sister that her life would soon look as horrific as Ayla's does. The men who threatened to hurt Alani if Ayla didn't do as they said, are the type to keep their promises. Only a few days ago, those men sent a warning—a video of Alani at college.

You see, they didn't exactly take kindly to us raiding the house where Ayla was being held captive and forced into sexual slavery. We weren't there for her but for Nash, one of Angel's operatives who had also been abducted while trying to get information about the group. He fucked up, and we were forced to save him. Pulling him from that hellhole also meant pulling the women out, too.

Nash and Ayla are having trouble getting back across the border, and that's why I'm here. The threat on Alani is real enough that I'm getting paid to watch an underage girl get drunk around a bunch of horny boys like she isn't in danger. As real as the threat is against her from the trafficking ring, there are threats here as well.

I watched one threat hand her not one but two different flasks before walking away, only to refill one and return to her.

It's clear the boy is trying to get her drunk, and she just smiles at him and takes what he's offering. She's clueless and misplacing her trust where any of these assholes are concerned. Any man in her life is capable of hurting her, even if that was never his intention.

She doesn't seem to care about the danger she's attracting. Even my sneer when we locked eyes a few moments ago only makes her hips swing harder, the roll of her body more enticing than it should be. I'm not the only one watching her. Several guys on the perimeter of the makeshift dance floor have locked their eyes on her. I evaluate everyone as a threat. As douchey as they all look, anyone here could be someone sent by the Cortez cartel. We took out many people when we went to Mexico to get Nash, but the head of the family was gone. We're not cocky enough to think we eradicated the problem or even scared them a little. If anything, going in and killing their men only angered them more. Taking the women, their means for income, is enough for them to seek vengeance on anyone they previously threatened. Alani is in danger and doesn't even know it.

I don't let myself be seen again by her until I want her to. Although I don't look the part of the drunken college student, I've never had a problem disappearing. It's why five years ago it was so easy to fake my death and walk away from all of it. Any connection I had to family was severed the night Marcello cut my baby from Maya's womb before letting her bleed to death right before my eyes.

Elio Lombardi died that night.

The world I left and the world I entered were never supposed to cross paths, but that didn't prevent my sister from popping back up in my life, swearing she'll hate me forever for the pain I caused her and my family. She claimed my mother died of a broken heart after my death. I should feel something about that. It should make the muscle in my chest clench. There should be regret or something, but I feel nothing.

I recognized my sister that day at Angel's office, but the sight of her didn't spark anything inside of me. I wasn't hit

with a wave of nostalgia or regret for letting her think I was dead for five years. The pain of betrayal in her eyes didn't tug at something inside of me.

I think a part of my thoughts at seeing her again would have some sort of effect on me. It's why I kept my distance, why I never went back to Chicago. The only fear I've felt since watching the life drain out of Maya's eyes that night was the sheer terror of feeling anything again.

Not long after that night, a car wreck provided the perfect cover for my disappearance.

I shift in the shadows once again, my movements dictated by her search around the room.

She doesn't have any idea how bad her night could be, how attractive the uncontrolled sway in her body caused by the alcohol is to traffickers.

Her hips move in a way that makes every man in the room think about taking something she isn't offering, and there are even parts inside of me that feel that tug of attraction. Hell, she may not even be the type of woman to turn down any offer thrown her way. Maybe she's equal opportunity. It wouldn't be the first time a woman had her family fooled. Ayla may think her sister is young and inexperienced, but the way her body moves to the music tells another story.

The song changes and she walks away from the gyrating bodies on the dance floor, forcing me to shift again to keep an eye on her. It's not often that I get to take such an easy job. More often than not, I'm in a situation where getting shot is a real possibility, and although one of the men here may have been sent by Cortez, it's unlikely my night will end by dodging bullets.

The douche, trying to get her drunk, offers her another flask as two more men join their little group. The additions to the group look bored and a little out of place. The eyes on the tallest one scans the crowd in a knowing way, and it makes my hackles take notice. His perusal of the people around him is too knowledgeable, too aware.

I step out from behind a group of cackling females, paying no attention to them when their laughter falls away, as I make my presence known.

Alani locks eyes in my direction, as if she can sense me looking at her.

If there is someone from Cortez's group here tonight, it's the man standing with her. The girl needs to be taught a lesson, but I wouldn't get paid if she's taken right out from under my nose. As horrific and brutal as the Severino family is, I know Angel Guerra can be just as brutal. Letting Alani get hurt under my watch can't happen.

She isn't as sure on her feet as she should be as she crosses the room toward me. I want to warn her, to remind her that bad things happen to obtuse little girls, but the second she's close enough, her hands are on my chest, the warmth of her palms settling against my skin through my t-shirt. Her hips move to the music, the brush of her body against mine more enticing than it has any right to be.

I can't open my mouth to tell her there's a bullseye on her back, that drawing so much attention to herself is dangerous even if she wasn't being targeted already because of her sister. She should know better than to act the way she's been acting. Hell, another girl her age was abducted from this school. She was at the same place Nash and Ayla were, and the sole reason we clashed with Cerberus, in Mexico, a few days ago.

No one was looking for Ayla because her cover was she was out of the country working with some humanitarian group, but the other freshman girl who disappeared was missed. Her family loved her, looked for her, ultimately reached out to that fucking group in New Mexico who found her. The girl rolling her body against mine right now has been given a second chance, earned through depraved things that happened to those other two women, and she's squandering it.

She's the complete opposite of Maya, from her dark hair and light eyes to the assertiveness in her touch. She didn't ask permission to touch me, and the fact that she's taking such

liberties makes me want to teach her a fucking lesson. I have no doubt she'll see the errors of her ways if I were to put my hands on her without consent. The double standard of it makes me grind my fucking teeth.

I hate that she happens to be exactly what I'd hunt if I were on the prowl. I've never wanted the reminder of Maya. The threat of those memories could possibly be the only thing that has the power to crumple me, so I never give them the chance.

Women like Alani are easy to walk away from. They don't linger in my head, thinking that if I could come back from the dead, so could she. There have been times that hope has had the ability to sneak inside of me. That I could somehow forget watching the life drain from Maya's eyes, that I could forget that she only died because I loved her. Her only mistake was loving me back, and that cost her everything.

I drag my hand up her side, resting it on her hip. I've been tasked with keeping an eye on her, and with her body pressed against mine, it's just gotten easier. This way, I don't have to contend with the tall guy across the room who was standing near her a few minutes ago.

I pull her closer on instinct, but it's less about protection and more about the way she rolls her hips against mine. She looks shocked when my cock thickens in my jeans, as if she had different intentions with the way she's moving against me.

The glint in her eyes speaks of some sort of victory she feels like she's accomplished, and that desperate need to teach her that fucking around with the wrong man will only bring her trouble begins to fester once again.

She's fucking trouble, and I don't mean only in the way that letting her leave here with another man would compromise my ability to keep an eye on her.

She spotted my darkness, distinguishing it from every other gaze in the room without hesitation. I can tell she wants the danger. She's the type of girl that craves it, but she has to know I'm not the give a gentle swat to the ass and call it kinky type of man.

Instead of arguing in my head, I make up my mind, grabbing her hand and pulling her from the house. She doesn't fight me, and not once does she glance back over her shoulder to let her friends know she's leaving. I could be dragging her to her death. From the devious glint in her eyes as I open the passenger side of my truck for her, this is exactly what she's been looking for.

As I round the truck, I look back at the house, locking eyes with the guy who kept handing her the flask. His face falls as he realizes he lost whatever battle he was fighting.

There's no point in gloating as I climb inside my truck. He could never handle a woman like her, but he shouldn't worry for long. It's not like I ever keep the toys I deem worthy. I only play with them for a while before tossing them out like trash.

Chapter 3

Alani

When I crossed the room, I had no idea how far I'd take it. I just knew that Blaine had to understand that there will never be a chance between the two of us. I don't want to lose him as a friend, but fuck, the guy can't take a hint. Instead of thinking back to the conversation I overheard several girls having in class a few weeks ago about how it's impossible for guys to be friends with girls because all of them are just waiting for their turn to fuck them, I lock my eyes on the side of this man's head.

I should be terrified, and I guess I am a little, but more than that, I'm thrilled with where the night could lead.

This man could easily drag me into the darkness, only for me never to see light again. There are some days I'm so bored with my life that I don't picture that scenario as a bad thing. I know it's fucked up, but I can't help the direction my thoughts take me sometimes.

He doesn't say a word as he drives, and another thrill of danger hits me when I try to roll the window down, but pressing the button on my door doesn't work.

His eyes slide to me in the darkness as he lowers my window two inches from his side of the truck.

It's a power play, a way to let me know that it works, but he's the one in full control. I can guess that if I tried to open my door, I'd find that it doesn't open from the inside.

My heart kicks up, pounding in my ears at knowing I can't get out without having to go through him.

My hands tremble in my lap as he continues driving further into the night.

He doesn't stay on the highway for very long. We're only in the truck for a handful of minutes when he pulls up outside of a motel, parking directly in front of a room rather than heading to the front office.

It ensures there will be no witnesses to see me inside his truck. I swallow thickly as he climbs out of the driver's side, reaching his hand across the seat instead of coming around to my side of the door. It doesn't give me the opportunity to run away while he's distracted walking around the vehicle. It's smart, a practiced move that makes me consider he's made that mistake a time or two.

"Scared?" he asks, the only word he's said to me.

I nibble on my lower lip, my eyes pulling from his outstretched hand back up to his dark eyes. Stupidly, I shake my head, a part of me refusing to voice the fears swimming inside of me.

I place my hand in his, and he smiles when he notices the tremble in it. He wants me afraid.

My mind flashes to the creepy video that was sent to me, the proof of what my sister has been up to the last several months.

Every call has been a lie. I never complained to Ayla when she called. I never let her know how disappointed I was that she took a job outside of the United States. She sacrificed so much for me over the last three and a half years. It would've been selfish to tell her that I still needed her despite being hours away.

To find out she's been lying the whole time, that she's been making sadistic porn rather than helping the people of a third world nation with medical care, crushed me. It's what leads me right where I am tonight.

I'm not a virgin, but the look in this guy's eyes as I climb out of his truck tells me that it wouldn't matter if I was. Pumping the brakes should've happened before I left the party with him because it's too late now. I can only imagine the word no isn't in his vocabulary.

I blame this on Ayla for my being in this situation right now. A therapist would say I'm lashing out, that I'm seeking attention because I feel betrayed by my older sister. That may be the case, but I've grown weary of not listening to that voice

inside of me that demands a thrill. I've lived much of the last several years afraid of what could happen. Losing your parents suddenly has the ability to do that to a girl, but no more. I'm tired of being safe.

What I saw in the video that was sent to me didn't seem safe. If my sister is capable of living her best life, no matter how depraved it looks, then I have the same right.

He drops my hand the second my feet hit the cracked asphalt. Where I thought he'd drag me into his room, he drops my hand and walks away.

I know I have a choice. I could run and seek help. I could just as easily be hurt by someone else in the shadows as I could be hurt by him. There's something about the way his legs cover the distance between his truck and the door of his motel room that locks me in place. I see the challenge in it rather than the opportunity to escape. He brought me here, but from the way he doesn't bother looking back at me, it's clear he doesn't give a shit if I walk away or not.

He's indifferent, and it's too similar to the informationless calls I've been getting from my sister since I arrived at Lindell University. Every time I've asked a question that's gone unanswered, I chalked it up to her being distracted. She only had so much time in town to speak on the pay phone before she had to go back to the village to save lives. At least I thought that was what was happening when instead, she was really into some sick, twisted shit, fucking for money.

Instead of taking the opportunity to run, I follow behind him, catching the door to his room before it can close in my face. I have no doubt if it did close, he wouldn't open it back up for me. The man doesn't care if I come inside or not, and that's what drives me into the darkness.

The blinds are closed, but I let the door close at my back anyway, the room in complete darkness.

My breathing grows erratic as my eyes try to adjust to the darkness.

Before I can change my mind, a hand grips my throat, my back slamming against the closed door.

He doesn't curb his aggression, doesn't pull back at the last minute in an effort to keep my head from smacking the wood. Instead of begging to be let go, I feel a smile turn up the corners of my lips.

Fear and arousal tangle together, making something so potent inside of me I start to crave even more of it.

"Scared?" he asks, a repeat of the same challenge he gave outside.

"Terrified," I answer honestly, the white of his teeth flashing in the darkness.

"Smart girl," he says, but even as he pulls his hand from my throat, he steps closer, his body pinning me to the door.

He pulls his shirt over his head. As much as I ache to trail my fingers down the sleeve of tattoos on his right arm, I somehow know touching him without permission isn't allowed. I don't think asking would grant it either, so I don't bother.

His lips are warm at my throat as his hands travel the length of my body. It makes me wish I were completely naked, just so the heat of him could settle inside of me.

"Get naked," he growls as he takes a step back. As much as I'd like for him to be the one to undress me, I'm not going to argue with him, either.

I've never been in a situation like this. If anything, the guys I've been with in the past are more prone to ask permission than issue a command. But with the way my body reacts to him, I'd say I've been missing this very thing. Arousal becomes a living breathing thing inside of me as I pull my sweater over my head, feeling his eyes on me as if the man can see in the dark.

His palm is rough on my breast the second I unlatch my bra and let it fall down my arms.

“Keep going,” he growls when my arms fall to my side as I relish the attention he’s showing my body.

My skirt pools around my ankles, the whisper of it down my tights more sexual than it probably should be. He has every cell in my body screaming for pleasure or pain, or maybe an erotic combination of both. I don’t care what the man has to offer, just so long as he gives it to me.

He takes a step back, making me crave him even more when he pulls away. I shove at my tights, pushing them, along with my panties, down in one go.

I feel his eyes locked on me as I kick off my shoes, a thrill running through me when I hear the crinkle of a condom wrapper. I ignore that disappointed part of me that has no business in this room, since I have no fucking clue who this man is. There’s living dangerously and then there’s being completely stupid.

I reach for him, running my hand down his arm. Angry puckered flesh meets my fingertips, but he shrugs away from me before I can explore further, leaving me unable to determine if he’s scarred or if the tattoo marking his skin was just drilled so deep in his skin that it left ridges behind.

The only light in the room is sneaking in around the curtains and filtering in from what looks like cigarette burns. This type of motel is the kind of place where people don’t ask questions and the clerk at the front desk is just as likely to pocket the money after renting the rooms out by the hour as he would be to put it in the cash register. It’s the type of place where secrets go to die.

It’s the perfect place for tonight. The perfect revenge against my sister. She isn’t the only one who can be depraved after acting so fucking innocent while we were younger.

I push down the hatred, hating the taste of it on my tongue. She doesn’t get to ruin this for me, too.

His hands are on me again, the brush of his thick cock on my stomach a thrill I can’t describe. He’s nothing like Blaine could ever be, and it wasn’t until recently that I realized

it. Blaine is safe, a sure bet for a comfortable future, but I have no business even thinking that way. Safety and comfort mean nothing. It can still all end in a fiery crash, so why waste time being safe when things like tonight make life so much more exhilarating?

I gasp at the warmth of his mouth when it captures my nipple, moaning half in pain, half in pleasure, when he bites down on it.

I reach for him, wanting to run my hands through his dark hair, but he stops me, pinning my hands to my sides as his mouth travels over my body.

“Bend over the bed,” he snaps as he steps away. Before I can move, he shoves me in that direction, my hands outstretched to catch my weight.

The blanket is musty, but it only contributes to the depravity of tonight. I don't want or need flowers and freshness. I don't want a room full of light and soft words. He somehow knows exactly what I need as he kicks my legs apart, pressing against me a second later.

I wish for his mouth on me there, but he doesn't comply. Instead, he swipes his cock up the seam of me, finding me slick with arousal.

“Fucking whore,” he grumbles as he notches himself at my entrance. “I could fucking hurt you and I have no doubt you'd beg for more.”

I moan, proving him right when he slams inside of me, not giving my body enough time to accommodate the stretch his body demands of it.

A fire-hot burn rushes through my body, the sting of his intrusion somehow too much and not enough at the same time.

He fists my hair, pulling my head toward him until my back is forced into a deep arch. It forces my chest out, my tits bouncing in a nearly painful way as he pulls back and slams forward again.

I'd question if he was feeling any pleasure from this, if it weren't for the rumble coming deep from his chest when he

finds the end of me. I'm second-guessing every choice I've made that led me here tonight when he shifts his hips. The tip of his cock brushes against that phantom part of me that, prior to now, has always been a mystery. My eyes are unseeing as I glare across the room, the darkness and the pleasure keeping me blind to anything on this plane of existence.

I clench my hands, tangling the bedspread between my fingers as my orgasm takes me by surprise. My body clenches around him, but he never slows.

"Dirty bitch," he grunts, sounding just as shocked by my release as I am.

I've always had to work so hard to come, and I've only ever been capable of it while solo, never with a man before.

"Please," I beg, wanting more and more.

His hips don't falter. He doesn't try to replicate whatever it was that he did before to make me come. This was never about my pleasure, after all.

He stills inside of me, grunting his own release as his cock throbs. A second later, he's pulling out of me, the flash of the bathroom light filling the room before he closes the bathroom door.

I stand, frozen in the middle of the room for a long moment, trying to decide what to do next. The smart thing would be to gather my shit and leave, but I haven't made a smart decision tonight, and honestly, there's really no point in starting now.

I trip over one of my discarded shoes on the way to the bathroom and shove open the door rather than knocking.

He's standing there, his eyes locked on the mirror when I enter, a cigarette hanging from his lips.

He doesn't say a word as I slide past him and take a seat on the toilet.

Letting a man I don't know fuck me is one thing. Getting a fucking UTI is another.

He doesn't stick around, and the sight of his naked back and flexing ass as he leaves the room both thrills and irritates me.

I finish on the toilet, wincing when I wipe because he was rough as hell. I wash my hands, sort of liking the way my mascara is in streaks down my face. It's evidence of a great night, and I don't even attempt to clean my face.

In the limited light filtering into the room, I find my panties on the floor and tug them on. I could easily ask him to take me back to campus, but instead, I climb into the same bed he's in, even though there's two in the room.

I keep my back to him and fall asleep like I would any other night, despite the fact that he could be a fucking serial killer.

Chapter 4

Donavan

She sleeps for a handful of hours, but I never close my eyes for longer than a few seconds, despite the exhaustion seeping into my bones. I'd never allow myself to be so vulnerable in the presence of someone else.

I don't bother opening my mouth when she wakes up, a groan of regret clogging her throat as she sits on the edge of the bed. She disappears into the bathroom for a few minutes before coming back out and using the light coming in from dawn approaching to gather her things.

She doesn't look over her shoulder once to check on me as she dresses. She doesn't ask me for a ride either before slipping out the door.

I should go after her, should trail her like I've been hired to do, but I need some distance from her. She's no less a whore than any other woman I've spent time with in the last five years, but she is the first one I didn't put out on her ass the second I came. I blame the job for it. I spent hours trying to convince myself that Angel's request to keep an eye on her is the only reason I didn't shove her out of the room in the first place. It should also be the reason why I shouldn't have let her leave.

The door closes behind her and something similar to guilt keeps me locked in place. She isn't the first woman I've been with since Maya, but she's definitely the youngest. Eighteen is only two years older than Maya was when we were together. Maya will always be sixteen, her life cut short because I was a greedy bastard and couldn't leave my sister's friend alone.

Hatred for the entire world seeps inside of me. As much as I want to blame the girl who just left my bed, I know there's no point.

I take a deep breath, having a little more trouble than normal pulling that mask back down into its proper place.

I wait to climb out of the bed until I hear the car she went out to meet pull away, figuring it's either Uber, or she messaged one of her friends to come pick her up. I get out of the bed and grab my clothes. I won't get paid a damn penny if the bitch gets abducted before Nash can show up with her sister.

I don't know why I even give a fuck, honestly, but maybe it has to do with the things I saw back at Cortez's compound. The things her sister was subjected to has me moving a little faster.

I take a deep breath, and, instead of getting dressed and chasing after her, I toss my clothes back toward the bed and climb into the shower. Years ago, I stopped letting others control my actions. That instinct inside of me that screams for me to chase after her is the exact reason I turn on the shower instead, waiting silently as the old pipes take forever for the water to warm.

As much as I live an independent life, I don't think anyone should endure what they were putting those women through in Mexico. Hell, Nash went through much of the same thing, but for some reason, Angel stopped me before I could kill the bitch that was riding his cock like she had every right to.

I see her as being just as weak as her sister. Given the opportunity, I'd choose death every time it was offered in exchange for the evil I mistakenly chose instead.

I didn't take pride in my initiation into the Severino family, but even then, the threat of losing my life was only implied. I was raised knowing loyalty to them was all that mattered. It wasn't until Maya came along that I longed for a different life. Some days, I blame the ghost of her for how things ended the way they did. If she hadn't loved me so fiercely, there's a chance it would all be different.

I slam my fist against the wall, ignoring the yell on the other side to shut the fuck up.

I tell myself it's only money that pulls me from the shower too soon. It's the promise of a payday where I don't

have to spend days getting shot at that puts me into my truck just as the sun is coming up. It has nothing to do with the woman that so easily came to the hotel without so much as an argumentative grunt that draws me closer to the college.

I park outside of her dorm, having followed her from there to the party last night without being seen. Daylight is now in full swing, making it nearly impossible to stay hidden without the shadows of night to conceal me. I don't look like a college guy despite only being a year or so too old to be on campus in the first place. Life experiences make me feel older by at least a decade, making what I did last night with that teenaged girl even fucking worse. Maybe I'm no better than someone from the cartel. Maybe Alessio and Marcello Severino saw something in me that I never recognized in myself. Maybe they knew of the depraved things I was capable of.

Thank fuck they're both dead now. Vengeance was sought not long ago for what that family did to Maya, my sister, and myself, but their blood pooling on the floor of their family home didn't bring the peace I always imagined it would. Maya and I both died that night, and no amount of blood spilled in vengeance could bring either one of us back to life.

A flash of blonde hair draws my attention, and to my surprise, I see Alani walking out of her dorm with a wide grin on her face.

She looks different, better even without the makeup she had piled on her pretty face last night at the party, despite how much I liked the sight of it trailing down her cheeks after I fucked her last night.

I climb out of my truck, ready to snatch her right off campus, but the guy from last night, the very same one who plied her with alcohol, approaches her. She's smiling, and from the outside looking in, her life is perfect. No one watching her would guess that she's the type of girl to come while getting railed in a filthy fucking motel room, by a man who didn't even have to ask nicely to get her to strip down to her skin.

I shouldn't feel any sort of way watching her walk away with him. She's a whore after all. But not getting paid because she isn't smart enough not to get abducted after a very clear warning was sent to her won't happen. Not on my watch at least.

I follow as closely behind her as I can manage without drawing too much attention, but I feel eyes on me with every step I take.

I wouldn't be surprised if someone calls the cops. The girl who was abducted from here six months ago is back in the news after having been rescued by Cerberus. I overheard people talking about it last night at the party. Where most women are once again cautious about their safety, Alani seems more than willing to live on the edge. It will end up getting her killed, but it shouldn't matter to me.

The dick who was trying to get in her pants last night catches sight of me first. But instead of turning away and disappearing into the crowd that was gathering near the fountain in the center of campus, I lock eyes with him. He has to know what happened between the two of us when she left the party with me. Hell, I can tell by the way she's walking this morning that I went hard on her last night.

My cock threatens to lengthen in my jeans at just the memories, but she notices that she no longer has her friend's undivided attention.

She looks at me, and a thrill I have no business feeling shoots up my spine.

She drops her eyes and gives me her back, indifferent to the sight of me on campus mere feet from her.

I garner another glance over the guy's shoulder, a smugness tilting up the corners of his mouth as she walks ahead of him into the cafeteria.

I fight the urge to storm in there and remind her what happened between the two of us last night. I have the feeling that I could strip her naked, bend her over one of those plastic fucking tables every college campus has, fuck her until she

screams, and the bitch would have the nerve to come just as hard on my cock as she did last night.

She's unaffected by me today, despite what her body did last night. For some reason, that chaps my ass in the worst fucking way.

But I don't follow her. I can't. Someone would step forward and stop me, because the non-verbal pressure of being in a crowd requires people to act a certain way. But as I walk away, I know it would never be the guy who just cast me that smug look. He's a pussy on a good day, and if it were left up to him to battle whatever sick fucks want to take her to prove a point to her sister, the girl would be as good as gone.

Chapter 5

Alani

My pulse is racing. At first it was from irritation, fielding the hundred questions Blaine was able to shoot in my direction between my dorm and the cafeteria, but then my friend pointed him out, the man I spent the night with.

An unexplained thrill ran through me at him being on campus a mere hour after I left him in his motel room.

Doing what I did last night, under the cover of darkness, is one thing. Being that same girl in the sober light of day is different.

How I managed to look at him and walk away, I'll never know.

"What is he doing here?" Blaine snaps as if either one of us can control what another person does.

"Maybe he wanted to make sure I got back to campus safely," I say, trying to find him in the crowd of people as I look out the cafeteria windows.

"He doesn't exactly seem like the type to care if you're safe or not, Alani," he mutters. "Where did he take you last night? What did you do with him?"

The man could probably guess and he'd be right. What he doesn't get to do is judge me, and the fact that he is is all over his face.

I walk away from him, forgetting about breakfast, and head to class.

I should skip. Having an eight o'clock class on a Monday morning was the worst idea ever, but when I made my schedule, I still cared about my future. All of that changed the second I watched my sister's video. She harped on me to not get a job my freshman year at college because I need to focus on school. She made sure to remind me that we didn't have the money for me to fail a class and need to take it again.

I shove down that part of me that wonders if she's doing creepy porn because she's trying to pay for my education. I quickly conclude that she'd never do that, but then again, I never thought she'd be the kind of girl to do porn in the first place. The video proves otherwise.

Class begins and ends with me being no more knowledgeable than when I first entered this morning, but I refuse to feel guilty about it. What does irritate me is that I wasted an hour of my life when I could've easily crawled into my bed when I got back to my dorm this morning. Being the good girl comes with its own set of muscle memory, however.

Blaine is sitting on the bench right outside of my room, and it frustrates me even more. It's not that it's anything different from what he'd normally do. He always meets me out here, but for some reason, I'm no longer impressed with it.

I had every intention of eventually giving in to him because Blaine is safe. He comes from a good family. His parents are still alive and still married. He's normal if not a little boring. It should be exactly what I'm striving for—comfort and safety.

“Hey,” he says, his eyes a little downcast.

I take a deep breath, wishing I was a big enough asshole to tell him to fuck off, but honestly, I'm more of an asshole for keeping him around. I know he has it in his head that he loves me, but I think he just loves the idea of me. We're friends, but I've never given the boy the impression that there would ever be an us.

“I hate it when you're mad at me,” he says, holding out a blueberry muffin, my favorite. “Forgive me?”

I take the muffin, my stomach growling as I give him a small smile. “Forgiven.”

I'm not a mean person, despite the thoughts I have. I'd respect him more if he gripped me by the throat and told me I was going to be his whether I liked it or not. I can't really fault him for not being an aggressively violent jerk just because that's what I seem to be into after last night.

“I thought you guys were heading out,” Blaine says as we leave the science building.

I pull my gaze from searching for the man and notice Landon and Rick approaching.

Landon looks me up and down as if he’s trying to determine if I’m hiding injuries or something. “Glad to see you’re in one piece.”

There’s a hint of something misplaced in his tone as if I’ve asked him to protect me, only to turn around and put myself in danger. It’s as judgmental as the way Blaine was looking at me earlier.

“On that note,” I say and break away from the group.

I pull my hand away when someone reaches for it, but the grip only tightens. I gasp when I look, expecting to find Blaine trying to stop me from walking away from him for a second time today. Only it isn’t Blaine.

I stare into dark, unforgiving eyes. “Hi.”

The word comes out on a squeak, and I feel foolish.

He doesn’t say a word as he pulls me toward the parking lot.

My pulse is racing as the guys call my name from behind me, but my feet move, obeying him without a word leaving his lips. He opens the door to his truck with a growl, using more force than he did last night to urge me up onto the seat.

I look, seeing Blaine, Landon, and Rick rushing toward me as he climbs behind the wheel. He doesn’t give them a second glance before he squeals out of the parking lot.

“That was rude,” I snap, rubbing at my sore wrist. “You hurt my arm.”

He doesn’t look at me as he leaves campus.

We don’t drive long, but like an idiot, I spend the time in the truck with him glaring at the side of his face rather than figuring out where he’s taking me. It’s utterly foolish to think

just because he didn't hurt me in any way I didn't like last night that he isn't capable of doing that today.

The truck jerks to a stop, making me throw my arm out in front of me so I don't smack my head on the windshield.

“Are you fucking serious?”

Instead of apologizing or saying anything at all, he grips my same sore wrist and pulls me from the truck.

His steps don't falter even when Landon pulls up outside of the fucking house he's brought me to.

“Hey, asshole,” Landon yells. “What the fuck are you doing?”

The man kicks in the front door of the house, and when he shoves me ahead of him, I'm scared for real for the first time. It's clear the house is abandoned. The furniture is filthy, some turned on its side with trash littering the floor.

He pulls me to his chest, and it isn't until I fight to get away from him, needing to face him to yell at him, that I notice the gun.

Midmorning sunlight shines though the window, glinting off the barrel.

I open my mouth to scream when I hear one of the guys on the front porch, but he clamps his free hand over my face and pulls my back to his chest.

My heart is pounding as guilt swarms through every cell in my body. He's going to kill them and that's going to be on me. I could've fought him. I could've kicked and screamed while on campus, done anything to delay him from taking me to a secondary location.

“Close the fucking door,” he growls when all three guys enter the house.

Landon spins around as if he's going to come to my rescue, but the gun angled under my chin stops him in his tracks.

“Fuck,” Blaine whimpers, terror in his voice.

“Fuck is right, little boy.”

“Just let her go,” Landon says, taking a step forward as he positions himself in front of his husband.

“Or what?” the man holding me challenges, as if he thought Landon was going to issue some ultimatum. “You, pussy boy, grab that rope and tie your friends up.”

Blaine looks down at the duffel bag, and it makes me realize this man is more prepared than I originally thought. This isn't just some random house he picked while driving by. He made plans to bring me here.

“Quicker,” the man says, making me wince when he presses the gun harder against my chin.

Unwanted tears stream from my eyes, but the rest of my body is frozen in place.

Landon looks pissed beyond words, disapproval and blame in his eyes as Blaine ties him to one of the chairs. Rick looks terrified when he's next.

“Your turn, Alani,” he whispers, pushing me away from him. “Tie your friend up.”

I glare at the man, wondering how he knows my name as I inch closer to Blaine. Landon was honestly the only one who could possibly be a hero here today, and of course this guy surmised that and had him tied first.

“It'll be okay,” Blaine says, trying to assure me despite the threat of tears in his own voice.

“You'll never get away with this,” Landon spits as I finish tying Blaine up.

“Sit,” the man growls at me, pointing to another chair.

I contemplate kicking him in the face when he bends to tie my legs then my arms to the chair, but I know the minuscule amount of pain I would cause him now will only lead to more pain on my end.

I search his eyes for something, any hint of humanity, but I come up empty.

He doesn't say a word, but I notice how he keeps his gun ready to fire and his back to the wall. It seems practiced, like this possibly isn't the first time he's done something like this. Maybe he was involved in the abduction of that one girl who was found recently. She disappeared the same day I came to campus, and everyone was talking about it the next day. The fear that I could be taken, too, kept me inside if it was dark out for the longest time.

I watch as he pulls his phone from his pocket, pressing several buttons before holding it to his ear.

"Where the fuck are you?" he grunts into the phone, waiting for the other person's response before speaking again. "You were supposed to be here hours ago."

"I'm going to fucking kill you," Landon threatens, interrupting his phone call.

"A complication," the man grunts into the phone, ignoring the threat coming from across the room.

"Nothing for you to worry about. I'm sending you an address," the man says to the person on the other end of the line.

"Piece of shit! Let us go!" Landon yells, fighting against the ropes.

I want to tell him to calm down, that the odds of getting the upper hand on this man are extremely low. I'd never forgive myself if something happened to any of them, because it would be completely my fault.

"I haven't hurt anything but these sissy bitches' prides," he snaps into the phone.

"Sissy bitch? I'm a fucking United States Marine," Landon counters, gaining a look of disgust from the man.

I hate that I still don't know his name. It's not that I even asked, and he refused. I never opened my mouth and made the request.

"Hurry the fuck up. I'm tired of babysitting," he says before ending the call.

“Who was that?” I demand, but he doesn’t look in my direction. “Are you selling us?”

He scoffs but doesn’t bother giving me any further attention.

I glare at the side of his head, my ass growing numb. I picture tearing him apart, gnashing at him with my teeth, but that’s as far as I can manage. He tied the ropes so tight around me, I can’t hardly shift my weight in the chair.

Chapter 6

Donavan

I set this place up before bringing her here. I'm glad I overly prepare because I didn't account for the three assholes turned heroes. What I didn't stuff into my backpack of depravity was a fucking blindfold and with the burn of her angry eyes on the side of my face, I'm regretting that slipup.

She's like a five-pound chihuahua, vicious yet ineffective. She might be able to break skin, but ultimately she'd never be able to take down an enemy. I resist the urge to walk up to her and pinch her cheeks just to make her growl and rage a little more.

It shouldn't turn me on. I shouldn't have to keep my side profile to her so she can't see what her anger does to my body. I don't think the proclaimed Marine would keep cool if I walked up to her with my cock straining against the front of my jeans.

The urge to put an end to all three of the guys is strong, but that's not why I'm here. Three dead young men would bring a little more heat than I need right now, but silence instead of them bitching is sounding better and better by the minute.

"There will be absolutely no fucking mercy," the one with the biggest balls roars as he fights against the ropes.

