

THE KIDNAPPED TRILOGY: BOOK 1



ROUGH
DIAMOND

A DIAMOND RING DARK ROMANCE

ALIX KEY

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BOOK 1

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DIAMOND SOLITAIRE, A FREE PREQUEL

Have you read *Diamond Solitaire*, the prequel to *Rough Diamond*?

You can *totally* read *Rough Diamond* without reading *Diamond Solitaire*. But if you'd like to read the prequel, you can get it for free here:

[Diamond Solitaire](https://alixkey.com/solitaire)

(If you have any trouble tapping on the free prequel, please type <https://alixkey.com/solitaire> into your phone or computer browser.)

If you don't want to read it—or if it's been a while—here's a quick summary of what happens in *Diamond Solitaire* (minus, of course, the spicy scenes!)



Alix Key is a psychology grad student who has spent her whole life saying *no*—no to fun, no to passion, and no to the friends and relatives who demand she abandon her drug-addicted twin brother, Leo.

When Leo's lies lead to Alix being evicted from their shared apartment, she's finally had enough. She ventures out to a local bar with one goal: saying *yes* to everything. *Yes*, that is, until midnight, when she must return home or lose access to all of her belongings.

Travis “Trap” Prince is a self-made titan of business who has transformed his childhood trauma into Diamond Freeport, a tax haven for billionaires. When Trap arrives at a local bar to celebrate a major business success, his one goal is finding a woman willing to be bound, gagged, and gone by dawn.

Alix and Trap’s one-night stand quickly becomes something more. They bond on an emotional level, each healing a deep wound in the other. As midnight (and Alix’s eviction) approaches, she flees but she immediately realizes leaving Trap was a terrible mistake. Returning to her apartment, she intends to call and apologize.

She never gets that opportunity. Instead, she finds her brother waiting for her.

Pleading with her.

Warning her she never should have come home.

Before she can react, she’s seized from behind. A hood is yanked over her head. She feels the sting of a needle and then...nothing.

1

ALIX



DAY 1

I don't know who I am. Where I am. How long I've been here or if I've ever been anywhere else.

I hear pleading, though, a clogged voice that sounds like a child repeating the same words over and over. "Please," it begs. "Don't do this to her. I'm sorry. I'll do better. Please!"

I know that voice. I've heard it before. It belongs to...

I can't reach the name.

A moan fills my ears, equal parts pain and terror. I'm the one making that horrible sound. Before I can stop, a clammy darkness oozes over me and I slip away to silence.



Heavy metal bands pin my wrists, stretching my arms high above my head. Sharp edges cut into my raw skin. My arms ache, and I know they've been held there for a long time.

My back presses against a hard table. The surface is narrow, not much wider than my hips. A tight strap binds my belly, keeping me from shifting up or down, left or right.

Metal cups anchor my heels. My feet are lashed into place. My knees are drawn up. My legs are splayed.

I'm in stirrups. A gynecologist's stirrups.

But no doctor would ever bind a patient this way.

I start to thrash, ignoring the weight of my bonds, ignoring the sting of open sores on my wrists and ankles. I realize I'm naked, that my bare bottom hangs off the edge of the table.

My pulse thunders. My lungs heave. My throat works and I can't breathe I can't breathe I can't breathe



The coppery salt of blood coats my mouth. I don't know if I bit my lip or my tongue or the inside of my cheek. I try to swallow, but the metallic tang just comes back, dripping down the back of my throat.

I stink, the smell of my sweat so sharp it burns like bleach. Fear has a smell too, something rank and heavy that soaks into the roof of my mouth.

I'm staring at a smooth white ceiling. It's blank. Completely empty. I could be in any room in any building in any city in the world.

A door opens on the far wall.

"You were out long enough." That's a man's voice. He sounds like he's commenting on the weather.

I crane my neck, fighting my bonds to raise my head, to look past my bare breasts, past the metal belt that's keeping me in place.

The man is tall. Lanky. His blond hair is cut short. He leans back, arms crossed over his chest, one foot planted on the door behind him, the other anchoring him to the floor.

Even from across the room, I can see that his eyes are pale, a blue so light it almost looks white. He's staring at me the way a fisherman measures a marlin. The way a crocodile

stalks a gazelle. He's studying my exposed flesh, staring *down there* like I'm some sort of painting on a museum wall.

He hasn't blinked yet.

"I was beginning to think Ramon gave you too strong a dose," he finally says.

Dose. I've been drugged. That's why I feel so strange, like I'm watching myself in a movie, a horror film about a woman who's been captured, stripped, and tied to a table.

I roll my tongue in my mouth and swallow more blood. I force myself to concentrate, to move my lips, to shape a word: "R— R— Ramon?"

The second syllable slurs away, but the blond man acknowledges my effort with a nod. "He works for me. Like Leo does."

Leo.

A lock springs open inside my brain.

Leo is my brother. I'm Alix Key and Leo is my twin. Leo was the person pleading a lifetime ago, begging over and over again: "Please, please, please."

I know how Leo sounds when he cries. He cries every time he falls off the wagon. He cries every time he makes a vow to get sober, to leave meth behind once and for all, forever. I've stayed by his side, slip after slip, even when my loyalty cost me the love and respect of every friend and family member I've ever had.

I heard Leo crying earlier tonight. *Is it still tonight? How long have I been here?*

But Leo pulled a hood over my head. Leo said he had debts to repay. Leo promised I would only be... Only be... Leo promised *he* would only hold me a few days.

He. The man leaning against the door. The man staring at me with a shark's dead eyes.

Remembering what Leo did burns off some of the fog in my brain. Shame at my nakedness clears more. I try to close

my knees, to hide my bare lady parts, but the stirrups keep me exposed.

“Leo worked at Barney’s.” I say. “As a waiter.” *Until he got laid off.*

The man snorts. “Leo sells drugs for me. Meth. Ecstasy. More.”

No. Leo is clean. Leo got his dark blue chip—six months at NA.

But the man says, “Leo stole from me. So I gave him a choice. His life or yours.”

Terror finally sears a clear path through my brain. “You’re going to kill me?”

“I’m going to make you wish you were dead.”

I believe him. “Wh— Who are you?”

“My name is Klaus Herzog. But you will call me Master.”

I bark in disbelief, and three things happen so fast my drugged brain can barely follow.

First, Herzog pushes off from the door, surging toward my table like a tsunami crashing onto shore. I barely see him make a fist, cock his elbow, and load his punch.

Second, he rams me with his fist, the blow landing squarely between my shackled legs. I hear it, bone on meat, just an instant before I feel it—white hot burning hot blazing hot white.

Third, words flood back to me.

Herzog punched my *pussy*.

My *clit* feels like it’s on fire.

My *taint* burns like I’ve been zapped with a cattle prod.

I didn’t have those words before last night. *Was it only last night? What day is it?*

But last night... Last night, I ended a lifetime of saying *no*. Last night, I said *yes* to everything.

I met Trap Prince in a bar and went home with him and we did wild things for hours. And somewhere between the second and third times I came, Trap taught me how to use my words. How to say who I was and what I wanted and how I wanted it and when.

Like an idiot, I left while he was sleeping. I panicked because Leo had stolen our rent money and we were being evicted. Leo had taken our rent because he owed someone...

He owed Klaus Herzog.

“Let me go, asshole.” The words are out of my mouth before I consider whether they’re a good idea. Maybe the drug still coursing through my blood makes me stupid. Maybe my night with Trap makes me brave.

Herzog’s hand flashes and his scarecrow fingers grab my right breast. He twists my nipple hard, like he’s trying to tear it off. Tears spring to my eyes, but he doesn’t let go. “The name,” he says, “is Master.”

I have to assume no one will hear me if I scream. Herzog would have gagged me if he feared my making noise. But I can’t let myself give up. I can’t make myself be quiet. “Go to hell,” I say.

He grabs my other breast and this time, he pinches. His fingers are as hard as the cuffs around my wrists. His nails tear into my nipple. I bite my tongue hard enough to taste fresh blood.

“Say it,” he commands. “Master.”

Lips trembling, I barely mouth, “Fuck you.”

He steps back from the table, and for a heartbeat, I think I’ve won. But then I hear the snake-slither of his belt whipping through the loops on his pressed khaki pants. He wraps the leather around his fist, and I barely have time to be thankful the metal tongue is folded against his palm. He stalks to the foot of the table, and he delivers a single, perfect blow to my exposed pussy.

I do scream then—loud enough to leave my ears ringing. Herzog drops the belt, but he’s not done. He works the zipper

of his trousers, reaching inside to free his furious scarlet cock. He shoves the tip against my slit.

“No,” he says, like we’re having a civil conversation. “Fuck *you*.”

He digs his fingers into my hips and jams himself deep.

I’m bone dry, and the blow from his belt made every muscle below my chin contract. His cock feels like a rail splitter, tearing me in two. He drives in again and again, spitting out another phrase with every brutal stroke.

“Your brother said you were *sweet*. He said you were *clean*. But you’re a fucking *whore*. Wearing another man’s *shorts*. Stinking from another man’s *cum*.” His fingers tighten on my hips with every phrase, and I’m terrified he’ll pull me apart at the joint.

“Call me Master,” he orders, sweat dripping from his face onto my belly as he rams me again.

“Master,” he demands. His face is red and wrinkled, his hair standing out like matches in a book. I start to gag from the pain between my legs.

“Master!” he insists. Black spots float across my vision.

“*Master!*” he bellows.

Hot slime floods inside me. My ears ring. My teeth vibrate. I can’t see, can’t swallow, can’t breathe.

He comes and he comes and he comes, his body rigid and his fingers turned to stone on my hips. When he’s finally done, he stays planted deep. He leans over me and closes his hands around my throat, pressing his thumbs into my larynx.

“Goddamn fucking whore,” he whispers, his face looming close. “Say it!”

He’s going to kill me. I’m going to die. So I fold my lips. I shape the word, the only one that has a chance of keeping me alive. “Master.”

I don’t have the air to say it out loud. I can’t even whisper. But he sees the shape of my defeat, and he nods. Planting an

elbow in my ribs, he pushes himself back to standing, freeing his withered cock from my body.

My eyes are closed, but I hear him pull up his pants. His zipper slides closed. He retrieves his belt from the floor and threads the leather around his waist.

He opens the door.

“Sir?” There’s a man waiting outside. Not Leo. Someone older, from the tone of his voice.

“Take care of her,” Herzog snaps before his footsteps fade away.

The man who enters the room wears a white coat. His name is stitched on his pocket. I can guess at the D and the R of *Dr.*, but I can’t make my eyes focus enough to read the rest.

“P— Please,” I beg, hoping he’ll take pity on me.

But I might as well be a piece of furniture as he strides to my side. He produces a tiny white square from the pocket of his lab coat. The scent of alcohol washes over me, sharp as smelling salts. He cleans the inside of my right arm, halfway between my elbow and armpit.

“What is that?” I ask. And then, more frantically, “What are you doing?”

He produces a white plastic device from the same pocket. It looks like a stapler, held open on its hinge. He checks a setting, nods, and puts the tool against my arm.

“Stop!” I beg. “Please! What are you doing to me?”

My last word ends on a wail as he presses a trigger, and something shoots into my arm. It feels like he’s jamming a ball-point pen under my skin. I start to sob uncontrollably.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” the doctor says, like I’m a naughty child crying over a splinter. “You should be grateful for that.”

I twist my head, trying to make out what he did. A raised white bar the length of a sewing needle rests just below my skin. With effort, I calm myself enough to ask, “What is it?”

The doctor is halfway out the door before he decides to answer. "Birth control," he says over his shoulder. "A five-year implant. Mr. Herzog thinks of everything."

TRAP



I'm running a fucking tax haven, not a prison.

Ella Locke had every right to leave.

I'm better off with her gone.

I tackle the seventy-five-pound dumbbell, ripping it back in a one-arm row like I'm tearing off some asshole's head. I came downstairs an hour ago, figuring I might as well work out because there's not a chance in hell I'm going back to sleep tonight.

Forty-five minutes on the treadmill did nothing to exhaust my lying ass. Yeah, Ella had a right to leave. But I'm pissed as hell that's what she chose.

Fuck me. I'm not pissed. It might be time to turn in my man card, but I'll tell the goddamn truth: I'm hurt.

I went to Debasement knowing I'd get laid. How hard could it be to find some chick horny enough to put up with my twisted demands—especially if I flashed a couple of Ben Franklins and offered her a ride in my Porsche?

But Ella wasn't just a quick fuck.

Ella *did* something to me.

She changed me.

Set me free.

I switch the dumbbell to my other hand, trying not to think about where those fingers were five hours ago. Not to think about Ella screaming my name as she came. Not to think about Ella's sweet lips tight around my cock. I wipe sweat out of my eyes with my free hand, and I catch a whiff of pure sex.

The Beast rumbles deep inside my brain.

Goddammit. I thought I'd killed the fucker.

I did things with Ella I haven't dreamed of in years. Touched her. Tasted her. Fell asleep with her tucked in by my side, skin to skin, without a whisper from my past.

Well, my past isn't whispering now. It's growling. The Beast zaps the base of my skull like a Taser.

I remember Ella's hand in mine, her fingers loose and trusting as I introduced her to her own body. *Down there,* she'd said, blushing. But I taught her the words she really needed: Pussy and slit and cunt.

The Beast howls, taking another swipe at my brain, and I don't have any choice. I have to appease it. I have to drop the fucking dumbbell and clench both hands into fists—once, twice, three times, four, five.

My goddamn broken brain thinks it's protecting me from something I can't see, from some sort of super-germ that's going to kill me on contact. Seventeen years, I've lived with the motherfucker, but I thought I'd broken the cycle tonight. I thought I'd stabbed the Beast through its blood-red heart.

With Ella, because of Ella, I thought I was free.

I need her back. I need her smart mouth and her quick brain and her crazy little-girl shyness. I need the woman who found her own freedom in my bed last night, the one who figured out how to ask for what she wanted. What to do when she got it.

I need to know why she left.

I won't stalk her. I just want to make sure she got home safely. Isn't that the gentlemanly thing to do? Besides, if I can't use my millions for this, what good is money?

I tap my phone, cutting off the speakers mid-howl. Fucking Måneskin and their song *Beggin'*. It's like they have a wire straight to my brain.

Upstairs in the kitchen, I stand in front of the refrigerator, chugging down coconut water like I'm in a drinking contest. I haven't been hungover in years, but I feel that way now—head pounding, throat dry, every muscle in my body aching.

I didn't drink enough last night to leave me hurting like this. I feel this way because Ella's gone.

I turn back to the center island, to the wrought iron chair she sat in when I told her exactly what I was going to do to her upstairs. I half-expected her to tap out then, but she surprised me.

My eyes go to the drinking glass on the counter, the textured highball I filled with water so she could sober up, so she could give me meaningful consent when I told her how I was going to fuck her blind. I can just make out the print of her lips on the rim. My cock twitches, like I'm staring at her actual mouth, at her painted-on dress, at her fuck-me heels.

How hard can it be to track down one woman's address?

I'm a captain of modern industry. I've got millions to burn. I stomp into my office and type her name into Google.

Fuck me.

Ten million hits.

I add *Dover* and cut the list to four mill. *Delaware* takes it down to a million. But a quick scan through the results shows that most of them are bogus—census records from the last century, obituaries from foreign countries, dozens of links that aren't actually about her.

I switch over to an Image search and type her name again.

Ella Locke is an old Black woman and a pouting blond kid. She's an Asian Realtor and a 1950s housewife and a

cheerleader somewhere in Iowa.

What she isn't is *my* Ella—with heavy, dark hair, with whiskey-colored eyes, with a wide, generous mouth...

Screw this. I'm a businessman, not a private detective. I *pay* people to do this kind of shit.

I text Harry Asher, a guy I know, retired cop. I tell him to get me her name and number, tell him she lives in Dover but I don't know anything else. I send another text, telling him it's urgent. A third, saying I'll pay double if he gets back to me by noon.

I glance out the wall of windows. The sun isn't up yet, but the sky's turned gray over the trees. There's a clock on the cooktop. 5:22.

I hit the stored number on my phone list for Pete Miller, my second-in-command at the freeport. Yeah, it's obscenely early. That's why I pay the big bucks.

"Trap," he says, like we're in the middle of a conversation. Three years we've worked together, and I haven't caught him sounding surprised yet. I only know I woke him because he keeps his voice low, probably trying not to wake Michael.

"I need the security tapes from last night."

"What happened?" he asks. Before I can answer, I hear Michael groan a question. Pete's voice is muffled as he says, "Go back to sleep. I have to go into the office."

I'm pretty sure Michael says something rude about my mother, but I don't really give a fuck. "What happened?" Pete asks again. From the hitch in his voice, he's pulling on clothes. A moment later, I hear the crank of his garage door opening.

"I had a visitor who left unexpectedly. I need the plate number of her Uber, so I can track her down."

Another guy might smirk at the *her*. Pete just says, "I'll be there in five."

I'm not a totally heartless bastard. I put on a pot of molokai coffee and take cream out of the fridge.

I can't believe this is my plan—going through security footage to get a fucking lead. But I was passed out cold when Ella left my bed—literally and figuratively drained.

For the hundredth time, I replay the scene in my head. Something woke me. I called her name from the top of the stairs. I heard the front door close. I bolted downstairs, but she was already halfway down the driveway, running like she was chased by zombies. I heard the clank of the front gate's one-way turnstile and Ella shouting, "Go! Go!" and the slam of a car door.

And then I was standing in the middle of Diamond Freeport with my junk hanging in the wind, listening to crickets and rustling leaves.

How far could she have gotten in six fucking hours?

And more to the point—what made her leave?

Yeah, I was rough. She used her fucking safeword.

But she stayed after that. We *talked* after that. I told her shit I've never told another living soul—the truth about the Beast, about why I'm so fucked up.

Now, the Beast acknowledges that betrayal by slithering inside my chest. I tap the counter with my right hand, playing an imaginary scale to put it back in its cage.

Pete comes through the door to the garage as the coffeemaker beeps. Without changing the arc of his footsteps, he gets a mug from the cabinet, pours his coffee, tops it off with cream, and slurps down half the cup, all while leading the way to my home office.

Without waiting for permission, he sits in my desk chair. The Diamond Freeport logo floats on my computer screen. He taps in his username and password, enough clacking of keys that I know he's following our rigorous security protocols to the letter.

He attacks the keyboard. Waits a moment. Attacks again. A window opens on the screen, a black-and-white image of my two-story home, the public-facing side with its blank wall of windowless white brick.

“Around what time?” he asks, fingers poised over a command box.

How the fuck do I know? I was sleeping.

But in the kitchen, before I knew what would happen upstairs, I’d told her she had to be out by midnight. She’d nodded, a tiny, tight acknowledgement. No argument at all.

Was that what this was? A misunderstanding? Did she think she was doing what I’d ordered her to do? That nothing had changed in the hours since I told her my rules?

I shake my head, answering my own question. She knew what happened between us. She knew my rules were off the table.

“Start at eleven,” I say.

Pete nods and types the instruction. The screen shifts for a heartbeat, and then it settles down to the same image of home. Cold. White. Impenetrable.

A clock runs in the bottom of the frame. 11:15. 11:30. 11:43, and the front door opens.

I suck in my breath when I see her. I’ve already made her taller in my mind. Made her hair longer.

She’s wearing my boxers and the black T-shirt I’d thrown on to cruise Debasement. Her feet are bare.