I raise an eyebrow at him. He sees it as the challenge it is. I have no doubt the guy would be a worthy opponent. I'm sure the Marine Corps trained him to be deadly in a fight, but there's a difference between the two of us. Where he'd probably pull back some, that pesky moral compass of his getting in the way, I silenced that voice years ago. I'd rip him to pieces and smile as I painted the walls with his blood. It gives me an edge over nearly anyone who thinks they have what it takes to stand against me.

"Do you have any idea who my father is?" the noisy one spits, his eyes narrowed as if he thinks it will make him look

scarier.

Does the idiot not remember he's tied to a fucking chair? That he hardly put up a fight while being tied up? I bet he's regretting being chivalrous now.

I look out the window, keeping my back to the wall. Darkness shrouds everything, the day having slipped away while I waited for Nash to fucking get here. Shadows dance in front of the house, but there's still no sign of the man who will deal with this problem.

I let my gaze skate toward Alani again but I don't have to look at her to know she's still looking at me. Her glare is a real thing on my skin, the heat of it warming me. My eyes trail down her body, and I fight against the worry that she may be cold. The house is deserted and without electricity. The few candles I lit just to avoid any surprises aren't providing much light.

Her hands curl into fists against the arms of the dining room chair she's sitting in, and I picture what all of that anger would feel like against my skin. How her little fists would attempt to fight me as I strip her naked. How her teeth would gnash at me, try to rip at my skin, only for her jaw to grow lax and hang open when she comes.

She shifts in her seat, squeezing her legs tighter, and I have to look away. The assuming light rumble of a chuckle that makes it to me from across the room makes me want to prove to her that she has no power over me, but I know better than to get close to her. Asserting my position, reminding her how dangerous I am, isn't part of the plan, and going against the plan only leads to trouble. I don't think Nash nor Ayla would be very impressed if I end up killing the woman.

The sound of a car pulling up fills the inside of the cottage. Although there's a greater chance that it's Nash than anyone else, I still position myself to have the best advantage and wait.

Silence swarms around me, and I remember a time when something like this would make my heart race. It wouldn't scare me, but the thrill of a possible fight always had

the ability to get my blood pumping. These days, almost nothing seems to make that happen.

I chance one more look at Alani as the door opens, and I pray it's Nash. The thought of someone else shooting first and asking questions later runs the risk of hitting her, and for some fucked-up, unexplainable reason that does have the power to make my pulse kick up a notch.

I shove it down—that threat of vulnerability—and hold my gun up, my finger on the trigger because if I'm anything, it's prepared.

My cell phone chimes with an incoming text, but I don't lower my gun long enough to check it. My guess is that it's Nash letting me know he's here and not to shoot his ass, but I won't risk myself to make sure. Plus, I haven't decided yet if I'll shoot him. He's late and I fucking hate late people, especially when it puts me out.

The door opens, and I recognize the side profile of his face as he steps inside.

From my position, I see more movement outside, and the flash of men in full swat gear makes me grind my teeth. It's no fucking surprise that those motherfuckers are here. Those do-gooder assholes from New Mexico have nothing better to do than stick their fucking noses where they aren't invited. In a battle one-on-one, I have no doubt I could best any given one of them. As a group, Cerberus is fucking unstoppable, and not to be fucked with.

“Seriously?” Nash growls, his eyes landing on the three men tied up across the room.

Relief washes over their faces in the flickering candlelight. The idea to shoot each fucking one of them just to prove them wrong hits me, but that's something a psycho would do. I don't think Alani would be impressed with me if I did that.

I step closer to Nash, knowing just how badly this evening can go with the devil dogs outside, inching closer to the house.

“If I’d known I’d end up on the wrong side of Cerberus, I never would’ve agreed to this shit,” I growl at Nash.

“Just put your gun away. They’re pissed at what you’ve done, but they’re not to the point of blowing your head off just yet,” Nash replies. I’ve yet to decide if he’s brave or just fucking stupid.

I lock my eyes on Nash, and in the next breath, the house is being invaded, a half a dozen men swarming inside like something you only see in movies. They do it with the ease of practice, perfecting what would take cinematographers many takes to accomplish.

I snarl at the man who put me in this fucking situation as I lift my hands over my head.

“Pretty fucking stupid,” Kincaid growls as he steps in closer to me.

His rifle isn’t at the ready but angled down.

“I should shoot you where you stand,” he growls.

I nod because he’s fucking right. He probably should, but I also know him to be merciful where he shouldn’t. The proof was in Mexico just a few days ago. The man can annihilate the bad guys and somehow still manage the softest touch for the victims. His whole fucking team is an anomaly, and I despise each and every fucking one of them for it. Why do some people have the ability to control that part of them and others, like me, get eaten by the darkness?

I look over Kincaid’s shoulder, a wave of something unexplainable washing over me when I lock eyes with Alani. She should be speaking with her sister, crying because she’s been rescued, but instead, her full attention is on me. I want to swim in it, to breathe it in and let it settle and burn in my lungs like thick smoke.

There isn’t a hint of the fear that should be there, and the absence of it makes it very dangerous for her. The challenge is undeniable, and my need to gobble it all up becomes a living breathing thing inside of me.

Her eyes narrow to slits for less than a breath, and then the tears pool over her lashes. I lick my lips, wanting to taste their saltiness on my tongue.

I'd consider the sight of them a reward, but then I catch the wink.

It stops me in my tracks, Kincaid's voice fading into nothing as I watch her.

She's purposely provoking me, and that knowledge settles deep, invading places I know it will be very difficult to pull her from. She feels like no less a part of me than my skin as I turn to walk away.

Staying in that house with her would cost me my life because I know there's no way anyone from Cerberus would allow me to get within ten feet of her, and I can't show her my monsters if I'm dead.

Another time, I vow in my head as I leave.

Chapter 7

Alani

Was I technically kidnapped?

I wanted a little adventure in my life, but this may possibly be a little more than I bargained for.

I watch him as he leaves the house, and I feel like I can breathe once again, the sense of smothering gone right along with his presence.

I hate the tears on my cheeks. They're proof of how weak I am.

I can't manage to pull my eyes from the doorway as I'm untied. He took all four of us, kept us tied to chairs for hours, and these men just let him walk out of here. If I were to call the police, which these men clearly aren't, they'd threaten to lock me up. They'd call me crazy.

I know referencing a movie is ridiculous, but the bad guy ends up on the floor with a steel-toe boot on his neck at a minimum. He doesn't just get growled at by the man who is obviously in charge and then allowed to walk away.

I stand, my hands trying to work out the soreness in my wrists caused by those stupid ropes, as Ayla approaches. I have so many questions, but I'm not certain she'll bother to tell me the truth. She's been lying to me for months. Despite knowing that I'm safe now, I'm left feeling a little insane for wishing I had the opportunity to leave with him.

Guilt swims in Ayla's eyes as I look toward her, stepping around the woman who untied me from the chair. She can't even approach me, but I guess keeping her distance is better than stepping up and spitting more lies.

I'm all for someone doing what they want with their life, but she didn't have to lie to me about it. I've been alone for months, spent the holidays with a friend because of what she's been doing. It's been a hard pill to swallow these last

couple of days, realizing exactly where I fit in her life when I've been the center of it since our parents' deaths.

A million things are happening around me, and I don't know where to focus my attention. Staring at the door would produce nothing. The guy is too smart to come back into the middle of this shitshow.

A man who looks like an older version of Landon is pressing a palm to his chest, preventing him from going after the guy who took us.

The second Blaine is untied, he's in front of me, wrapping his arms around me. I'm hit with a wave of guilt because I'd much rather him not touch me at all. The man is trying to be my friend, and it pisses me off. It makes me a complete asshole. My arms stay locked at my sides, my eyes once again darting to the front door.

Relief fills me when he finally takes a step back, only for it to ramp up again when the female who untied me steps back in my field of vision.

"Alani?" she says, her voice low and trusting. "You're safe now. We need to get you to a hospital for evaluation. If he ___"

"He didn't," I snap. "Nothing happened."

Technically, we were held hostage, but other than the burn of the ropes on my skin, the man did nothing despite having hours' worth of chances to do as he pleased.

I swallow down the regret, knowing that level of wickedness has no place in my life. Shame for wishing tonight was different heats my cheeks, and I hate that others are standing around witnessing it.

I lock eyes with my sister, needing to deflect that emotion.

I step around the woman trying to make sure I'm okay and walk closer to Ayla.

"I guess I have you to blame for all of this?" I snap. "This has something to do with all the twisted shit you've been

involved in?”

Ayla looks like she swallowed glass. Her mouth opens as if she's going to explain or lie some more, but no sound comes out.

“Your sister was abducted from the parking lot outside of your dorm building,” some guy growls at me.

The words make me freeze as Ayla grabs the arm of the man who seems to hate me for some reason, but it doesn't keep him from speaking.

“She was abused, tortured, fucking raped, countless times, to fucking protect you.”

I shift my eyes from his, back to my sister's, my head shaking because that can't be true. My chin trembles, fear, and self-hatred threatening to take over. Ayla doesn't argue, doesn't deny what he's said.

“Ayla?” Her name is a plea, a way of begging it all to be a lie,

Goddamn, I need it to not be true. I need it to be a lie. Just the thought of her suffering the way he claims would be unbearable. I can't imagine what it would mean for her if it's true.

Her lack of response hits me like a ten-ton truck, right in the chest and having the power to lay me flat.

“Donavan may have gone about it the wrong way, but he was here to keep you safe. The video you were sent was a threat.” Her voice is monotone, emotionless.

My hands lower to my stomach, the threat of getting sick right on the floor becoming more real by the second.

“They made you do those things?”

Bile burns my throat, both from imagining what she went through and also from my guilt for how I handled being sent the video. I blamed her. I hated her for what I thought she was doing. Knowing that she was forced, that she'd been tortured for months, all the while protecting me from knowing

the truth since the moment I arrived on campus, makes me sick.

Her head dips, the motion too simple for the truth the confession holds.

“You’ll tell me everything?” It’s a plea, and I know the last thing I want is details of her abuse, but I deserve the pain too. If she weren’t on campus for me, she wouldn’t have been forced into that situation.

Guilt eats away at me, and instead of making excuses and trying to point the finger somewhere else like I normally would, I let it sink inside of me. I deserve the pain from it.

The woman who untied me steps forward. “We have a room set up for you two to stay in tonight.”

Ayla looks to the man who made her confessions, but he takes a step back. I have no idea who he is, but it’s clear that he’s someone to her when she looks a little disappointed at the distance he’s put between the two of them.

“That would be great,” Ayla says.

I can guess the female sticks close to us as we are escorted to a waiting SUV because she either doesn’t believe me that the man didn’t hurt me or she’s here for Ayla because of how badly she was hurt.

At my sister’s insistence, we’re driven to my dorm so I can get some clothes. The woman escorts me inside, her eyes looking everywhere, as if she expects more danger than I’ve already encountered. I make quick work of gathering clothes, including enough for Ayla, before heading back down to the SUV.

The hotel they drive us to is a hundred times better than the one I stayed in last night, but I find myself more apprehensive than I did walking into a motel room with a stranger.

I know Ayla will answer every question I have, but I’m wishing she’d refuse as we’re shown the room provided for us.

The woman issues a warning, telling her we're free to go, but requesting we take an escort with us if we decide to leave. I catch a glimpse of a man before the door closes, and the shadow of his feet outside our room never leaves.

Ayla seems as nervous as I feel as she drops to the sofa in the living area of the massive suite.

We spend the next several hours crying as she explains what happened and how she made all these sacrifices to protect me. She doesn't point fingers. She doesn't put the blame on me for what she went through, and I hate her a little for not doing it. She's so much stronger than I could ever be, and I know I would've caved early on.

I don't know if it's because I'm the younger sister and had so much protection growing up, but I know myself enough to know I would've given in.

"It wouldn't have mattered. The deal wasn't 'do what we say or we'll take her and set you free.' I was always going to be hurt," she says as tears stream down my cheeks. "I just couldn't let you get hurt too."

I nod, her explanation making me feel a little better, but I don't think there's an answer or anything she could say to make it all go away.

"We still aren't safe?"

The man standing outside the door is proof of that.

"That's why Nash sent Donavan," she explains. "He wasn't supposed to fucking kidnap you though."

I swallow against the lump lodged in my throat. It's weird to hear my sister use such language, but I guess she's no longer the same person I once knew. What she's been through has changed her as much as it would anyone.

"I hate him," I say, running the man's name through my head.

He doesn't exactly look like a Donavan. It's a little too clean and proper for such a vicious person.

"He has a different way of going about things."

I snap my eyes to hers. “I hate Nash for what he did to you.”

She shakes her head, tears renewed on her lashes.

“Don’t hate him,” she begs. “I hurt him as much as he was forced to hurt me.”

I keep my mouth shut. I’m no fucking expert on knowing how people should respond to their own trauma, but looking at him with hope the way she did back at the house doesn’t seem like a smart plan.

Eventually, we get to the point where we can’t hold our eyes open, and after one more quick hug, I crawl in between the sheets somehow hating the fresh scent of the linens and their softness against my skin.

I feel like I should be punished rather than wrapped in comfort. I’ve been taking my life for granted, feeling bored, all the while Ayla has been suffering unmentionable pain and humiliation. What would bring me to my knees has left her standing tall and resilient.

Chapter 8

Donavan

I take risks every day. Some days I'm in the mood to mitigate the chance of dying, but for the most part, I couldn't care less if any given day could be my last. I defied death once, and where did it get me? I haven't been able to outrun my demons no matter how much distance I put between Chicago and me. Hell, my sister still somehow ended up right exactly where I am. I realized there's no escaping destiny.

The fact that I'm still in Lindell, parked outside of the hotel I followed Alani and her sister to last night, should be cause for concern.

Hell, Cerberus is watching me while I keep my eyes locked on the front door, but I'm not the only one who had this idea.

Nash's pitiful ass is here too, looking like a lost fucking puppy who got smacked with a rolled-up newspaper for pissing on the floor. How he's not licking that woman's blood from his fingers after what she did to him, I'll never understand.

But then again, vengeance doesn't ever bring back the things that have been lost. I know from firsthand experience. Marcello and Alessio's deaths brought no peace. If anything, the effort of going to Chicago was wasted. If it hadn't been for Madelene's abduction, I wouldn't have expended the energy. I severed ties and thought I had erased all semblance of loyalty to my family years ago. But that tiny part of me, the man who remembers the love I felt at home despite the hell I was going through with the Severino family, pulled me in to help. Vengeance, though, was my number one priority.

One of the Cerberus members goes to Nash's vehicle and speaks with him. I feel both pairs of their eyes look in my direction, but I pay them no mind. They don't exactly seem annoyed enough with my presence to confront me, but I'd be a

fool to think they'd just let me walk into that fucking hotel unchecked.

When the biker finishes his conversation with Nash, I watch him walk back and stand sentry at the front door. He looks casual enough, but I know he'd put a clip of metal in my ass if I attempted to walk past him.

I spot Nash climbing out of his truck, but instead of him approaching me, he diverts his path and walks right past the man and through the front door of the hotel. I know I won't be afforded the same luxury. Nash was hurt and tortured for weeks. It gives him a pass.

I'm the man that stuck a stick in the fucking hornet's nest that's the Cerberus MC, and that's not something that will be forgiven easily, if ever.

It isn't long before the front doors slide back open and much to my surprise, Ayla and her sister come out, walking beside Nash rather than being escorted by a member of Cerberus. Maybe the man has more power over the club than I initially thought.

As Alani looks all around the parking lot, I let myself believe that she's looking for me. When she actually sweeps her eyes in my direction, she looks pissed.

She mouths a curse word before determined legs carry her in my direction. I sit a little straighter in my truck, watching the bounce of her fucking perfect tits as she approaches, surprising me when she tugs open the passenger side door rather than confronting me from the driver's side.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" she yells the second she climbs inside.

As much as I want my hand around her throat, her angry breaths on my skin, I lock my eyes on the Cerberus man still standing in front of the hotel. It's a real possibility I'll slit his throat if he even thinks to interrupt her little tantrum.

"Kidnapping!" Her animated hands are flying all over the place. Although I can control the look on my face, I can't

control my cock, and the damn thing is making its own set of demands.

“Did you miss me, little bird?” I ask, turning my head a few inches in her direction.

I know she’s going to hit me seconds before she strikes out, but I do nothing to stop it. The impact on my cheek is enough to turn my face so I’m fully facing her.

Terror fills her eyes, and maybe that’s a lesson she needs to be taught—to only act when you’re prepared for whatever the consequences might be.

My jaw flexes, a fight against showing her what such a level of disrespect will get her, but instead of gripping her throat, knowing I’ll only be stopped, I decide to bide my time, looking straight ahead.

Like a petulant child who has no idea the level of danger she’s in now, Alani snaps her eyes forward, a stubborn set to her jaw.

“Seatbelt,” I growl as I watch her sister and Nash climb into his truck.

I’m a safe driver, but accidents happen. I’ll be damned if anything other than me will hurt her any time soon.

She doesn’t say another word as I follow Nash, ending up parked in front of a bank.

Her eyes burn into the side of my head before she sighs in frustration and climbs out of my truck.

Of course, it doesn’t take much longer after the women walk into the bank for Nash to end up at my window. The reprieve I thought I got at the hotel fades away like a distant memory.

He purposely blocks my view of the bank until I roll down my window.

“Got a fucking problem?”

“I was about to ask you the same thing,” he snaps.

I pull my eyes from the front of the bank to look at him.

“Explain to me how a girl who you abducted feels comfortable enough to not only climb in your truck but slap you in the face without fear.”

The implication in his voice is almost enough to make me climb out of this truck and prove to him exactly who I am.

“I don’t fucking hurt women.”

“You abducted her,” he argues.

“I tried other ways to keep an eye on her. They didn’t work.”

“You fucked her,” he guesses.

Silence fills the cab of the truck. I don’t owe this man any type of explanation.

“You took advantage, asshole. She’s like fucking eighteen. She—”

“She wasn’t a fucking virgin if that’s what you’re accusing me of,” I snap. “I didn’t drug her. I didn’t abuse her. In fact, I couldn’t keep her off my dick.”

It’s not the full truth, but she had the chance to leave my room and she crawled into the bed instead.

“That’s enough. Ayla’s going to be pissed that you’re doing the whole barely legal thing with her little sister.”

I fight the urge to smile. Barely legal. Her age is the least of this man’s worries if I consider the smirk on her lips before I walked out of the house last night.

“I don’t fucking answer to Ayla, now do I?” I say instead.

“Watch it,” he warns.

I keep my eyes pinned to the front of the bank. He’s looking in that direction as well when the women walk out, an envelope clutched in Ayla’s hand.

Alani doesn’t look in my direction, not even when Nash walks away from my truck without another word.

I don't hesitate to pull out right behind Nash's truck when he leaves the bank parking lot. I don't have a plan, and, if anything, I'm doing my best to shove down the idea that threatens to pop up in my head.

We end up back on campus, and I grab a parking spot close to the entrance of Alani's dorm, waiting for her to climb out of Nash's truck. My position will force her to walk right past my truck, so I climb out of the cab and wait near the hood. She walks by me without so much as diverting her eyes to me.

The lack of attention feels like a punishment, much like I'm sure she thought the slap to my face was.

I lick at dry lips, resisting the urge to grab her by the arm. With how protective Nash is of Ayla, the sister is ten times that of Alani. She went through hell and back to protect the girl, and I know today would be no different.

As she disappears inside, I have no other recourse but to climb back in the cab of my truck, but I don't back out of the parking spot.

Ayla doesn't climb out of Nash's truck, and I'm still sitting here, having no plan, as they leave.

The job is over. I have no doubt payment for it will be in my bank account by tomorrow morning. There's absolutely no reason for me to stay, but I can't seem to leave either.

The threat that brought me to Lindell in the first place is just as real today as it was yesterday when I dragged Alani to my truck. I know Nash hasn't forgotten it, but Alani is still alone inside, left with no protection. Cerberus is probably still slinking around campus, but they can't be everywhere at once. Their obligation, if I know anything about the club, is to everyone, not just one person in particular. Alani will get no more attention from them than any other person on campus even with an active threat against her.

My blood boils at the prospect of someone else thinking they have any right to the woman inside the dorm building.

I know Ayla warned her sister, told her to be vigilant, but after just watching the younger woman, I know she wants danger. There aren't many people who can imagine what trafficked women go through even when told by someone with firsthand experience. I also don't doubt Ayla watered down what really happened to her to protect her sister, considering what she was willing to endure in Mexico to keep her safe.

I war with myself literally all day, but it seems like in the blink of an eye rather than hours, the sun sets behind her building, casting the front in an ominous glow. The light on the front only reaches a few feet into the darkness.

I'm out of my truck the second I see her walk outside, looking in my direction.

An unexplained thrill hits me in the gut that her first instinct is to check and see if I'm still here, but then I freeze, my hand lifting to the gun tucked in my belt when someone else steps out of the shadows.

It proves how fucking sloppy this girl is making me, and that alone should make me bolt and put all of Lindell behind me.

When I realize it's that female Cerberus bitch, my steps falter. There's still a part of me that wants to put a bullet in her fucking head. I don't, simply because of the shitstorm it would bring down on me.

I'm reconsidering if it might be worth it when I'm forced to stand there and watch the two of them walk away.

Chapter 9

Alani

I grind my teeth together when she walks up to me. I'm mad enough to spit nails when she positions herself between Donovan and me.

I want to tell her to mind her fucking business, to leave me alone. I don't want nor do I deserve her protection. I'm lower than the worst person in the world for not figuring out what was going on with Ayla. As her sister, I should've been able to read between the lines. I should've questioned her sudden change in out-of-character behavior. Instead, I internalized it like a spoiled fucking brat, all the while she was...

I blow out an annoyed huff of breath, the only thing I can think to do so I don't start crying again.

"It's probably safer if you stay in the dorm," she says, but her steps match mine as I walk away from my building.

"Listen—"

"Slick," she answers. "Or Brynn if you prefer."

"Lady," I say, rather than one of the two names she's offered.

Where Ayla is kind and respectful to a fault, I tend to lean more toward not giving a shit.

"I don't need you to follow me everywhere I go. Ayla warned me about the danger, and I know how to look out for myself."

I've managed to get it in my head that the only reason I ended up tied to a chair is because I let it happen. If I had begged Donovan to let me go, I'm nearly certain that he would've. It's the thrill of that small percentage that he'd refuse that has me feeling alive for the first time in months.

"I have no doubt you think—"

“Tag along,” I interrupt. “If you have nothing better to do, but do it without speaking.”

Instead of growing angry, I see a spark of humor in her eyes, and I stand a little taller with what I’m reading as pride in her eyes.

I’ve seen the men she works with and I know she has to be a badass as much as they are to be part of that Cerberus group. I can respect that about her, but at the same time, I’m not going to just roll over and not live my life because there might be some danger lurking in the dark.

Donavan is in the fucking dark, and I can’t imagine anyone more dangerous than him.

With everything that’s happened, I can’t help but feel a little disappointed in the bonfire size taking up space in the vacant field on the edge of campus. Since returning to campus after the Christmas break, all I’ve heard about was bonfire night, a welcome back to the second semester of sorts.

Students, alumni, and staff mingle together, the students sneaking sips from tumblers I’d wager aren’t filled with hot cocoa while staff pretend that it is.

Orange flickers across Blaine’s face but instead of approaching me after looking in my direction, he turns back around to speak to one of the guys in the small group he’s standing in. I guess getting abducted and tied to a chair was his limit. I don’t blame him. The whole situation was kind of fucked up, honestly.

“You look better than you did last night.”

I turn in the direction of the voice, meeting Landon and Rick’s smiling faces.

“Same,” I tell them, my brows drawing closer together.

“Wouldn’t be the first time we were held at gunpoint,” Rick mutters, his cheeks red from the cold air swirling around us.

“Really?”

Landon cuts his eyes to his husband before looking back at me. “We just wanted to see how you were.”

“I’m fine,” I tell him, giving them both my best smile. Rick seems convinced. Landon looks to be harder to convince.

I lift my hand, seeing Blakely standing a few yards away.

“I see my roommate. It was nice meeting you two. Maybe next time it’ll be less dramatic.”

I walk away before they can respond, taking a deep breath as I approach my friend.

“Rumor has it you were abducted right off of campus yesterday,” Blakely says, grabbing my hands as I reach her.

“It was so much less exciting than you’re making it sound.”

Her face jerks back. “Exciting? I’d maybe call it terrifying, Alani, not exciting.”

She’s the girl I went home with for the holidays. Even though we’re roommates, we aren’t exactly close. I think her offer to join her family for the holidays was out of guilt rather than actually wanting me with her. I agreed out of necessity because campus closes for the holidays. Staying on campus isn’t allowed because they have no staff here in case of an emergency.

“So you’re working tonight?” I say, pointing at the camera around her neck.

It serves as a distraction from the current topic just as I hoped it would.

Her eyes sparkle with the thrill of being a part of helping capture memories for so many, making her damn near giddy.

“I’ll let you get back to work,” I tell her.

She must consider this conversation as awkward as it’s making me feel because she takes the offer and walks away.

I feel unprepared, finding myself wishing I had something in my hands as I walk around. If I hadn't ruined my friendship with Blaine, I have no doubt the man would offer me a flask or the contents of his own metal tumbler. I avoid that side of the bonfire altogether.

He'd probably expect an apology, and honestly, I don't have one to give him. His not minding his own business put him, Rick, and Landon exactly where they ended up last night. I never asked nor needed him to be my knight in shining armor. I didn't need a rescue, and I'm feeling a little irritated at how things did turn out. I know the evening would've looked much differently if those three hadn't followed us to the house.

Ayla explained last night that Donovan was sent to watch over me while they got out of Mexico.

I wanted to hate him once I knew he was at that party for me, that me approaching him might've been bold on my part, but leaving with me that night was always his plan. I consider him nothing more than a hooker, deciding to get me under him as a means to keep an eye on me rather than just following me around. Taking me yesterday was easier than doing the same.

I was a solution to his boredom, but it still doesn't explain why he sat outside of my dorm all damn day.

Him getting cut off by Brynn could mean he's gone now, but it doesn't keep me from imagining him lurking in the shadows, watching me as he formulates a plan to snatch me up again. Maybe he sees last night and the presence of three men in the house with us as their way of foiling his true plans. Maybe he's waiting until he can get his hand around my throat once again.

I lift my hand there, my eyes darting over the shadows between the small groups of people rather than trying to find someone to talk to.

Ayla said his job was over. He was only meant to keep me safe until she and Nash got to town.

She also assured me I wasn't in any danger from Donavan, but the man was able to subdue three men. I realize as I spin in the middle of the field that he did that because they were heroes. His threat to me was what gained their compliance. I get the feeling that the men who took Ayla wouldn't bow down to a man threatening to hurt me. If anything, they'd get some sick thrill out of watching someone else hurt me.

Would Donavan actually follow through? Would he have pulled the trigger if Blaine, Rick, and Landon hadn't acted the way he told them to?

A slow smile spreads across my face because I know the answer without having to think about it very long. He doesn't want me dead. He didn't so much as issue a threat when I hit him earlier today. He's all bark no bite, and unlucky for him, I desperately need to feel his teeth on my skin.

My body reacts to his threat of violence in ways that it shouldn't. Instead of shaking or cowering, a rush of arousal hits me when I think about the cold metal that was pressed to my skin last night.

The heat of his body—twice my size—and the damage he could cause thrills me in ways I never thought imaginable.

Even as the cheers and shouts of purple-and-black, voices filled with school spirit, echo around me, I find myself still searching the shadows, praying he's hidden somewhere in the darkness, waiting to hurt me again.

Chapter 10

Donavan

Most people can feel someone following them. I'd say nine out of ten people have that instinct inside of them that warns them they're in danger. I imagine it's one of those things left over from when we as a species were more animal than human, and it was a requirement to staying alive.

It's happened to every one of us, the urge to run when those tiny hairs stick up on the back of your neck, warning you of impending danger.

Alani is a different breed. The second after she freezes, her eyes darting to the shadows, a slow smile spreads out across her face.

She can feel me following her, but instead of running, she walks slower. Instead of staying inside her dorm at night, she ventures outside into the darkness as if challenging me to step out from the shadows.

The woman doesn't have an ounce of self-preservation, and it's starting to drive me fucking crazy.

I've been following her off and on for weeks, leaving town for a few days when I get sent out on a job. Instead of going back to the small apartment I rent over the hardware store back in Mission, Texas, I find myself a couple hours north in Lindell, keeping my distance but also keeping my eyes on her.

It's not nights like tonight that drive me insane. It's knowing she's putting herself at risk when I'm not lurking in the shadows.

Silence from Cortez's crew means nothing. They're probably getting their shit together after taking such a hit to their organization weeks ago when Nash and Ayla were pulled from that hell they'd been in. Thinking they've given up on the younger Warren sister would be a huge mistake. If anything, they're biding their time until she's able to breathe a sigh of relief, and then they'll make their move. Scaring and

traumatizing the women they take is as much a part of the thrill as putting them to work is.

I don't care that Angel claims to have his sights on Raul Cortez. It doesn't mean shit to me that the threat to Alani is low. Any threat makes my skin crawl, and Cortez and his crew aren't the only ones capable of causing the woman harm. There's no shortage of predators and sick fucks that could see her wandering around alone and decide to take advantage of the clear situation she's all but offering them.

I haven't stepped out of the darkness once since she walked away with that Cerberus member the night of the bonfire, although I've been tempted to more times than I can count. She needs to be taught a lesson, but I just haven't been able to bring myself to be the one to do it.

I consider letting someone grab her, rough her up a little so she'll fucking learn, but I know I'll rip anyone limb from fucking limb if they even look at her wrong.

It's what stops me every time I get the urge to make my presence known other than that feeling she gets in her gut when I trail her. I shouldn't want anything from anyone. I went years without needing anything other than to make some money and shed blood.

She went to Nash and Ayla's place two weekends ago, and as happy as I was to have a break, I found myself hovering on the edge of his property. She showed up late Friday afternoon and never reemerged until late Sunday evening when she drove back to campus.

I hated the way my skin itched that entire weekend, being so close yet unable to set my eyes on her.

I refuse to think about the way Nash asked me to fucking dinner at the office on Friday like he suspects I haven't been able to keep away from her. I consider that I may be watching Alani, but he may have someone watching me.

That suspicion is what kept me from driving to Lindell and trailing her all the way back to her sister's house. I flipped the bird and left, spending hours stewing in my truck.

I could easily show up on Madelene's doorstep and she'd probably welcome me into her home with open arms, but I'd never do that either. Connections make people sloppy. Chivalry pulls at pieces inside of you that will only get someone and everyone around them hurt.

It was a brutal lesson I learned many years ago as the light faded from Maya's eyes.

When Alani looks back over her shoulder, her teeth digging into her lower lip as she steps off the front porch of the frat house, I want to rush up to her and shake her. I want to take her for a few hours and force her to watch videos of what happens to pretty little careless girls until it finally sinks in that she isn't invincible, that's she's putting herself at undue risk.

I can't do that, however. If anything, I think making my presence known will only make things worse for her. Each staggering step feels like a challenge, her way of trying to control me.

My blood boils when some cocky motherfucker starts walking alongside her.

I'm too far away to hear their conversation, but they seem friendly enough. It proves she at least knows the guy in passing, but I'm educated enough, have seen enough, to know casual acquaintances are just as likely to take advantage of a debilitated girl as they are a stranger. Men like that don't think in terms of consequences. They think with their cocks first and then victim blame later. It's a story as old as time, and they always rest the blame on the woman.

It shouldn't matter that Alani is walking down the sidewalk alone or that she's wearing a skirt so short it made me think probably the same things the guy that's walking beside her is thinking. Honestly, I'm not much different from him, come to think of it, but the huge difference is that she's fucking mine. Mine to torture, mine to taunt, mine to touch.

I step out of the shadows, not bothering to try and sneak up on them. Keeping to the darkness comes to an end tonight.

I shove the guy, watching his face pale when he spins to argue with me. Like the fucking coward he is, he doesn't even argue when I growl in his direction. He's concerned about his own safety and that's it as he scurries away.

It makes me want to track down that pussy-ass Marine who shouted obscenities at me for hours and threatened to rip me to pieces. At least he had the balls to fight back a little no matter how futile it ended up being.

I drag Alani into the darkness with me, pressing her back to a thick tree as I clamp her face between my fingers.

Instead of fear in her eyes, she grins right in my fucking face, her hips pulling away from the tree to press against mine.

Her eyes widen, a little moan slipping past her swollen lips when I clamp my hand around her throat.

“Who the fuck have you been kissing?” I growl.

Her eyes are slow to blink at me, but she doesn't answer.

It's as if the accusation of kissing someone else diverts her attention, and I feel more than I should when she lowers her gaze to my mouth.

“Fuck you,” I hiss, stepping back and grabbing her arm.

I all but drag her through the darkness. As much as her feet can't keep up, she doesn't open her mouth to argue as I close the distance between where I had her pressed to the tree and my truck.

“What you're doing is fucking reckless,” I snap as I open the passenger side door. “Get in the fucking truck.”

She's slow to move, so I help her. The hand on her ass to help lift her to the seat is a big fucking mistake. Skin meets skin, and it carries with it too many memories to keep me sane in her presence.

I slam the passenger door with a growl of frustration. I wasn't supposed to make contact with this woman. I never planned on stepping out from the shadows. If anything, being

close and keeping my distance proved my strength. It all changed tonight.

She wants my attention? Well, now she well and truly has it.

I ignore her eyes on me as I climb in the truck and drive away from the curb. Not once in my life have I ever had the urge to bend someone over my fucking knee. I can't seem to push the idea out of my head, and I don't want to spank her in some fatherly fucking way either.

I want the brat to learn her lesson, but I know better than to risk getting my hand anywhere near her ass.

"I missed you," she whispers, her voice marked with a hint of something I can't let sink inside of me.

She's already caused so many problems for me. The last thing I need is more.

I clench the steering wheel, refusing to speak to her. It doesn't stop my eyes from darting in her direction when she shifts on the seat. Buzzed or not, she's well aware of what she's doing to me.