Pete’s smart enough not to say a word as she closes my front door and looks toward the road with panic.

“Freeze it,” I command.

Pete catches her looking over her shoulder, back at the door. She’s stepping awkwardly on the paved driveway, like her feet hurt. She’s holding something in her arms. I squint and imagine I can make out a bundle of black fabric. It must be the dress she painted on before she got to Debasement.

“Okay,” I say, and Pete advances the tape frame by frame. It only takes a moment before she’s gone.

“Just a…” he mutters, his fingers already flying over the keyboard. Another camera angle comes up, this one from the

freeport's six-story office tower. "There!" Pete says, freezing the screen. "It looks like she dropped something."

He replays it as I nod. We watch her hesitate, turn back, then hobble out of the frame.

"What do we have from the front gate?" I ask.

Pete works his magic and two screens open. One camera is pointed back, toward the warehouse under construction. Another is pointed out, toward the road. We watch Ella limp to the gate, fumble with the turnstile, turn it the wrong way, then figure it out.

"There!" I say as she stumbles toward a waiting car. "Her Uber."

Pete shakes his head. "That's not an Uber." He does something, turning up the contrast. Does something else, and the picture tightens, pixelating as everything gets larger. He points, though, at a glowing white oblong on top of the car. "That's a taxi."

"Who the hell uses taxis anymore?"

He doesn't bother answering. Instead, he says, "From that shade of gray, I'm guessing it's Dover Yellow Cab."

"Call them," I say. "Find out where they took her."

I don't care about privacy laws. I don't care about confidential business records. I don't care if Pete needs to bribe some idiot dispatcher with last month's profits from the freeport.

"Where are *you* going?" he asks, as I reach the door.

"To find out what she dropped."

From the camera footage, it's halfway down the drive. I ignore the paved circle in front of the office tower. I don't bother looking at the bulldozers guarding the warehouse construction site. I cover the distance in an easy lope, my Nikes keeping me steady where her bare feet slipped.

It's lying in the middle of the drive. Sideways. Like something dead.

I pick it up like it's as heavy as the dumbbell I threw around the gym.

I close my hand around a black stiletto. My fingers squeeze the polished leather like I can force it to talk. Like it can tell me how to find the woman who fled my house ten minutes before midnight.

ALIX



DAY 2

My head bobs above my body like a balloon on a string, and I don't know if it's because of the drug they gave me or because I'm still chained to my metal table like an animal in a cage. Maybe it's because of the pain running from my wrists to my ankles like an electric river. Maybe it's because I'm starving.

I remember eating an apple before I left my apartment for Debasement, along with a heel of cheese from the back of the fridge. Trap gave me strawberries, but I was too nervous to eat more than a few. And he fed me chocolate after I used my safeword. Two pieces.

But I'm dreaming of real food now—a steak, or grilled lamb chops, or the roast chicken my mother used to make for Leo's and my birthday, before we turned nine. Before she died.

Even worse than the hunger is the thirst. I read once that tortoises absorb water from their bladders. Too late for me, even if I had that superpower. I've fouled the floor between my legs.

Trap gave me a bottle of some fancy water that probably cost a hundred bucks. He poured it over a mountain of ice

cubes. I drank it like it was nothing special, like I wasn't about to be chained in this insane hell.

How long have I been here? And how long before I die?

Because that's the worst of all: Klaus Herzog is going to kill me. I've seen his face. I know his name. He isn't going to let me go, and there isn't a person on earth who will search for me.

My family—alienated, every one of them, because I chose Leo's side over and over and over again.

My professors—oblivious, because I'm through with classes, only owing them my dissertation, whenever I get around to finishing it.

My landlord—relieved, because he can follow through on my eviction without my pleading for an extension.

Trap. Trap can't find me because I ran away in the middle of the night. Worse than that—Trap can't find me because I gave him a fake name. I wanted to be someone different from who I am. I wanted to forget all of Alix's rules, all the ways she—I—knew how to say no. Even *if* Trap looks for me, he'll try to find Ella Locke. He has no idea that Alix Key exists.

I'm testing my chains for the thousandth time when the door opens. My head shoots up and my heart starts to pound. I try to wet my lips, to beg, to plead, but the words die in my throat as Herzog leans against the door with the same nonchalance he had before.

"Thank me," he says.

"Why?" I manage to growl.

"Why, *Master*?" he corrects.

The feral cat inside me wants to argue, but I've always prided myself on being a quick study. I don't want to be strangled again. "Why, Master?" I drip the words like acid.

He reaches into his pocket and extracts a key. Dangling it between his thumb and forefinger, he lets it catch the overhead light. "This is the key to your bonds. How will you thank me if I unlock them?"

He's already raped me. If he tries to shove his cock in my mouth, I'll bite it off, I swear.

"Answer, Slave," he says, and his name for me damages something deeper inside me than muscles and bone.

"Wh— What do you want? Um...Master."

"Wrong answer, Slave."

To my horror, my throat tightens, and I realize I'm on the verge of tears. I'm too tired to play games. Too hungry. Too sore. "What's the right answer?" I ask, remembering just in time to add, "Master."

He pushes off from the door. Glancing at the mess on the floor between my legs, his nose wrinkles. But he walks to the head of the table, and he says, "The answer is..."

Pausing dramatically, he turns his key in the lock on my wrists—right first, then left.

My arms sag, carried to the table by their own weight, and I can't help myself. I scream at the fire raking through me, at the flame of overstretched muscles finally releasing. My chest locks in protest, and I can't draw a breath. My heart feels like it's shattering my breastbone.

Herzog ignores me. He's close enough that I can wrap the chains around his throat. I could pull the links tight. I could strangle him, here and now.

I can't move a pinky, much less transform into a ninja assassin.

"The answer is..." he repeats, and he unlocks the bond around my right ankle.

"Whatever..." he says, knocking my right heel from its stirrup, sending my quad and hamstring into immediate spasms.

"I..." he says, stepping wide of the filth and unlocking my left foot.

"Want."

He knocks that heel free as well. The cramps are so intense, I can't straighten my legs.

But that doesn't matter because he yanks me around to the side of the table. His hands are like pitchforks, catching me, tossing me, and the wind is knocked from my lungs. My chest is crushed against the table, my face mashed into the hard metal that somehow stinks of my sweat and terror.

My legs scream and my arms are on fire and I miss the chance to push back from the table, to fight for my freedom. His claws dig into the back of neck, pinning me without mercy. His other hand slaps my ass, hard enough to make me buck, and then I hear him spit.

For a moment, I don't understand. Then he wipes his slimy hand against my back entrance. No man has been there before. I've panicked at the mere thought.

I scream as he fills me, splitting me in two. The pain short-circuits everything else—my arms, my legs, my nose crushed into the table.

He's killing me. I'm going to die.

I must pass out, because I wake on the floor. Every muscle in my body trembles. My teeth chatter like I'm stranded on a glacier.

The toe of his shoe digs into my side. "What do you say, Slave?"

I need to answer. He'll punish me if I stay silent. But I can't imagine what words he's looking for. "Wh— What do I say, Master?"

"You say thank you."

Thin bile rises in my throat. If I had any food in my belly, I'd splatter it on his fine leather loafers.

"Slave?" he asks, and I hear the warning.

"Thank you, Master." I say the words, even though something deep inside me screams.

He nods, but he also draws back his shoe, planting a kick beneath my ribs. As the pain explodes, he says, “And now, Slave? What do you say now?”

I don’t want to do it. I can’t do it. But his foot is already pulling back again. I gasp out the words before he can deliver another kick. “Thank you, Master!”

He shifts his weight, and I know I haven’t been fast enough or loud enough or grateful enough. But I’m literally saved by the bell when his phone rings. He takes it out of his pocket and taps the glass screen, barking something in German.

I open my mouth to scream. This is my chance to let someone know I’m here, to beg for rescue. But Herzog’s foot lands a devastating blow to my belly. I’m still gasping for breath when he closes the door, locking me tightly inside my prison.

TRAP



Two days and a thousand bucks later, the president of Dover Yellow Cab finally decides a bribe is better than a hailstorm of trumped-up consumer complaints to the Taxi and Limousine Commission. I find myself standing in front of a run-down apartment building, the destination of Ella's midnight ride.

I scan the list of tenants by the intercom, looking for Locke. I'm not surprised when I come up empty. Half the tags are missing. Most of the ones that *are* displayed have multiple names crossed out.

I drop my thumb on the buzzer for 1A, but the box stays silent. I try another one at random, then three more. Nothing. The whole system is shot.

Cupping my hands around my eyes, I peer through the scratched glass of the front door. A table by the stairs sags under a bunch of cheap plastic daisies. A row of mailboxes hangs on the wall, but I can't make out any labels. A trashcan overflows in the corner.

"May I help you?" The question comes from behind me, in the tart tone of my fourth-grade English teacher. I turn around and face a woman who looks like she was born in the early

years of George Washington's presidency. She's dragging a wire cart filled with two paper grocery bags.

"I'm looking for a friend," I say. "I tried buzzing her apartment, but she didn't answer."

"Hmph," the woman says. "The intercom hasn't worked for three and a half years."

"Maybe you know her," I say. "Ella Locke?"

"Ella..." she says. And then again, like it's the chorus of a song: "Ella..."

"About this tall." I hold my hand at chin level, mine, not hers. "Long brown hair. Brown eyes. My age, maybe a little younger."

"Ah!" she says. "You mean Roberta. She and her husband moved in last month."

Ella's not married. No one's that good of an actor. "My friend doesn't have a husband."

"There's Alix," she says doubtfully. "The one with that good-for-nothing brother."

"No," I say. "*Ella*." I wonder if she's hard of hearing.

"She might be sub-letting from someone. Against the rules, but that doesn't keep the Sherman students from doing it."

I thank her and offer to help with her groceries, but she looks at me like I'm an axe murderer. "No thank you," she says. And then she stands there waiting, like I couldn't wrestle her keycard out of her hand with one arm tied behind my back.

But I head back to my car. It's not like I'm going to learn a hell of a lot more by pushing my way inside. I take out my phone and shoot another text to Asher, telling him to track down the landlord.

That task completed, I head into town. I park at one end of the main drag. There isn't much of a downtown anymore; Wal-Mart and Amazon have seen to that. But I step into the

ambitiously named Fashion Queen Boutique and flash a grin at the hungry-looking blonde behind the register.

“I hope you can help me,” I say.

“So do I,” she purrs, pulling her elbows back just enough to shove her tits in my face.

I can’t piss her off. Not if I’m asking her questions. So I take a second to admire the goods before I put Ella’s shoe on the counter. “I’m hoping you carry these.”

I see her start to flirt, start to say something witty and entertaining and stupid enough to make me want to puke. My face must give me away, though, because she shakes her head and pushes the shoe back toward me. “I’m afraid our customers are looking for things a little more...matronly.”

“Any idea who might sell something like this?”

“Zappos, online—”

“I want to buy in town.” I have no idea if Ella shops in Dover. Chances are, she buys online, like the rest of America. But I don’t have a chance in hell of bigfooting the internet.

Ms. Fashion Queen steps back, crossing her arms over her ample chest, clearly disapproving. Maybe she’s pissed that I interrupted her. Maybe she’s decided I want to buy the shoes for myself, that I’m Dover’s butchest drag queen. “You could try Mary Beth’s. On Washington, over by the university.”

“Thanks.”

I try Mary Beth’s. And The Shoe Closet. And Clarice’s and Love Bug and Elan. My last hope is a tiny shop on Parker, a block away from Sherman’s football stadium. The pink and white sign says Daisy Chain.

“Oh yes,” says the man behind the counter. “Isn’t that heel *delicious?*”

“I’m trying to track down the woman who bought this one.”

“Let me guess,” he says. “She ran off at midnight, leaving you nothing but her shoe.”

“How the fuck—”

“Cinderella?” he says. “Glass slipper? Prince Charming?” He gives me a sly wink.

“Cinder...” I start to repeat.

No. She couldn't have lied to me. She couldn't have made up her name.

Because if she isn't really Ella Locke, then there's no way in hell I'll find her. And I'll never have a chance to slip free from the Beast again.

Lips pursed, the guy holds out his hand. “May I?” he asks.

I hand it over, taking care not to brush against his palm. Even so, the Beast isn't happy. I tighten my fingers into a fist and squeeze out a rapid five-count.

“My, that's quite a scuff,” the guy says. He clicks his tongue as he studies the scraped side of the shoe, where it dragged against my driveway after falling from Ella's arms. But he turns to the laptop computer he has balanced on the counter. “Size seven. We use one system for both point-of-sale and inventory,” he says, typing with precision. “We can track exactly when we sell every pair of—” He cuts himself off. “Hello, beautiful!”

My belly flips. “You've got it?”

“November 25 of last year. Oh, my...” he says.

“What?” I can barely get the word out.

“She bought a dress too. One of our finest. And some matching *unmentionables*—quite an ensemble.”

Sweet holy fuck. He just described every stitch Ella wore. “I need her credit card number.” Sixteen digits, and Asher'll have a street address before sunset.

He gasps in surprise. “We could *never*—”

“I need her fucking credit card number. Not the expiration date. Not the three-digit code. The goddamn number.” I fish out my wallet. I came prepared, even though I never really

thought I'd succeed. "Come on. What'll it take? Five hundred?"

"Sir—"

I slap down another bill. "Six?"

"Sir!" He slides my bribe back to me, using the tip of one buffed fingernail. Before I can pick up the money, he turns his computer around to face me. He points at a single, devastating word. "She paid cash."

Who the fuck buys four hundred dollars worth of clothes and pays cash?

"Do you have anything?" I ask. "A name? A phone number?"

He shrugs, spreading his hands wide. "She paid *cash*," he repeats, enunciating like he's speaking a foreign language.

I nod because I don't have anything else to do. I pick up the shoe, and head toward the door.

"Sir?" the guy calls after me.

I turn in slow motion, like the world has stopped around me.

"Your...change?" he says, nodding toward the six hundred-dollar bills by his computer.

"Keep it," I say. And I walk back to the car, wondering what the fuck I'm going to do now.

ALIX



DAY UNKNOWN

I learn a lot.

I learn to assume Presentation Posture when Herzog enters the room—on my knees, spine straight, hands planted on my head with elbows out to best display my chest.

I learn to swallow Herzog's cock without gagging, forgetting my stupid plan to bite him because he says if I try, he'll break my jaw and still make me suck him off, and I believe him.

I learn that Marta will arrive in her shapeless blue smock three times a day, bringing me food and water because Herzog wants some meat on my bones, because fucking me is like fucking a goddamn skeleton.

I learn that Marta doesn't speak a word of English—*Ich spreche kein Englisch*.

I learn that Herzog will beat Marta into unconsciousness if I stand too close to the door, if I linger too long in a corner, if I take too long to eat, if I wolf my food so fast I vomit.

I learn how to shit and piss in a bucket.

I learn how to count the ceiling tiles over and over and over again because there's nothing else to do.

And I forget, too.

I forget what it feels like to wear clothes.

I forget the taste of toothpaste and the scent of soap.

I forget the softness of a pillow and the warmth of a blanket.

I forget what it's like to spend a single, solitary day without being raped, without being beaten, without being kicked for saying the wrong thing or for saying the right thing too slowly or for no reason at all.

I forget what it means to be human.

And then, after too many days for me to count, Herzog stands in the doorway and tells me it's time to come back to the world.

TRAP



DAY 90

“I don’t know what to tell you, boss.” Harry Asher shifts in the chair across from my desk, sending up a cloud of stale cigar fumes. “They’re all dead ends.”

“You missed something.”

He squints. “You pick up a PI license in your free time?”

Scowling, I tap the report he handed me. For the money I’ve paid him over the past three months, I expected something more substantial. What he’s got here only fills five pages.

“Walk me through it again,” I command.

He could tell me to go fuck myself, but he knows who’s got deep pockets. He keeps his voice level. “I started at Debasement. Talked to the bartender, Caitlyn Young. She said she’d never seen your girl before. Remembered the two of you leaving, though, and said Ella...”

He checks himself. I prompt, “Said Ella what?”

Asher clears his throat and for the first time in all the years I’ve known him shows a little discretion. “Said Ella didn’t seem your usual type.”

Fair enough. Ella's special. She has the power to kill the Beast. Not that Caitlyn Young would have a clue about that.

When I don't respond out loud, Asher takes that as permission to go on. "I checked with a buddy on the force. No cars ticketed or towed as abandoned within six blocks of the bar, not through the end of July."

Shit. A car registration would have gotten me an address, easy. But I'm not really surprised. Ella never said anything about leaving her car behind.

Asher continues. "I took the glass you gave me and called in some favors at the lab. There were three sets of prints. We ruled out two—yours and your cleaning lady—who was a real bitch about coming in to give exemplars."

Maybe. But she didn't complain to me. I make a mental note to raise her already generous pay.

"The third set must be your Ella's, but she isn't in AFIS. So she isn't police or military. Hasn't worked with kids or taken the bar. Probably isn't a truck driver or funeral director or a priest."

I could have told him all those things. Well, maybe not the bit about working with kids.

Asher goes on. "I retraced your steps with Yellow Cab. You already had the destination on her trip, but I talked to the driver. He remembered the fare, mostly because the dispatcher told him it was a rush, in the middle of the night. And because he couldn't get through the gate here. He honked three or four times and was about to drive off when she came running out."

I nod, wanting to hurry him through the facts I already know, but that would defeat the purpose of this review. Like there actually *is* a purpose to this review. Like I have any hope of finding Ella after three fucking months.

"She was a mess when she got in the cab," Asher says. "Out of breath. Crying. She didn't talk, except to tell him her address. She paid him twenty bucks on a six-forty fare and hauled ass before he could offer her change."

There it was again—extravagant use of cash. But nothing about Ella had said she was rolling in dough. I work with billionaires every day. I know the casual ease that comes from a bottomless bank account. Ella didn't have it.

And even if I read her wrong, even if she was worth more than Bezos, Musk, and Zuckerberg combined, why would she spend her time in the shithole building I tried to get into?

“Go on,” I say.

“The apartment building went up in 1948. It's changed owners four times. Current guy is a shitass slumlord—owns nine of these joints around town and near as I can tell hasn't hired a plumber or electrician in the past twenty years.”

My shoulders tighten on Ella's behalf. She shouldn't have to live under those conditions. If Asher notices my reaction, he doesn't let on.

“The joint's got a pretty standard layout. Six apartments each on six floors. It was summer when I asked around, so the vacancy rate was high—douchebag owner says the place runs ninety, ninety-five percent full during the school year. It's two miles from Sherman, close enough if you have a car.”

“How many units were occupied in June?”

“Twenty-two. And yes, I've talked to someone in each of those units. Finally caught up with the last ones two weeks ago—newlyweds, Roberta and Caden. Too busy fucking like rabbits to answer their goddamn phones.”

“And no one knew her?”

“No one even blinked at the name.”

“And the pictures? The ones from my security cameras?”

“Gotta be honest with you. The resolution on those things is for shit. But one old broad said she'd seen her.”

My pulse quickens. “And?”

“I showed her a picture of Taylor Swift. Old bitch swore *she* also lived in the building. Said she held the door for her, just the other day.”

Fuck.

“Okay,” I sigh. “What else?”

“You already crapped out with the shoe. No way to track who bought it. I double-checked every woman’s clothing store in the city limits, just in case there was some miracle coincidence and two women bought the same pair at two different places. No dice.”