"What would've happened if I wasn't here tonight?" I growl, hating that she doesn't even have to say a word to make me speak to her.

I feel rather than actually see her smile. She's still playing a game, and it seems I'm the one in last place.

"I guess I'd be a few minutes away from fucking a frat guy."

I swear I crack several molars from how hard I clench my teeth together.

Lucky for her, I'm pulling into the parking lot of her dorm.

She opens her mouth to argue when I climb out, circle around the truck, and pull open her door.

Her eyes narrow, and the woman must be clinically insane to challenge me after what she just said in the fucking

truck.

I grip her arm, refusing to loosen my grip when she winces.

She barely gets her feet under her before falling, but a few scraped knees is the least of her fucking worries right now.

She fights against me, grumbling about being manhandled as I drag her toward the front door of her building.

“Enter the fucking code,” I snap. For the first time, she listens to me without me having to issue a threat.

She reaches her hand out but forces me to grab the door when the door clicks, revealing that it’s unlocked.

I step just inside the door with her, but don’t make it very far before I’m stopped.

“Sir,” a girl behind a desk in the corner says. “You aren’t allowed in here after eleven.”

All dorms on Lindell University campus used to be co-ed, but it changed after the abduction of the college girl at the beginning of the last semester. Female students got with the dean and voiced how they no longer felt safe with men having access to their building, and the college was quick to fix that for them.

I growl at the woman, watching her cringe in fear.

If only Alani was just as scared of me, I might be able to get the woman to listen to my warnings.

“Get to your room and go the fuck to sleep,” I command, hating the way she reaches for me when I shove her away.

She looks as pissed as she did the morning she slapped me right across the face. As she walks away without argument, I shove down the disappointment that she doesn’t open her mouth to spew hatred my way.

Chapter 11

Alani

Blakely clicks closed a window on her computer screen the second I step into the room.

“Smooth,” I say in a droll tone.

Her cheeks pink, and the embarrassment staining them is almost enough to make me forget what an asshole Donovan was a few minutes ago.

“You’re back early,” she says, not giving a voice to the accusation in my stare.

“My babysitter showed up,” I mumble, spinning in the room and falling back on my bed.

I screech when I nearly miss and land on the floor, having misjudged the distance.

Maybe I’m more than a little buzzed.

“I told you, you’re imagining things.”

I brought it up once that I felt like I was being watched, and at first she was creeped out. I don’t know a single girl on campus who didn’t start looking over their shoulders after that girl’s abduction. When I told her it felt like Donovan, she all but said I was crazy.

“He literally stepped out of the shadows tonight and scared Bradley away.”

“Really?” There’s a hint of disbelief in her voice. “He may have helped more than you know.”

I narrow my eyes at her, kicking my foot off the side of the bed and pressing it into the floor to make the room stop spinning.

“What is that supposed to mean?”

“Haven’t you heard the rumors about Bradley?”

I shake my head, realizing the mistake of it when the room spins faster a little too late.

“Some of the football guys were talking about it.”

I sit up on my bed and glare at her.

“Some of the football guys? You hang out with football guys?”

My roommate is the quiet type. I know she has plenty of opportunities to be around all sorts of athletes here at Lindell because she works for the college newspaper, but every time I’ve ever seen her working, she’s hiding behind the camera rather than experiencing life on the other side of it.

“I had a shoot with a couple of them,” she says with a shrug of her shoulders.

I narrow my eyes at her. “Football season ended weeks ago.”

“It was for the championship.”

“We lost the championship,” I remind her. It was the first one Lindell lost in decades, and there was talk around campus of the head football coach not returning next year.

“Before that,” she says, her voice highlighting her lie.

“You are such a liar.” I grab the pillow from the head of my bed and hurl it in her direction.

It falls two feet from her, and we both stare down at it sitting in the middle of the room.

A cackle rushes up my throat at the sight of it there. As much as I’d like to think I could defend myself if I were attacked like Donavan had threatened could happen, I can’t even get a pillow across the fucking room.

“We’re friends,” I remind her, and that’s truer now than it was when I went to her house for the Christmas holidays.

With the loss of Blaine, who hasn’t spoken to me in weeks and weeks, I’ve spent more time in my room, getting to know my roommate better.

“Tell me,” I urge when she darts her eyes away.

“You’ll make fun of me.”

“Probably,” I say, drawing a smile from her lips.

“Promise you won’t.”

“I can’t,” I tell her honestly.

She chews on the inside of her lip, and I know that she’s going to spill her guts before she even realizes it herself. She looks like she’s been dying to tell someone. I take a deep breath, preparing for disappointment. Something I’ve discovered in recent weeks is that everything seems duller than it ever has before. I don’t even feel the life of the world unless I’m walking home late at night by myself. Danger drives me now, and as stupid as that is, Donovan pushing me against the tree tonight proves what I’ve known for weeks. He hasn’t gotten his fill of me yet, and the notion of that thrills me beyond words.

“On a dare, one of the football players had to do a photoshoot with me.”

The mention of the football players reminds me she never told me what the rumors about Bradley were. I try to shove that in a box in my head so I can bring it up again later.

“You’ve done lots of photoshoots with the athletes.”

I fall back on my bed, yawning and growing bored already.

It’s not her fault she lives a boring life. Most people want boring. Most people would cringe if they had any idea of the things I crave.

“This type of photoshoot,” she says, turning her computer so I can’t see the screen before I have time to sit up fully. “You have to swear that you won’t tell a single soul.”

I hold up my hand. “Scout’s honor.”

“Swear.”

“I swear. Shit, get on with it.”

My jaw unhinges when she turns the screen around. “Holy shit.”

“Right?”

I stand from the bed and make my way closer.

“Jesus. It might have been a dare on his end, but you won the fucking lottery.”

“I was so embarrassed,” she whispers.

“Why?”

I can’t pull my eyes from the screen. Miles of tan skin fill the screen. The look in the football quarterback’s eyes is sultry, the definition of bedroom eyes if I’ve ever seen one.

“He’s naked,” she rushes out on a whisper. “And hard.”

“Did you fuck him?”

The images disappear, the folder minimizing on the screen.

“I take that as a no.”

“I’m a professional,” she growls.

“And the last ten images in that folder were of the money shot. You can’t lie to me and tell me you weren’t affected by photographing that.”

Her cheeks flare red just as realization smacks me in the face.

“There are at least twenty other folders there, Blakely!”

She slams her laptop closed and draws it into her chest protectively.

She holds her head a little higher.

“As embarrassed as I was to take those photos, he was just as eager to share them. I’ve done nineteen shoots since then, and I’m booked solid every weekend until the end of the semester.”

A huff of laughter escapes my throat as I stare at her.

My smile is slow and teasing, and she looks less than impressed at the sight of it.

“That’s so naughty. What would Mr. and Mrs. Corrigan think?”

Her mouth hangs open with the mention of her parents. They insisted on being called by their last name like the prim-and-proper socialite snobs they are. We literally had to get ready for dinner. Leggings or jeans weren't allowed. It was the most uncomfortable visit I've ever experienced, and as much as I hated it, I knew Blakely hated it more.

"They can never know."

"What are you charging for the shoots, and what would it cost me to get a look at those albums?"

"I shouldn't have even shown you what I did."

"That's not a no," I hedge as I cross back to my side of the room and sit down on my bed.

"I charge fifteen hundred a session, and don't ask to see them again."

"Fifteen hundred a weekend?" My eyes widen. I've been thinking of getting a job to take some responsibility off of Ayla and this chick is raking in fifteen hundred a weekend taking pictures? I can't even spin around a pole in Austin and get that, at least according to the research I've done online.

Her chin lifts a little higher.

"What does that look mean?"

"I'm able to do four sessions a weekend."

I slow blink at her, my alcohol-addled brain trying to do the math of that. "Six fucking grand?"

That's legitimately drug-selling returns.

"Guys are paying you six grand a weekend to watch them jack off?" I'd fucking do it for half that to be honest.

"To photograph it," she clarifies as she clears her throat. "I'm a professional."

"I can't believe there's such a market for it."

"Online pay per click website are all the rage right now. Since college athletes are restricted on what they can be given, they're finding ways to make their own money. We have a lot

of guys here on scholarships. When they have to spend all their time either working out, playing their sport, or doing schoolwork, it doesn't leave much time for a job on the side."

"You sound like an infomercial," I mumble. "If you're so in favor of athletes getting paid, why aren't you offering your services for free?"

"My time is valuable too, but the entire point of all this is that while doing a photoshoot they mentioned Bradley."

"They?" I ask, the plural of the word a little weird after what she just disclosed.

"Not all shoots are solo."

I smile, my fist tucked under my chin. "Tell me more."

Maybe there's some trouble to be found on campus after all.

She shakes her head. "Not all shoots are boudoir either."

"Boudoir." I huff. "That's putting it mildly."

"Anyway," she snaps, waving her hand in front of herself as if to shove away the distractions. "Bradley has bragged more than once about scoring with some of the women that leave the parties early. It was implied he doesn't exactly take no for an answer."

This sobers me a little.

"So the high-and-mighty athletes of Lindell University will warn the girls about him but don't do anything to step up and make sure he doesn't hurt someone?"

"They reported it to the dean," she says, having a little more knowledge than she initially let on. Knowing Blakely, I imagine she argued the exact same point I'm arguing now.

Donavan would never allow the man to see the light of day again if he stumbled upon Bradley hurting someone. At least that's what I'd like to imagine. I have limited knowledge of him regardless of how intimate we've been in the past.

"You promised you wouldn't tell anyone about the photo shoots," she reminds me.

“I won’t,” I agree. “But if you ever need a helper, just let me know.”

“You’d be okay with watching them do that thing in front of the camera?”

The thought of college boys getting naked and jacking off really doesn’t do much for me. They’re boys compared to the man I can’t seem to get out of my head. “I’d be okay with splitting six thousand dollars.”

“I priced it that high because I figured the first guy would tell me no. He didn’t even blink at the price.”

“You should tell them the price goes up next year.”

She looks away.

“You already did, didn’t you?”

She chuckles. “Next semester is booking quickly as well.”

A real laugh bubbles out of me, but it has more to do with the redness growing in her cheeks than anything else.

Blakely Corrigan would never put herself in danger the way I did tonight, and she sure as shit isn’t the type to allow herself to be dragged out of a party and bent over a bed by a stranger.

She was appalled when I told her what had happened between Donovan and me. She shed tears of fear when I explained what happened the day after and how we were held at gunpoint.

She chastised me when I told her how much of a rush it was, how thrilling.

Her response was... *Jumping out of an airplane is a rush until the parachute doesn’t open.*

“You have that look in your eyes.”

“What look?” I ask, closing them so she doesn’t have easy access to my thoughts.

“The one that says you’ve been looking for danger.”

“You do dangerous things.”

“I take pictures of hot guys masturbating. Not much danger in that.”

I lift my head and glance over at her. “I’m talking about the rock climbing.”

She scoffs. “It’s nothing compared to luring a madman from the shadows just so he’ll pay a little attention to you.”

I drop my head back down to my bed, my eyes angled up at the ceiling. She’s absolutely right. It is crazy to taunt a madman, but then again, how deranged can he be. He had me in his truck, and the asshole carried me right back to my dorm when he had every opportunity to drag me into the shadows with him. It’s not like I would’ve fought him, and maybe it’s that compliance that turns him off so much.

Chapter 12

Donavan

Agitation creeps over every inch of my body. It pulls at my skin, making it too tight to handle at times. If I thought walking away would make it abate, I'd head right for the door and never look back.

I've stayed away for a month, but every second I was gone, my mind was still right here with her.

The way she's acting right now. The way her skirt is inching up her thighs with every dip of her hips as she sways to the music is drawing me closer and closer to the edge of my sanity.

She hasn't behaved. She hasn't changed the way she acts. She's lucky to still be alive. Some fucking stars must've lined up to keep her in Texas because the attention she's drawing to herself right now would put her right in the crosshairs of any trafficker who caught a glimpse of her.

She's a fucking danger to herself.

Another man steps up to her, puts his hands on her hips and a predatory smile on his face as her head rolls on her shoulders. Since I was here last, shoving the asshole away from her after she left a frat party, she's managed to get a fake ID. I watched her use the motherfucker to get into the off-campus party. I doubt they'd make her leave if she didn't have one. She's too pretty, that teasing look she's mastered on her face, too tempting, to tell her to walk away.

I've seen it in every guy's eyes who has approached her tonight. They all have it in their heads that they'll be the one to get lucky. They're going to be the one with whatever it is she's looking for, who will end up with her on her back or on her knees.

This newest guy gets one song, and when the beat changes, she waves him away, finding him lacking. His jaw flexes, his barely controlled anger at her rejection evident in

the way his hands clench when he steps back. His darting eyes tell me that if he didn't have witnesses, she'd be in trouble.

I'm all for women having the right to say no and using that word to stop anything at any point in time, but as a man, I can also understand the frustration. The temptation of her body will make any man jealous and irate when she's fine with rolling that lithe body against his for three minutes only to become indifferent the next.

Watching her act this way wouldn't enrage me so much if I knew she was only doing it to force my hand, but she has no clue that I'm here tonight. I've kept to the shadows, making sure not to draw attention to myself. I wanted to see how she's been acting when I'm not around.

I both hate and crave it all at once. If she were being a good girl, she'd be in her dorm room, and all I could do is stare up at her window with the hope that I'd catch a glimpse of her through the gauzy curtains. The way she's acting now puts nearly every inch of her on display. I'm hard as a fucking rock and pissed beyond measure. She's both giving me exactly what I want and doing exactly what I've instructed her not to do.

Yet another guy shimmies up to her, and she doesn't even bother to open her eyes as she smiles when he drops his hands to her hips. The list of motherfuckers I should kill tonight just continues to grow. The fucked-up part is she doesn't even care who's touching her. It could be that smarmy bastard that I know had intentions of hurting her from the last time and she'd just let the motherfucker touch her.

This guy takes it a step further than anyone else I've seen tonight by running his hand up her arm and caressing the side of her face. Her nose scrunches with the softness and she pulls her face away.

My girl doesn't want it soft and gentle. What she craves is darker, more sinister.

She craves me.

I ignore the woman trying to get my attention as I circle the group of people dancing in the middle of the room, grateful I never went to college. The stench of sweaty bodies, booze, and vomit is enough to make me sick to my stomach.

When the gentle-touch guy is shoved away, I make sure to shoulder check him as he walks past me.

He's pissed, practically simmering with rage, but as I look down at him, he decides very quickly I'm not the one to take his anger out on. There's a very real chance that every man who has been shoved away by her tonight will find someone else to take that aggression out on, but I'm not responsible for how they deal with their anger issues. Honestly, neither is she. She shouldn't cave to pressure and take something from someone she doesn't want just because of how they'd choose to react if she didn't. That would be toxic on so many levels.

At the same time, I know my need for her, this draw I can't seem to control, is also dysfunctional. Then again, I haven't been normal in a very long time.

Her lip twitches when I step in closer to her, and for a moment, I don't know if it's going to be a smile or a sneer. Maybe it's the alcohol in her blood, but she doesn't seem like she knows either.

With a rough hand, I pull her closer, locking her in place. I'll be damned if I'm going to act like one of these college boys and fucking dance with her. She wiggles enough to keep her hips moving, a slow smile spreading across her face while keeping her eyes closed.

When her teeth dig into her lower lip, I realize she's living some kind of fantasy behind her eyelids. Her mouth drops open when I grip a handful of her hair in my fist. I swear she makes a sound, maybe a dick-hardening whimper, but it gets lost with the music.

Her hands find my biceps, just resting on them at first, but then she moves them, her thumbs sweeping back and forth. Her eyes widen the second she slits them open.

I offer her a lethal sneer, pulling her head back even harder to reveal the perfect column of her throat. I'm torn between biting it and tracing the pounding pulse point with my tongue.

"I missed you," she says, and I read her lips more than actually hear her.

It's the very same thing she said last time, and the unprompted confession affects me in a way I should be immune against. It feels like a vulnerability, like I've offered her some sort of control over me, and that's reason enough to hate this girl.

"Let's go," I growl, grabbing her arm and pulling her off the dance floor.

"Where are you taking me?" she asks, more unsure on her feet as we descend the front steps of the house than I originally thought she was.

"Home," I grunt, slowing down enough that she isn't struggling to keep up. I vow to make it the only fucking concession I'll offer her.

The March days have gotten warmer, but the temps are still dipping into the forties at night, but I know the shiver she just felt that caused her to run her hands over her bare arms won't stop her from leaving her dorm tomorrow night in such a small amount of clothing. The woman has no sense of self-preservation, and above anything else, it's what rubs my ass raw.

I don't release her arm the entire way back to her dorm, and she doesn't attempt to pull from my grip either.

"Where have you been?"

I lock my eyes ahead of me. I answer to no one, especially petulant little girls.

"In the shadows?" she guesses.

I'm gone from here far too often to keep letting her think I'm watching her every night. If she's getting that sixth

sense that someone is watching her still, then she's responding to someone else. I've been gone for weeks.

"I haven't been back here since the last time you saw me."

She freezes, her eyes widening, the fear so real in them that I halt all my movements.

"But last night—" she begins.

"Last night, I was in Mexico."

She searches my face, her head shaking.

"You chased me. Last night, you chased me."

I step in close, my anger barely contained. "Last night, I was in Mexico."

The tremble in her body begins right in the center of her, but it doesn't take long before it's radiating into her extremities. I feel the vibration through my palm.

"Pl-please," she begs on a swallow. "Tell me you're joking."

"I don't fucking joke," I growl, my chest starting to heave at the very real possibility that someone might have gotten close enough to hurt her last night. "Let's go."

The vulnerability in her eyes as she darts them all around gets me moving again. What might've been a close call could actually serve me the way I need it to. If she's scared and realizing I'm not here all the time, maybe she'll curb her irresponsible behaviors.

The attendant isn't manning the front desk when she keys in her code to her dorm building, and as much as I want to shove her toward the stairs, I find myself walking in the direction with her.

"My roommate went home for the weekend," she says as she pushes her key into the lock.

I know what her tone is suggesting. As much as my body craves everything she's offering and more, it also serves

to piss me off because there isn't a hint of the fear I heard in her voice only moments ago.

The second the door closes and we're alone inside her room, she turns to me, lifting up on her toes and attempting to press her lips to mine.

I grip her jaw, the skin of her face around my fingers turning white from the pressure.

"I don't fucking kiss whores," I growl.

The truth is, I don't kiss anyone. The intimacy of it makes my fucking skin crawl more than watching her dance earlier tonight.

Her eyes search mine, and instead of her figuring out anything about me, I shove her to the floor at my feet.

She whimpers in pain when her knees hit the hard floor, but at least she's smart enough not to complain. Before I can reach down to unzip my jeans, her hands are trailing up my fucking thighs.

I should walk out right now and never look back. Her eagerness to have me in her mouth should be all the warning I need that this woman will never fucking learn. She'll be a danger to herself until the day she fucking dies, and there's no amount of punishment I can mete out that will change it. I'm wasting both of our time.

I just can't seem to walk away. If the girl wants to be used, there's no sense in me walking away with aching balls.

The tip of my cock is already leaking with just the sight of her licking her lips in preparation, but I don't offer it to her immediately.

She swallows, her eyes locked on my working hand as I pull up on my length, the sizzle of arousal stronger than it was the night I commanded that she strip for me in that filthy motel room.

"Please," she whispers, her mouth open and empty.

My molars grind together as I brush the head against her lips.

I pull back just in time to miss the swipe of her tongue. It's the only thing that keeps me in control.

"Men will abuse you," I warn.

Her eyes flash with need.

"But that's what you want, isn't it?"

Her attention is locked on my cock, and just knowing it has heat settling in my nuts.

"Taste it," I growl as another bead of precum forms at the tip.

With perfection I've only ever dreamed about, she extends her tongue only enough for the sample offered there.

My legs tremble, my control slipping by the second.

A glimmer of knowing pride in her eyes forces my hand, and in the next breath, I shove my cock past her lips.

She shifts her weight on her knees, trying to adjust to the intrusion, but I move too quickly, activating her gag reflex before she can prevent it.

I pull back only long enough for her to catch her breath before gagging her again. Her fingers dig into my thighs. I know tomorrow I'll revel in the marks she's sure to leave behind, but tonight, I can only focus on the heat of her throat.

She doesn't try to push me away. She's accommodating in a way that enrages me, threatening to activate that seriously sinister side of me, the parts I know better than to feed because they're nearly impossible to cage once they're free.

My balls draw up. I hate to pull back, but the memory of her tight cunt forces my hand.

In the next breath, I drag her to standing and press her face into her closed door.

After flipping her flimsy fucking skirt up, I take a punishing handful of her ass cheek before ripping her panties from her body. A whimper and a moan tangle together. I know I'll struggle to forget the sound for the rest of my fucking life.

She stays locked in place, exactly where I leave her, as I pull a condom from my pocket, the threat of coming only increasing as I roll it down my cock.

With one hand on the back of her neck and the other on her hip, I force her into the perfect angle before shoving inside of her. The tortured scream she doesn't even attempt to hold back is loud enough to wake the entire floor, but I'm relentless as I pull back and slam into her again.

The clench of her cunt around my cock is damn near unbearable. It isn't that she wasn't ready because she's slicker than she was the first night at the motel.

"Fuck," I hiss, squeezing my eyes closed as if it has the power to stave off the threatening orgasm.

I'd fucking last longer if her body wasn't begging for more. If she was even just a little fearful. If she wasn't shifting her ass back to meet my thrusts, I might have better control.

"Stay still," I demand, both my hands clenching her hips.

She disobeys, just like I knew she would. Much like me, she's no longer in control of her own body.

"Coming!" she screams the second her body tightens even further.

The utter perfection of it is haunting, life-altering, but I grind my teeth and power through it, my own orgasm only three breaths behind hers.

Her breath is ragged when I pull free from her. I want to bathe in the way she's finding it difficult to get it under control.

Her eyes soften when I pull her away from the door, and I hate it.

Instead of warning her again, I open the door and walk out, nearly running into another girl out in the hall as I'm tucking my dick away.

I know I'm the one who sought her out, but I'll be damned if I do it again.

Alani Warren is on her own from now on.

Chapter 13

Alani

I shouldn't be stunned that he just fucked me and walked away. What did I expect the man to do? Stay and fucking cuddle? Any unmet expectations are my own fault, but that doesn't stop that voice in my head that continues to tell me I'm unworthy, that Donovan would stick around for any other woman but me.

I strip out of my clothes and pull on a robe before making sure I have everything in my shower caddy that I'll need, before leaving my room.

I hold my head high despite my quivering chin. I have no business feeling any sort of way other than satisfied because he gave me exactly what I was craving. I wanted the threat of danger. I wanted to feel used. He feeds that part of me I didn't know I had until the first night I met him. I knew I was searching for something, that every other man I met before him lacked in giving me.

I take a shuddering breath as I shove open the heavy door to the shower room, doing my best not to give the rest of our conversation any thought. But it's impossible not to think about what he said.

A man, nothing more than a dark shadow and feet pounding on concrete, chased me back to my dorm room last night. I feel stupid now for standing outside and giving who I thought was Donovan the chance to catch me.

A shiver of terror travels down my spine at just how dangerous it was. I don't think he was lying about it not being him. Maybe I could convince myself that it was probably some stupid jock fucking around if I didn't know what happened to Ayla and another girl right in front of my dorm building eight months ago.

Cold chills cover my body as I step closer to the long mirror. Whatever buzz I had from the party was fucked out of

me, and my reflection tells me that I was thoroughly used tonight in the best way.

“Umm...”

I snap my eyes to another girl in the room.

She looks a little lost, but instead of dropping her eyes, she continues to look at me.

“Yes?” I ask, shrugging out of my robe because I’ve found that the fastest way to get some privacy in the fucking shower room is to get naked. For some reason, exposed skin makes people uncomfortable.

I’ve seen this girl in passing, but I don’t know her at all.

“I heard what happened in your room.”

“Heard or were listening like a pervert?” I ask, folding my robe before shoving it into a cubby.

She points at me before speaking again. “I wanted to ask if you need help. Do you want me to call someone?”

I look down, following the direction of her finger and notice the purple bruises already forming on my hips.

I don’t know what enrages me more—the fact that she thinks I might not have enjoyed what happened or the fact that she heard what was going on, suspected I was in trouble, but waited until he left to say something. I was in my room for ten fucking minutes after Donovan left before coming down here.

“Are you fucking serious?”

She takes a step back, her throat working on a swallow. I don’t want to get the man in trouble. What happened between us was consensual. Fuck, how many people saw Ayla or that other girl taken and didn’t say shit?

I’d much rather tell the police I’m fine than risk someone being hurt and no one speaking up about it.

“Get the fuck out of my face,” I snap, her feet moving immediately toward the door. “And the next time you think someone is being hurt, go get fucking help.”

She scurries away.

I hate how fast people are to show up after tragedy strikes, so fucking willing to offer a helping hand, but they're blind to what's going on in the moment. Don't even get me started on the motherfuckers who are quick to jump on social media, offering fucking thoughts and prayers after someone has been victimized, like it makes any goddamned difference.

I'm simmering with rage during my entire shower, and it makes me want to find that girl and punch her in the fucking throat. I walked in here on a high I'll never be able to duplicate, and she fucking ruined it.

As I scrub at my skin, pressing a little harder than necessary into the bruises on my hips, I consider that maybe he'll come around more often now that he knows someone else was after me. I should be scared. It should make me want to stay inside and cower in fear, but it only thrills me to think about the next time I'm out at night and the possibility that he could just pop up again.

Maybe he was lying. Maybe he was just trying to scare me.

I think he likes the chase just as much as I like being the prey.

I have one more week until spring break. As a student that honestly hates fucking college, I should be thrilled, but I'll be at Ayla's house, the one she shares with Nash. It's a nice enough place, but I hate the isolation.

There's no way for him to hide in the shadows. The property has so much surveillance on it, I don't think a bird can land a hundred yards from the house and not be detected on the security system. I know it's what Ayla needs to feel safe, but it's extremely confining for me.

I should be happy I still have a sister to visit because, unbeknownst to me, I almost lost that chance.

I turn the shower off, feeling like an ungrateful brat who, even after facing tragedy, is so selfish about

opportunities I'll miss while I'm there. I'll have no chance of seeing him in the middle of nowhere.

Going home with Blakely isn't an option. I lied when I told Donovan she went home for the weekend.

A week ago, Blakely's worst nightmare came true. She was out hiking by herself on a trail she was very familiar with. The washout rain from the previous week left spots unstable. One minute, she was on solid ground and the next, she was falling face-first into a ravine. It took hours of screaming for help before someone else happened along. The injuries to her right leg were so extensive she had to have surgery.

I've spoken to her a couple of times but was told a visit was out of the question. Her parents apparently feel as if getting hurt has somehow brought shame to the family. They've closed rank as if she's been involved in some scandal rather than hurt in a hiking accident. Those people are weird as fuck.

Thankfully, the hallway is empty when I head back to my room.

I shrug off my robe and climb under the sheets completely naked, my body sore in the most perfect way. I consider the very minimal chances that Donovan may follow me back to Mission while I'm on spring break.

The threat of danger follows me into my dreams where I spend the night running from shadows.

Chapter 14

Donavan

I've been twitchy for fucking days.

I forced myself to get into my truck on the Lindell University campus. The second I drove away, I knew I had to keep going. Leaving has grown increasingly difficult, but I knew I had to put an end to it.

I couldn't keep showing up. Warning her makes no difference, but that part of me that normally feels justified knowing I'll have to tell someone I told you so never arrives.

I don't want her to get hurt, but I also know there's nothing I can do to keep it from happening.

In fact, she seems hell-bent on getting there on her own. Short of locking her away, I don't see it as a possibility.

My lip twitches at the prospect of having her all to myself. I think she'd enjoy the hell out of it at first. She'd lift those hips, angle that perfect ass of hers toward me, and offer anything I wanted to take from her.

But eventually, the darkness would be too much. The rough hands would stop being enough. My inability to offer her anything would leave her wanting something else. She'd grow desperate for a softer touch, and that's not something my hardened self would ever be capable of giving her.

My eyes dart to the left, out my driver's side window. The drunk man staggering down the block poses no threat to me, so I shift my attention back to the house I'm watching.

Normally, I'd feel something, anything, while working. There would be a simmer of a thrill for what I've been hired to do, but tonight brings none of it. I'm almost bored tonight, wishing I was anywhere but here right now. It won't stop me from getting the job done, but it does make for a very long night.

I stay vigilant, wishing that staking out a house also had the ability to clear my mind. If I could erase all my memories

of her, I'd take it in a heartbeat. I don't need nor do I want her in my head. But I've learned from experience the last two months that actively trying to keep her from my thoughts only makes it worse, so I let visions of her swim through my head, ignoring my thickening cock when those thoughts go back to the last time I was with her.

My phone vibrates in my pocket a second before the name pops up on the screen. Ignoring it only puts it off for a few hours. If I know anything, it's that my sister Madelene is willing to call at any time of day or night in an effort to catch me at a good time. I've told her numerous times there's never a good time to call, but she doesn't listen.

"Yeah," I snap when the call connects, hoping she'll take a hint.

"How are you?"

"I'm working."

"You're always working. I never know when to call."

I clamp my lips closed before telling her that never would be best.

Madelene, much like Maya, is just a ghost from my past. I don't want a relationship with her. I sure as fuck don't need one. As much as Hollis thinks he can keep her safe, he and I both know that it's impossible.

I also hate the reminder that she's stronger than I ever could be. Where I faked my own death and disappeared, she stuck around, taking all the abuse the Severino family threw her way. She could've taken the easy way out. The drop from her bedroom window alone was high enough to kill herself, but she persevered. Many would call her weak, but I saw the strength in it, and it has only been a reminder of my own weakness.

I once loved her, but feeling any part of that now is more weakness that I can no longer afford. The price I paid the last time was much too high.

She stays on the line, seeming okay with just having this connection without saying anything, but there are a million

words in the silence shared between us.

It's been over eight months since justice was served to the Severino family, eight long months of feeling no different from how I did the five years before that. Their blood pooling on the floor offered no redemption for the pain they caused, and I know it was because of me. I played the biggest role in their evil. Maya was on their radar because of me. She died because I was foolish enough to love her, foolish enough to think that I could lie to Marcello and Alessio and keep her safe.

“You still there?”

I shift in my seat rather than responding, and I don't know why I offer that to her. Usually, by now, I hang up, knowing the only reason she calls is to verify I'm still alive.

I've avoided the office as best I can in an attempt not to run into her. I saw Hollis here in Mexico when we went into Cortez's compound to get Nash, but I've only seen her a couple of times since the bloody trip to Chicago.

I know she sees Ayla and Nash often, but I bite back the urge to ask her if Ayla knows her sister is self-destructing without the help of Cortez and his henchmen. It feels like tattling on the girl. As much as I've told myself I'll never go back to Lindell, I also know that's probably a lie I'm only telling myself to keep me away a little longer. It's only been a couple days since I left, and I'm already feeling like an addict that needs to return.

“Elio, I—”

I hit the end button before she can even continue. She fucking knows better than to call me by that name.

It isn't the first time she's done it, and I know from experience that she won't call back again tonight. It's the only guarantee I have about anything these days. I also know I'll get a call from Hollis in the next twenty-four hours with a barely veiled threat about making his woman cry.

My phone chimes with a text, and I sigh in irritation, knowing who it's from. Hollis isn't wasting any fucking time.

Hollis: She just wanted to tell you that we're having a baby, you fucking asshole.

I stare down at the message, thinking the announcement should make me feel something. It doesn't. I think even if it did, I'd work hard to shove that weakness down.

Madelene is my only existing blood family. Our mother died while I was "dead" and our father was murdered after Hollis abducted Mads from the Severino brothers. News of my father's death didn't affect me at all. News of my mother dying almost hurt me, but the reminder that she was no longer tangled up in criminal bullshit eased whatever I might have felt about it.

I reread the text, anger starting to bubble up inside of me.

A baby complicates things. It has the power to control other people. It makes not only my sister stupid but also Hollis. They both have more to lose now, and that's the most dangerous position to be in.

Me: She deserves better.

I power down my phone before he can respond.

Ten minutes later, the man I've been hired to kill is walking out of his house, turning and locking the door behind him as if he has all the time in the world.

I don't question the briefcase in his hand or why he walks down the street rather than getting into his car. There's a price on his head, and that's all that matters.

This isn't a job sanctioned by Angel, but there's been a lull in work coming out of his office because of his obsession with tracking and trying to annihilate Raul Cortez. My thirst for blood is too strong to just sit around and do nothing.

The man walking down the street could be a demon, a man who preys on small children. The contract could come from a girlfriend angry he won't leave his wife. The reason never fucking matters to me.

The only rules I have are no women without proof of their evil nature, and no kids, ever.

I'll kill the dog or someone's hundred-year-old Papaw without blinking but those two rules I never break.

Quietly, I climb out of my truck and blend in with the shadows behind him. Unlike Alani, he doesn't seem to sense me at all.

I try to think of all the things I can do to him once I have him, but nothing seems remotely appealing. It's just one more thing I can blame *her* for.

What reason do I have for living if I can't even enjoy the death and brutality I bring to others?

With less fanfare than I'd normally use, I slit his throat the second I get close enough, preventing his ability to scream. Instead of taking him to a different location and peeling away his flesh until he begs for death, I let him fall to the ground and then rip open his shirt. He's still gurgling, dying through a combination of blood loss and drowning on his blood, as I cut into his chest.

The days are over of people insisting on pictures of a body or requiring fingers or hands to be delivered for proof. Pictures can be faked and anyone can live without fingers or hands.

This job requires a higher level of proof, but it only takes a minute and a half for me to pull his heart from his chest.

I don't bother hiding his body. Solving a crime like this is damn near impossible. I shove his heart into his briefcase and walk away, stopping half a block away to rinse my hands in the rainwater flowing through the gutter along the side of the street.