“We’re missing something. What if she wasn’t living in that firetrap? What if she just visited someone there?”

He shakes his head. “I’m telling you. I talked to someone in every occupied unit. I even tracked down the two people who moved out that month end. No one knew her.”

What was I overlooking?

Ella was celebrating her birthday.

She drank Grey Goose at the bar. Belvedere at my house.

She was nervous as hell in Debasement and not much better here. She talked too much, too fast, until the vodka kicked in.

She rattled off strings of words I didn’t begin to understand—something about parts of the brain and neurons and shit like that.

Parts of the brain. A bar near campus. An apartment two miles from the university. “She’s a student at Sherman,” I say.

Asher gives me a skeptical look. “Since when is jailbait your idea of a good time?”

I frown. “She’s not that young. A grad student, maybe. In biology. Or medicine. Maybe a new professor.”

Asher shrugs. “Easy enough to check on that.” He reaches across my desk to take back his report. “I’ll show her picture around campus and get back to you.”

I wait for him to stand, but he doesn’t. Instead, he looks out the window. He studies the pens corralled on my desk. He fidgets with the spiral binding on the report he reclaimed.

“What?” I ask.

“You don’t want to hear this, boss.” And he clearly doesn’t want to say it.

“When has that ever stopped you?” I ask.

He finally mans up and meets my gaze. “Here’s the thing. You’ve been looking for what? Three months? If Ella Locke wanted to see you, she’s had plenty of time to swing by for a private little tour of the freeport.”

He’s right.

He can’t be right.

I spread my hands on my desk. “Opinion noted,” I say.

“You’re not gonna do anything crazy, boss?”

“Like what?” I say, my embarrassment turning to sarcasm. “Kidnap her? Chain her to my bed?”

“I’m just saying—”

“And I’m just saying fuck you. If you don’t want the job, I’ll hire someone else.”

Asher huffs, and I’m hit with another wave of stale cigar. He defends himself. “It had to be said.”

“And now you’ve said it. So get the hell out of my office and let me get back to work.”

Before he shuffles out, I’m on the intercom with Pete. “Can you swing by?”

“I’ll be there in five.”

He makes it in three, like I knew he would.

“What’s up?” he asks, dropping into the chair just vacated by Asher. He sniffs, wrinkles his nose, and shifts to the other guest chair.

“Where do we stand on security upgrades?”

He rattles off facts and figures from memory. The warehouse will be online in thirteen weeks; it was designed

with top-of-the-line in mind. This office building has been retrofitted.

“The front gate will be ripped out and replaced as soon as the construction is complete,” Pete concludes. “With all the heavy equipment moving in and out for the warehouse, we didn’t want to do the more sensitive biometrics twice.”

“What about cameras?” I ask, thinking about the lousy images Harry’s shopping around.

“We’ve got six feeds online now. Another four will go up when the warehouse is finished.”

“And the quality of those cameras?”

Pete releases another flood of numbers, along with abbreviations I’ve never bothered to learn.

“Those are the best on the market?”

“They were when they were installed. There’s nothing older than three years.”

“What about gear that’s not on the market?”

“I don’t follow.” An edge of wariness sharpens his voice.

“What’s being used by the government? CIA? NSA?”

“That sort of information isn’t exactly available on their Wikipedia page.”

“But you can find out?”

He nods. “I can make some calls. But whatever they’re using, it won’t be cheap.”

“Do you think I give a fuck about the cost?”

Pete looks like I kicked his puppy.

I sigh. “We’ll use it as a selling point. Our clients won’t get better security anywhere on the planet.”

Pete takes out his phone and taps out a message to someone I probably don’t want to know more about. “Anything else?” he asks carefully.

“What about my house?”

“Biometrics are on target to be installed when we do the gate.”

“No. I mean cameras.”

This time, he stares at me like I’m suggesting we spend the afternoon on Mars. “You’ve always said you don’t want cameras in the house.”

I don’t. I need some place where I can live in absolute privacy.

“I’ve changed my mind,” I say. “Put them on the front door and the garage. The feeds can go exclusively to my account. Bypass our security office.”

I can share the images if I ever need to.

Pete nods, like I haven’t just blown up every principle I’ve ever had for living and working at the freeport. “Anywhere else?” he asks neutrally.

I shake my head. “Just the doors.”

I’ve never made any part of my house public. But if I’d had cameras installed when I brought Ella into my kitchen, Asher would have decent images to show around now. Images where Ella wouldn’t be confused with Taylor Fucking Swift.

“You’ve got it,” Pete says. “I’ll get a price quote, and we can schedule installation at a convenient time.”

“Now,” I say. “Now is convenient.”

Pete sets his jaw. “I’ll get you a timetable by close of business.”

He leaves, and I stare at my computer screen, like I can concentrate on anything related to business. My revelation with Asher feels different from anything I’ve come up with in the past three months. Placing Ella at Sherman University feels *right*.

We’re close now.

So close.

I'll finally find her. Learn why she ran away. And then I'll do whatever I have to to get her back.

ALIX



DAY UNKNOWN

Herzog doesn't actually say it's time to come back to the world. He says, "You reek."

But he leaves the door open when he walks away. I hesitate to follow him, expecting some trick, but he calls out, "Slave!" His voice is thick with impatience.

I walk down a normal hallway in a normal house. It's big—there are four rooms on the left side of the hall and five on the right. But it's not a medical building like I expected. It's not an institution.

The farther I walk, though, the more I realize that nothing about this place is normal.

None of the rooms—they're all bedrooms—have doors. A naked woman sprawls on one of the beds, her eyes too dull to track me as I pass. Two women laugh in another room, their voices floating down the corridor. But when Herzog stalks past, they stop talking and throw themselves to their knees, assuming Presentation Posture in their matching blue smocks.

All three women have bruises—on their arms, their legs, their faces.

Large windows look out on a sunny day. There's a clearing around the house, enough grass for a dozen football fields. Trees grow beyond that, tall and leafy. I spy a few patches of red and some clusters of gold. I'm surprised to realize that summer is fading to fall.

The hall ends at a bathroom. As with the bedrooms, there's no door in sight. Three toilets sit between dividers. Four sinks line up under windows. Open cabinets hold caddies like the one I used in college, each filled with personal belongings—brushes and toothpaste and soap.

An industrial-looking shower fills half the room—four shower heads, each with its own controls. The tiled floor slopes gently to a drain. Large dispensers are attached to the wall—shampoo, I assume, and conditioner and soap. A table to my right has shelves beneath, each one filled with white towels that look like they were stolen from a mid-range hotel. Nothing fancy, but there are bath sheets and body towels, hand towels and washcloths, each folded with perfect precision.

A large woman stands next to the table. If Central Casting were still in the business of sending up actors for unimaginative directors, she'd stand in for prison guard. She's the first woman in this place who's wearing ordinary clothes—a mustard-colored camp shirt tucked into khakis that are giving up the battle to span her bulging waist. Her mud-brown hair is pulled back in a bun so tight it has to hurt.

She isn't bruised.

Herzog says, "Do everything Ursula tells you to, Slave." He leaves without waiting for my acknowledgment.

Ursula crosses to the shower controls, and her beefy arms bunch as she turns on the water. An incredulous corner of my brain registers the excellent water pressure. I jump back from the cold splash, but the water heats quickly, curling steam toward the ceiling. I barely smother the urge to laugh at the incongruity of first-rate plumbing in Hell.

"Come," Ursula says, waving an impatient hand. "*Beill dich!*" I assume that's German, same as Marta speaks.

I actually don't need her encouragement to step under the water.

Heaven.

Hot and wet and clean, clean, clean. Months of filth sluice off my body. I catch my breath and turn my face up, directly under the pressure of the shower head. I arch my neck and hold my arms out at my sides.

And just like that, I'm transported out of this miserable prison and into Trap's fairytale castle. He had a shower like this, with multiple jets and endless hot water. I showered for him, shaved for him, did whatever he needed to drive the demons from his skull. And he paid me back a thousand times, teaching me how to banish my own dark past.

"I wash," Ursula says.

Trap is nowhere in sight, of course. Trap is from Before. I'm never seeing Trap again.

Ursula's thick fingers close around my wrist and she yanks me out of the water. I gape as she pulls on heavy rubber gloves. They're textured, like they're designed to exfoliate a giant. She pulls a load of soap from one of the wall dispensers, rubs it between her covered palms, and starts at my neck.

Ursula's touch is completely dispassionate. I could be a statue, or maybe a dog that rolled in muck.

She scrubs hard. She raises my arms and spreads my legs and methodically separates every finger and toe. "Rinse," she says three separate times, waiting for me to step back under the water before she raises fresh lather.

When she's satisfied with my body, she hands me a washcloth. "You do face."

I wet the cloth and soap it up. I scrub where I can, including my ears, but I stay gentle around my eyes and lips. After I rinse, I submit to her inspection.

"Is good," she says. "But no hair."

I start to turn to the dispenser marked *Shampoo*, but Ursula grabs my wrist.

“No hair,” she repeats, and she pulls me toward the table.

It only takes a moment for her to strip off her gloves and spread a towel on the floor. When I stand on it, she reaches into a box and produces a pair of barber’s shears.

“No!” I raise a hand to my hair, tangled from months of abuse.

“Too much knot.”

I shake my head, using my fingers to show her I can comb through the snarls. But I can’t.

“Too much knot,” she repeats. And before I can beg for another solution, she slices away a massive hank, letting it fall to the towel below.

I’ve been locked in a prison cell. I’ve been beaten. I’ve been raped. But somehow, this shearing is the worst. I love my hair. It’s long and thick and straight, with highlights of gold and red in the deep, dark brown.

Ursula chops it off at chin length, then goes back to trim it shorter, no more than an inch all around. As I stare at the snarled clumps on the floor, she takes a hand towel to my head, rubbing vigorously. Then she digs in her box again and produces an electric shaver.

The buzz sounds like a dentist’s drill as she rakes it over my skull.

“Now,” she says. “You wash hair.”

While I shampoo the fuzz she’s left me, she collects the towel. She shoves the mess into a trashcan, which somehow makes more sense than a hamper.

I pass on conditioning after I rinse. There’s no need. Besides, Ursula has produced another tool from her box—a straight razor. I wonder if she’s going to slit my throat. I wonder if I care.

“I shave,” she says. She foams shaving gel under my arms and scrapes me bare. She shaves my arms, too, from shoulder to wrist, even though my body hair is fine. My legs get the same treatment, hips to toes.

I expect her to go after my mound. That's what Trap required. But he let me shave myself. And he gave me the comfort of a safeword.

Slaves don't get safewords.

In any case, Ursula doesn't go there. Instead, she says, "Rinse." The water feels like heated oil, flowing over my bare body.

"Dry now." Ursula waits with a towel. She wipes my hands and feet like I'm a baby.

"On table," she says. I hesitate because I can't imagine why she needs me there. "Table," Ursula enunciates, as if the problem is her accent.

I sit on the edge of the table. There aren't any chains here. Nowhere to anchor manacles. I try to tell myself I'm safe.

"On back," Ursula says.

I want to refuse. But I have no doubt that she has Herzog's permission to do whatever it takes to make me comply. And I definitely don't want to bring him into this room.

I lie on my back.

Ursula rummages in her box. When she returns to the table, she holds a wooden stick in her left hand, along with a sheaf of white papers. Her right hand holds a white plastic jar. The letters on it are large enough to read across the room: Brazilian Bikini Wax.

"No," I say, slamming my knees together.

"Hurt more if you fight."

"No," I repeat.

"I get Mr. Herzog?"

"No," I moan, but we both know the argument is over.

Ursula places a dry washcloth in each of my hands. "You squeeze," she says. And then she methodically coats me with wax, ripping out the hair on my mound and between my legs,

front and back. I mangle the washcloths and crush my lips between my teeth, determined not to scream.

As she uses tweezers to catch a few strays she says, “Next month not so bad.”

Next month. I feel faint until I take a few deep breaths.

“Come,” she says, and I follow her down the hall on trembling legs. She stops at the second room on the right. “You live here now.”

The bed is like the others—bondage-ready headboard and footboard made of iron bars. There’s a plastic shower caddy by the pillow, with a toothbrush, a tube of toothpaste, and a bar of soap. A calendar sits on the nightstand, the page-a-day type that belongs in an insurance office, or maybe a mechanic’s garage.

September 19.

I’ve lost three months.

Ninety days of hell in that prison room at the end of the hall.

“You dress now,” Ursula says. She points to the open-door closet. Three garments hang there, identical blue smocks. I look for a dresser or cubby. “Where is my underwear?” I ask.

“No underwear,” Ursula says.

“Panties,” I clarify. “Bra.” I mime at my waist and chest.

“*Nein*,” she says. “You hurry. Bad to make Mr. Herzog wait.”

I pull on the smock. Somehow, going commando down the hall, I feel more naked than I’ve been since I woke here. Ursula walks me down to the first floor of the house, and then to a luxurious office.

Herzog stands behind a desk that could double as an aircraft carrier. He’s looking out the window when we arrive. There’s a flock of crows out there, thirty or more. They’re strutting and squawking and fighting over something, a hunk of meat the size of a Great Dane.

A lifetime ago, I made friends with crows who visited my apartment—Gorgeous and Nosy, Grabby and Caw. I gave them peanuts, and they brought me presents. Gorgeous gave me a battered metal heart the night I met Trap.

Herzog's crows don't look like they bring anyone treats.

Realizing I've been staring at the birds too long, I assume Presentation Posture, dropping to my knees and planting my hands on my head. I'm kneeling on some sort of rug, Turkish maybe. My knees think I've died and gone to heaven.

"Thank you, Ursula," Herzog says, turning away from the birds. "That will be all." When she's gone, Herzog prowls toward me like one of the carnivorous birds outside. His eyes narrow as he evaluates Ursula's handiwork.

By now, his casual violence shouldn't be a surprise. But the false modesty of my blue smock somehow makes his rigid fingers seem more invasive. He drags me to my feet, then clamps an arm across my throat. My back is anchored to his chest. His fingers feel like tree branches as he rams them into my freshly waxed pussy. He checks my ass as well, then wipes his hand across my belly.

"Finally clean, Slave," he says.

There was a time when I would have pointed out that I could have been clean at any point in the past three months, if he'd freed me from my cell. I would have told him he was clearly suffering from sexual sadism disorder with psychopathic characteristics, and I suspected substantial dysfunction of his prefrontal cortex and orbitofrontal cortex, with potential involvement of a damaged or diseased amygdala.

But now, I simply say, "Yes, Master."

He strides over to his desk and picks up a black band. Before I can react, he fastens it to my wrist. "This is your lifeline, Slave."

"Master?" I raise the band to my face. There's a black glass window, like a high-end electronic watch.

Herzog stalks to his computer and types something with stiff fingers. The band buzzes and its screen lights up: *Office*, it says, in clear, bright letters.

“Good slaves have the right to move around the house. But you have ninety seconds to report to any summons, at any hour of the day or night. Late arrival will be punished.”

“Yes, Master.” I vow not to report late. I’ll need to study the layout of the house.

“Failure to report will result in a demerit.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Any attempt to leave the house will result in a demerit.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Any attempt to harm Ursula or me or any of my guests will result in a demerit.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Very well, then. Go.”

I hesitate, in case this is a set-up. After three months of living in a ten-by-ten cell, the idea of walking the hallways—lifeline or no lifeline—is intoxicating.

He barks in irritation, “Go!”

“Yes, Master,” I say, inclining my head in the bow I know he likes.

But he stops me before I reach the door. “One more thing, Slave. Three demerits, and I feed your body to the crows.”

ALIX



DAY 90

When I get back to my room, a woman is sitting on my bed. She stands the moment I enter, smoothing her blue smock with a nervous smile. She reaches up to twist a curl of dark hair around her finger. Her brown eyes are huge, and her skin is so pale it looks almost lavender.

“I wait for you,” she says, but she immediately corrects herself. “I *have been* waiting for you. I am Lilyana.”

I shake her extended hand. “Alix,” I say.

“This is present—a present—for you,” she says. She hands me a small white pill.

“What is it?”

“Tylenol. One of my *gadzhe* bring it to me. Is safe. It help with...” She waves her hand in front of her waist. I’m sure she’s waxed clean like me.

“Thank you,” I say, and I dry-swallow the pill.

“You in Holding Room long time,” she says. “More long time than any other girl.”

I shrug. God knows I wasn’t trying to break any record.

“Master, he very mad at Leo when you come.”

“Leo! You know my brother?”

She nods. “He *gadzhe* many girls. He very nice man. Very kind man.”

Her very nice man sold me like the runt of a litter from a puppy mill. And that was *after* he got us evicted from our apartment.

But we’re talking about *Leo*. My brother. If anyone can get me out of this hellhole, he can.

I lean close to Lilyana, pitching my voice to a harsh whisper. “Where is he? Can you get a message to Leo?”

Impossibly, her eyes go even wider. “No one tell you.”

“Tell me what?”

She bows her head and clutches at the fabric of her blue smock. Shifting from foot to foot, she refuses to meet my eyes.

“Lilyana,” I say, bargaining that she’s conditioned to respond to a firm tone. “Tell. Me. What?”

Her throat works. When she finally forces out a response, it’s a whisper. “Leo is dead.”

The floor tilts. My knees melt. Before I can fall, Lilyana seizes my arm and guides me to my bed.

As I collapse on the edge, she mutters something that sounds like Russian. Then she starts to explain, her English more broken as she hurries to get out words.

It takes me a while to piece it together. Leo was dealing drugs for Herzog—the meth that was his personal downfall, but ecstasy too.

And Crash. I make Lilyana repeat that, and explain it to me, because I’ve never heard of the drug. Crash is something new, cooked up by Herzog’s scientists. It’s specifically designed to addict young users.

Leo was in charge of Crash distribution from Baltimore to Philadelphia. But he started using the drug himself. And his

girlfriend convinced him to sell on the side, to hold back money from Herzog.

When Herzog came to collect, Leo begged for his life. He knew Herzog kept a string of women, slaves for himself and the kingpins of his drug empire. Leo offered me to Herzog so he could clear his debt.

“That doesn’t make sense,” I say to Lilyana. “Herzog can buy women anywhere. What’s special about me?”

Her full lips twist into a frown. “At first, not about you. About Leo. About making him pay.”

My mind is spinning, but I manage to grab onto her words. “You said, ‘at first.’ What happened? What changed?”

Lilyana blushes, the violet-tinged skin around her eyes turning a mottled pink. She whispers, “Leo tell Master you virgin.”

“But I *wasn’t*—” I cut off my protest.

Lilyana’s eyes are very wide. “Master very very mad when you get here. When he find lie. Leo beg and beg but Master too mad.” She shrugs. “So Leo dead.” And then, perversely, she corrects herself. “Leo *is* dead.” And then she says, “That why Master keep you in Holding Room so long.” She repeats: “Master very very mad.”

I shake my head. I can’t believe it—any of it.

Leo and I are closer than any brother and sister I’ve ever known. Every year, he writes me a letter for my birthday, using the secret language we created when we were four.

He’s the only person in the world who knows I cheated on a math test in fourth grade. He beat up Billy Masters for popping my bra strap when we were twelve. He took the blame the one time I got drunk in high school, at senior year Homecoming when I stumbled into the front hall and vomited all over our stepmother’s brand-new Manolo Blahniks.