I drive right past his body, a smile toying at my lips when I watch the same drunk old man step over his corpse on his way back to his house. No one gives a shit down here. As bad as it can get, there's always those that have seen and

experienced worse. I'm honestly surprised the guy didn't bend down and check his pockets before carrying on his way.

Chapter 15

Alani

“What is it?” I ask, staring down at the small box Ayla placed in my hands.

“A Christmas present,” she explains with a shrug to her shoulders. “I missed it.”

Three simple words, but they aren’t an apology. I’d never ask that of her. She was being held captive, forced to do all sorts of horrific things, during the holidays, and I was drowning in a pool of self-pity, thinking she was being selfish.

“I don’t expect gifts from you,” I tell her, having to look away when I notice the shine of a tear in her eye.

I know recovery and healing take a very long time. I also know that it’s only been two months since she was rescued and that’s not nearly enough time to be fully recovered from what she experienced. If I’m uncomfortable when she seems incapable of controlling her emotions, I can’t imagine how she feels.

“It’s not a big deal,” she says, waving her hand dismissively at me. “Open it.”

I pull the ribbon and lift the lid to the small box.

“Do you like it?”

I nod, the threat of my own tears burning my eyes.

“It’s different,” I say as I lift it by the chain and pull the necklace from the box.

“I know you don’t like rings, so I had it reset.”

The sapphire in the middle of the rose gold setting catches the light, casting sparkles around the room.

This very stone was in the middle of our mother’s wedding ring. Our father couldn’t afford an expensive ring and always frowned at the sight of the synthetic stone on our mother’s hand. But she loved it and even refused to have it

replaced the numerous times he offered to buy a diamond for her instead.

“It was promised to you,” I remind her.

The love our parents shared was unmatched. Although losing them both at the same time was horrific, we’ve both agreed more than once that it happened exactly how it was supposed to. It was hard as a fifteen-year-old girl to realize that as much as her parents loved her, they loved each other more. If one had survived, it wouldn’t have taken them long to join the other.

“She doesn’t look impressed,” Nash says as he enters the kitchen, pressing a kiss to Ayla’s forehead before opening the fridge.

I want to snap at him for pointing out the things my sister has always had a hard time reading.

It’s not his fucking business if the necklace feels tainted in some way. Giving me something that my mother valued so much because it was given to her with so much love seems like a waste. Ayla, the sister capable of love and worthy of it, should keep this. It’s wasted on me.

“I thought it was buried with her,” I say, not giving a voice to the accusation Nash just made.

“I couldn’t bear to let it go,” she confesses.

I know what she’s doing. I can read between the lines of what she’s offering me, but that doesn’t make me want it any more than I did when I first saw it sitting in the box.

“I won’t wear it,” I tell her, dropping the chain back into the box and putting the lid back on it.

She looks crestfallen when I hand it back to her.

“I appreciate the thought though.”

It would’ve been easier to just accept the damn thing and shove it into the back of my dresser drawer, but that voice inside of me that tells me to stop placating people has grown louder in recent months.

I'm tired of not having a say, of playing the role people expect of me just because their opinions may be different.

"That's hurtful," Nash says before I can turn and leave the room.

I freeze, my eyes flickering from Ayla's hand on his forearm—an attempt to get him to stay out of it—to the man who hurt her at the commands of some seriously sick-and-twisted pieces of shit.

"What's hurtful," I begin with as even of a voice as I can manage, "is being expected to just love something because someone else does."

"It's the thought that counts," Nash challenges, and I have to scoff at the ridiculousness of the notion.

"Her thoughts aren't my responsibility," I argue. "And giving someone a gift out of misplaced guilt is pretty fucked up as well."

I look from him to my sister, genuinely hating the tears now tracking down her cheeks.

"You didn't miss Christmas because you wanted to, Ayla. Please don't feel guilty about it. Nothing you were forced to do was your fault. I place absolutely no blame on you for any of it. It wasn't your fault. You did nothing to entice those sick fucks into abducting you. You did more than you should've to keep me safe, and while I'm grateful for that, I feel like I'm being punished for the decisions you made."

Nash tenses beside her, but he somehow manages to keep his fucking mouth shut. This isn't about him in any way, shape, form, or fashion, and digging his heels in won't lead to me suddenly understanding his point of view. If anything, it'll punish Ayla because for some fucked-up reason she wants me around. Visits like this is why I hate fucking coming here in the first place.

"I've heard *she did it for you* more times than I can count, as if I need to consider everyone else but myself when I make a random choice."

"I'm sorry if I made you feel that way."

I lift my eyes to Nash. I don't think the guy is as big of an asshole as I originally thought. I honestly think he just doesn't have much experience when it comes to family dynamics, but yesterday he literally said, *she didn't go through what she did so you can flunk out of college.*

Her sacrifices are her own, and having some misplaced level of expectation when giving or doing something for someone when they never asked for it is pretty fucked up.

She sacrificed so much before she was taken. Every day she was exhausted, forced to raise a fifteen-year-old sister while going to nursing school. She didn't ask for that role any more than I wanted her forced into it. Blaming me for any of it hurts more than she can ever realize.

I did my part. I was a model fucking student every day in high school, even when I wanted to give up, because I didn't want to disappoint anyone.

"I don't want to live my life for anyone but myself," I say, taking a deep breath for finally being able to voice it out loud. "I don't want you doing it for me either."

"I do it because I love you."

"And just saying that implies that if I don't take you into consideration when making a decision, it means I don't love you."

"You shouldn't quit school."

I turn my face to the ceiling and roar in frustration, hating the way Nash takes another step closer, putting himself between Ayla and me as if I'm going to claw her eyes out or something.

"I'm not going to quit school, but if I did, I wouldn't do it in the middle of a semester.

"You're failing—"

"Mind your fucking business," I snap at Nash. "This isn't about you on any fucking level."

"School is important," Ayla says, her voice carrying that calm tone our mother always had.

“You say that but you tortured yourself with nursing school, and now you work a shift a week at a pediatrician’s office.”

I hate the way she rolls her lips between her teeth as if she has a lot to say but is refusing.

“You’re important to me,” she finally offers, and somehow that stings more than anything else she could say.

Instead of standing here and letting her see my tears, I spin around and leave the room.

If I were as important as she claims I am, she would’ve remembered that I was coming to stay with her for spring break rather than looking surprised and asking me if something was wrong when I showed up on her doorstep three days ago. You don’t forget important people.

Nash is the important person in her life. I honestly want my sister to be happy, but I just never thought it would come at my expense.

The guilt is bad enough to deal with.

Despite wanting to throw everything across the bedroom they’ve designated as mine, I softly close the door, turning the lock for good measure.

I spend hours sitting on the bed, waiting for the sun to dip below the horizon. I don’t leave my room and walk out of the house until there’s nothing but quiet everywhere.

I ignored my sister’s sobs and Nash’s attempts to try and make her feel better. I hate that it’s easier for people you love to hurt your feelings than those that you hate.

My feet move slowly down the driveway, and I consider that maybe I should’ve packed a bag so by the time I make it to the end of the extremely long driveway, I could just keep walking.

I’ve done this every night since I got here, wishing I’d feel his eyes on me by the time I near the road, but I never do. Even in the pitch-black, the creepiness I felt on campus never

threatens me here. It leaves me feeling lifeless, unwanted, undesired... completely alone.

Knowing he's truly done with me hurts more than it should for a guy I simply hooked up with twice.

Realizing that he has probably found a different toy to play with brings a level of pain I have no business feeling.

It seems everyone in my life finds a better way to spend their time than wasting it on me.

Chapter 16

Donavan

If admitting to a problem, or a weakness in my case, is the first step then I figure facing it and being able to walk away from it would be the second step.

As I watch her once again swaying to the music, I don't feel any closer to getting over this shit than I did when I was hundreds of miles away.

Unlike the last time I was here, she's drinking heavily. Her arms are heavy, the movement of her body to the music seeming forced more now than ever. From what I'm watching, it's clear she doesn't want to be here, so it makes no sense why she is.

Even the guys around with their eyes on her don't approach and it makes me wonder what she's done in my absence to cause them to act that way.

Several girls pass by, looking at her with disgust, shaking their heads at the sight of her, before whispering god knows what to their friends.

She's worse than a fucking mess, and her spiral seems to now be circling the drain. I don't notice the guy that she was with that first night I was sent to protect her and it makes me realize I didn't see him the last two times either.

I don't exactly have time to fucking worry about some other guy right now because as each minute ticks by, she seems less and less capable of even standing on her fucking feet.

As much as I want to intervene, I don't. It's not my place. Who would step in if I weren't here? Why doesn't she have friends? Where the hell is that roommate of hers I've seen around before?

It's been months since I was here. This seems to be the semester opening party, but tonight doesn't seem like a celebration to her. Makeup streaks down her face with random

tears, making me wonder what has happened to her in my absence. How many nights has she spent acting this way? How did she spend her summer?

The party carries on, getting louder and louder. She only stops dancing to grab another drink.

I watch as the guy manning the keg shakes his head, looking at her with such disgust you'd think he was looking at a dirty homeless person encroaching on his space rather than a drunken college girl.

She walks away after spitting cuss words at him, but she doesn't return to the dance floor. People move out of her way, choosing to talk shit about her as she passes rather than offer a helping hand.

I jolt, fighting the urge to rush to her, when she trips at the bottom of the steps.

A group of guys laugh harder as she struggles to stand rather than helping her. My need to follow her as she stumbles away is the only thing that keeps them from dying tonight. The sight of blood on her skinned knees is nearly enough to make me take their heads off, and I don't mean that in a metaphorical sense either.

She's mumbling to herself, more unaware of her surroundings than I've ever seen before. She needs to be taught a lesson, but honestly, she's past the point of heeding any sort of warning as drunk as she is. Any energy on that front would be a waste tonight.

It doesn't stop me from moving in front of her and blocking her path.

"Move, motherfucker," she grumbles as she's forced to a stop. She reaches her arm out in an effort to shove me away, but she's got no real strength behind it.

Her affect remains flat when she looks up at me. Even when it dawns on her who I am, she can't seem to muster any emotion other than irritation. She isn't happy to see me, and that makes my heart clench.

“Where the fuck have you been?” she growls, her ineffective fists swatting at my chest.

The *I miss you* is gone, and I find myself aching to hear it a third time.

Maybe this is my punishment for staying away for so long and trying to forget about her.

When she tries to step around me, I clamp her chin in between my fingers and get in her face.

“You need to start acting your age instead of like a fucking toddler whose toy got taken away.”

“I’m not—”

Her face screws up, and I only have a second to step away before she gets sick. I only grab a hold of her to keep her from face-planting on the sidewalk because I feel obligated to get her home. I’d prefer to do that without her being covered in puke.

I look away, my nose scrunching up at the scent of all the alcohol making a reappearance. It’s absolutely disgusting. I’d rather deal with blood than vomit any damn day of the week.

I’m annoyed beyond fucking words by the time she’s done heaving. I spend probably a little too much time trying to convince myself that dragging her back to my motel room and showing her exactly what happens to careless women would be a terrible idea.

This has to be the last time I come here. I’m not responsible for her choices any more than she’s responsible for mine. If anything, I think I’m just making it worse for her. I’m not her fucking savior and we owe each other nothing, but she still seems to hold some sort of expectations where I’m concerned.

“Enough,” I spit as I grab her arm again and start pulling her toward her dorm building.

I may be walking away for the final time tonight, but I’ll be damned if I leave her standing in the middle of nowhere.

“Let go of me,” she growls, her attempt to jerk away from me ineffectual.

She fights me all the way there, growling and snarling like a deranged animal. People look at us as they walk past but even as aggressive as it looks, and as unhappy as she is to have me pulling her along, no one steps in.

That’s what’s wrong with the entire fucking world these days. People are so worried about offending the wrong person, they just gape and stare rather than offer a helping hand. One guy literally walks past holding his phone out in front of him, recording a goddamned video for social media with us in the background.

“Your generation sucks,” I mutter, refusing to believe that I’m also a part of any of this shit.

I wasn’t raised this way. Yeah, I’ve done my fair share of turning a blind eye, but the way these college kids act is beyond fucking words.

“You suck,” she hisses, her feet getting tangled together somehow. I manage to stop her once again before she hits the ground.

My sigh is more of an irritated rush of breath than anything else. I pull her closer to her dorm, reminding myself that getting pissed is ignorant because all emotions are wasted. The fact that she even has that level of power over me pisses me off and that just makes this entire night one giant fucking circle of mistakes... which I hate.

“I’m tired,” she complains, her steps growing shorter, her eyelids heavier.

“Jesus, fuck,” I grumble, catching her under her arms before she can pass out.

The knowledge that she never would’ve made it on her own makes me raving mad.

There’s no way that she only acts this way when I’m in town. This has to be routine for her at this point. How many times has she acted irresponsible that every time I come to town she’s putting herself in danger?

I lift her, slinging her over my fucking shoulder and muttering a warning about puking down my back as if she isn't fucking passed out and dead weight. From watching her enter this building more than once, I type in the passcode, tugging the heavy door open when the lock deactivates.

"Sir," the girl at the desk snaps at me when I go to walk past.

"Let me guess?" I snarl. "I can't be in here this late."

Her lips form a flat line, irritated she didn't get the chance to deliver the line herself.

"You want to carry her to her fucking room?"

She doesn't say a thing.

"Exactly," I growl when she sits back down behind the desk.

The stairs are no harder than they've usually been because she doesn't weigh much of anything. She's even more gaunt tonight than she has been in the past. It makes me wonder what the fuck Ayla has been doing with her life because it certainly isn't fucking watching over her goddamned sister.

"Put me down," she complains when I take no care in preventing the jostling as I climb up to her room.

"Where's your key?" I growl, knowing the doors lock instantly when they close, much like most hotel room doors do.

"Lost it."

I grip her thigh harder than I probably should, but the thought of someone out there possibly having that kind of access to her makes my vision turn red.

I bang my fist on the door, deciding I may just have to kick the motherfucker in, but then it opens.

I shove against it, earning a screech from the girl inside.

"Really?" she snaps, backing away. "Again?"

“The fuck do you mean again?” I ask. She’s not the same girl she shared a room with last semester, but from the frown on her face, this still seems to be Alani’s room.

She snaps her jaw closed, but one glance at the wiggling girl on my shoulder and she opens her mouth to speak.

“This happens all the time, some random guy carrying her home. I’ve reported her to the dean, and it looks like I’ll be doing it again tomorrow.”

“Shut the fuck up, Della,” Alani snaps, lifting her head only a few inches off my back. “Don’t listen to her. She’s a fucking liar. She’s just mad because the guy she likes hit on me last week.”

Della shakes her head, but she doesn’t refute what Alani is saying.

I don’t know who to believe, but none of this is my fucking problem anymore. Hell, it never was my problem in the first place.

I pull her over my shoulder, dropping her to her bed like a sack of horse feed, but instead of walking away immediately, I inch closer, pinning her face between my fingers. I lean in close so there’s no room for misinterpretation.

“I miss—”

I squeeze harder, forcing her to shut up. “You need to get your shit together.”

Tears form in the corners of her eyes, but I force myself to ignore them. I can’t keep getting tangled up in her shit.

“This will be the last time I rescue you. The next guy who snatches you up in the dark will hurt you.”

She swallows, her eyelids lowering before she jerks her face out of my grip.

“Fuck you, Donavan.”

I leave her, walking out of her room, not even bothering to close the door behind me. I’ve wasted too much time on her, and I don’t even understand why I’ve done it.

She means nothing to me.

Just like everyone else walking this stupid fucking planet.

Chapter 17

Alani

I know it's going to be a terrible fucking day before I can even manage to open my eyes.

My body aches. The hell I've put it through the last several months seems to have finally caught up with me. I should be used to the hangovers by now, but I'm still surprised by them every fucking time.

I remember puking last night. That disgusting saving grace will make my recovery a little faster since I'm not going to have to deal with all of that trash in my system, but it's still going to be bad.

I roll my head on my pillow, smelling the filth in my hair but feeling a little relieved that my bitch-ass roommate isn't here. Blakely is back on campus this semester, but her accident left her incapable of climbing the stairs. She's in a first-floor dorm room a few buildings over. I went from having the best to the naggiest.

I have no clue why I even came back to school. I barely passed my classes from last semester. When I left this place in May, I was certain I'd never return. I wanted to be an adult. I wanted to make money and just live, not spend hours a day studying and maintaining grades. I got a job in McAllen and lived with Ayla and Nash. It took all of two months to realize that doing that for any extended period of time was less appealing than school, so basically, I'm only here so I don't have to live with my sister.

I'm slow to climb out of bed, having to sit on the edge and take deep breaths so I don't get sick. The walk to the shower room is even slower, and I only feel marginally better when I'm done. At least my hair no longer smells like a dumpster, but my full body exhaustion doesn't leave me with enough energy to fix it, so it ends up in a messy pile on top of my head.

I swipe my hand across the condensation on the mirror and stare at myself. Dark circles ring my eyes and my skin looks gaunt and unhealthy. I should care. I know I should, but I have to keep those feelings shoved down where I keep the memories of *him*.

I'm well aware the obsession I have with Donavan isn't healthy. The man himself isn't healthy. He's all things dark and dangerous. Before meeting him, before that video of Ayla was sent, I would've never even imagined anything like him and the things he has to offer. I knew I was missing something in my life, but until it was thrust in my face like it was, I never would've figured it out on my own. I never would've tested those boundaries in such a dangerous way.

Now I can't seem to help myself. I crave the darkness and danger. My body aches for some of that pain, some of the fear that goes along with being chased in the darkness, not knowing if I'll make it back into the light alive.

As drunk as I was last night, I know he was here. I know he wasn't a figment of my imagination, something I wanted so much that I dreamed him into reality.

I know he vowed to never see me again. I know he meant it, or at least he was trying to convince himself he meant it.

It could end up being true. He stayed away for months. It could be years this time.

As much as I want danger, I also know how safe I've been playing it by sticking here around campus. I know the risks are zero, but they're also much lower than if I went into the city.

A thrill of possibility zings up my spine as I make it back to my room and grab my phone. My fake ID is good enough to get me into a bar. Plus, the kind of place I'd want to go really wouldn't give a shit about how old the people inside are.

I search all around Austin, looking at the places with the lowest ratings, the ones the tourists feel inclined to spend time

warning everyone else about. I find several, many deemed dangerous by online reviewers because they weren't impressed the second time around after trying to relive their youth by revisiting their old stomping grounds twenty years later. I have to be cautious because there's a very real chance that it's age and maturity, the removal of rose-colored glasses, that may make them see things differently now versus when they were in college.

I find the place I plan to end up at tonight, hating how fucking expensive it's going to be to get there because I'll have to order a ride share. Blakely used to let me borrow her car on occasion, but when she returned to campus this fall, she did so without her car. With the torn ligaments in her right ankle, she hasn't been able to drive and her parents were worried about it getting damaged just sitting in the parking lot for months.

I don't bother worrying about how I look or if my clothes even match when I leave my dorm room. I don't care about the looks I get and how those looks are now much different than they were my first two semesters here.

Before, I was the girl who turned heads and was approached because guys thought they had a chance. Now, I'm the one they seem to avoid. I don't know if it's my behavior or someone spreading rumors, but everyone seems to steer clear of me these days.

I'm fine with it honestly. My ability to placate people dwindled right along with my concern for my grades. Ayla threatened to pull me from college, telling me that there's no point in wasting the money on tuition if I'm only going to fail. After that conversation, I was no more willing to give a shit than I did the mornings I purposely turned off my alarm for class.

Grabbing a tray, I step up to the counter, my stomach turning at the sight of everything.

Wanting to eat and knowing I need to are two very different things. I reach for a blueberry muffin but stop short. The streusel on top looks like mold, and there's no way I can

convince my brain otherwise. I end up with a granola bar and a soda, a breakfast of champions, I guess.

“Hey, I—”

Whatever Blaine was going to say falls away when I turn to glare at him.

I haven’t spoken to him since Donovan tied us up.

He made it very clear by his absence that he’d given up on whatever it was he wanted from me.

“Oh,” I say as I walk past him toward an empty table. “I exist to you now?”

“That’s not fair,” he says, following behind me despite my attempt to make it clear I have no interest in talking to him.

“Not fair?” I growl.

“We were friends,” he says, his tone sad.

I angle my head to the side. Is this guy for real right now?

“We were,” I agree. “I’d even go so far as to say that we were best friends. That is until you realized I wasn’t going to fuck you and then all of a sudden I wasn’t worth your time.”

He clamps his mouth closed.

“I just wanted to check on you,” he says rather than arguing what I know to be the truth. “There was talk about some scary tattooed man leaving your dorm last night.”

I stare at him, wondering what his fucking motive is right now. He’s gone months without speaking to me, and now all of a sudden he pops back up?

“It was Donovan,” I confirm. “But he won’t be coming back around.”

He doesn’t perk up as if he thinks he has a chance.

He stares at me as if he’s asked a question and is waiting for an answer. I have no more to give him now than I did when he was falling over himself to please me. Maybe I abused that

friendship. Maybe I took too much and didn't offer enough in return. But at the same time, I'm never going to feel obligated, like I owe someone something because they're nice to me, especially when they're only being nice to get something in return. Conditional friendships don't interest me.

"It was nice seeing you, Blaine," I tell him before walking away.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes when I hear his sigh of relief.

Chapter 18

Donavan

I can count on one hand with five fingers left over how many times I've made a decision and then went back on it. I stopped living my life for others after the car crash. I had to. It was the only way I could walk away from my family. It was the only thing that kept me sane.

Shutting down all my emotions was for the very same reason. If I thought about what could've been happening to my little sister, I would've gotten myself killed trying to protect her.

I went five years without giving a shit about anything or anyone.

If my sister's abuse from the Severino brothers and my mother's death weren't enough to make me step back into the light, I have no fucking clue why this snotty brat is somehow managing it without so much as opening her perfect fucking mouth.

The issue tonight is that I don't think she's prancing around fucking Austin, near the university, because she's trying to force my hand. I followed her from campus, and the Uber that carried her an hour away didn't seem to have any clue that I was behind him.

I wasn't going to intervene, but she fucking clocked me when I was circling the block, looking for a place to park. I spent fifteen minutes looking for her after she disappeared around a corner.

My blood boils watching her stop to talk to an obviously homeless man who blocks her path. Not once has she looked over her shoulder. This isn't a tease. She's not trying to force me to act on her behalf. It seems she legitimately doesn't care.

She climbed into that fucking Uber, looking like a million bucks, wearing a skirt that made me want to force the driver off the road just so I could drag her out and fuck her on the side of the highway. By the time she climbed out of the

Uber, her feet were unsteady and her eyes were glassed over, making it apparent she spent the drive drinking something she must've had in her purse.

Her laughter catches up with me on the wind, and I hate the way the homeless man notices the sleek column of her throat when she tilts her head back. He's got a hungry look to him that speaks of needs more on a carnal spectrum than one having anything to do with his empty stomach.

"Watch it," someone slurs when I bump into them as she starts walking again. They shut up quickly when I turn my head and glare at them.

For good measure, I punch the guy who's still staring at her as I pass by him. He's lucky that's all he gets, but as I continue to shove my way through the crowd of people, I haven't completely ruled out the idea of finding him later and gutting the motherfucker.

Austin isn't exactly familiar to me, but I've been down here a couple of times. Alessio brought Marcello and me down here before we were even out of high school. I spent a lot of my time disappearing into the crowds, and purposely getting separated from the Severino brothers so I could call Maya. It was pretty bad then, but it's even worse now. Before, there were crowds of drunk college students. Now, the street is overrun with the homeless begging for cigarettes and lost souls looking for trouble.

I shove down that part of my past, hating that it has the ability to sneak up on me so easily.

I keep my eyes locked ahead, ignoring the two guys getting shook down by some thugs. I'm not a fucking do-gooder, and I'll be damned if I'm coming to anyone's rescue.

I step around a guy with his dick out as he pisses on a nearly dead tree.

The entire scene is chaos. The music coming from the bars is too fucking loud. The crowd is too goddamned thick.

I lose track of her for a minute, having to step into the street to avoid a fight breaking out right in the middle of the

sidewalk. I know it's luck that I spot the flash of her blonde hair as she darts around some parked cars.

She lifts her hand, throwing some asshole her middle finger when he blares his horn because he almost fucking ran her over.

I grit my teeth when she trips over the curb, her hands clamping on some stranger to stop her fall. I know it's instinct. I know the guy she happened to touch didn't ask for it, but when he smiles at her, I add him to the list of people to track down later.

I swear to God I'll be coated in fucking blood before I leave town.

A woman at his side literally peels Alani's hands from her man's chest, but she sees something in her eyes that makes her back away rather than engage.

Her stumbling is worse, making me wonder if she's somehow been drugged and I missed it. Her steps falter, pulling her to a stop in front of a busser playing an old, worn guitar. She sways to the music as if she can hear the strumming but the mayhem around her makes it impossible. She is so fucked up right now.

She might as well have *VICTIM* tattooed on her forehead. Part of me thinks she's already forgotten that she saw me, or maybe I just thought she did because she hasn't looked around once to try and find me.

I can't consider that she just doesn't care that I'm here. What would accepting that do to me? That she's got me so fucked up that I can't function and she's just wandering around downtown Austin like she's untouchable.

Rage transitions from a low simmer to a rolling boil as I step closer to her, but I stop short of grabbing her. If she doesn't give a fuck about herself, then why should I?

Maybe this is all part of her game. Maybe she's wandering around, waiting for me to step out of the darkness.

That has to be it because the alternative gives her way too much fucking power.

I circle around, stepping into the street so I can move past her and get within her line of vision.

I stand behind the guy playing the guitar, locking eyes with her when she looks up. Her throat works on a swallow, the only hint she gives me that tells me I might pull more of a response from her than any other idiot on the street.

But then she turns around and walks away.

I'm frozen in place, my eyes locked on her back, trying to convince myself to just let her go. I know I'll spend the next week scouring the newspaper, looking for a story about a pretty blonde girl falling victim to the Austin streets.

I'm torn for the longest time, but then she looks over her shoulder, a mischievous grin on her lips.

I see the challenge in it, and, for reasons I will not focus on right now, I accept.

Unlike when she first climbed out of her Uber, she looks over her shoulder many times. I make sure to stay where she can't see me. When her feet begin to slow, so do mine. When she speeds up, I walk faster too.

It thrills me to see her eyes darting all over, looking for me. I only let her spot me occasionally. I want her frantic, wondering when I'll pop back up.

She starts to distance herself from the crowds, entering the shadows where the lights of the city can't quite reach.

The smile on her face says she knows I'm following her.

I swore to her she'd never see me again, and yet here I am, playing right into her fucking hands.

I have to make sure after tonight, she knows that looking for me will only be a waste of time.

I've tried getting my point across as best I can, but the woman doesn't seem very keen on listening, and this shit has to stop.

I have to make sure her erratic, dangerous behaviors end tonight.

Chapter 19

Alani

The thrill of knowing he's here is a living, breathing thing in my chest.

I'm an hour from campus, looking for trouble, and he's somehow found me.

I grin as I think of all the danger he brings. His obsession is the most powerful thing I've ever felt. It's more addictive than the alcohol rushing through my veins.

The look in his eyes is murderous when I catch a glimpse of him over my shoulder as I walk deeper into the darkness. It's thrilling in a way I never thought I'd like.

I bite down a scream when he grabs me, trying to fight a smile when he spins me around to face him.

He doesn't say a word, and the giddiness quickly fades as his eyes dart between mine. It feels like a test, like he's analyzing me in an attempt to figure me out. The scrutiny scratches at my skin, the judgment something I could probably handle from anyone else but him.

He's danger and darkness, having a hint of evil in his eyes that I'm certain isn't just a defense mechanism. His ability to tie four people to chairs without blinking an eye says a lot about the man. He doesn't conform to society's norms. He doesn't give a shit about what others think. I want to be like him. I want to be able to walk around, not giving a shit about anything, without having to drink to get myself there. I want to be able to shut off the voices in my head that are always worrying about others. Ayla has Nash so there's no point in caring about how she's doing. The people at school, other than Blakely, haven't even checked on me. Blaine's attempt earlier probably had more to do with him being jealous on some level that Donovan was spotted in my dorm than anything else.

"What are you doing here?" I snap, craving the grip of his hand on my face like he's done so many times before.

He grabs me, but his hands are clamped on my biceps, and he doesn't attempt to pull me against his body.

I try to wiggle away from him, but he's just too strong.

"What the fuck did you take?" he growls, his eyes darting between mine.

"Nothing," I lie, attempting once again to get away from him.

The man probably kills people for a living. What right does he have to question the tab of ecstasy I took in the back of the Uber?

"You're putting yourself in fucking danger," he hisses through his teeth.

"Ayla lived her life worried about danger, and she still got hurt," I spit at him.

He doesn't even look at the guy that comes walking in our direction.

"Nice," the guys says, his own voice sounding slurred, but it could very easily be the shit in my system. "Can I get a taste when you're done with her?"

I keep my eyes on Donovan, watching his jaw flex in irritation.

I roll my head on my shoulders and look toward the guy. He's absolutely disgusting with dirty clothes and a stench coming off of him that tells me he probably hasn't seen the inside of a real shower in weeks.

"I was hoping to get railed by both of you at the same time," I tell him.

"Nice," the guy says again, rubbing his hands together as if he's just won a prize.

I nearly crumple to the sidewalk when Donovan releases me without warning.

"Remember this is your fault," he tells me. In the next breath, he has a knife in his hand.

He moves forward, seating the thing fully into the guy's chest. The sound the blade makes when he pulls it from the guy's body is sickening, but all I can do is stare as the other man crumples to the ground, his eyes wide and already lifeless.

Donavan bends, wiping the knife on the guy's filthy clothing as if he didn't just murder him for no reason.

Tears run down my face, like I'm only now realizing how damn dangerous he actually is. My head shakes as if I'm trying to understand my reality, but I can't manage words when he grips my arm and drags me further into the darkness.

By the time he's shoving me toward the passenger side of his truck, I've convinced myself that it didn't happen. People don't just kill people in the middle of nowhere with no warning. My first time taking drugs will obviously be my last because I can't handle imagining stuff like that.

"Let go of me," I hiss.

"Gladly," he returns, opening the door and shoving me inside.

My head dips, and when I lift it, we're already moving, his truck sailing past street signs and flickering lamp posts.

"Where are we going?" I ask, but he doesn't answer.

His fingers are gripping the steering wheel and he's staring straight ahead.

I clear my throat, considering I didn't say it loud enough. I repeat myself, but it still doesn't draw an answer from him.

"You're being childish."

He scoffs.

"You're not my fucking father. You have no right to drag me to places because you don't like how I'm acting. I'm not a child."

He still stares straight ahead, only looking over his shoulder to merge on the interstate.

“Why are you even here? You said you were done following me around. You’re ruining my fucking high.”

We’re passing cars on the interstate like they’re standing still. As much as it should scare me, it doesn’t. I can’t pinpoint the exact moment I stopped caring if I lived or died, but I feel weightless with that worry gone.

I’m warm, my skin feeling like I have a million ants crawling up and down my arms, but when I reach for the buttons for the air conditioner, I realize it’s already on full blast. I turn one of the vents some to get better airflow in my direction.

“Was it X?” he asks.

“I’m so hot,” I complain. “My skin feels alive.”

I run my hands over my body, hyper focused on how the attention sends a thrill up my spine.

“You need to stop,” he grumbles. “Put your fucking seatbelt back on.”

“It’s too tight. Everything is too tight.”

“Swear to God, Alani.”

I lift the hem of my shirt, angling the air from the vent onto my thighs.

“I’m hot.”

In a fit of madness, I reach across the seat and run my hand up his jeans-clad thigh, stopping when I brush over his erection.

“You seem to be hot, too.”

I press my lips to his neck, needing his mouth more than I ever have before.

He refuses me again, turning his head when I brush his cheek with my mouth.

“Why won’t you kiss me?”

“I’m fucking driving,” he snaps. “Get back in your fucking seat.”

My refusal is clear in the way I keep rubbing him over his jeans. He can act as pissed as he wants to, but it still doesn't stop him from angling his hips up some when I pull away a few inches.

His hand comes out to grab me just as I feel the terrain under the tires change.

My eyes widen, that fear of death I thought I got rid of coming back with a vengeance as I'm jostled.

He never releases me. When he comes to a stop, I find my fingers tangled in his shirt as if he has the power to keep me safe even during a car accident.

When I look out the windshield, I realize we didn't crash. He pulled over on the side of the road, having enough forward thinking to turn his hazard lights on.

"Get in your fucking seat," he hisses.

I don't know why I listen this time. Maybe it's because of the look in his eyes. Maybe it's the realization that as hard as I try to act, there's always going to be some part of me that's afraid of the reality of getting hurt or killed. I don't think it's death that frightens me. I think it's the pain I'm afraid I'll suffer getting there.

He pulls down on the gear shift, merging back on to the road, but he doesn't speed up as fast as we were going before. The very next exit we come to, he takes, and then there are a series of turns. I don't know what his plans are, but whatever it is he's decided, I can see the determination in his eyes.

He doesn't say a word as he unbuckles his belt, pulling down his zipper in the next breath.

Before I can challenge him, he's reaching across the seat and wrapping his hand around my throat.

My head hits the passenger side window, and the wince from that combines with the pain at my hips when he rips my panties from my body.

"Donavan," I screech, but any and all further complaints fade away.

My back is at an odd angle to the door, but that doesn't stop him from shoving inside of me.

I'm not surprised by his aggression, but I am surprised by the slick path my body has provided his.

"Open wider," he growls, using one hand to shove at my hip, but it's locked against the back of the seat. "Fuck it."

He pulls from me, and I feel like a whore when I reach for him.

Hitting the button on his door, my window rolls down and before I can question what he's doing, he's flipping me over and shoving my head through the open window. The bite of the door pinches the skin across my chest, but his grip in my hair lifts me from the frame just as he presses inside of me again.