Leo loves me.

And I love him, even when the meth runs his life. That’s why I chose his side when our father cut us off. That’s why I

told my friends I'd stick with him when they said we were codependent, when they said I was being used.

But Leo doesn't know me as well as he thinks he does.

Didn't know me.

Can Lilyana be right? Is Leo really dead?

I wasn't a virgin, not when Leo made his deal with the devil. I lost my virginity to Jason Carter a month into graduate school. Jason and I dated—with regular sexy times—for three and a half years, until Leo's using finally broke us up.

And yet...

Leo wasn't entirely wrong.

Jason may have taken my virginity, but he never gave me an orgasm in exchange. No one had—not even myself.

Until Trap.

Until the night I decided I'd had enough of Leo's drama, enough of his lying, enough of his using. Until I said *no* to the life I'd led for far too many years. I vowed to say *yes* to everything the night I went to Debasement. And Trap showed me exactly what I'd been missing.

It was Leo's fault I ran out on Trap—Leo got us evicted from our apartment. It was Leo's fault I rushed home by midnight, wearing Trap's boxers and T-shirt. Leo's fault I didn't waste time on a shower, didn't hide the evidence of a night of filthy, satisfying sex.

So, yeah. Leo lied to Herzog.

And Herzog was very, very mad.

“You're certain?” I finally ask Lilyana. “You're positive Leo's dead?”

She nods. “Marta tell Rosa. Rosa tell Rayna. And Rayna tell Simona and Pavla and me.” She twists her hands in her smock. “Leo is—” She corrects herself. “Leo *was gadzhe* to Simona and Pavla and me.”

“What does that mean? *Gadzhe*?”

She frowns. “Is special friend. Bring present for sex. You say...boyfriend?”

Leo used these poor women. He used them, and he sold me to Herzog knowing I’d become one of them.

For the first time since I woke in the Holding Room, I give myself permission to name how I feel about that.

I. Hate. Leo.

It doesn’t matter that he thought he was selling me for just three days.

It doesn’t matter that my night with Trap especially enraged Herzog.

It doesn’t matter if Leo was high when he made the deal or desperate when his life was threatened or devastated when he found out the truth.

My brother knowingly sold me into slavery.

And I’ll never, ever forgive him.

TRAP



Her name is Alix Taylor Key.

She's twenty-six years old. Her birthday is June 21, the day we met at Debasement. The night she came to the freeport.

She's a grad student in the psychology department at Sherman University. She's completed all of her classes and all of her teaching requirements. Once she finishes her dissertation, she'll have her PhD. Her thesis is about addiction-specific support group use and relapse in substance abusers.

She lived with her brother, Leo Aidan Key, in the building where the Yellow Cab took her the night of June 21. She was evicted the next day.

Asher got me all of that. And he got the name of her ex, too, some asshole she dated for a few years. He offered to interview the guy—Jason Carter—but I said I'd do it myself. I told Asher to see what he can dig up on the brother.

Jason Carter. Now I have a name for the jizzstain who treated Alix like shit.

Not that he beat her. I'd have his balls for that.

The one night Alix and I spent together, she didn't seem afraid of physical pain. If anything, she was more trusting than

she should have been. If loverboy had beaten the crap out of her, she would have been more wary.

But for the last three months, I've been haunted by the memory of Alix's face as she came. She'd sworn she wasn't a virgin, and I believed her. But even if her cherry'd been popped, no one had ever taken the time to make her feel good.

I'm willing to bet Jason Carter never went down on her. Probably couldn't find her clit with an app and a flashlight.

Alix deserves a hell of a lot more than that. And the longer I have to wait to talk to this Carter shitbird, the more pissed off I get. I track him down in one of the classrooms on the Sherman campus. He's got his back to the door as he erases the whiteboard at the front of the room.

"Got a minute?" I ask, my voice too loud on purpose.

He jumps.

I close the door behind me. This is too easy.

"Certainly," he says. "Mr...."

"Prince," I say. "Trap Prince." I could give him more, a smile at least. But I don't feel like making him comfortable.

He shifts the eraser from his right hand to his left, like he's going to offer to shake, but I don't make a move. He ends up squeezing the eraser and looking past me to the shut door. I've got a good five inches on him and thirty, forty pounds. And my weight is muscle, trained in a krav maga dojo and maintained in a home gym.

"I've only got a minute," he says, like he isn't about to crap his pants. "The next class comes in..."

No one's using this room for an hour at least. The hall outside was empty. I let him sweat it for a full minute.

"Academic buildings are closed to the general public," he finally says. "If you'd like to make an appointment, you can ___"

"I don't need an appointment." Now I do step closer. The blood rushes from his face like I just flushed a toilet.

“Mr....” he repeats, fumbling for his phone in his pocket.

As much as I’d like to see if he can unlock the thing before I break his fingers, I actually don’t have time to deal with campus rent-a-cops today. Or worse, Dover’s finest. So I give him my name again: “Prince.” And I say, “I have a couple of questions about Alix Key.”

I watch him closely. I want to see if he’s worried about her. If he knows she’s been gone for three fucking months.

Nothing. But an annoyed scowl quickly crosses his face. “You’re with Leo, right?”

“Leo?” I ask, like I’ve never heard the name before.

Now he doesn’t know what to think. I see him consider going for his phone again. He checks the door, too. But he’s not quite as much of a tool as I thought he was, because he settles on giving me the truth.

“Her junkie brother. If Alix is in some sort of trouble, you can be sure Leo’s involved.”

“Go on.” My fingers curl into fists. Leo—wherever he is—had better be praying Jason Carter doesn’t know his ass from his elbow.

“Look, Alix and me, we broke up months ago. The day after Thanksgiving last year. Leo’s crap was bad enough. But Alix wouldn’t see it. *Couldn’t* see it, maybe.”

Thanksgiving. The guy in Daisy Chain said Alix went on her shopping spree on Black Friday. So she bought her fuck-me shoes just in time for this little cocksucker to cut her loose. Her shoes, and that dress, and the panties and bra I can still see if I close my eyes...

And this Carter pussy thinks *Leo’s* dangerous enough to send an off-the-rails motherfucker like me to rough him up, but he still walked away from Alix. Didn’t make sure she was safe. Didn’t care that she was gone.

I’m obviously not bothering with a poker face, because Carter quickly says, “Maybe it sounds messed up, my walking

out. But they were the definition of codependent. Classic textbook case.”

“You’re right,” I say, but I only give him a second to look relieved. “It does sound *messed up*. So if she’s been missing for three months, where do you think she is?”

“*Three months?*”

I’m glad I shocked him. I wait while he thinks.

“Three months...” he says again. “I don’t know what to tell you. Alix cut ties with pretty much everyone. None of her friends had any more patience for Leo’s crap. Her family cut both of them off years ago.”

“But if something scared her?” My question grabs me by my nutsack. I don’t want to admit it—even to myself—but *I’m* the reason Alix ran. Me and all the shit I put her through to get past the fucking Beast.

Carter shrugs. “I’ve got nothing.”

I’m wasting my time here. He doesn’t have a fucking clue. But I take one of my cards from my wallet and slap it on the desk beside us. “Call me if you hear anything.”

I see the dismissal in his face; he’s going to chuck my info the second I walk out the door.

“*Anything*,” I say, squaring my shoulders and taking a step forward. I know I’m in his personal space, and I don’t give a flying fuck. He scrambles for my card and puts it in his pocket without reading the fine print.

That’s as much as I’m going to get from him. I turn toward the door, my mouth setting in a grim frown when I hear him exhale.

“Hey,” he says, just before I’m out of there.

I stop without turning around.

“Why do you care? Who are you to Alix?”

I do turn then, nailing him with a stare I hope feels like a bottomless pit. “I’m the man who fucked her till she came four times, screaming my name and begging for more.”

I don't bother looking back as I hit the hallway.

ALIX



DAY 107

I'm astonished—and disgusted—by how much a human being can adapt.

I've been out of the Holding Room for over two weeks.

Three days after earning my lifeline, I launched English classes for my fellow captives. I half-expected Herzog to punish me, but there must be a market for women who know more than a few verbs and random body parts.

I'm the only American in the house. Lilyana, Pavla, and Simona are from Albania. Rosa and Rayna are from Moldova. Marta is from Germany, like Ursula and, of course, Herzog.

We eat our meals at a table in the kitchen, like we're in a college cafeteria. Ursula makes sure we clean our plates. Herzog likes his women with a little extra flesh.

The food is surprisingly good—plenty of fruit and vegetables, fresh baked bread we can smell in our rooms upstairs, and a new dessert every night. The one catch is, we're only given spoons. No forks or knives, nothing that can be used as a weapon.

Aside from mealtime, and the hour I've commandeered for English class every morning, we're left to entertain ourselves. There's a television in a room on the ground floor, which is usually tuned to soccer matches or action movies.

There's an unlimited supply of cosmetics, and most of the women spend hours each day creating dramatic effects. The only danger is Herzog hating the result. Rosa ended up with a black eye when she dyed her hair green with Jell-O. Simona's jaw was sore for a week after she painted her fingernails black.

We aren't allowed pens. No knitting needles or crochet hooks. Paintbrushes are out, too—that weapon thing again.

Marta—Herzog's favorite—convinced him to give her a guitar. But Ursula must have heard Pavla and Rayna joking about making necklaces out of the strings. It didn't take a university degree to realize necklaces could be pulled tight enough to strangle someone. The guitar was gone before dinner.

Most of the women spend a lot of time sleeping. Of course, there's "work" too—that's what Rosa calls it. But Lilyana calls them "dates."

The men come and go from the house. They seem to represent all aspects of Herzog's business—fat-cat importers who oversee foreign shipments, lieutenants who manage distribution in cities up and down the East Coast, chemists who develop and manufacture new drugs. When Herzog is pleased with their reports, he summons one of us as a reward.