Cool night air swarms around my top half while all of the heat I felt earlier settles below my belly button. His hips are brutal, every forward jab hitting something inside of me that makes me see literal stars, or at least that's what I thought was happening until I realize his hands are around my throat.

"I fucking hate you," he hisses, my vision narrowing.

I try to scream his name, but his grip is too tight.

The second he releases my neck and the blood starts to flow once again, I explode. My body convulses around his. I fucking love it, but also hate it because I miss his reaction.

I don't realize he has come until my heart rate settles some and he's pulling out of me.

"Fuck," he whispers.

I jerk at the brush of his finger up my slick thigh.

I moan when he dips his fingers back inside of me, my body extremely sensitive after coming so hard.

When he shifts, sitting back on his ass and lifting his hips to get his jeans back in place, I turn around to face him.

Once again he doesn't look at me, but he also doesn't argue when I lean over and press my cheek into his thigh.

His fingers are sweeping through my hair as he pulls back on to the road. All I hear is the wind whipping through the truck as I fall asleep.

Chapter 20

Donavan

Alani hasn't stirred in over an hour, and as much as I argued with myself over the fact that I've just let her keep her head in my lap while she sleeps, I haven't moved her away either.

I should've taken her back to her dorm. As childish as she's been acting, she was right. She's an adult, and I have no right to try and control her behavior.

Yet, I've just pulled up outside Nash's house, knowing her sister is living here with him now. This is where she spent her summer, but I only know that because of conversations around the office. I told myself I was checking in with Angel not checking up on my sister, but it made me realize I was lying to myself. I never made contact with Alani. When others discussed her being home for the summer and working at a local diner, I made a point to never drive down that road. I avoided her and somehow managed to keep busy with work instead of following her to and from her job.

I blame the blonde girl I was sent to save last week for forcing my hand. I didn't make it in time, but for some reason, it was more than the disappointment of not getting paid that settled in my chest. She looked nothing like Alani, but four days dead in a random field has the power to make anyone look different than they did alive.

I knew who I was looking for, and I had it on very good authority that was who was in the field, but her blood-stained hair made my mind race back to Alani. I had to see her. It was the only thing that would calm that voice in my head telling me she was gone.

What I found, her spiraling at college, was probably worse. Seeing her pain, the blankness in her eyes, cut me more than any knife ever could.

I shove at her shoulder, the serenity I managed on the drive to her sister's house escaping out of the open windows.

“What’s wrong?” she asks, her face lifting from my lap.

She looks at me rather than around. It’s clear she doesn’t care where she’s been brought.

“Get out of the fucking truck.”

She scrunches her nose like I just told her to walk through a pile of shit barefoot or something.

“My head hurts,” she complains.

“Coming down from X will do that,” I snap, opening the driver’s side door and climbing out.

I reach and pull her out too, waiting until she’s standing steady before letting her go. Unable to resist, my eyes drop to her thighs, the memory of how my cum dripped out of her last night threatening to make me hard, standing right here in the driveway.

I should probably hate myself for fucking her bare, but I just can’t muster the disdain for that or for the bruises on her neck. I fucked her hard, and she came even harder.

What pisses me off is the simple fact that she affects me at all. I sneer at her before turning around and walking toward the front door.

With the level of security Nash has on this place, I’m surprised he isn’t at the front door with a shotgun pointed at my head.

“Are you fucking serious, bringing me here?” she snaps as I walk up the front porch steps.

I bang on the door, unsurprised the man doesn’t have a doorbell. It would be too inviting. If this man is anything like me, he expects privacy.

It takes longer than I thought it would for someone to answer the door, but Nash doesn’t speak when he sees me. If anything, he looks terrified. Is he in some kind of trouble? Does he have a price on his head and he thinks I’m here to collect?

I open my mouth, but no words come out.

“Donavan,” he snaps, and it sounds like a warning.

I lock eyes with him, keeping them on his face even when Ayla steps out from behind him.

I step to the side, feeling Alani at my back, and I point at her. “She’s your goddamned problem.”

I walk away before he does something stupid like ask why she’s with me in the first place.

I know that whatever he and Ayla have has only grown in the months they’ve been together.

I’m fairly certain they’re trying their hand at being normal even though how they met a year or so ago was nothing but normal. Going through what they did seems to have strengthened something between them. There’s no doubt it’s some form of trauma bond, but I’m not in the business of telling people how to live their life.

I feel no freer than I did before pulling onto Nash’s property.

I should feel a hundred pounds lighter for offloading Alani to her sister, but my boots seem heavier than before, that voice in the back of my head warning me that I might be doing something wrong.

I’m trying to convince myself it’s this addiction to her I can’t seem to kick and not a warning that I’m making a mistake. This is exactly how addiction works. It convinces you that survival is impossible without the object of your obsession.

The passenger side door opens at the same time I climb into the driver’s side door.

“Are you fucking serious right now?” she snaps, settling back into the seat.

“Get the fuck out of my truck,” I snap.

“I can’t be around them and their fucked-up relationship.” She sounds a little broken, but all of her emotion is in her voice because her face is angry.

It does nothing to detract from her beauty.

“I know how it got started, and it just fucking disgusts me.”

I scoff before I can stop myself.

“Are you for real?” I point out the windshield toward the front porch where Nash has his arm around Ayla as they stare in our direction.

The urge to put the truck in reverse and haul ass out of there is because Nash is standing there with a fucking bedsheet wrapped around his waist as if it's the most natural thing in the world. I hate the idea of Alani around a naked man, but I don't think Nash would try anything with her. He's pretty obsessed with her sister right now.

I turn some in my seat to face her, hating the way her eyes scan my body, pausing on the tattoo-covered scars on my right arm before moving to my face.

“You don't get to judge them.”

“You're sure as hell quick to judge me. You have no right to yank me up and tell me what I'm going to do and what I'm not allowed to do.”

“You're right,” I quickly agree. “And it stops now. Get out of my fucking truck.”

“No. You brought me here, you can damn well take me back to my fucking dorm.”

I can't really argue with her reasoning.

“Just look at them,” she says, disgust on her face as she watches her sister and Nash. “So gross.”

I put the truck in reverse, throwing up dust from the gravel as I turn us around and drive back down the driveway.

“You sure have a lot of judgment in your tone for someone who got fucked raw on the side of the road last night after getting high and putting your own life in danger on Sixth Street.”

I peer over at her once we are at the end of the driveway, waiting for her to say something.

She doesn't open her mouth. She doesn't make threats about turning me in for killing that guy last night. Hell, from the way she's acting, she may not even remember it.

She keeps her mouth clamped closed. It may possibly be the first time she hasn't wasted her energy arguing with me.

I hate the silence, but it's just one more contradiction battling in my head. I know if she were talking, I'd want her to fucking shut up, too.

The drive is silent, and it's quite possibly the longest fucking five hours of my life.

She's pulling on the door handle before the tires stop rolling in front of her dorm building.

She doesn't look back over her shoulder before disappearing inside.

This has to be the last time. I can't keep pulling her out of danger, only for her to do it over and over again. I've made my mistakes in life. I've suffered more than nearly every other person walking the earth.

I couldn't save Maya, and the only reason I felt like I should've was because I put her in danger. She never asked for what happened to her.

Alani is begging for it, and there's nothing I've said or done that has made her stop. She knows more than most what kind of evil exists in the world, and yet she still seems hell-bent to travel down this path of destruction.

The girl will get herself killed, and I just have to be okay with her blood being spilled. At least this time it won't be my fault.

Chapter 21

Alani

“So about tonight?”

I glance at Mark over my shoulder. I know I should feel something with the way he’s smiling at me. He’s a nice guy, and maybe that’s the problem. Even before Donavan, I wasn’t exactly interested in nice guys.

“I’m not dating.”

“You’re too young to not be dating,” he says, but all I do is shake my head and continue wiping down the table.

“I just got out of something serious.”

“You’ve been working here and single for two months.”

I stand, twisting the cleaning cloth in my hands as I turn around to face him.

I know he thinks he’s being charming, and the flirting he’s prone to do is good for my self-esteem, but at some point, he’s going to have to understand I’m not the type of girl that can be chipped away at until I agree. If anything, he’s going to really start to annoy me, and I’m going to jump in his shit. Then he’ll think I’m an asshole because he can’t seem to take no for an answer.

“Look, I said from the beginning I’m not looking for anything but friends.”

“With benefits?” he asks, his smile growing as his eyebrows wave up and down comically.

“No.” My answer is flat, and the playful look in his eyes fades away quickly.

“Oh, you’re serious.”

I tilt my head. “I’ve been serious this entire time.”

“Well, shit,” he says, rubbing a hand over his chest. “I thought you were playing hard to get. You’re not interested?”

I clamp my lips together and shake my head.

“Fuck, sorry. Now I feel like an asshole.”

I don't tell him it's okay and that it's no big deal, but I know most people would. It's almost ingrained to apologize or minimize when someone reacts the way he just did, but I've been working on not making excuses any longer and that includes doing it for others.

He watches me as if he's waiting for me to tell him I'm just kidding and agree to go to dinner with him.

“Was there anything else?”

“Table eight needs tartar sauce.”

I nod before walking away. The man has been bugging me for ten minutes while one of my customers has just been sitting there watching us chat. It frustrates the hell out of me because now he's messing with my tips.

After grabbing the sauce, I drop it off at table eight with an apology. The man is already halfway through his catfish dinner, and the curt nod he gives me translates into no tip.

I step into the back of the diner and press my back to the wall.

I hate this constant feeling that nothing is right. I've fought it for more than a year.

School wasn't right, so after my grades dropped to the point I couldn't get them back up for the fall semester no matter how hard I tried, I dropped out. Ayla was livid, but she still offered me a place to stay. I wanted to turn her down, but the idea of being homeless sucked even more.

This job has allowed me to save some money, but thinking I'll be able to work here and afford a place on my own is impossible without having to live in a dangerous neighborhood. The thought of that still sends a thrill up my spine, so I know it's a bad idea and one I need to avoid.

I know I'll have to go back to school. Working at a diner for the rest of my life isn't going to cut it, and it's immature to throw away the chance to make more money. A college degree will increase the chances of me doing that, but I'm not even

remotely thrilled that I'll be returning to Lindell in just over a week for the beginning of the spring semester.

"Think you can work the morning shift tomorrow?" Mark asks, unwilling to give me just a couple of minutes alone.

"I can," I quickly agree.

"You're sure? You worked doubles the last three days."

"Yet you're asking me to work another one," I remind him. "But I don't mind. I need the money."

Sunday morning is great for tips. It's a combination of folks heading to church and a crowd of those trying to remedy their hangovers with greasy food.

He nods before walking away. As much as I'd like to hang out in the back until my shift ends in twenty minutes, I have tables to clear.

The man at table eight hands me a twenty when I go to drop off his ticket and tells me to keep the change. I feel lucky for the three dollars left over, especially after the issue with the tartar sauce.

As I clean away his dishes, I think, not for the first time, about getting a second job.

I'm exhausted after being on my feet all day, but avoiding Nash and Ayla's house is appealing. I've tried putting myself in my sister's shoes. I've tried imagining Donovan in his place because I know he could probably do exactly what Nash did. I get what happened was something neither of them could control, but I don't know that I'd want to stick around and make a life with a man who was forced to hurt me.

I shake my head, trying to rid it of those thoughts. Their relationship doesn't matter to me. I have no right to judge. I'm not in the habit of picking the most stable guys either, and it's this reasoning that has helped me at least school my face better when I'm at home.

I know Nash is doing my sister a favor, and he isn't exactly impressed with me nor my presence in his space. Then

again, maybe I'm jealous that he's so territorial and protective over her. Maybe I want that. I know Ayla deserves it. He gives her what she needs, and I don't get an opinion about it.

I count out and leave before Mark can ask me to stick around to help close. I wouldn't mind the work, but having to listen to him beg to take me out again would probably push me over the edge.

I feel it the second I step outside, and the way the hairs on my arms stand up scares me.

The men around here are creepy as hell, and that's just part of working in a diner that is frequented by people who just want to eat and go about their business. The place isn't exactly making the news for delicious food and exciting ambiance.

Those men usually stare or make comments. They're quick to flirt and say suggestive things. I've learned in the months working here that the majority of them are more likely to say something and then leave to go to the bar in town or pass out in their trucks in the parking lot than attempting to hurt someone who worked there. We deal a lot in regulars, and they aren't going to ruin their chance for an \$8.99 chicken dinner with two sides and a biscuit just to cop a feel of one of the waitresses.

Tonight feels different. The air is charged, the shadows in the parking lot stretching longer than I remember them ever doing.

I haven't looked for trouble in a very long time. That night in Austin was too close of a call, and the look in Donovan's eyes when he took me back to my dorm told me he was done. As much as I wanted him to chase me, I wasn't exactly interested in ending up in someone else's crosshairs.

He swore he wouldn't follow me again, warned me against putting myself in danger, but I feel his eyes on me as I walk to the car Nash has let me borrow for work.

I slow my steps, that part of me I've worked so hard to shove down beginning to bubble up again.

Darkness engulfs me as a shadow covers my back, and I can see my reflection in the driver's side window. My eyes are wide, a certain kind of thrill in them. God, I've missed this feeling.

The man steps closer, his face visible beside mine. It's not him. It's not Donovan.

I open my mouth to scream, but his hand roughly clasps over my face, and I feel the prick at the side of my neck before I can fight him off. My heart is pounding, knowing what's coming, but it's already too late.

I changed. I did what he told me to do, and yet I still end up exactly how he predicted.

Fear and tangible terror wake me up. There's a tremble that feels bone-deep in my hands, arms, and legs. It's reminiscent of standing in the freezing snow with no jacket. The cold feels as if it will never dissipate.

Surprisingly, my arms aren't tied down, but they feel heavy as if weighed down by bricks.

I try to hold in the whimpers threatening to bubble out of me, but I'm not completely successful as I try to take in my surroundings and finding it impossible in the nearly pitch-black room. The only light penetrating the room is coming from under the door. I have no way of knowing if it's nighttime still or if I've been out for more than a day. My clothes still carry the stench of the diner, and they're fully intact. The clench of my thighs and the absence of pain there make me believe I wasn't raped by the man who took me.

I sit up on the edge of the bed, wondering what kind of kidnapper takes me to a house with fresh smelling sheets. My stomach twists, the threat of getting sick in the back of my throat, but I force it down.

I know I need to leave the room, to get away, but I have no idea what I'm going to find on the other side of the door.

I sit on the bed for a long time, seeing a shadow pass through the light coming from the other side of the door,

fearful of whoever it is coming in the room and finding me awake, but I can't lie back down and pretend to be asleep still. It makes me even more vulnerable.

Eventually, I stand, taking more deep breaths as dizziness makes my head spin.

I don't know where I find the bravery to cross the room and reach for the doorknob, but somehow I manage it. I send up a quick prayer that whoever has me doesn't shoot me on the spot as I twist the knob.

The door opens into a small, tidy living room. There aren't a group of gangbangers sitting around drinking and playing cards as cigar smoke swirls overhead. There aren't lines of cocaine on the coffee table. The room isn't strewn with debris, and there isn't a half-naked woman passed out on the couch.

It seems normal.

And that, in this situation, isn't normal.

I know not to fall into the trap of allowing movies and television series to dictate my expectations but I can't seem to help it.

A noise down the narrow hallway draws my attention. I don't know if it's the drugs I was injected with or what, but instead of heading out of the unguarded front door, I turn in that direction. Maybe there's a false sense of security in the clean little house, but the fear I woke up with is fading.

I may be making the biggest mistake of my life, a decision that will end it faster, but there isn't a voice in my head telling me to bolt when I push open the other door in the hallway.

I'm struck with several things at the same time, my senses overwhelmed and leaving me speechless.

First, is the sight of a shirtless Donovan standing in the middle of the room, the scent of clean sweat on his skin washing over me.

Next, I see a man tied to a chair with blood coating his skin. His eyes are swollen nearly shut, but I can tell it's the same man who I saw in the reflection before I was injected.

"You need to go back to the bedroom," Donovan growls at me as he lowers a very large knife back down to the man's chest. "I'll deal with your ass after I deal with his."

The man barely flinches when the knife cuts into his skin.

I'm stuck in place, unable to move.

"You're not going to want to stick around for this," he says, sneering over his shoulder at me.

"Probably not," I tell him, but my feet don't move. "But I'm not leaving."

Chapter 22

Donavan

I lay the knife on the table, reaching for the bottle of rubbing alcohol. His eyes dart back open as far as his injuries will allow, a rushed intake of breath echoing around the room.

He darts his gaze around the room, and I hate the way his eyes settle on her, as if she's going to offer him a helping hand.

She hasn't opened her mouth since I got back to work. Although it's only been twenty minutes, I've done a lot of damage in that time, going as slowly as possible in an effort to find her breaking point. She hasn't begged me to stop or asked for mercy for this man.

"He wants you to help him," I taunt, looking back at Alani.

Her face isn't pale like I'd expect it to be. She doesn't look completely sick to her stomach, and I get the impression that any ailment she's feeling right now is more an aftereffect of the shit this guy injected her with than disgust in what I'm doing.

"Don't look at her," I growl at him, hating even his eyes on her. "She can't help you."

"Won't," Alani corrects, and I swear to God she's going to make me hard.

I wink at her, something so out of fucking character for me, but it pulls a half-smile from her lips.

"What were they planning on doing with her?"

"I don't know what you're talking about," he lies, as if I didn't follow his ass from one of Cortez's compounds straight back to McAllen, where Alani has been working after quitting school a couple of months ago.

Cortez is floundering. A lot of his men jumped ship after the news of the compound getting raided circulated.

That's the thing about Cerberus being involved in that job where Nash and Ayla were found. They're known for taking no prisoners. I don't either, but what I do is small potatoes compared to what those guys do. Plus, I'm just as likely to kill someone for cash as I am to save someone. I'm not exactly picky about the jobs I take. So long as the cash is green and untraceable, I'm all for it.

Since only the most loyal men and a handful of those needing work have stuck around, it's been easier for us to track what they've been doing, especially after Cerberus took down a second compound connected to Raul Cortez two weeks ago.

I keep my eyes on Alani as I drag the knife over his collarbone. It's close enough to his carotid to scare him but far enough away that it's not going to actually kill him.

She licks her lips, her eyes locked on yet another wound on his skin. Her smile grows when he screams, begging for mercy.

He isn't to the point that he's begging for me to just end his life, but he's getting closer by the minute.

I knew ten minutes ago the man wasn't going to disclose any information, but he's been fun to play with regardless. It's likely he's one of the new hires and honestly doesn't know anything of substance, but he signed his own death warrant when he stuck that needle in Alani's neck. He was as good as dead then.

I've been hurting people since before I graduated high school. Although we were required to hurt people, we weren't allowed to take a life until our initiation into the Severino family. I think about Marcello and Alessio every time I carve someone up. Alessio was an evil bastard, but he was a skilled teacher. I hate that I didn't get the chance to show the man everything he taught me before he died. I dreamed of carving those lessons onto his skin more times than I could ever count.

"I don't know anything!" he screams, his voice holding the hint that he's nearing the begging-for-death stage of the evening.

“Do you want to help?” I ask, holding the bloody knife in her direction.

She looks from me to the knife twice, her throat working on a swallow, but then she surprises me by stepping forward with her hand outstretched.

She freezes, only a few inches short of accepting the knife, before looking back at the man.

“It’s not my vengeance to seek,” she says, her hand falling back down by her side.

I drop the knife back onto the cluttered table of torture implements and head out of the room.

I feel her follow me, that energy arcing between us just as strong as it has ever been.

She doesn’t say anything as I step up to the kitchen sink and wash my hands. She doesn’t ask me where I’ve been or how she ended up here or how the man ended tied up. She doesn’t get angry and ask why I didn’t step in before he drugged her.

She’s silent, including her not telling me that she missed me.

My heart is pounding in my chest, but it’s not because it’s been so long since I’ve seen her. I’ve watched her every chance I could when I haven’t been working. Honestly, I’ve only been taking jobs from Angel that involve Cortez. Although there are tons of people who’d want to harm pretty girls like Alani, I know that man and his crew in particular has her in their sights. She’ll never be safe, but she’s almost guaranteed to be in trouble so long as they’re still in operation.

I knew the second she walked into the room, shocked to see me standing there, that I’ve done a good job of hiding. I was glad to see that she’s calmed down since coming back to her sister’s house, but it came at the expense of that light in her eyes which was always so appealing. It’s probably what drew me to her the most, and I hate seeing it gone.

The last two months, she’s seemed like someone who feels like they have nothing to live for, as if she’s just been

going through the motions, and that doesn't bode well for the rest of her life. She should be having fun in safe ways at nineteen, not looking like a beat-down woman who doesn't have her entire adult life ahead of her.

She pulls out a chair from the small dining room table and takes a seat as I pull out my phone.

I keep my eyes on her as I make a call.

"Nash," I grunt when he answers.

Her eyes narrow as if she thinks I'm ratting her out or calling him to come pick her up.

That would be the status quo. I've always been quick to put physical distance between the two of us. Being near her forces walls I've spent years building to crumble, and I hate the vulnerability of it. I've accepted that she means more to me than she should, but I also know the danger and impossibility of it all as well.

"I've got a present for your woman," I tell him, keeping my eyes on the younger Warren sister.

"Yeah?" he says into the phone, his voice filled with agitation. "We're getting ready to look for Alani. She didn't come home from her shift at the—"

"Then I've got two presents for you," I amend. "Didn't know if you or her wanted to unwrap it yourself."

"I think we'd like that," he says. "Location B?"

"That's the one."

"Think you can hold off opening it up for half an hour?"

"I'll do my best," I say and end the call.

The man screams for help as if there's anyone here that can save him, and it draws Alani's eyes from mine. Instead of looking back toward me for help, she stands from the table, takes her time pushing the chair back under it, and walks down the hallway.

She doesn't hesitate at the door, reaching for the knob the second she's within reach.

Whimpers and begging come from the man, and I have no doubt he thinks she'll eventually help him. I'm guessing he's never been more wrong.

Chapter 23

Alani

The only reason I hesitate in picking up the knife is because of the blood coating it.

Donavan didn't seem to have an issue with the man's blood coating his own skin, but I'm the type of person who wears disposable gloves while handling raw meat. The idea of the bacteria on it getting on my skin makes my stomach turn for some reason.

A quick look around the empty room tells me that there are no gloves to be had. Honestly, if I'm going to do any of the things my head is urging me to do, then I really need to get over the sense of ickiness caused by the thought of his blood touching me.

"Please," he begs. "If you let me go, I'll let Raul know and he'll never go after you again."

I pick up the knife, my rage barely controlled.

"You think he'll listen?" I ask, circling around him and standing at his back so he can't see me.

He does his best to turn his head, but the movement makes the wound on his shoulder start to bleed again.

"You'll be safe," he promises, even though we both know that's not his promise to make.

"Okay," I say, relishing in the whimper of relief that escapes his mouth. "On one condition."

"Anything," he vows. "I'll do anything."

"I want you to take away all the times Raul Cortez and his men raped my sister."

A sob bubbles from his mouth.

I twist the tip of the knife into a spot on his back that Donavan has cut, watching as blood blooms with the minor penetration.

“Can you do that for me?”

His shoulders shake, his head held down. “You know I can’t.”

“Well,” I say, pausing for dramatics but also to take a deep breath.

This should be harder than it feels to hurt someone, but it seems to come easy for me, probably because it was so easy for me to put myself in danger all those times.

“Those are my terms.”

He screams when I slice at his skin, and the noise makes my heart rate double. It isn’t fear that pulls that from me but exhilaration.

I know how fucking demented it is to feel joy while hurting someone else, but that doesn’t make the emotion any less real.

“Alani?”

I jerk my head up, pulling my eyes from the wound I caused, at the sound of my sister’s voice.

I was so lost in what I was doing, I didn’t notice the crowd that has gathered in the doorway.

Donavan stands to the side, casually leaning against the wall, but his body position does nothing to detract from the look of hunger in his eyes. It turns him on to watch me hurt someone else, and I’d be lying if my need for him didn’t feed off of it too.

“Alani?” Ayla says again. “What’s going on?”

I shrug, dropping the knife back on the small table and taking a step away from the man.

“Why the fuck is she even here?” Nash snaps, taking a step in front of Ayla, as if the bleeding man poses some form of threat to his woman.

I see it then, the connection, the way this man is willing to burn down the world for my sister, and it all makes perfect sense why she stays with him. The dedication in his eyes and

the way I can tell he'd do literally anything to keep her safe speaks volumes right now.

"Cortez sent him after Alani," Donavan explains.

Ayla watches my hand as I lift it to my neck.

"Your hands are bloody, babe," Donavan says, stopping me before I inadvertently get more of it on my skin.

"Babe?" Ayla says, confusion tainting her voice.

Donavan shrugs when she looks over at him.

Warmth swims inside of me. I'm not foolish enough to let the part of my brain that's desperate for him get lost in the sentiment.

"I followed him from that location we were sitting on in Mexico City," he continues. "He came right here. Stuck her with a needle before I could stop him."

I narrow my eyes at him, the glint telling me that part of that is a lie. If I had to guess, I'd say he let the man drug me then stepped in. I saw the surprise on his face when I almost took the knife from him earlier. Maybe he did it so he could deal with this man before I woke up, thinking I'd freak out at the sight of him torturing someone.

Honestly, I should be freaked. I should be at the police station recalling all the gruesome things he's done, but the inclination isn't there.

"You killed that man in Austin, didn't you?"

I had somehow convinced myself it was a hallucination. I'd never taken ecstasy before, so I didn't know what kind of effects they'd have. I was certain he wouldn't just stab a man without so much as a grunt of effort.

He winks at me, proving that it wasn't my imagination that created that scenario. For some reason, that affects me in a way that makes me lick my lips. He was willing to kill someone to keep me safe? Maybe it was anger, because I remember taunting him by mentioning I'd fuck them both at the same time. Fuck my life. If it was jealousy that made him do it, I might melt right here on the spot.

Donavan's eyes are slow to lift from my lips back up to meet my gaze.

"Are you sure?" Nash asks, pulling my attention away from Donovan.

Ayla looks from me to the man before she locks eyes with her man again.

"I'm sure," she says, holding her head a little higher as if to compensate for the waver in her voice.

"You want to do it?" he asks, and I want to take a step forward and argue.

I stop short, thinking maybe this man is one of the ones who hurt her in Mexico. If that's the case, then she deserves to be the one to seek the revenge.

She shakes her head, her throat working on a rough swallow.

"I can't."

A thrill of opportunity seeps inside of me.

"Down, tiger," Donovan says, but there's a hint of humor in his voice that sinks inside of me in an unexplained way.

My sister turns and leaves the room, and I feel obligated to follow her. I walk past her when she stops in the middle of the living room, and head to the kitchen sink, washing my hands the way Donovan did earlier before rejoining them.

"We were getting ready to go look for you," Ayla says. "I was freaked out when you didn't come home."

"I appreciate your concern," I tell her, knowing my tone makes me sound completely ungrateful, but I feel like they're here interrupting something.

I know what comes next. She's going to insist I come home with them, but I can't. I don't want to leave here, but if Nash gets involved, always quick to voice his opinions, then Donovan's going to insist I leave. Hell, history says he's going to tell me to get out of here anyway.

When she frowns, I feel the niggling urge to apologize so I choose distraction instead.

“How far are we from the diner?”

“Ten minutes,” Ayla says. “Thirty from home.”

I nod, realizing that Donavan lives freaking close. It shouldn’t surprise me, considering he and Nash sort of work together.

Nash and Donavan step outside to talk, and the second the front door closes, Ayla steps in closer to me.

“Is he hurting you?”

I lift my now clean hand to my neck. “He injected me with something that knocked me out, but Donavan—”

“Is Donavan hurting you?” she clarifies. “Making you hurt that man? Is he holding something over your head?”

I tilt my head in confusion. “Donavan? What? No, he’s not hurting me or making me do anything.”

“Have you... done that before? Cut someone?”

“No, never.” I shove away the shame she’s trying to make me feel. “He’s a bad man.”

“And he’ll die for his association with Cortez, but torturing him? You don’t find anything wrong with that?”

I shake my head, my answer immediate. “No, Ayla. I don’t see a damn thing wrong with it.”

“I’m worried about you,” she whispers, and I have to take a step back before she can place her hand on my arm.

It’s comforting, and it’s also something Mom would do. I hate the way it makes me feel, like my own emotions don’t matter because they might not look the way someone would expect them to.

“You don’t need to worry about me,” I assure her. “I’m fine.”

“I guess I’d be wasting my breath asking you to come back home tonight?”

I nod. "He may ask me to leave, but I don't want to."

"What exactly is going on between the two of you?"

I shake my head. "I don't have a clue, but I can tell you I'm drawn to him."

"He's dangerous," she says.

"So is Nash." Her man is just as willing to kill that man in the room as Donovan is.

"I know," she says with a nod. "Don't lose yourself by getting lost in him."

I don't respond because I can't make that promise. Hell, if I'm being honest, I might have already lost myself to him long before tonight.

Chapter 24

Donavan

“I don’t mind taking care of it,” I tell Nash. “But if you want to do it, that’s fine, too.”

He shakes his head, his eyes staring off into the sunrise, the sky barely pink and orange.

“He’s not one of the ones from before.”

“They’re all pieces of shit. Just because he didn’t hurt you or Ayla doesn’t mean he didn’t hurt someone.”

His jaw flexes, irritation clear on his face. “I know.”

I shrug. “Consider it handled.”

I’m not close to any of these guys. We aren’t exactly the type of men to have planned jobs. More often than not, we don’t work well with others. I know calling him and offering this opportunity has more to do with Alani than it does anything else.

My skin is still too tight, the fucking gall that man had to touch her making my rage barely containable. I knew she was in danger, and as much as I warned her that her behavior was going to land her in some fucked-up situation, it didn’t happen until she made the decision to get her shit together.

“Ayla’s going to have questions.”

“I couldn’t get much out of him. I think he’s either new or extremely low on the fucking hierarchy.”

“Not about him,” he counters. “About her sister.”

I pull my eyes from his face, shifting some on my feet and angling my body further away. I don’t want to talk about Alani with anyone. I have a million questions, too, and I have zero answers for any of them.

“I’m not responsible for her.”

“Aren’t you though?” he asks, turning to look at me.

I keep my eyes locked on the street. If he tries to pull the *older sister's boyfriend and I'm just here to protect them both* kind of shit on me, this morning is going to take one hell of a turn.

“She had a smile on her face when she cut that man.”

Just the reminder manages to turn me on.

“How long has she been doing this shit with you?”

I scoff. “Alani hasn’t seen me in months until last night.”

“She hasn’t seen *you*? But you’ve seen her?”

“I don’t have to explain myself to you, Nash. I called you over here for this guy because I didn’t know if it would help you with some form of fucking closure. I know a little about traumatic histories, but it wasn’t an open invitation for you to stick your nose in my business.”

“You need to ask her to leave.”

I clamp my lips closed. I dropped her off on his fucking porch several months ago, and all she did was turn right back around and get in the truck.

“No one tells her what to do. I’m sure you’ve figured that out already. She won’t listen to me. The best I can tell you is that I won’t ask her to stay.”

“She’ll read your silence as an invitation to stay.”

“And she’s still in fucking danger. She needs to be protected.”

“Like you protected her the first time you were asked?”

My fingers crack as I fist them at my sides. The night I met her was one of the most frustrating yet also rewarding nights of my life. It kicked off my obsession with her, and nothing else that I’ve tried has managed to calm that voice inside of me the way being around her does.

“I won’t ask her to stay,” I repeat before turning around and heading back into the house.

“I’ll be fine,” Alani says to her sister when I step into the living room.

Ayla looks at me, silent begging in her eyes. She wants me to tell her sister to leave, and I know Nash is right. If I don’t force her out of here, she’s not going to go.

My silence works in my favor, and Alani’s footsteps fall into line with mine when I head back down the hallway.

I expect Nash and Ayla to leave, but as I enter the blood-coated room, I hear them chatting quietly in the living room.

“Will you kill him?” Alani asks.

“Do you want him to live?”

Her eyes search mine, and I want to tell her that her answer shouldn’t depend on what I think.

“Would it make any difference?”

I give her a light smile and shake my head.

“I didn’t think so.”

“Do you want to kill him?”

Her eyes dart from me to the man. He’s silent now, his head hung low between his shoulders. He isn’t quite dead yet. His chest is still inflating some, but he doesn’t have long. He’s slowly bleeding to death. If we were to just walk out and leave him here, I imagine he’d be dead in an hour, but I have no intention of leaving him to die that way.

“He hurt me,” she whispers, her eyes locked on him. “I should want to, right?”

“I can’t tell you how to feel.”

She takes a step closer to him but doesn’t reach for any of the tools that would get the job done. I swear I’ll nut in my jeans if she wraps her hands around his throat and looks him the eyes as he struggles to breathe.

“I don’t think I want to kill him.”

“You don’t want to kill him or you don’t want him dead?” Just like she predicted, her answer won’t matter, but

I'd like to know where her head is at.

“He has to die, but I don't want to be the one to do it.”

“Do you want to watch it happen?”

She looks back in my direction, the slightest nod of her head moving me into action.

I step past her, grabbing the sharpest knife from the table, and step in behind the man.

She shifts, a little nervous gesture as I grip the man's hair and hold his head up. He doesn't whimper or beg, and if I had to guess, he's already past the point of being able to respond.

“Keep your eyes open,” I tell her as I run the knife from one side of his neck to the other.

It's honestly a lackluster death, his heart already beating so slowly that it doesn't have the dramatic spurt one would expect.

She keeps her eyes locked on him, watching every second until the blood stops flowing from his newest wound.

“Alani?”

I could strangle Nash for interrupting this moment.

“Ayla wants to speak with you.”

Alani lifts her eyes to me, holding my gaze for a long moment before turning and leaving the room.

“I thought you were leaving,” I say, wiping the dirty knife on the guy's jeans before dropping it back to the table.

“I wanted to discuss the two of them,” Nash says, making the regret in calling him in the first place even bigger.

“It's simple. You need to protect them.”

He nods, as if that was always his plan.

“That's easier said than done. It's easy for Ayla, but I don't think threatening Alani with an ass whipping is going to have the same affect it does on her sister.”

I barely manage to hold back the growl at him even implying putting his hands on Alani.

He chuckles, telling me I'm not as good at controlling my face as I am at controlling the sounds leaving my body. When the corners of his mouth pull up in a smirk, it feels like it was a test.

I fucking despise people who do that shit. It's reminiscent of the Severino brothers. Everything was a fucking test with those two.

"Alani is mine to worry about," I say, the warning in my voice that says him trying to say anything different will be met with a resistance he won't like.

I've fought this fucking territorial sense I've felt from the first time I met her, and I'm fucking done. It only causes undue stress. I know it has everything to do with witnessing her being hurt, knowing from the look in the man's eyes that he would deliver Alani to Raul as ordered but she wouldn't be in the same condition she left work in last night.

I regret not cutting his dick off before he passed out. It seems like a wasted opportunity now.

"For how long?"

"For how long what?" I snap.

"How long is she your responsibility? I need to know if I'm going to need to step back in tomorrow or the next day when she gets on your nerves."

I want to say never, but I know myself too well for that. I've lived a solitary life for years, and I'm not exactly known for having patience. Although I can't see it now, there may come a time when the shiny new toy is no longer fun to play with.

Instead of answering him, I walk past him, heading out of the room.

Both women are sitting quietly, an air of annoyance heavy around them. Neither seem happy, and it's my experience that's always the best compromise.

Nash heads to the kitchen sink and washes his hands even though he never touched the man. He looks to Ayla when he's done.

“Ready to go?”

Ayla looks at her sister, but Alani is watching me.

“You should go with them,” I say, my tone flat.

“Probably,” Alani says, but instead of standing, she leans back and crosses one leg over the other, getting comfortable on the sofa.

Ayla doesn't say a word as she walks across the room, following Nash out of the house.

“You really need to go.”

Alani doesn't look impressed with my tone at all, but there's no way to control the thickness in my voice, much like the thickening of my cock.

“If you stay...” I warn.

“I know,” she says, her eyes drifting lower on my body, a mischievous glint in them.

Chapter 25

Alani

I should probably care that my sister, my only living relative, is pissed when she leaves, but I said my piece, told her how I felt, and what I was going to do. It's not my problem to worry about. I'm not responsible for her feelings. I keep saying it, but I doubt anyone will actually listen to me.

I know she worries about me, and no amount of times I tell her not to will make that change, but she has to accept that I'm an adult at some point.

She accused me of spiraling, of making decisions that will put me in harm's way, and she was less than impressed when I told her anything that happens is on me.

I was working with the idea that Donovan would protect me, but the feral look in his eyes right now isn't speaking of protection. It's dark and devious, a promise of bad things, and I crave all of it.

I don't need to see a therapist to know that getting turned on while watching a man die is fucking sick and twisted, but I get the feeling he's the same kind of demented.

He remains standing across the room as we listen to Nash's truck back out of the driveway. Surprisingly and despite his warning, he doesn't pounce on me the second they're gone. I can't tell if he's trying to get a handle on himself or if he's waiting to see what I'll do.

I know he's not all talk. I've experienced this man when he's pissed and out of control. I had a bruise across my chest for weeks from the window sill of his truck after the last time.

His eyes sweep my body, but instead of speaking, he turns and heads back into the bedroom I woke up in. By the time I stand and catch up with him, he's standing at the bathroom sink, scrubbing at his skin.

I stand in the doorway, eyeing the shower. I still reek from work. Before I can ask him to shower with me, he turns

off the water and leaves the bathroom, making sure not to brush against me as he leaves the room.

Agitation grows inside of me as I follow him back into the kitchen. His back is to me as the scent of bleach fills the air and he begins to wash down every surface as if the dead man was in here rather than the other room.

He may be acting as if I don't exist, but since Ayla and Nash left, he hasn't asked me to leave. I want to shake the shit out of him because the look in his eyes when he issued his warning said a lot of things and none of it included him acting as if I'm invisible.

He spends half an hour, probably, scrubbing the front of the fridge, the counters, even the small dining room table, before putting all the supplies away, grabbing a trash bag, and walking back toward the bedroom.

I feel like a lost puppy hoping for scraps of attention as I follow him once again.

I keep my eyes locked on him as he wordlessly strips out of his clothes, shoving them all into the trash bag he carried in here with him.

His muscles flex, bunching and stretching as he strips completely naked. Jesus, the man is magnificent. I couldn't pull my eyes from him even if I wanted to.

He doesn't tell me to stop watching him, though I know he can feel my eyes roving over every inch of his skin. He doesn't tell me to get lost, but he also doesn't invite me to join him either as he disappears into the bathroom.

The shower knob squeaks when he turns it on. I follow him once again, standing in the doorway, finding him waiting outside of the shower for the water to warm.

I look toward the mirror, wondering if I can catch a different angle of him there, only to lock eyes with him in the reflection. His cock hangs heavy between his legs, and it continues to grow as he watches me. He's a virile beast, a man who makes no excuses for how his body is reacting. He

doesn't curb it or turn away, and he looks starved when I lift my eyes back up to his.

His lip twitches, a sneer on his face. He's looking more at a spot on my skin, and I want to gag when I turn and see a smear of blood on the side of my neck.

He pounces on me when I lift my hand to wipe it away.

"Don't fucking touch it," he snaps, grabbing a rag from the small shelf over the toilet and wetting it in the sink before pressing it to my skin and wiping it away.

He looks no calmer, no more satisfied that it's gone, when he looks at me again.

In the next breath, he's pulling my shirt over my head, the top button of my work uniform popping free and skittering across the floor. He makes no apologies, and his hands keep moving. My bra is unsnapped at the back, nothing but the simple flick of his wrist used to open it before he's unbuttoning and unzipping my work slacks.

His hands are rough, not much care taken, when he shoves them down my legs. I lift each foot as he pulls my shoes and socks off.

I'm left standing there, my clothes scattered all over the bathroom floor. He simply turns and walks toward the shower. He offers no invitation, no request or command to join him. Hell, he was so agitated when he stripped me, I can't even argue it's implied.

"Alani," he snaps from behind the shower curtain. "Now."

I slow blink at the closed curtain, wanting to tell him to fuck off and stop commanding me, that maybe if he used his big boy words, I'd know what he wanted, but my body moves as if he's holding my remote.

I step inside, the warmth of the water rushing over me and relaxing me almost instantly.

He doesn't say a word as he runs a bar of soap over my skin, the bubbles tickling and flowing down my body. I spread

my legs some at his insistence, but he just cleans me. What kind of man washes a woman's naked body without spending an extra second between her legs? It's very focused and economical, and I hate every second of it.

His cock is still hard, and it's the only thing that makes me believe he's turned on.

"Fuck me," I beg when his hands trail over my breasts.

He ignores me, urging my head under the water and dribbling shampoo into it once it's soaked through.

"Donavan?" I whisper, my eyes closing once the threat of suds in them becomes more real.

I'm nearly liquid, my body relaxed, when he rubs the shampoo through my hair, but he doesn't spend an extra second before tipping my head back and rinsing it.

I open my eyes once he takes another step back, and I see it then, the war between wanting to touch me and wanting to escape.

I reach for him, but he pulls his hips back before I can wrap my hand around his cock.

"Are you really saying you don't want to fuck me?"

His eyes narrow as he watches me.

"No condom in here," he grunts.

"We didn't use a condom the last time," I argue.

"And that never should've happened. That didn't work out for me so well once before."

My hand falls to my side. Why the idea that he's had unprotected sex with other women rubs me the wrong way I'll never know. I went through the motions after we were together last. I feel a little obsessed with this man, but I'm also not an idiot. I was tested after our last encounter and everything came back fine. Even the pregnancy test was negative, even though that made me a little sad. It would've been crazy to be happy he knocked me up, but I couldn't exactly control that response.

The look on his face is telling a different story. What I first thought was him saying he fucks other women bare, is speaking more of tragedy or like he's missing out on something.

“You have a child?” It's the only reasoning I can come up with right now.

His jaw flexes, real irritation on his face, and I can tell my question struck a nerve that doesn't get touched very often.

His look grows distant as if he's thinking of someone else, and I fucking hate him for it. How dare he stand here with me, being the one to strip me naked and insist I join him in the shower, and then go all reminiscent, thinking of someone else.

Instead of arguing because there's no fucking point with this man, I climb out of the shower without another word. Let him stand in here and jack off to the thoughts of someone else. Maybe I should consider myself lucky he didn't fuck me while thinking of her.

I grab a towel and wrap it around my body before leaving the bathroom, ignoring him when I hear him follow behind me.

Chapter 26

Donavan

A huge part of me is screaming for me to leave it alone. She's wanting attention, and not the good kind. The problem is, the attention she wants, that angry hate-fuck, is exactly what I want to give.

She's pissed about my comment, but she doesn't get to be mad about Maya. She doesn't get to throw attitude my way because of my past. She doesn't have any right to feel offended by her presumptions.

I clench my hands into fists as I stalk behind her into the bedroom, the repeated motion doing nothing to staunch my anger. I have this urge to wrap my hands around her throat, but I'm not so sure I'd let go once I feel her warm skin under my palms.

I consider making her leave, but fuck if I don't want her here, and that pisses me off as well.

She stands in the middle of the room, her eyes wandering over the sparse furnishings, and I wonder what's going through her head. Is she wondering why there isn't much here? Does she think this is my home?

Before she can turn around and ask more questions she won't like the answer to or get a bigger attitude, I grip a handful of her wet hair and step in closer.

She wanted this, and she'll probably get it harder than ever because she's made me want it too.

She may be pissed about my history with Maya, even with the very limited information she has, but Maya never had the ability to enrage me as much. Maya never would've stood in a room and watch me cut on a man. Maya never would've picked up a knife and used it herself. She sure as fuck wouldn't have stood there while I slit his throat.

Maya wasn't a part of the world I was born into until she was at Marcello and Alessio's mercy. She'd only heard

hints of our darkness. When she was brave enough to ask, I shut those questions down, thinking her asking around would be what got her into trouble.

Alani and Maya don't compare. They're not only different on the outside. Inside, Alani has a darkness in her, something that was formed long before I came along because she was pretty sheltered until she learned about her sister. Some things can't be experienced. Some things have to come naturally to a person.

It feels like a betrayal, like I'm tainting Maya's memory with my attraction and addiction to Alani. I've fought it for nearly a year, mostly feeding my addiction by watching her from the shadows. I've gotten better in recent months, keeping my promise of not making physical contact. It was going as best as it could until that dead motherfucker in the other room thought he could touch what's mine.

Mine.

Four letters and one syllable that encompasses so much. It doesn't seem like a good enough word. It doesn't speak of the pain and suffering, or the lengths I'm willing to go to for her.

Wanting anything has always been a mistake. It means there's something that can control you.

A person makes that ten times worse. It's a weakness I can't afford.

She's a betrayal to the vow I made when I shut it all down the day Maya was murdered right in front of me.

Alani whimpers when I grip her hair tighter, but it doesn't even cross my mind to ease up. If anything, it makes me want to twist my fist more.

She releases a harsh breath when an equally rough hand rips the towel from her body. I take a step back, keeping my hand locked in her hair just so I can look down at her perfect heart-shaped ass. God, that thing haunts my fucking dreams.

My breaths are ragged when I pull her back closer to me.

“You’ll bend over the fucking bed,” I growl in her ear, waiting until she nods her head before releasing her. “Don’t fucking move.”

The warning is in my voice, but I’m certain I didn’t even have to say it because this is exactly what she wanted.

I step back, walking toward the duffel bag in the closet, and grab a condom out.

I wasn’t joking in the shower. Fucking her in my truck without protection was a moment of insanity. I spent many hours watching her the last several months for signs of pregnancy, fully prepared to lock her away if she was pregnant. There is no scenario in this world that would allow her freedom, even for a second, if she was carrying my baby.

I clench my eyes closed against the memories from six years ago trying to gain access, and when I open them and look back to Alani, it’s easier than it has been before.

I rip the condom wrapper open, rolling it down my cock as I make my way back to her.

“Spread your legs.”

She turns her head, her face pressed into the mattress, and I love how she has to stand on the tips of her toes because of the height of the bed. It means when I fuck into her, I’ll probably be lifting her clear off the floor. My cock jerks with anticipation.

“Spread further.”

“I can’t.”

“Use your fucking hands, Alani.”

I watch as her cheeks heat, embarrassment in what I’m asking putting that beautiful color there, and it’s the biggest fucking mistake. In the blink of an eye, it becomes my most favorite fucking thing, a new addiction I know I’ll have to recreate over and over.

This poor fucking girl. She doesn’t have a clue what she’s just done.

She clamps her teeth on her bottom lip as she reaches back, one hand on either ass cheek before tugging. Sweet fucking Christ.

She is fucking exquisite—perfectly pink, slick with her own arousal.

I squeeze my cock right behind the head in an effort to stave off my own desire.

“Who was the last one in this pussy?” I growl.

She swallows before responding. “You.”

“Are you lying to me?” I reach out, swiping my thumb through the wetness glistening on her cunt and trace it up higher, circling the pucker of her asshole.

Her moan is the sweetest fucking song, and my heart kicks harder in my chest.

Maybe there’s something about her pleasure that’s just as desirable as her pain.

“You were,” she says with a seductive roll of her hips.

I press that thumb into her, testing her reserve.

“You filthy bitch,” I growl when she moans. “You want my cock here, too?”

“I want what you want.”

“You want to please me?”

She takes another shuddering breath. “Always.”

With my thumb still in her ass, I take another step forward, resting the tip of my cock at her entrance.

“Good girl,” I whisper before slamming inside of her.

Just as I predicted, her feet leave the ground as I find the end of her.

If I were the type of man prone to praise, I’d likely fall at her feet in worship.

As it is, I have to look up at the ceiling to keep from blowing my fucking load within a second. With a deep breath,

I pull my thumb from her ass, the clench of the damn thing on my digit taking things a little too far right now.

When she squeezes, testing the feel of me there, I grip her hip with a punishing force.

“I’ll fuck you for hours and not let you come if you keep that shit up.”

I’ll be damned if this bitch doesn’t smile, knowing I’m not going to have the fucking stamina to follow through with my threat.

I shift back, pulling all but the tip from her. I swear on everything holy, her body is trying to suck me back in, a nonverbal plea for more.

My mind is blank, void of everything but me and her and this very fucking moment.

I fucking hate her for it.

I’m supposed to be drowning in comparison, hating myself for giving into carnal urges. But the only regrets I feel are for staying away from her for so long and for being unwilling to fucking seek someone else out in an attempt to get the taste of her out of my mouth.

With her in my truck after that little trip to Austin was the last time I got laid too, and the lack of desire to seek someone else out was only one of many clues that this woman has seriously fucked me up.

I’m pissed that I’m not pissed at what we’re doing, and I realize how fucked up that is.

The clench of her cunt a second time draws all of my focus back to her.

“Alani,” I growl.

“I’m sorry,” she moans, and fuck, I love the sound of her voice when she’s overcome with desire.

It’s husky and pleading.

The misery I’ve suffered when fucking a woman never comes. I’m supposed to hate every woman I touch, every

woman that isn't Maya. I'm supposed to be haunted by her ghost, not lost in a way I've never been in my life.

I swore to love Maya until I died. I meant those words when I spoke them to her, and her death shouldn't matter. I made that vow with every intention of seeing it through.

Now it seems like a distant memory, like a promise made by a child who didn't understand the real world when it should feel like a betrayal.

Alani makes me feel alive when I should've been destined to die years ago. I've put myself in that position many times, but now it seems like I've been living for this moment.

I do my best to wipe my brain of all thoughts, letting my body take over. I want nothing but the physical pleasure right now as I slam my hips forward again.

Over and over I drive into her, the sounds she's making serving as the chorus to the song we're writing together.

I'm relentless in the way I take her, in the demands I make of her body.

"Donavan!" she screams, her fists gripping the sheets to keep her in place.

Goddamnit if she mutters those words.

"I'm coming!"

Jesus, it's like she controls every fucking switch in my body.

Announcing her orgasm is akin to her demand I come as well.

She clenches around me, the rippling of those internal muscles forcing my balls to draw up as if it's now become a race. I fuck her through it, pulling at her hair to force her back into an arch. In a moment of insanity, I pull out, ripping the condom off.

The first fucking rope of cum lands on her back, but I'll be damned if I don't fucking shove right back inside of her and finish that way.

I realize I'm ruined for eternity when she starts to come again.

Chapter 27

Alani

I know I should probably feel bad when he jerks from inside me and immediately heads into the bathroom, but even as the sound of the shower coming back on drifts into the bedroom, I don't have the energy to do anything but smile.

He's the absolute best fuck.

When I try to stand, my legs refuse to work. They tremble, barely holding up my weight long enough for me to slink to the floor. Zings of electric currents swim through me, my pussy throbbing with the way he used me for his own pleasure. I could tell it was for him. He didn't reach between my legs and swirl a finger on my clit. He wasn't fucking me to get me off. He was using my body and knowing that was enough to send me over the edge.

I knew he enjoyed it the moment he slammed inside and then gripped my hip with a long pause of his own.

As much as he wanted it, he still had to rush to the shower, probably unable to stand the feel of me on his skin.

I curl up on the floor, naked and used, and in utter fucking bliss.

I'm too fucked out to care if the floor is dirty, too satiated to worry about his cum inside of me. I want it there as much as I want my stomach to swell with his baby. I was on birth control the first time he fucked me without a condom, but I stopped taking it the very next day. My reasoning was that if he came back, and we ended up this way again, maybe he'd leave something behind.

Getting pregnant because I'm desperate for someone to love me is fucked up beyond words, but there aren't many things I do these days that make sense.

My eyelashes rest on my cheeks as I take a deep breath. I don't know if it's possible the drugs are still in my system or

what, but I'm insanely exhausted, and sleeping right here seems like the perfect place.

I jerk at the sound of his voice, knowing I must've drifted off.

"I said get up and get yourself cleaned up," he growls, the familiar annoyance in his tone.

It makes me want to bite the man. Commanding me when he's about to fuck me is one thing. Thinking he has any right to control me before or after is a mistake on his part.

Anger bubbles inside of me, making it easier to hold the weight of my body this time as I stand.

He's naked, dripping fucking wet, and the way my eyes drop to his heavy cock makes me hate myself a little.

I step up close to him, resisting the urge to bury my nose in his chest.

"Fuck. Off."

I don't know that I'd call it amusement, but the words spark something different than anger in his eyes.

I shove past him and head into the bathroom. The man shouldn't fuck me if he's only going to regret it after. I refuse to think about how it makes me feel because focusing on his regret will only make me feel it too. I'm tired of feeling unworthy, of being good enough to be used for an orgasm, only to be shoved away.

I know what it means. He stays away longer after he fucks me. I step into the shower, letting the tears that fall mix with the water as I clean him from my skin.

When I finish and head into the bedroom to find the towel I used earlier, I find it empty.

In a moment of juvenile immaturity, I unzip the bag in the bottom of the closet. If I'm good enough to fuck, then he can damn well let me borrow something to wear. The stench of the diner stays in my clothes no matter if they're washed or not, but I'll be damned if I'm putting dirty clothes on.

I pull a t-shirt out, pulling the softness to my face before reaching in again. I find nothing but boxer briefs and jeans. When I try the boxers on, not even rolling the waistline will keep them on my slim hips, so the t-shirt will have to do.

I zip the bag up, wondering just how pissed he's going to be that I didn't take the time to fold his clothes back up, but I figure it serves him right. If he'd put his shit in the dresser, instead of being packed up like he's ready to bolt in a moment's notice, then I wouldn't have had to make such a fucking mess.

I leave the room on bare feet, a hint of arousal threatening at the way his shirt feels brushing my hips as I walk.

The house isn't that big, but searching all but the room with the dead body in it, I don't find him.

I chew on my thumbnail, at the mouth of the hallway, wondering how I'll feel when I open that door again. I don't feel bad for the guy who died in there last night, but a sense of apprehension at seeing him dead again hits me.

I know he won't look much different than he did the second his heart stopped beating, but it just feels like it should be different.

Taking a deep breath, I walk up to the door, hesitating once again as I reach for the knob. When I push the door open, I find it empty.

The body is gone and Donovan isn't in here either.

Leaving the door open, I walk to the window. There are no cars in the driveway nor parked on the street. Worry settles inside of me. What if he sets me up? What if he calls the police and I have to explain why there's a huge puddle of blood on the floor?

I rush back to the room, a little relief hitting me when I see the knife I touched earlier still in there.

I'm not familiar with this neighborhood, but the fucking sun is up. Maybe it's still early enough that he could carry a dead body from the house and it would go unnoticed by

everyone around. Maybe they're all still asleep. Maybe he kills a lot of people here and the neighbors are too afraid of him to call the police. Maybe the neighbors are just as willing to take a life as he is.

As a swarm of maybes continue in my head, I go to the kitchen and grab the cleaning supplies Donovan used earlier before heading back to the room.

The amount of blood on the floor calls for an initial wipe down before the real cleaning can take place, so I start at one edge of the floor and begin to work my way through it.

Chapter 28

Donavan

I lose count of how many times I dart my eyes to the rearview mirror on my way back to the house.

Dumping a body isn't a new thing for me, but doing it on American soil is different. In Mexico and South America, there's always a chance to persuade the cops or even witnesses to keep their mouths shut and turn a blind eye. Here, in America, everyone has this sense of right and wrong that's so fucked and skewed that the chances of a witness not reporting a body are slim. If anything, they'd do it just so they could later point out how much of a hero they are on social media because God knows it didn't happen if you don't speak about it.

No one is following me, but I still circle town twice, taking different routes to make sure.

I should probably go home. Nash and Ayla know where Alani is, and she has her phone if she needs to call someone, but I just can't fucking stay away.

The front door is still locked with the deadbolt, so I know she's either inside or left through the back door which is unlikely. I don't find her in the main bedroom or en suite, but the scent of bleach carries me down the hall to the other room.

I'm not prepared for what I see—Alani on her fucking knees, scrubbing at the floor. It's a kind gesture, but my own OCD tendencies won't keep me from doing it a second time.

That's not what has my attention.

She's wearing one of my t-shirts, her ass up in the air, the slightest hint of puffy fucking pink lips between her legs. My cock thickens. My mouth waters.

"You could help," she says, but I find it impossible to move or pull my eyes from her naked ass.

I move my gaze further up, the shirt hanging low and making her tits visible. Jesus, she's the sexiest fucking thing

I've seen.

She's looking over her shoulder at me, and despite her not having a look of need in her eyes, I'm still turned on.

I growl when I see her hair hanging dangerously close to the floor, the threat of contamination to it extremely likely.

Her legs widen a little further.

Her chuckle makes me snap my eyes back to her face.

I can tell by the gleam in her eyes that she thinks she's controlling me in some sort of way. Maybe she is, but that doesn't mean that I have to like or accept it.

I'm cognizant enough of my choices to know she has some form of power over me. I've gone to her how many times?

I've been the one to seek her out. She has no means of contacting me. She could possibly try to go through Angel or his wife Lauren, but I haven't had messages delivered. I've been the active one in making contact, not her.

I spend a moment longer just staring at my obsession, knowing that taking it any further than I have already will only lead to her demise. Still, I can't seem to walk away from her. I've tried. Over and over I've walked away, and I can't recall a single extended moment where she wasn't on my mind, where I wasn't thinking of fucking her or worried she'd put herself in danger. What I thought would fade and disappear has only gotten stronger as the months have passed.

"What the fuck do you think you're doing?" I snap, knowing the question encompasses so many things.

Alani drops the pink-stained sponge into the bucket of water before turning to face me and sitting back on her calves.

Her position is dangerous, subservient, and the sight of it hits me in the gut.

It doesn't seem intentional. I don't get the feeling that she's doing it to turn me on, but that doesn't stop it from happening.

A puff of air leaves her lips, and I realize she looks fucking tired. She was quick to fall asleep on the floor while I showered, but it doesn't look like she tried to lie back down after she finished her own.

She blows a lock of hair from her eyes. When it doesn't move enough, she swipes at it, tucking it behind her ear. She leaves a crimson mark on her cheek, and the sight of it staining her skin makes me sick to my stomach.

I take two steps closer to her, but she holds her hand up in front of her, stopping me in my tracks.

"No," she says. "I know what you want, but it has to wait until this shit is cleaned up."

Ignoring her, I move closer, but the second I get in close enough to touch her, she slaps a bleach water-soaked sponge into my hands with a look in her eyes that tells me she means fucking business.

With the point of her finger across the room, she says, "You start on the wall over there. How in the hell did you get blood that goddamned far away?"

"I got a little carried away before you woke up," I answer, unconcerned that she asked a question and I immediately chose to respond. "You don't seem upset."

"That a piece of shit is dead? I'm not, but the cleanup is less than desirable."

"I normally don't have to clean up," I say and watch her face while delivering the news.

She tilts her head to the side, analyzing my words rather than being disgusted by them.

"Usually I'm in their house and I don't even bother to move the body, but I can't really do that here in the States."

She points again. "Clean while you talk."

I chew the inside of my lip to keep from smiling at her, but then she rises from her kneeling position and that sweet ass goes right back into the air.

We work for well over an hour, emptying the bucket of water several more times until we're done. I know this room wouldn't pass any forensic tests, but to the naked eye, it appears clean.

"Now," she says, dropping her sponge into the water for the last time. "Now, you can go all caveman on me if you want to."

I walk closer, dropping my own sponge into the water. With each step, I attempt to get better control of myself, if anything as a challenge because I'm not exactly comfortable with the way she's able to control parts of me.

I fail, miserably.

She squeals when I lift her up under her arms, her legs immediately going around my waist. Her lips are close enough to kiss, but she doesn't press the issue like she tried that first night. Jesus, have I really never kissed this girl? Just the thought of it makes my heart kick up behind my ribs. I'm not supposed to get lost at the sight of her lips. They aren't supposed to affect me the way they do.

I catch myself smiling when she does, my lips mimicking hers, but I get a handle on it as quickly as possible. I realize when she tries to fake a scowl that I didn't hide it quick enough.

"I caught you," she taunts, not letting it go like I hoped she would. "Are you afraid it will make you seem human?"

I don't answer her. It's hard enough not to stop and hang her nearly upside down on the back of the couch because I can feel the slick heat of her pussy right against my erection.

The urge to get her clean is stronger. I loved seeing her with the knife in her hand last night, but the sight of his blood on her makes me livid. I prevented him from hurting her, and I don't want his blood tainting her skin. She deserves better.

I pause at the bedside table, pulling my phone and wallet from my pockets. Instead of pulling my clothes off, I walk us straight into the shower, relishing in the squeal that erupts from her lips at the first splash of cold water. Our

clothes are ruined and will have to be burned like the set I was wearing last night.

She keeps her legs wrapped around my waist but allows me to pull the soaked t-shirt over her head.

My mouth wraps around her nipple the second it's available. She moans, her fingers tangling in my hair. I should put an end to it. I shouldn't allow her to have free rein at touching my body. Hell, by this point, she should know I don't want it, but I find myself leaning into her touch rather than pulling away from it.

I pull her hips from my body, giving her wandering hands room to work open the button on my jeans. The rasp of the zipper echoes in the small shower, and for the briefest of moments while I'm struggling to push my wet jeans far enough down my legs to free my cock, I regret not getting undressed before stepping in here with her.

Her mouth hangs open when I press inside of her, her head angled down, her forehead resting on my pectoral as she watches my hips move, my cock sliding in and out of her.

It's fucking bliss, utter perfection. It may not be fair to the women that came before her, but I've never felt anything better.

I grip one breast in my hand, holding it up before feeding it into my mouth. She likes it when I suck but likes it even more when I nip and bite at her skin.

"God," she moans. "Love getting fucked by you."

"You've got a greedy cunt," I manage, the threat of getting fully lost in her a very real possibility.

"You know just how to take care of it," she says just as her eyes float closed.

I press her back to the wall, placing my hands directly under her ass, and fuck into her. Over and over, I stab into her and pull back out to the head. Each glide of her down my cock is better than the one before it. If infinite stamina were a thing, I could fuck this woman nonstop. I'd starve if I had to choose between the two.

“Gonna come,” she moans, her teeth digging into my muscle.

I fuck her through her orgasm, having enough wherewithal to hold off my own until hers is over. Then I pull free and splash ropes of cum on her stomach. I watch as my cock jerks again at the sight of it sliding back down between her legs.

Chapter 29

Alani

What I wanted to do after we fucked in the shower and what I could've gotten away with were two very different things.

I wanted my hands all over his body. He allowed me to touch him while he was inside of me, but the second he was done, he lowered me to my feet and washed every inch of my body, no more attention paid between my legs than needed to get me clean.

It's as if he can't help himself when he fucks me, but the second it's over, that switch flips back in his brain and he has to recharge that need before he's even remotely interested again.

What surprises me the most is waking up with him beside me in the bed. It's literally the only one in the house, but I figured after we dried off, he'd tell me to call Ayla to come get me or he'd insist I get in his truck so he could drive me home.

He hasn't once questioned if I'm planning on turning him in. I don't know if he's so cocky that he thinks I won't or if he'll just hurt me if I try.

I wouldn't. That man got what he deserved. Although it probably makes me sick and sadistic, I have no feelings about the man he killed that night in Austin either. It doesn't matter that I didn't know a damn thing about him.

I should probably struggle with that realization but I'm not going to. I just don't care.

His breathing is even and calm. Although I have my back to him, and his thigh is barely touching the back of my legs, I know he's asleep.

I don't turn over to face him because the movement could make him wake up, and I don't doubt he'll leave then. I

doubt he slept while I was drugged and unconscious, so he'd been up more than twenty-four hours before he passed out.

The soreness between my legs throbs, but not in a way that makes me regret any of it.

The chemistry between the two of us is off the charts. Sexually, he's everything I didn't know to want, but as good as that part is, it still leaves me wishing for more.

I got half of a smile earlier and that was it. I couldn't even bear to look him in the eyes when he was inside of me because I was afraid I'd find disgust for me in them. Yeah, he comes. His orgasms are powerful, but enjoying sex and enjoying the person you're having it with aren't the same thing. With the speed in which he gets away from me, I'm left feeling like he hates me more than he likes me.

I hate that I want more from him. I hate that I've let some idea of us together infiltrate my head because now I can't make it go away. He's proven more than once that I'm very easy to walk away from, and I think the only thing that made him interfere this last time is because he needed to fuck me one last time.

With tears in my eyes, I close out the world, forcing in deep breaths and releasing them slowly. With any luck, he'll leave a part of him inside of me. If I can't make this man love me, then his son or daughter will.

The pain and heartache that I fell asleep to are not the same things I wake up to.

His breath is so fucking warm on my neck, his tongue sneaking out to taste the skin there.

His hand teases me, his fingers exploring my most intimate, tender flesh.

Once I begin to understand what's happening, I spread a little wider for him, lifting my leg and pushing it back over the top of his.

He likes it, if I go by the way he rolls his hips, pushing his erection into my back.

But as good as it feels, I know it only leads to him getting away from me as quickly as possible. Maybe if I walk away this time, it'll be easier to deal with.

I pull away, turning to climb off the bed, but his hand immediately tangles in my messy hair. I went to bed with it wet, and because of that, it's a complete mess.

"Goddamnit," I hiss, falling back on the bed.

His hand sweeps between my legs again. It feels so fucking good, and I'm torn between attempting to leave again and just giving in to what my body wants. The pain in my heart always lasts longer, making it a very difficult choice.

"I'll fuck you when I want," he growls in my ear.

"And if I don't want it?" I spit.

"Your cunt is too damn slick for me to believe that lie."

I do my best to hold back a moan when he pushes two thick fingers inside of me.

"So fucking wet for me."

He keeps me on my side, moving until my top leg is over his shoulder before he slides inside of me. The motherfucker is right. His entry is easy because of my arousal.

This isn't the part I hate. I could spend every waking moment with this man like this. Hell, I'm not opposed to him fucking me while I sleep, and honestly, that's a hot fucking thought.

But the second he comes, he bolts. I may want a little pain and for him to treat me like a whore, but I don't want to feel used up and discarded like one when he's done.

"Fuck, Alani," he groans, but then immediately snaps his mouth closed.

What I avoided before, thinking he'd be looking at me with disgust, was all wrong.

His eyes are squeezed closed, the skilled fingers of one hand swirling around my clit. His teeth are digging into his lower lip as if he wants to make more noise, but he isn't allowing himself to do it.

"Feels so good," I moan. "Deeper."

His eyes snap open, the fire in them burning my skin.

It's a level of contact we've never had before. On one hand, I want to pull my eyes away because I know this is only going to make things worse for me when he leaves again. On the other hand, I'm powerless to not take this gift and swim inside of it as long as he'll allow it.

His fingers dig into my skin, but he doesn't pull away when I clasp my hand around his wrist. Zings of electrical current flow through me as his hips continue to work.

"I'm—"

"Fucking don't," he growls, but I can't stop it.

I've never been able to control my orgasms. Hell, until he came along, I fought for them.

He pulls his fingers from my clit too fucking late. My body is already jumping over the edge. My eyelids grow heavier with my release, but I manage to keep them open.

"So fucking greedy."

He presses all the way inside, my mouth opening as I feel the pulse of him as deep inside of me as he can get.

His chest is heaving, his reaction an homage to how powerful his own orgasm is.

He licks his lips, making it clear to me once again that he still hasn't kissed me.

He moans when he slips from inside of me as if he wants to stay there forever. He crashes beside me, on the opposite side he woke up on. It gives me the opportunity to see his face, and I relish the tiny smile on his lips.

He doesn't immediately climb out of the bed, and he doesn't form a flat line with his lips.

It's another gift I know better than to take for granted.

I stay still and just watch him.

"Your pussy," he says as if those two words explain everything.

"I'm more than just a pussy," I say, hearing the pain lacing my own voice.

He rolls his head on the bed, his dark eyes locking with mine. The smile is gone.

"You have no fucking clue."

Chapter 30

Donavan

I swear the woman is going to ruin me. I'm going to fuck around and really get her pregnant if I'm not careful.

I drop my eyes down to her flat stomach.

What if she's already pregnant?

I shove down the thought of getting her a morning-after pill. Somehow, her growing my baby is both the best and worst fucking idea in the world.

"You need to get dressed. I'm taking you to your sister."

"I don't want to go there," she argues.

"I have a fucking meeting," I say, climbing out of the bed.

She doesn't argue with me further as I head back into the bathroom. I've showered more times in the last two days than I ever do, but no amount of scrubbing at my skin makes me feel any cleaner. I know I'm not physically tainted with my sins, but having committed so many with my hands, I'm almost disgusted at using them on her.

She doesn't join me in the shower. She's sitting on the side of the bed when I finish and go back into the bedroom.

I watch her for a long moment, wondering how opposed she would be to me pushing her to her back and forcing her hips up for the next hour.

"You can't ride across town naked."

It was her warm clothes-free body that enticed me to touch her when I woke up this morning. If she just pulled on one of my t-shirts, I could keep my fingers in her all the way to Ayla and Nash's house.

She stands, walking past me into the bathroom, and she gets dressed faster than I can manage. I hate the sight of that fucking diner uniform on her body. It does too much to

accentuate her curves, the top dipping lower than needed to wait tables. But I get the appeal. It's purposeful, the uniform possibly drawing in more customers than the shitty food they serve there. I hate whoever thought it was a good idea to sexualize their staff.

"Ready," she says without bothering to look in my direction before grabbing her powered-down phone from the bedside table and walking out of the room.

The ride to the house is silent. As much as I want all emotions left in the past where they belong, it makes me feel like I've done something wrong. I hate to feel things, especially regret or remorse.

She leans forward when I pull up close to the house, and I can see by the look on her face that she hates it here. I hate that I insisted she leave the house. I should've asked her to stay, asked her to be waiting for me on that bed once the meeting is over.

"No one's here," she says, but she climbs out of the truck anyway.

I follow her. She doesn't question why I step inside with her or why I follow her to her bedroom.

She doesn't speak as she strips down. No noise is made when she steps into the shower and washes quickly.

I don't shy away or hide the fact that I'm watching her, and she doesn't attempt to hide a thing from me either.

"You hate it here," I say when she steps out and begins to towel off.

The towel in her hands looks luxurious, something she didn't even come close to having back at the other house. Yet, she never complained.

"I told you I didn't want to come here."

"Why don't you like it?"

I swear to God I'll rip Nash's heart out if she says he's done something to make her feel uncomfortable.

“I guess I’m still a little shaken up about what happened the other night.”

She takes a deep breath before hanging the towel back up and heading to her closet for clothes.

“Has he hurt you?”

She’s silent for a minute as she moves hangers around, deciding on a t-shirt and jeans.

“Who? Nash? Other than giving me his unsolicited opinions on occasion, he rarely even speaks to me. They spend a lot of time alone in their room.”

“They ignore you?”

She frowns as she slips a pair of lacy panties up her thighs before reaching for the matching bra.

“I’m not a child. They have their own lives and like to spend their time how they want. I don’t get an opinion about it. I’m just saying it’s lonely. It’s why I work so much and one of the reasons I’m going to try college again.”

There’s nothing she’s doing that’s overtly sexy, but I think it turns me on to watch her dress as much as it does to watch her pull each item of clothing off.

“Alone doesn’t bother me usually, but I’ll be fine. You don’t have to stay and babysit me.”

I watch her face, checking her eyes, but I can’t see even a hint that she’s trying to manipulate me. The thought of her in the house alone annoys me. Knowing she’s scared to be here? I’ll never be able to focus.

“Put some shoes on, and you can come with me.”

She chews on the corner of her bottom lip and she looks at me.

“Or you can stay here,” I tell her and walk out of the room.

She may think she’s getting an option, but honestly, I’ll go back into the house and drag her out if she doesn’t do as I say.

She's coming off the front porch by the time I make it back to my truck. I school my face, doing my best to hide the smile I catch in my reflection in the driver's side window.

I honestly don't know if continuing to fight the idea of her would even be beneficial at this point. I don't have a way to predict how long this obsession with her will last, and it's a first for me since I was a teen that I'm considering someone else in my decisions.

There's a real chance I'll use her up and discard her, but worrying about the aftermath is not usually part of my plan.

I hate that she's different, even as much as I like that she's the only thing I've found that silences the whispering ghosts in my head.

She's silent on the drive to the office, almost as if she's worried that speaking will make me change my mind.

When we arrive, I don't bother looking back at her. She follows me to the door, and I knock before even attempting to pull the handle. The office is more of a front than anything, and the door is always locked, a sign hanging on it that notifies people that the business is by appointment only but doesn't offer a way to contact them.

I nod my thanks when Madelene opens the doors, stepping aside so we can enter.

"Oh, hi," she says at my back. "I'm Madelene."

She doesn't mention being related to me by blood. If my sister is still anything like she was when I vanished, that hurts her. Pride and loyalty in family was something we were both raised to value.

"Alani. I'm Ayla's sister."

"Nice to meet you."

I try not to picture what my life would've looked like if Marcello hadn't picked Maya for his initiation, but sometimes those thoughts sneak up. There's no benefit in imagining her here. Thinking of the baby we would've had if it hadn't been

cut from her body before it had the chance to breathe doesn't change the way things are.

I sweep my eyes around the room. Everyone but Fox has a woman with them, despite this being a business meeting. I do my best not to see Alani as my woman the way Nash sees her sister, but the connection is hard to deny when she comes to stand beside me and not her older sister.

I feel Lauren's, Ayla's, and Madelene's eyes on me, but I refuse to look in any of their directions.

"Men," Angel grunts before heading to the back.

We all turn and file out of the room, following him to his office.

"I called the meeting because I want to get everyone on the same page," Angel begins the second the door is closed.

There are six trained psychos in this room, and just the proximity of other men who would rather slit a person's throat than listen to excuses has a way of vibrating. It's as if the energy can't escape so it becomes a living breathing thing.

It makes me want to kill and maim, to torture and scar. Being around these men is dangerous for all of us. Feeding off their energy is what will get us killed or arrested.

"I know most of you don't give a shit what you're doing so long as you're getting paid. This will be a paid job, but it's also personal for several of us," Angel continues.

"Cortez," Hollis says, his lip pulling up in a sneer.

Angel verifies with a quick dip of his head. "He's gearing up to open his next fun house."

My skin itches with the need to slice that man's skin from his body, piece by tiny piece until he goes insane from the pain.

I know that I wouldn't be the one to kill him though.

Liam, Angel, and Nash have all been tattooed with numbers, making them the equivalent of cattle in Cortez's eyes. I'm not sure what the first two men went through, but I

know what Nash suffered and what Ayla suffered with him. The fact that Cortez sent a man after Alani and wasn't exactly successful doesn't give me more skin in the game.

"I want to work together to—"

"No," Fox grunts. "I work alone."

None of us argue or give the man shit for his declaration. If that's how he operates, that's just how it is. We're what most would consider private contractors. If we don't want a job, we turn it down.

I don't know about everyone else because we all have our own shit that makes us do the things we do, but I do it first to feed that sick twisted part inside of me, and second, the money is great. I'd wager most of us do it for the payday, but Fox is a different breed from all of us.

"How much does it pay?" Fox asks, surprising all of us.

"I was planning to do ten a piece," Angel says, and I know that's fifty thousand out of his own pocket because he's the one hiring out for this.

"You can have mine," Nash says.

"And mine," Liam adds. "We're stronger with you."

Fox's jaw flexes, and I don't know the man enough to determine if he's actually considering it or if he's getting pissed others have offered him something.

"Don't want anyone's fucking money," he growls. "I want to be the one to end him."

Maybe I was wrong about Fox not being linked to Cortez. It seems the sex trafficker and drug dealer has made a lot of fucking enemies. From the look in Fox's eyes, things aren't going to end well for him.

I try to convince myself as the meeting continues that the second Cortez is no longer an issue, I'll be able to walk away from Alani and my life can go back to normal. But even still, as I work through that plan, I can picture waking up with her beside me.

I know that I'm well and truly fucked where that woman is concerned.

Chapter 31

Alani

“You look nervous,” Madelene says after the guys walk out of the room. “Don’t be.”

I stand a little taller, refusing to walk toward Ayla because I feel like it shows a weakness, as if I’m skittish and still need my big sister to protect me somehow.

“That woman is Lauren, and yes, that’s just her face.”

The woman in question waves but then glares at Madelene.

“Raya is with Liam. He’s the supermodel-looking guy.”

Raya nods at me and I stupidly give her a little wave.

“Of course you know your sister, and I didn’t tell you before, but I’m Donovan’s sister.”

This news floors me, and I jerk my head back in her direction.

“Well, I’m Elio’s sister, but Elio no longer exists.”

She tries to keep her smile on her face, but she just can’t manage it enough to make it believable.

It shouldn’t come as a surprise. I know literally nothing about the man other than he lives out of a duffel bag as if he has no roots at all.

I have so many questions, but I also know I have no right to ask them of Madelene. The woman probably wouldn’t tell me a thing, and I know that Donovan would be pissed.

Now that she’s mentioned being his sister, I can see some of the familial traits, mostly in the eyes because Donovan has a very full beard. I watch as Madelene presses her hand to her round belly, a sad smile on her face.

I realize they aren’t close or at least not as close as this woman would like them to be. With nothing else to go on, I

wonder if the burns he tries to hide on his arm have anything to do with the distance between them.

The other women chat some, but I keep my distance. They're all older than me, although the difference in age has less to do with it than their own life experiences.

I recognize Raya as the daughter of a former presidential candidate, and it makes me wonder how she got mixed up in this group of people. I have no doubt the guys are operating some kind of business the feds would be interested in.

I do my best to pay attention to what they're saying, but I honestly just can't pull myself from my thoughts long enough to track their conversation.

I'm lost, wondering about Donovan and what would make him become a different person. I don't get a witness-protection vibe from him, and he doesn't seem the type to run away from his problems. The man is ruthless. I saw that side of him both in Austin when he stabbed that man without so much as asking for his name first, and again with the man who drugged me. He's fearless and brutal, and it should scare the hell out of me, but for some reason, it doesn't.

I stand a little taller when the guys start filtering back into the room.

Raya and Liam walk out first, followed by Hollis and Madelene.

My heart aches when Donovan walks past me without so much as a glance in my direction. I know the feelings are one-sided. I know caring for him on any level has been a waste of energy on my part, but it's not like I can control my heart.

"Are you coming?" Donovan asks as he nears the front door.

I don't know what his plan is, but no matter what it is, I'm not going to turn down an opportunity to spend more time with him.

I don't even look at my sister as I follow him out of the building. My heart is racing, threatening to take flight as I

climb into his truck.

“I thought you were going to walk out and leave me there with Ayla,” I confess as I pull on my seatbelt.

“Can’t suck my own dick,” he says, his eyes on the rearview mirror as he backs away from the sidewalk.

My smile drops from my face, his words hurting more than a fist to the gut.

I know I mean nothing to him. I’m well aware that I’m simply a hole for him to fuck when he feels like it. It shouldn’t bother me, but at the same time, I’m also not exactly known for being capable of managing my emotions that well.

I feel more than see him turn his attention to me more than once, but I don’t acknowledge it. What could I possibly say? He doesn’t give a shit about me as a person, so my reaction to what he said won’t matter either. I feel stupid for even wanting him to see me differently.

I don’t react when he sighs heavily. I do my best to focus on the anger side of how he makes me feel because giving any other emotion room to breathe will only make me cry, and he doesn’t get to see me that way.

“What did Madelene tell you?”

“Nothing,” I mutter, keeping my eyes on the buildings passing by.

This town is very familiar to me. I’ve been living with Ayla and Nash for months, but for some reason it all seems so different in the passenger side of his truck, rather than driving the car Nash has let me use to go to work.

Work. Fuck, I missed my shift yesterday, and a quick glance at the clock tells me I’ve missed today’s too.

Waitressing jobs come a dime a dozen, and even as painful as it is to know Donovan is only using me because he needs to get off, I don’t speak up about it. I don’t demand to be taken back to Ayla’s so I can get a clean uniform and go to work. I don’t want to be there. I don’t want dirty men eyeing

me from across the room or having to spend my day moving out of the way when they try to touch me.

I'm like a fucking puppy at his feet, begging for scraps and waiting for something of substance to fall to the floor so I can lap it up with an eagerness that should make me feel ashamed.

"Something," he grumbles, turning on his blinker and pulling into a fast-food place.

"She said that the man you used to be was her brother."

I glance over at him, but he's emotionless. He doesn't care about Madelene, and if the woman is a blood relative and doesn't even tip a scale from him emotionally, then I have no fucking hope of doing it.

He turns his face, his eyes meeting mine, but he offers nothing up. He's not going to explain, and I know asking questions would only be met with his refusal to answer them. There's no point in wasting the energy.

"Burger and fries?" he asks me as he inches the truck closer to the drive-thru menu.

"That would be great," I tell him with a weak smile.

He keeps his eyes locked on me for a long moment, only pulling them away when the car behind us honks in irritation. It takes several more breaths before he moves forward again.

He places the order for our food and after he pays, hands the bag to me before pulling out of the parking lot.

If I thought things turned icy in the truck, I was wrong.

Once we get back to the house, I sit down at the table to eat, placing his food on the table as well. He simply takes the burger and fries and heads out onto the back porch. It's fucking freezing outside, but he'd rather eat out there than sit beside me.

He keeps his distance for the rest of the day.

Chapter 32

Donavan

She's annoyed with me for some reason, and that annoys the fuck out of me when it shouldn't bother me at all.

It's honestly all too damn familiar, making me wonder if women get a fucking crash course in how to be passive aggressive in their anger.

Maya did this shit. She'd be close but not speak, forcing me to be the one to pull information out of her.

I hate that the silence is familiar, but I'll be damned if I'm going to be the one to ask the questions.

I know where the conversation will lead, and I don't have any fucking desire to go back six years to Chicago. I left all of that shit behind. I knew it was a mistake to take her there. I knew Madelene would be there. She's been working for Lauren at the office for months. I knew before I joined Angel and the other guys that there was a chance my sister would stick her fucking nose where it didn't belong.

I should leave. I should just cut ties with all of them and start over again. Florida sounds really fucking good right about now. At least the weather would be nicer.

Alani looks up at me as I enter the room, and I don't miss the twitch in her cheek as if she was going to smile or speak but forgot she was ignoring me.

I swear every fucking woman is trained the same. Either that or it's ingrained in them at birth.

Maybe I should've left her at the fucking office with her sister. Let her be Nash's problem rather than mine.

Instead of speaking, she stands from the couch and heads into the kitchen, checking in the cabinets for food. I could offer to order something. Hell, leaving the house long enough to go grab something to eat would probably be less icy than the temp inside the house from her being so distant.

I'd like to bend her over the couch and fuck her until she screams or shove her to her knees and choke her with my dick.

I watch her back, wondering if she's going to find some way to poison me if she cooks. Hell, that would be working under the assumption that she'll even offer me anything.

I pull out a chair from the small dining room table and just watch her. As cold as she's been to me today, I've also avoided her. The last thing I want is a million questions, mostly because if she asked, I'd probably tell her. It's just one more thing to add to the list of what makes her so dangerous.

I couldn't talk to Maya about what I did with the Severino brothers.

Alani is different. She didn't cringe or turn white as a ghost when she found me hurting him. Hell, she used the knife against that man herself.

"My parents died in a car accident when I was fifteen," she says, her back still turned to me as she grabs a pack of pasta from the cabinet.

I got over the part of me that turned my nose up at ready-made pasta. I imagine my Italian mother and father would turn sickly green at the idea of eating it.

"Ayla was away at nursing school, but she dropped everything to come back home and take care of me. She was barely an adult herself and in the blink of an eye, she became a parent." Alani bends, that perfect ass almost enough to distract me from listening to what she's saying. "I did my best to be good. I followed the rules. I wasn't allowed to ride with anyone but her. It really put a damper on my high school years. I mean, what was the point? Our dad was a safe driver, but that didn't stop both of them from dying."

Even years later, there's still a hint of anger in her voice, but I know it can take years to work through the other stages of grief. I'm no fucking expert, nor do I have any room to criticize how she deals with her pain.

There's still a twinge of my own pain at losing my mother, but it's encased in so much guilt, I'll probably never unpack those feelings. I've gotten pretty fucking good at shoving them down and ignoring them for the most part.

I swallow against the threat of the memory of Madelene being so angry when she saw me at Angel's office. She blamed our mother's death on me. If I hadn't been to blame for so many other crimes against people I loved, it might have hurt a little more. What Madelene couldn't see was that if my mother truly died of a broken heart, she did so because her only daughter wasn't worth living for. I don't think my sister could deal with that if she actually sat down and thought about it.

I don't feel a thing about my father's death. Even knowing how brutal it was, I couldn't care less about the man. I might've left Madelene to the wolves, but as her father, he should've done something to at least attempt to get her away from those monsters. Somehow, my sister still managed to be a functioning fucking adult, and it was from no help of our father.

I can't say the same for myself. I can't imagine a day when I'll ever be normal. Hell, I don't even think I want that. I know I'll die from the same violence I was born into, but at least with the decisions I've made, I'll die from my own mistakes and not because some piece of shit got annoyed with me or with any little thing, and I'm the way they decide to deal with their irritation.

“Where's the oregano?”

“Probably isn't any. Wouldn't know. This isn't my house.”

For the first time since I entered the room, she turns around to look at me. Did she really think this was my house? Killing someone in your own home is like What Not to Do 101.

She frowns at me before turning her attention back to the jar of spaghetti sauce she pulled from the cabinet.

“My parents were great. They were supportive and helpful, but not overbearing. They’d let us make our own mistakes and more often than not, they wouldn’t come at us with I told you so. Were your parents like that?”

I knew it wouldn’t take long for the questions to start. At least she did it the right way, offering parts of her life because she thinks it would make me feel obligated to do the same.

“No.”

She huffs a humorless laugh as if she expected that response.

“Where do they live?”

“They don’t,” I mutter, fighting the urge to get up and walk out of the room.

She turns to face me once again, a look of pity in her eyes. “I’m sorry for your loss.”

“I lost them long before they died.”

She carries on, talking more to herself it seems than to me, as she boils the pasta before stirring in the sauce. There isn’t much here in the house that would have a close expiration date. I didn’t go shopping. This is one of the locations that Angel keeps in case any of us need it. I hadn’t planned on staying past Alani waking up from being drugged and killing the guy who hurt her.

She dishes the spaghetti out on to a plate, and walks it toward me, dropping it in front of me with such force that I feel some of the fucking sauce land on my cheek.

I grab her wrist before she can walk away.

“This childish fucking behavior is exactly what I’d expect from a fucking brat,” I growl, standing from the table.

“I bet you aren’t thinking I’m such a brat when you’re fucking me.”

The gleam in her eyes tells me exactly what she’s doing. I think I might hate her as much as she intrigues me with the

way she's attempting to force my hand.

The little minx likes it rough. She wants to be mistreated and called a whore, but it goes against how she acted in the truck when I mentioned not being able to suck my own cock.

"I always think of you as a brat," I hiss as I work open the snap and zipper of her jeans. "Especially when I'm fucking you."

Her eyes shine, making me think this was her fucking plan all along. I can't ever remember a time when anyone had the power to make me act any other way than how I wanted to in the first place.

"Kick off your shoes," I growl, but before she can obey, I spin her around, placing her face right next to the fucking plate of food she dropped down in front of me.

A whimper escapes her mouth when I grasp her hair, holding her in place with a grip on the back of her neck as I get my cock out.

I press into her without warning. Any worry I might've had about her not being ready fades away when I slide home without much resistance other than the tight clamp of her pussy around my cock.

"Fucking bitch," I grumble. "Is your pussy always ready?"

She remains quiet, the push back of her hips making demands of my body.

As much in control as I'd like to think I am where she's concerned, I know I'm wrong.

I grip her harder, slamming into her with more force, and she fucking takes it and begs for more.

Her pussy tightens, and I know what's about to happen. Just the promise of it forces my own hand, but before she can open her mouth and declare the arrival of her own orgasm, I pull from her body and force her to her fucking knees. It's about fucking time I get better control of myself and this entire fucking situation.

“Open your mouth,” I growl, painting her cheek with her own arousal.

She doesn't hesitate, and it feels less like a punishment for her, and more like torture for me when she wraps her perfect fucking lips around my cock and sucks me to the back of her throat.

I fucking lose it, my orgasm pulsing through my body.

Her eyes flutter closed as she finishes me off, and I swear my brain fucking refuses to come back online for a long moment.

I want to offer her pleasure, to spread her back out on the table and eat that sweet pussy of hers until she comes on my mouth, but she stands and walks away before I can remember that speech is a skill I possess.

Going to her would be a weakness. I've created this routine of getting away from her after I've come, needing the distance because resisting the urge to pull her to my chest has become harder and harder.

I zip my jeans back up and take a seat at the table. I eat the meal she made for me, realizing a little too late it's the only time I've had food cooked for me by someone who wasn't being paid to do so.

When I head back into the bedroom, she's already on the bed.

I can tell by the thickness in the air that she's only pretending to be asleep, but I let her have it, stripping down to my boxers and climbing in beside her.

Chapter 33

Alani

I exhausted myself last night, lying next to him for hours before being able to fall asleep. I fought the urge to talk, to tell him how I felt because rejection with those words unspoken seemed so much better than the real rejection of him telling me to leave, knowing how I feel.

It seems the war I fought inside myself didn't even matter. I know he's gone before I have the chance to open my eyes and sit up on the side of the bed. The open closet door and the missing duffel is as loud as cannon fire in the small bedroom.

He told me last night this wasn't his house. I guess I just never imagined he'd leave me here and go home without me.

I shouldn't be surprised. I can't think of one moment when he consulted me for anything past asking me yesterday if I wanted a burger and fries. Even then, I think if I had said no, he'd tell me too bad and order exactly that anyway.

As I pull my phone out, I consider the consequences of ordering an Uber. It puts me on record as being here, and considering a man died in this house, that probably isn't a good thing.

I fire a text off to Ayla for her to come get me instead, hating the million questions I know I'm going to field on the drive back to the house.

Thankfully, I'm returning to college tomorrow. Nash was able to work something out, and they accepted me back. I'll be on probation because my grades were so terrible last semester, but at least I'll be able to have some form of independent living.

I don't bother showering because I don't have clean clothes to change into. Plus, if it's the last time I'll see Donovan, I don't mind him being on my skin a little while longer.

My anger grows as I sit and wait for Ayla.

Why did he ask me to come with him if he was just going to sneak away in the night like an asshole?

Do I mean so little to him that I didn't even warrant a simple goodbye?

Did he think I was going to beg him to let me go with him?

He made it very clear what I meant to him in the truck after leaving the office. I knew where I stood as far as he was concerned even before that.

Somehow, even knowing that, his sneaky departure slices at my skin in a very painful way.

I've never had a problem with just sex. It's never been that big of a deal. Hell, I much preferred getting the deed done and moving on.

Yeah, the sex with Donovan is life-altering but there's something to be said for being up front and honest, rather than using facial expressions and expecting someone to translate those correctly.

Surprisingly, Ayla keeps her mouth shut when I open the passenger side door fifteen minutes later, and she doesn't speak until she pulls up outside the house.

"You're not coming in?" I ask when she doesn't turn off the car or take her seatbelt off.

"I have a meeting."

She doesn't offer anything else, and I can't tell if she's being secretive. But our relationship still hasn't completely recovered from her being gone so long, her lies, and then the confessions of what actually happened.

I don't know if we'll ever heal completely and get back to how we were before. I don't know if either of us even want that, honestly. I don't need a mother, and I'm fairly certain she's content with not having to be my parent.

I wanted freedom. I wanted to be an adult, but I also never thought it would come at the expense of losing her too.

“I leave for school tomorrow. Did you want to take me or—”

“Nash said you can take the car again. Keys are on the table by the door.”

I nod, my emotions threatening to get clogged in my throat.

“I was going to leave early,” I say.

“My meeting is out of town, but I’ll call you tomorrow evening to make sure you made it there safely.”

“Is there something I should know?”

She shakes her head. “Everything is fine.”

She offers nothing else, and it’s just one more testament to how far we’ve drifted from each other. The old me would point fingers and blame her, but I know I’ve played a huge part in driving that wedge between us.

“I’ll text when I make it,” I tell her and climb out of the car.

The house is tomb quiet, but I’ve grown used to the silence around here.

I make quick work of a shower before starting to pack my things. From working and getting tips, my bank account has enough that I could get an apartment near campus for a few months, but I don’t have enough to cover the entire semester. Nash offered to pay for one, but I’ll be damned if I’ll take anything from that man.

I try not to think about the danger I could still be in. I don’t know if this Cortez guy will send someone else after me, but I plan to be diligent.

The days of me putting myself in danger are over.

Donavan was there most times things really could’ve gone wrong for me, but him leaving hurts more than I think anyone else could cause. Physical pain has a way of dulling

over time. The way my chest feels like it's going to cave in is something I wish I could've avoided altogether.

I wanted to ask yesterday, while I was at the office, if the meeting was about Cortez, but I doubted anyone would give me any details. Being denied an answer would've just pissed me off. I'd like to think Ayla would warn me or ask me to start school later if I were in danger, but I guess there's always a chance that she's too busy with her own life to worry about me. I've screamed until I was red in the face claiming to be an adult, so I guess this is her way of proving that I am.

Afternoon fades into evening, which fades into night, without Nash or Ayla returning home.

I check the locks a hundred times, and never grow calm enough to fall asleep. The drive back to campus tomorrow is going to suck.

I make mental plans to be better this next semester. If anything so I can have a job different from waiting tables, not that I've declared a major or anything. The idea of working in an office for the rest of my life makes my skin crawl, but not as much as going home every night smelling like fryer grease.

I leave Nash's house behind, refusing to see the use of his car as anything other than his way of getting me out of their hair. Traffic is horrific because I-35 is never fucking calm.

I try to put as many miles between how I feel about Donovan as I put between Mission and Lindell, but as I pull up to campus, I still look around, hoping to see him hiding in the shadows.

Chapter 34

Donavan

I don't know if Angel teaming Fox and me up together is his way of punishing us or his way of getting rid of us. I swear I'll slit his fucking throat if he clears it one more time.

I clench my hands into fists as he sniffs.

“Do you need a fucking tissue or some goddamned cough syrup or something?”

“Getting over a fucking cold. Get off my ass,” he grumbles.

“We aren't going to find shit. It's like that motherfucker has an inside man. He's always two fucking steps ahead of us.”

Fox doesn't respond. The man hates to talk more than I do and that's saying a lot.

“What's your connection to Cortez?” I ask, even though I know he's not going to answer me.

He clears his throat again before reaching for a fucking cough drop in the cup holder.

“You better not be fucking contagious,” I mutter, keeping my eyes on the front of the house we've been instructed to watch.

I want to get this shit over with so I can get back to Alani. I had to leave her sleeping two days ago because if I woke her up, I was going to be even later than I was. We were supposed to meet at the office at three in the morning. I overslept and didn't get there until half past, but Fox was even later, arriving dead last and looking like we were the villains in this fucking story.

The house is non-descript, looking like every other damn house on the block. It's rundown but still a few years before it would be considered needing to be condemned. It's in a neighborhood where people turn their heads when they see

shady shit going down because they expect the same thing when they're up to no good.

Two men walk past, their heads bent over as they look at the baggie they just scored on the corner three blocks down.

No one pays attention to us. Hell, I'd bet we aren't the only vehicle with people lurking inside even though I don't see anyone else when I look around.

"Are we waiting for someone to leave or for someone to show up?" I ask.

He shrugs, the best response I could probably expect at this point.

"Does Angel think this is where Cortez will show up?"

"He better," Fox growls.

"The man is the leader of one of the biggest fucking organizations in Mexico. I doubt he's going to be caught dead in some shitty neighborhood."

"No one would expect him to be here. That's why he just might."

"We've been sitting here for hours."

"And you're acting like you've never cased a fucking house before. Shut the fuck up, man. You're getting on my nerves."

My hand flinches as I do my best to resist putting a bullet in the side of his head.

I could blame my impatience on Alani. Surely, she has something to do with me wanting to be near her rather than working. I know the tables have shifted some. Hell, this would be fun if she was with me, if the night would end with us cutting up someone together.

Instead, I'm forced to sit beside this surly bastard who is probably going to get me sick by breathing all of his contagious fucking breath into the closed vehicle.

I use the hand crank in this old-ass vehicle to roll my window down an inch or so, angling my face in that direction

in an effort to get some uncontaminated air.

“Have any desire to tell me exactly how you’re connected to this motherfucker?”

“Not a one.”

I nod. Maybe his reason for being the way he is happens to be just as painful as mine.

“I fucking knew it,” he mutters when a car pulls up outside the house.

It’s a beat-down piece of shit, much like the one we’re in, because anything new and flashy would bring the wrong kind of attention.

“That fucking bitch,” Fox whispers as a woman climbs out of the back seat.

The back passenger door of the old Explorer opens.

“Holy shit,” I mutter. “That’s fucking Raul Cortez. Do you know the woman?”

“That’s his daughter.” The disdain in his voice speaks of something personal, but I’m not opening that can of worms.

She stands on the curb, her eyes roaming down both sides of the sidewalk as her dad gathers a suitcase from the back of the vehicle. The second he closes the back hatch, the vehicle drives away.

They walk through the gate, not bothering to close it as they walk closer to the house.

The door is unlocked, and I realize from the flash of the inside that the house isn’t what it seems.

From the outside, it looks rundown. The yard is overgrown with dead grass left tall before winter hit. The front porch is sagging and looks like a handful of safety hazards on its own.

The wall inside the house that’s visible when the door opens, however, is clean and pristine, the tray ceiling inside not matching the condition of the outside.

The door closes behind them, all light from the inside snuffed out.

“The windows are fake,” I say. “At least they’re blocked. The inside was lit up, and none of that is visible from outside.”

It wouldn’t be the first house that I’ve encountered that looked like shit on the outside on purpose.

“I fucking knew Cortez wouldn’t be caught dead in a house like that. It’s been remodeled on the inside,” I say.

Fox is still staring at the front door as if he can’t believe what he saw.

“Are we going in?”

He pulls his eyes from the door and looks over at me. “He probably has men inside.”

I nod, knowing that’s extremely likely.

He points. “Those guys are probably on his payroll.”

I shrug. “So we kill them first.”

He nods.

“You know the woman?”

He pulls his eyes away once again. “I thought I did.”

“I can tell she’s betrayed you, but you seem calmer than I’d expect.”

“I had my fucking suspicions.”

“She has to die, too,” I tell him, trying to see where his head is at with the declaration.

“She may be more fun to kill than her dad.”

I’m an evil fucking man. I’ve done some seriously bad shit. For as big a monster as Alessio and Marcello were when I was younger, I’ve done things some would consider just as evil.

The look in Fox’s eyes right now speaks of more violence than I think I could fathom.

“Keep your head on your shoulders, yeah?” I say. “I don’t plan on fucking dying tonight.”

I open my door when Fox opens his, going around the back of the vehicle so we can sneak up on the dealers on the corner.

They go down easily enough, and neither one of us bother to pick up the baggies that fell from their hands when we slit their throats. We each drag one into the bushes, unconcerned about how soon they’ll be discovered. We’ll be done with this thing in a couple of minutes. I don’t think people understand just how quick you can kill a couple of people. Most perps are long gone before someone even discovers a body, and a lot of distance can be created in as little as five minutes.

In silence, we walk toward the house, the streetlights having been busted out by someone prior to our arrival. No one in a place like this wants light shining on what they’re doing.

Despite us knowing that we’ll more than likely be met with force inside, Fox doesn’t hesitate to kick the front door in.

You’d think it would be more secure than just a basic lock and deadbolt. With the way the doorframe splinters, it’s clear they didn’t even replace the regular screws with the longer ones like everyone should do.

Gunfire echoes around me, but it’s Fox pulling the trigger on two men who come around the corner. We wait for the briefest of moments, but no one else moves toward us.

I follow Fox down the narrow hallway, simply because he’s moving faster, not that we had any sort of fucking plan. I fucking hate working with other people, but if he wants to get shot first, fucking let him.

I nearly run into his back when he stops cold in the doorway.

“What the fuck are you doing here?” a female voice asks.

Fox pulls a pair of handcuffs from his back pocket as I step around him into the room.

The woman Fox identified in the SUV earlier is standing in the middle of the room. Cortez is there looking smug as if he thinks he's going to get out of this.

"Handcuff him," Fox demands, throwing the cuffs at her feet so hard she has to step back in order not to get hit with them. "So much as fucking twitch and I'll blow your head off."

She scoffs. "I know better than that."

I flinch as the echo of a shot rings out. The woman narrows her eyes but doesn't try to dodge the bullet as the shot goes wide mere inches from her head.

She has seen some shit. She has been through some shit for her to have such a blasé reaction.

"Behind the back," Fox says when Cortez holds his hands out in front of him.

"Who the fuck are you?" Cortez spits as his daughter clips the cuffs on.

He winces, telling me she either put them on as tight as possible or he's trying to make us think she did.

Fox waves his gun, indicating she needs to step to the side. I go back behind the man, making sure the cuffs are in place before patting him down to make sure he has no weapons.

I pull a chair from near the blacked-out window and force him to sit.

"What are you going to do?"

"Nothing more than what was done to me," Fox snarls.

"You?" Cortez spits. "I've never seen you before in my fucking life."

Fox doesn't look away when he pulls a tattered picture from his back pocket, holding it up so he can see.

“My wife and daughter,” he says before sliding it back into his pocket.

“Papa?” the woman asks, a waver in her voice that I know can’t be trusted.

Evil people will turn on anyone to save their own hides.

It seems Fox has more skin in the game than any of the others who managed to escape one of Cortez’s houses of depravity.

“You can go,” Fox says to me.

I shake my head. “I won’t leave you alone.”

“I’m not alone,” he says, waving his gun to indicate the two others in the room. “Let Angel know it’s over and I’ll send proof in the next couple of days.”

“Fox,” I say, a pleading in my voice. “At least let me help you get them to a safe location. I don’t want you to end up dead.”

“I died the day my family did,” he says, no emotion in his voice. “What happens here tonight doesn’t even matter.”

I know I don’t have a valid argument as he holds out the keys to the vehicle outside. I take them, not bothering to ask him a second time.

I walk out the front door without looking back, unsure if I’ll ever see that man again. He deserves his vengeance. There are so many of us that won’t get it. Alessio’s twin sister took that chance from me. It left me feeling like I never got vindication. I didn’t avenge Maya’s death. I didn’t get the chance to torture her murderer or peel his skin from his body.

Maybe even if Fox dies tonight when some of Cortez’s people come looking for him, he’ll do so with more peace than he woke up with this morning.

Chapter 35

Alani

“You’re going out?”

I look over my shoulder at Jennifer, trying my best to smile rather than sneer in her direction.

How I keep getting paired up with the worst roommates is beyond me. It makes me wish Blakely was in the room with me. Jennifer is another freshman, and I recognize the fire in her eyes, that anticipation to come to college and learn all the things. I saw it in the mirror my first week on campus too. She doesn’t know it yet, but it fades very quickly.

“There’s a gathering just off campus,” I say. “Want to go with me?”

She cringes like I asked her to eat a shit sandwich.

“Classes just started today.”

“Hence the reason for the beginning of the semester gathering.”

“You keep saying gathering like it’s not a party.”

I shrug and turn my attention back to the mirror hanging on the closet door.

“Will there be alcohol?” she asks in a way that I know she won’t be impressed with the answer.

“Of course.”

“Drugs?”

“More than likely.” I lift my eyes, meeting hers in the reflection. “Wanna go?”

She scoffs. “Absolutely not. I’m not getting caught at a party and getting kicked out of school.”

“Suit yourself,” I say as I gather up my phone, ID, a bottle of water, and my keys. “Don’t wait up.”

I take a deep breath as I leave the room. I want to do better this semester, but I've been back on campus for four days, and staying in the room with Jennifer is driving me insane.

I stop beside a few girls in the lobby of the dorm building.

"Are you going to the party?"

One of them nods, but the other looks at me like she knows me and hates me.

"We are," the nicer of the two says.

"Think I can walk with you? Safety in numbers and all that?"

The angry girl's face softens. "Sure."

I don't say a word as we leave the building. There's a very real chance that I danced with the angry girl's boyfriend last semester or let him feel me up on the dance floor. I was pretty liberal for a while about who I allowed to touch me at parties. My spiral out of control wasn't very pretty.

I want to turn over a new leaf. Last semester was all about trying to draw Donovan out of the shadows, to force his hand so he'd step in and take control.

I know better this semester. There's also something about getting a needle jabbed into your neck by a man planning to do terrible things to you that makes you take a step back and really look at your life.

I wanted the fear when I knew Donovan was my safety net. When he was the one stalking me, I knew deep down that I was safe. Now that I know he's gone, that he couldn't even be bothered to say goodbye, risking my safety in that way would be careless, possibly a suicide mission.

"Buck and I broke up so..."

I turn my head in the angry girl's direction, but it's the friendlier one who speaks. "Bethany."

Bethany, the angry one, shakes her head, and I can tell by the look in her eyes she has something to get off her chest. “You look confused.”

“I was a fucking mess last semester. If I—”

“*He*, not you,” she corrects. “He was the one in a relationship. He approached you. It took me a long time to accept that.”

“Any role I played, I’m sorry.”

She nods, giving her friend a light smile when she grips her arm in solace.

“Maybe you shouldn’t drink as much tonight,” Bethany adds.

“I’m not drinking at all,” I assure them both. “I just had to get out of my room. Got stuck with a wide-eyed freshman. I think she was ten minutes away from asking me if I wanted to help her study.”

Bethany scrunches her nose. “Classes just started today.”

“Exactly,” I answer. “It’s going to be a long semester.”

Music from the frat party meets us on the sidewalk, but there aren’t many people milling about outside. The weather is extremely cool, but Texas is notorious for having their coldest weather later in January and into February.

“Ten dollars a cup,” a guy wearing a t-shirt with Greek frat letters on the front says.

I hold up my bottle of water, waiting for the other girls to buy their cups.

“Kegs are in the kitchen,” the guy manning the door says before stepping to the side so we can enter the house.

“See you around,” I tell them. “Thanks for letting me walk with you.”

They both give me light little waves, and I walk toward the dance floor, wondering if they might actually become friends. I could use a handful of those, honestly.

I actually take a moment to look around, nodding and doing my best to smile at others when they smile at me. All the faces around me make me realize just how singular my focus had been last year. I was so hyper focused on trying to pull Donovan from the shadows that I rarely paid attention to anything going on around me.

I'm in jeans and a bulky sweater rather than a short skirt and revealing tank top. Not only is it freezing outside, but I also don't exactly want to draw too much attention to myself. The thing about frat guys though is they honestly don't care what you're wearing.

I step further into the living room, moving in the direction of the group of people already brave enough to start dancing despite it still being early in the night.

"Hey there."

I turn at the sound of the familiar voice.

"Hi."

Blaine reaches out for a hug, and I wrap my arms loosely around him, patting him on the back like a friend rather than clinging to him. I did this man wrong. I should've been clearer about what our relationship was rather than letting him think he had a chance.

"I'm glad to see you're back."

"It's good to be back," I say, wishing it wasn't a partial lie.

I don't want to be on campus. College is more just a means to an end than anything else. If I don't want to wait tables for the rest of my life, it's a necessity. I'm going to try to make the best of it, but I'm not happy I'm here.

"Is that vodka?" he asks, pointing at the bottle of water.

"Just water," I say, wondering how we went from being such good friends my first semester to damn near strangers. I guess getting kidnapped and tied to a chair with the threat of death will really make a guy reevaluate his choice in friends.

“Did you want to dance?” I ask, hitching my thumb over my shoulder.

He eyes the dance floor, his nose scrunched up, making me remember the man loathes dancing.

“I’m meeting a date here. I better go look for her,” he says. “It was nice to see you.”

“You too,” I say, watching as he walks away, getting swallowed up in the crowd.

I feel clunky, my movements mechanical rather than flowing like they would be with the lubrication of alcohol. I do my best to sway my hips to the music, but even closing my eyes doesn’t seem to help.

I need safe, but safe isn’t what I want.

I want adventure. The threat of danger, and the urge to embrace some form of chaos, flows through me, urging me to get crazy.

I feel a little insane with the mental struggle I’m having. What I need and what I want are two very different things. I feel directionless despite being on campus because the light at the end of the tunnel seems so far away. What I want in the end isn’t something I want to have to work for. I know how damn selfish and entitled that is, but it doesn’t change how I feel.

Does it show growth that I know I want to have money but not have to really work for it? Maybe lots of people feel that way, but they know the impossibility of it, so they just keep plugging away at life, hoping they catch a couple of breaks along the way.

I open my eyes, once again looking around the room, knowing it’s muscle memory to look for him even though I know the days of him showing up here are over.

I sigh, my body stopping right in the middle of the makeshift dance floor. Being safe is boring, and honestly, it’s not something I can do.

I leave the house before I do something stupid like go on a one-woman mission to find the bottom of the keg.

I consider other options for my life, but all roads in my head lead back to Donovan.

Fuck, it's going to be a long-ass year.

Chapter 36

Donavan

I ignore the pep in my step as I pull up outside the house. Being gone for nearly a week has been much too long, and I know that if I keep working jobs Angel sets me up on, they have to be over faster.

I consider taking Alani with me, but the danger would be too great. I think she'd enjoy some of those adventures, but risking her safety in an environment I can't control just won't happen.

I insert my key into the front door, but when I turn it, I meet no resistance. My blood runs cold, knowing the front door is unlocked.

Pulling my gun from my jeans, I hold it ready, my pulse pounding in my ears.

The living room is as neat and orderly as I left it. The coffee cup I used to drink water from before heading to work is still on the counter.

The bedroom is empty, the bed unmade. A sweep of the rest of the house shows nothing out of order. If I had to guess, I'd say she woke up the morning I left and fucking took off herself.

I reholster my gun and run my hand down my beard, annoyance at her being gone settling inside of me.

It's early afternoon, so I guess there's a chance she's at work. The thought of her going back to that disgusting diner pisses me off. The logical part of me argues that I didn't set her up like I should've. I didn't tell her that she didn't have to work. I didn't provide her with cash for food. Hell, I didn't get her number or give her mine. Basic reasoning would show that not having a conversation with her left her having to make all the decisions on her own.

I inhale, looking up at the fucking ceiling in annoyance.

How the fuck did I get here? Worrying about anyone but myself wasn't something I was ever supposed to burden myself with again.

I know I can't stop it. Fuck if I hadn't been fighting against it for going on a fucking year.

I drop my ass to the couch, letting the idea of her being mine settle deep inside of me. It doesn't come with the sense of betrayal I always thought it would. The guilt over it being someone other than Maya doesn't hit me like a semi-truck.

I swallow, wondering how much time I've wasted, but the idea that she might be in trouble gets me back off the couch.

Ayla wasn't far from Nash's side this last job, so that means Alani was left alone. Cortez is done, the head of that organization meeting his brutal end at Fox's hand. The images sent to everyone were especially gruesome, but I know it was exactly what everyone needed to start healing from the pain the man and his business inflicted. Fox didn't send any information about the daughter who was still inside with him when I left the house that night, but he did let Angel know he was no longer available for jobs. Maybe the man finally found his peace when he killed the man who killed his family.

I pop up from the couch, pulling my phone out. I shoot off a text to Nash.

Me: Where is she?

When the three dots don't pop up, telling me he's texting me back, I press the button to call him.

"If you gave me a fucking minute to text back," he says in lieu of a hello.

"Where is she?"

"Ayla is right—"

"I'm not talking about your woman," I growl.

"You're talking about yours?"

My cheek twitches at the challenge in his voice. It says more than words, and I know what he's after.

"Yes," I answer, the three letters answering every question he could have.

"Donavan," he groans, and I imagine him pinching the bridge of his nose.

"There's not a fucking thing you can say to stop it," I warn before he opens his mouth and pisses me off.

"She went back to school."

Except maybe that.

I drop back down on the couch. She'd already calmed down after having to drop out last semester. She spent her time working, saving money rather than partying and looking for trouble.

Maybe what happened outside of her work and inside this very house changed her. Maybe she was waiting for the right moment to get away from my brand of darkness. Maybe she had time to think about what she'd done, and that life isn't something she wants.

"She needs a normal life," Nash says. "She doesn't need to be tangled up in the middle of our shit."

Silence fills the line because I don't know how to respond to that. He's right. I know he is, but maybe he didn't see the darkness that lurks inside of her the way I did. Maybe he read that knife in her hand as she cut into that man differently than I did.

"Ayla didn't want this world to touch her," he continues when I don't speak. "Is it possible for you to walk away?"

"I don't know," I answer honestly.

"She's safer if you did."

"I know," I say and end the fucking phone call.

I've gotten the air knocked out of me twice and I haven't even been in the house fifteen minutes.

Can I walk away from her?

Can I convince myself that what's best for her isn't what's best for me, and that's just something I need to deal with?

Can I walk away from her without seeing her one last time?

I may not be able to answer those first two questions, but I know without a doubt the answer to the last one.

It's nearly impossible to quit anything when you didn't know that last time was the *last* time.

It's what leaves such a mark behind when someone dies so quickly or without warning. Not knowing always leaves you filled with regrets and a million unanswered questions.

I take a long moment to breathe. I'm not a man prone to making hasty decisions, and this is one I need to think through. My choices would no longer affect just me, and I feel too much for Alani to make swift decisions that could ruin her life, even if walking away would ruin mine.

Chapter 37

Alani

I tried so damn hard to do better. After that first party a couple of days ago, I went home instead of getting drunk and looking for trouble.

After three more days of classes, that need to seek adventure was inside my veins like poison, eating away at my resolve.

It's what led me back to another frat party. But as the need to feel something more than boredom swarms inside of me, I still haven't grabbed a drink from the kitchen.

I try to let the music sink inside of me, but I can't even keep my eyes closed long enough to let the song vibrate through my body. I watch as my roommate scrunches her nose at the taste of whatever is in her cup.

She didn't come here tonight with me, but I overheard her on the phone with someone earlier, all giddy about one of the track guys asking her to meet him here. She sank into college life a lot quicker than I guessed she would.

I drop my eyes to the floor, moving as best I can to the music, but I'm running into the same problem I had several nights ago. I can't feel the music the way I want to. It doesn't become a part of me. I know alcohol or one of the party favors from the weird guy standing in the corner would put me in the right headspace. I also know I'm fighting a losing battle. I can only come to so many parties before I give in. Avoiding them is out of the question though. I feel like I'm going insane, sitting through classes all day and waiting for darkness just so I can breathe a little easier.

It has bothered me so much that I made an appointment with the campus therapist through student services. Since the little quiz they gave me didn't classify me as an emergent case, I have an appointment for the Tuesday after spring break. I laughed when the lady at the front desk gave me the card, but

all she did was tell me to give her a call if my situation changed.

I've done my best not to think of *him*. I was less than a passing blip on his radar, and losing sleep or wasting time on him is fruitless. All it does is sour my mood, and that isn't exactly conducive for this attempt to get lost in the music.

Still, I can't unwind.

A guy with a nice yet crooked smile steps up to me. He places his hands on my hips, and it helps some, letting his body lead mine in the movements.

He doesn't speak. Hell, he doesn't even look me in the eye like most guys would. When the song is over, he nods at me, something I translate as a *thanks for the dance*, and then he simply walks away.

I allow a little smile on my lips because it was one of the more cordial dances I've ever had on campus. He didn't try to run his hand over my ass or push his chest against my tits. He didn't lean in and whisper dirty shit in my ear. I look over my shoulder, trying to see where he walked off to, but I can't spot his orange shirt anywhere.

Another warm body presses to my back halfway through the next song. This guy does lean in closer, his warm breath on my neck.

"I remember you from last year," he says, his breath coated in the scent of hard liquor.

"Just fucking dance and shut up or fuck completely off," I growl.

He huffs in annoyance, but then he walks away.

It doesn't take long before I'm enveloped in more heat at my back. This guy doesn't speak, but it doesn't stop one of his hands from flattening on my lower belly and pulling until our bodies are flush with each other.

A light smile spreads across my face before I can stop it, but it starts to feel wrong when he curls his fingers, one directly on my skin under the edge of my sweater.

I try to pull away, the touch too intimate for the secret I'm sheltering directly under his palm.

He moves his head, allowing me a little more room to breathe. Instead of walking away like I know I should, I roll my hips, imagining Donovan in the shadows, clenching his fists and getting madder and madder until he's so angry he can't help but step forward and make his presence known.

The song changes, and with the switch in music, that edge of wrongness I was seeking transforms from something I want into something I'll regret.

I try to take a step forward but the hands on my waist grip me tighter. My heart races at the trouble I start to picture myself in. I know someone here will step in if I make a scene. Too many witnesses has a tendency to make people think they should be heroes. They're more likely to do something with witnesses.

My mood shifts immediately when he grabs me a second time. Before I can think things through, I spin to face him, my hand moving to slap his face before I can even fully evaluate the situation.

Angry yet familiar brown eyes stare back at me.

Donavan.

I slap him a second time just for good measure. The growl that erupts from his mouth is loud enough for the people dancing around us to take a step back and stare in our direction.

There's a simmering violence in his stance, but I know the man wouldn't really hurt me. The others around us, however, probably don't have a clue.

As quick as I was to imagine someone stepping in to help me, no one comes forward. Donovan looks like a true psycho, simmering with rage.

"You're going to get—"

The cordial guy I danced with only moments ago steps closer, and I clock him from the corner of my eye, but so does

Donavan.

“Hey, do you need—”

Donavan shoves at his chest with one hand, never breaking eye contact with me. The guy stumbles back but seems undeterred as he steps forward again.

“It’s fine,” I tell the guy.

He doesn’t deserve to get his ass kicked over some misplaced chivalry.

Instead of speaking or insisting I leave and go back to my dorm, Donavan steps in close again, his hand tangled in my hair, burning my scalp in that way that makes me a little wild and crazy.

It’s the first time I’ve felt that thrill at a campus party without the aid of alcohol or drugs.

My eyes threaten to drift closed when he presses fully against me. He’s doing nothing but standing still, his hand is on my ass, urging me to roll my hips. I don’t have to move to feel his arousal pressing against his jeans.

“Miss me, baby?”

I could fucking cry with the ease this man has at controlling not only my body but also every thought in my head.

I can’t get lost in him. Doing so would be dangerous. I need him gone. I’m certain I’ve gotten the only thing worth keeping.

The threat of tears once again burns my eyes as I try to shove him away from me. I don’t want to make too big of a scene. Although there’s more movement around us now, I can still feel many pairs of eyes on us.

He holds me tighter, his hand gripping the back of my leg until I lift it, hiking it over his hips. It’s damn near lewd the way he’s holding me to him.

Despite wanting to leave, his nearness affects me in the most primal ways. He once commented on my body’s

readiness, and this time is no different.

I dressed for trouble tonight, knowing deep inside that I couldn't keep up this good-girl bullshit. My sweater is thick and warm but the skirt I'm wearing leaves my legs bare except for the dark tights I have on under it.

The way his mouth hangs open an inch or so tells me I'm not able to hide my desire from him.

"I'll fuck you right here," he growls when my fingers curl into his shirt.

Fuck if I don't believe every word.

"Dance," he growls, and I do.

I use his body like a pole in a club, rolling my hips and grinding against him. He must get lost in it too because eventually he begins to move, if only a little, to the music.

No one else matters. There isn't a person here more important right now than this man, and even as tattered as I know he's going to leave me, the road getting there is always paved with the most fun I've ever had.

I know he's eventually going to lead me out of this house, and when that happens, I know there's a good chance he's going to fuck me.

I also know there's a chance it would be the last time I see him. If it isn't, then the next time he'll discover my secret. Coming back to college was a mistake. I should've packed my shit and disappeared instead. There's no telling what he'll do to me when he finds out.

Chapter 38

Donavan

She's doing exactly what her body is demanding of her—rubbing her pussy all up and down my leg—but it's the look of defeat in her eyes that guts me.

It's clear she can't resist me, but it's also evident that she wishes things were different. Like she wishes I was either someone else or that we didn't have this pull to each other.

Same, sweetheart.

She dances against me for several songs, the warmth of her body calming something inside of me I can't put my finger on.

What I do know is that I need her. There's something about this girl that's vital to me. She calms the voices in my head, and tamps down the anger that's always simmering just below the surface and threatening to take over.

She also somehow manages to feed a fire that others have only been able to stoke enough to get the tiniest flickering flame.

She turns me on to no end, the roll of her body tonight enough that I may end up having to fuck her on the hood of my truck. She'll have to be punished for leaving, despite that being more about me than about her. I'm not much of a masochist so that retribution will end up on her shoulders.

I bite at my bottom lip as she rolls against me again, trying my best not to moan like one of the horny college boys who fill the room.

I'm able to keep an eye on her and the people surrounding us. I don't think any of them pose a real threat, but jealousy swims off one guy to my left. I turn my attention fully to him, gripping a handful of her hair a little tighter because the whimper of need she releases makes me harder. I lock eyes with Blaine, that douche kid who followed her to the house with those other two guys. She spent that day staring

at me, livid, but he spent it watching her, trying to make sure she was okay. It was clear then that he wanted her, but the guy is too soft for my girl. She doesn't want to be doted on. She wants to be mistreated, fucked hard, told how much of a whore she is before she comes. She wants a man ravenous, as greedy for her cunt as she is for his cock, not a man who stops and checks if she's okay every time she makes a noise while being fucked.

I lick up her neck, maintaining eye contact with him. At least the boy is smart enough to look away, shifting the girl in his arms around so his back is to us.

"You're mean," she says, somehow catching what I just did. "Can we get out of here?"

"Not until you come."

Her eyes widen, darting back and forth between mine, as if trying to gauge if I'm being honest.

Her hips roll again, and I know even with tights and panties on she's not going to hesitate to take what she needs. I swear to God my cock is leaking in my jeans as she doubles her efforts.

I cup her ass, my fingers on either side, pulling at her tights until they rip right up the center.

She's hot and slick. I know her skirt is just barely long enough with her leg hiked up over my hip to hide my fingers when I slip them inside of her.

"Oh God," she pants against my neck, her pussy clamping down on my fingers.

She rolls again, only managing half of the movement before she falls apart in my arms. I bite at the skin of her neck as she jerks in my arms. She's a fucking goddess, and a part of me wants to kill every man in this room who might have caught a glimpse of what just happened.

She freezes against me as I pull my fingers from inside her, her eyes locked on mine as I lift them to her mouth.

“Jesus, I want one,” a girl says loud enough to be heard beside us as Alani cleans her own cum from my fingers.

Alani smiles around them, nipping at the tip of one when I pull back.

“Ready to get out of here?”

She nods, her tongue sneaking out to lick her lips.

I grip her hand, not willing to risk her changing her mind and trying to dart away. She looks at me weirdly when I open the passenger side door of my truck.

She seems to be battling some type of internal war, but she caves, crawling inside. I get a glimpse of bare skin through the hole in her tights. There’s a very real chance I may just have to flip her to her stomach right here on the street and fuck her in my truck just to take the edge off.

“Can you take me back to my dorm?” she asks the second I climb in behind the driver’s seat.

“You aren’t staying on campus.”

She scoffs.

I turn toward her, my hand reaching out and clamping her jaw so she doesn’t have the chance to look away from me.

“You are fucking mine. Do you understand?”

She winces, causing herself pain when she tries to pull her face away.

“Since when?” she growls.

“Since the first fucking time I saw you.”

I think a part of me knew it even then, but I’m a stubborn motherfucker. It’s one of those character flaws I couldn’t get rid of when I became a new man.

“You’ll do what the fuck I say when I say it. I work too goddamned much to accommodate someone else’s schedule. I expected you to be at the house when I got back, Alani, and it doesn’t make me very happy that I had to track your ass down here.”

She narrows her eyes at me, and my cock kicks in my jeans at the possibility of her challenging me.

“You didn’t so much as fucking say goodbye.” There’s a hint of an emotion other than anger in her tone.

I hurt her feelings. I can see how my taking off looked. I’m also self-aware enough to know that I didn’t give her the means to contact me and get a better understanding of what was going on.

“Have you lost your fucking mind? You can’t claim me as yours. It’s barbaric. Besides, if you owned me, you’d have more respect for me than you do.” Her voice wavers on the last couple of words. When she tries to pull away this time, I allow it. “You left without a word, like you have every other time, and I had to assume you didn’t want me.”

“If I could quit you, I would’ve done it long ago,” I confess, hating I’m the reason tears pool on her lower lashes.

She nods, knowing it to be true. I never asked for this. I wasn’t looking for her or any situation that looks like this. I’d planned on spending my life alone. I didn’t want anything else. I sure as fuck didn’t deserve it. The last woman I loved died because of it.

“You could’ve said goodbye,” she whispers.

“And I will the next time.”

She shakes her head. I don’t know if she’s trying to reject my words or if it’s because she doesn’t believe me at all.

I lean in closer, my fingers finding the back of her neck. I pull her closer, her eyes brimming with tears as she locks her eyes with mine.

Her eyes don’t dip to my lips like they did in the beginning.

How the fuck could I have missed this part?

I swallow just before inching my face forward, brushing my lips against hers once before slipping my tongue past her shocked lips.

She's frozen in place for a long moment before the reality of what I'm doing hits her. She moans into my mouth and I swallow it down as if it's water and we've been trapped in a desert for months without quenching our thirsts.

Her fingers grip on to me, holding me tight as if she's afraid she's going to lose me in the next breath, or as if she's certain I'll fade to mist when the kiss is over.

Goddamn, she's perfect, and a tingle of regret slinks inside of me from all the missed opportunities to do just this.

Her body shifts, her knee coming up on the seat so she can angle her body better. I pull her to me, gripping her ass so she can straddle me.

Even the blare of my horn as her ass hits it doesn't have the power to break the kiss. Her mouth is minty, no hint of alcohol on her lips. She's here, completely in control of her own body, not being led by some false sense alcohol could provide.

I nip at her lips twice when she pulls back to take a breath.

"I can't be yours if I don't know who you are," she whispers.

I nod once before leaning in to kiss her once more.

I know I have a lot of explaining to do, but I also know that it won't happen tonight. There are so many things I need from her before I risk sending her running for the hills.

I need to remind her of all the things I can give her before I lay my trauma at her feet.

Chapter 39

Alani

I press my fingers to my kiss-swollen lips as I stand a few feet behind him, recalling the way he kissed me in the truck, threatening a second later that he'd fuck me right there if I didn't get back in my seat and put my seatbelt on.

He didn't bring me to that filthy motel we first hooked up in. Instead, we're at the more expensive one the Cerberus people put Ayla and me up in for a night.

The woman behind the counter is going extremely slow, but I realize why when I catch her looking up at me several times.

Donavan isn't like biker cool. He isn't going to smile to try and reassure anyone that he isn't a psycho.

I do smile at her, however, because she looks like she's seconds away from calling the cops.

I press my body to his back, leaning my cheek against his bicep. I feel him freeze because it's just as out of character for me as it would be for him to experience it.

We aren't soft and cuddly. We aren't the type of people who hold hands or whisper sweet nothings, but there are probably very few people who would understand this dynamic between the two of us.

Eventually the lady accepts his cash payment and hands over the keycards for the room.

"The only room available is right beside the elevator," she says, earning a scoff from Donovan before he turns around and leaves the front desk.

"She was letting you know that if you scream for help when you hear the elevator that someone would hear," he says once we're on our way up to the fourth floor.

"Good to know," I say, trying to sound teasing, but honestly, I'm a little worried.

I'm not foolish enough to think everything is fine. His claim on me doesn't mean much when he doesn't know all my secrets. There's a very real chance he'll bolt the second he does.

He holds the door open for me, letting me walk in ahead of him, and it's just weird.

Wrong, actually.

To go even further, he doesn't pounce on me the second the door closes. Instead, he uses the light coming in from the gauzy curtain to guide him to the lamp on the bedside table. When he clicks it on, it casts the room in a soft orange light.

"We need to talk," he says. "I didn't want to do this shit tonight, but we have to lay it all out."

"I'm pregnant," I blurt.

He freezes, his eyes dipping to where my hands are clasped in front of my stomach before drawing back up to mine.

"What?" he asks, as if he somehow heard me wrong.

"I did it on purpose. I mean, I couldn't predict that you'd fuck me without a condom again, but you did, and yeah."

He takes a step forward. "Do you realize what you've fucking done?"

He seems to be vibrating with energy, but as much as I want this man, I still don't know him well enough to predict which mood I'm going to get.

"I was going to give you a fucking option, Alani. Even with all of that you're mine shit in the truck, I was going to walk away if that's what you wanted."

"It's probably best," I say, my throat working on a swallow.

He shakes his head. "I would've struggled with it, but I would've done my best to give you what you wanted."

I chew on the corner of my bottom lip, backing up when he inches forward.

He lunges, his hand somehow reaching out and softening the blow to the back of my head when I smack into the door.

“A fucking baby,” he whispers, his breath warm on my lips. “That changes everything.”

“For me,” I offer. “It doesn’t have to change anything for you.”

“That’s where you’re wrong, baby. I had that chance before, and it was literally ripped out of my fucking hands.”

My eyes close, the threat of tears more real now than it was before. I knew there was someone else before me. Sometimes I felt like he was punishing me because I wasn’t her, or at a minimum, he was upset that I didn’t meet his expectations the way she would’ve.

Before this exact moment in time, I wanted to know everything. But as I’m facing it, I realize I was wrong. I don’t want to hear his confessions of lost love. I don’t want him comparing me to her, knowing I’m only going to come up short in his eyes.

“My life before this one was dangerous,” he says, his lips moving against the soft skin on my neck. “I was just a boy, barely eighteen. I thought my love could protect her, but I was wrong. She died because of it. The baby we created died because of it. I was a changed man after that. I couldn’t let a single fucking thing inside of me, not even the love for my mother or my sister. The pain of losing her ate me from the inside out and left nothing behind. It had to be that way. I wouldn’t have survived it. Most days, I don’t know why I even bothered trying to live. Maybe it was my way of punishing myself. Staying alive was harder than dying.”

“I don’t—” He presses his lips to mine, but it really isn’t a kiss, more of just enough pressure to shut me up.

“I’m five seconds away from fucking you, Alani. Let me get this shit out because I don’t know if I’ll be able to talk

about it again.”

I nod, tears trailing down my cheeks.

“I had a guy in the organization I was a part of help me fake my own death. He was with me when we wrecked. The plan was to crash the car and then set it on fire, but I knew I couldn’t leave a witness. I shot him in the car, expecting him to just fucking die, but he had other plans, and made me wreck worse than planned. The gas we already bought caught fire, and it fucked me up pretty badly. My skin was melted by the time I crawled out of the car. I didn’t know if it was going to work. All I knew was I had to get away. I do vigilante shit for money now because as evil as the men I was connected to were, they started something inside of me I have to feed on a regular basis. I’m basically a gun for hire, a mercenary of sorts, and there aren’t many rules or laws I don’t break regularly.”

He pulls back a few inches, his eyes searching mine. I know everything he’s telling me should freak me out. I’m having a baby after all. I should put the child first and walk away, but I know he won’t let me.

“So you want the baby because of the one you didn’t get with her?”

He presses his forehead to mine.

“I’m fucked up. I’ll never deny it, but I want our baby as much as I want you. I don’t deserve a fucking second chance, and there will be nothing fucking normal about what we’ll share, but I’m too selfish to let you leave. I don’t even think I could try to let you walk away.”

“So you’re saying I don’t get a choice?” A zing of awareness rages through me.

“I’m saying I’ll lock you in a fucking dungeon if I have to in order to protect you from the world.”

“And who protects me from you?” I whisper.

A slow, feral grin spreads across his face, but I know better than to think it’s coming from a place of happiness.

“No one.”

“Is it crazy that I don’t want to walk away?”

He shakes his head.

“Our darkness feeds each other. I think I knew that from the first day. I just didn’t want to accept it.”

“If I can’t leave your sight, how do I attend classes?”

“I told you that you aren’t going back to campus.”

“I’m your prisoner?” I verify.

His eyes dip back down to my lips.

“I’ve got extravagant tastes.”

“I plan to give you anything you desire, Alani.”

“You’ll fuck me slow and gentle?”

He shakes his head, no hesitation.

“You and I both know you don’t want that.”

“What do you think I want?” I challenge, knowing he’s going to do exactly as he’s promised.

Not only will this man nurture me and give me everything I need to survive, but he’s also going to feed those parts of me that seek danger and adventure. But he’ll do it in a way that keeps me and his baby safe.

His grip in my hair makes me squeal in pain, and my lower half clenches with need.

“Take my cock out,” he growls, stepping back only enough that I can get my hands between us.

He doesn’t bother taking a stitch of clothing off before he bends me over the bed.

My tights rip further under his fingers, but I don’t have time to complain before he pulls my panties to the side and slides his thick cock inside of me.

He’s possessive and territorial, unrelenting on my body. I come before I can even announce it, but it doesn’t stop the growl from his throat.

“Always such a whore for my cock. Your greedy cunt will be the death of me.”

I whimper, my body begging for more.

“Donavan,” I scream when his fingers find my clit.

His hips ram forward over and over, my body taking everything he gives because it was fucking made for him.

“Goddamn,” he growls as my fingers try to gain purchase on the bed.

Before I can argue, he flips me to my back, shoving inside of me immediately. His hand tangles in my hair as I lift my knees high up on his sides. He pulls me forward, curling over my body until our mouths are nearly touching.

“Tell me you love me,” he demands.

I shake my head, my tears renewed. It feels like a fucking trap, like he’s trying to find a reason to shove me away.

Every time we’ve fucked, he doesn’t waste a second running from me.

“You better,” he growls. “Because I fucking love you. Mmm... Goddamn, baby.”

His mouth hangs open, his hips slowing as if he’s trying to postpone his own release.

“Fucking say it!” he roars, his cock kicking inside of me.

“I love you, Elio.”

His eyes widen, his throat moving his Adam’s apple under his beard.

“Baby,” he whispers just as the pulsing of his cock begins deep inside of me.

Dampness hits my face, tears falling from his eyes as he looks down at me.

“I’m never leaving you,” I promise.

If this man is going to dedicate his entire life to me, then I plan to offer the same in return.

His lips find mine, and this kiss is somehow more intense, needier than every one that came before it.

“I’m going to have beard burn on my face,” I say when he pulls away.

I clamp my hands on his face, and I can tell it doesn’t make him exactly comfortable. I think he has a long way to go before he’ll let me actually love him. I imagine he’ll fight against it, no matter what he’s told me here tonight because he doesn’t think he deserves happiness. I’ll be here to prove him wrong, to scratch and hiss when he fights back too much.

He pulls his hips back, slipping from inside of me, and I have to fight back a groan of pleasure.

“If you run away from me right now, I’ll never forgive you.”

“Don’t want to crush you,” he says, falling to his back and pulling me on top of him.

“How do we do this?”

“You press your feet to the mattress and bounce,” he says, guiding himself back inside of me.

I slap his chest.

“I mean you and me.”

“One fucking day at a time,” he says, licking his thumb and pressing it to my clit.

THE END

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