Actually, Herzog summons one of *them*.

He hasn't handed me over to anyone else.

Herzog's men seem to enjoy bringing their women little treats. It probably helps them forget they're assaulting slaves who have no say in the matter. The *gadzhe* buy forgiveness with chocolate and hand cream and Tylenol.

Herzog, of course, doesn't bother giving me gifts. Now that I've become his personal whore, he yanks my lifeline at least once a day. At first, he tested me. The instant I sat on the

toilet or stepped into the shower, the band on my wrist buzzed. Ursula had to be spying for him, and probably Marta, too.

I've learned to sleep with my wrist pressed against my ear, because he calls in the middle of the night. He's interrupted more meals than I can count. Once, he buzzed me every hour on the hour for thirty-six hours straight.

During that torture sequence, even *he* couldn't get it up every time. Instead, he entertained himself by penetrating me with objects. He made me lick the candles clean, along with the glass dildos. I don't know what he did with the butter knife.

The other women are grateful I'm around.

Which makes all the difference the morning my lifeline buzzes and Herzog orders me to meet him in the library. I know where the room is, on the ground floor at the back of the house, but this is the first time I've been inside.

A wall of windows looks out over the back yard. The crows are busy out there, tossing something around in the lush grass. It's the size of a chicken, or maybe a human head. Herzog turns to me with a gleam in his ghost eyes.

"Slave," he says.

I drop into Presentation Posture. Polished mahogany bookcases line the wall behind me, and I have a vague impression of a jumbled mess, books cascading from floor to ceiling. From my knees, I can see that every horizontal surface in the room is covered with volumes.

"Master," I say, my heart pounding because I've taken too long to answer.

"You're a lazy cunt."

"Yes, Master." Agreement is easier than punishment.

"Stupid, too."

"Yes, Master."

"You can use a little toughening up."

"Yes, Master."

He lurches toward me, capturing my jaw in the pincers of his fingers and thumb. He yanks my head left, then right. “These books belong on shelves,” he says.

“Yes, Master.”

“In order.”

I’m supposed to agree. I’m supposed to say yes. But I have to know what he expects if I have any hope of satisfying him. “Which order do you prefer, Master?”

His eyes gleam, and I’m not sure if he’s pleased or disappointed that I thought to ask.

“Alphabetical will do,” he says.

I’ve spent enough time in academic libraries to know that’s not enough of an answer. “By title, Master? Or by author?”

A slight nod, and his lips tighten into a smile. We’re playing a game, and I’m a good enough opponent to hold his interest. For now. “Author will do.”

“Yes, Master.”

“Very well,” he says, stalking toward the door.

Still on my knees, I’m amazed at my good luck. This is the first time he’s used my lifeline without raping me.

He stops, though, before moving into the hall. “Finish by supper, Slave. Or you’ll get a demerit.”

I wait until he’s gone before I stagger to my feet. Supper. That’s a little more than eight hours from now. Less, if I eat lunch, which I must do, because I have to show Ursula a clean plate.

I start to study the books that tumble over the shelves, the low, wide coffee table, the couch, and its matching armchairs. There are leather-bound sets of the classics—Dickens and Austen and the collected works of Mark Twain—scattered across the room. There’s an Encyclopedia Britannica, fifty volumes or more, tossed randomly from the windows to the door. There are at least five hundred cookbooks in half a dozen languages.

But most of the books are about art—stack after stack about painters and sculptors, architects and photographers. Some of the books are little pamphlets, listings from gallery shows decades ago. Others are huge treatises, complete with full-color reproductions on thick, glossy paper.

I collect an armful and start to sort them, trying to approximate where they'll end up on the bookshelves when I'm done. It only takes a moment to realize the shelves need to be cleared first.

A sliding ladder lets me reach the top shelves. It's tricky, though, climbing down with my arms full. Demerit or no demerit, I can't risk a broken neck. And I'm certain to be punished if I damage books by dropping them.

Sweat prickles in my armpits. My blue smock is streaked with dust. The room seems to have grown since I entered.

I rethink my strategy. Maybe I should collect the outliers first—the literature, the encyclopedia, the cookbooks. Get them out of the way, before I tackle the art books.

Or maybe I should prowl through the stacks, putting all the As to the left, and all the Zs to the right. Ms can go in the middle.

But that might not be right either. Some letters are a lot more common than others. The actual middle of the collection might not track the middle of the alphabet.

My head aches. My mouth is dry. I glance out the window. The crows have finished their morning treat, and now they're strutting through the grass, searching for morsels they may have overlooked.

Before I settle on a sorting strategy, it's noon. Time for lunch. I hurry to the kitchen and take the last place on the bench. Ursula serves us massive bacon sandwiches; they're slathered with mayonnaise and dripping with fresh-cut tomatoes. I gulp mine without tasting a bite.

Lilyana says from the far end of the table, "Alix? You are good, yes?"

I shake my head. "No. Master gave me an assignment."

“Assignment?” She doesn’t know the word.

“A job,” I say. “Task. Something I have to do.”

“What is your assignment?” She masters the new vocabulary, looking pleased as she licks mayonnaise from her fingers.

“I have to put all the books in order in the library. By supper.”

Pavla chimes in. “Books? Master make Rayna and me move books yesterday. Take off shelf. Put on table. On floor.”

Rosa nods. “I move book too.”

Simona says, “And me. Many many book.”

Herzog made the women scramble the collection. That’s why the library is so chaotic. That’s why I don’t have a prayer of meeting his deadline.

Lilyana must read despair on my face. “We help,” she says.

“What?”

She gestures at the table. “All of us. We help.”

The other women nod. Marta whispers, “You tell us what to do, and we help.”

Tears spring to my eyes. I glance toward Ursula’s bedroom, just off the kitchen, where she retreats while we eat. I wonder if I’m allowed to have assistants for Herzog’s impossible task.

It doesn’t matter if I’m allowed or not. If I don’t rely on the other women, I’ll never finish on time. I’m certain to get a demerit.

“Okay,” I say, pushing back from the table. “Let’s do this.”

Back in the library, I find twenty-six books, one for each letter of the alphabet. I place them around the room, in order. I remind the women we’re going by author’s last name. They dive into the stacks, carrying each book to its appropriate letter.

At first, everyone works with deadly concentration. There are a few whispered debates—what to do with books by De Brunt (D or B) and Le Marque (L or M), whether to put McMullin before or after MacPherson.

But as we manage to clear surfaces in the room, the women start to talk. They practice their English, pronouncing titles and authors out loud. They show off their favorite painters. They laugh at some of the ugliest nudes.

By 2:00, all of the books are in twenty-six piles. We dive into the As, alphabetizing by the second letter. Simona scrambles to the top of the ladder, and we set up a book brigade, passing the volumes to her in perfect order.

At Lilyana's suggestion, we leave a little space for misplaced books we find on the floor. Soon, we move on to the Bs, then the Cs.

My sisters flit like cheerful bluebirds, their smocks billowing around them as they work. Rosa strikes a pose like one of Degas's ballerinas, and everyone laughs. Rayna stands like a colossal Egyptian statue.

We get through the enormous pile of Ms. We're positively buzzing by the time we get to S. Some names, like Smith, are so common we have to sort by authors' first names, but everyone is an expert on alphabetic order by now. T. U. V. The W pile is larger than I would have guessed—Waters and White and Williams all add up. But then we fly through X and Y and Z.

The floor is clear. The tables and the couch and the chairs are clear. The shelves are filled with the massive collection, every book pulled to the front of the shelf so the entire wall looks uniform and orderly and perfect.

I'm shaking as I look around the room. My sisters are glowing, despite the dust on their hands and faces. We pull each other into a circle, hugging each other tight as the tall-case clock in the hall chimes six.

My lifeline buzzes.

Library.

I look up to see Herzog standing in the door. His jaw is set. His eyes are narrow.

All seven of us drop to our knees, hands on our heads, arms akimbo. Herzog snaps his fingers. “Out,” he orders. But his glare pins me. “Not you,” he says. “You stay.”

Lilyana is brave enough to look back from the doorway. She bites her lip as the other women leave. But then she follows them out, and I’m alone with Herzog.

“You think you’re smart, Slave?”

I stare straight ahead. “No, Master.”

“You think you can use those cunts whenever you want?”

“No, Master.”

“You broke the rules—in spirit, if not in fact. I should give you three demerits and be done with you.”

He won’t. He likes torturing me too much. He’s not ready to kill me. Yet.

But it takes him a century to say, “No demerit today. But you’ve certainly earned a punishment.”

I have to say it: “Yes, Master.”

He crosses the room in four long strides, stripping his belt free as he moves. He wraps the leather around his hand, letting the buckle trail on the floor.

“Stand up, Slave.”

I do. I don’t know if my knees have turned to water because I’m physically exhausted from moving books, or if I’m terrified by the jangling buckle as Herzog moves behind me.

“Elbows on the coffee table, Slave.”

I comply, even though the position leaves my bottom high in the air, the backs of my thighs dangerously exposed.

“Count, Slave.”

And I do. I count. One blow for each letter of the alphabet.

By E, I'm bloody.

By L, I'm screaming.

By T, I'm praying to the crows outside, begging them to storm the house, to break the glass, to swarm me and put me out of my agony.

Herzog leaves me after Z. But not before he drops a book by my head. I have to blink hard to make the letters stop swimming but I finally make out the title: *Death, Torture and the Broken Body in European Art*.

The editor is Decker. I'll shelve it in the morning. If I can stand by then.

ALIX



DAY 132

Three weeks later, I'm heading to my bedroom after a marathon session in Herzog's office, where he kept me under constant threat with a stapler as I sucked him off, no hands allowed. Before I'm halfway up the stairs, I hear a flurry of conversation. The women are gathered in Simona's room, clustered at the foot of her bed. I join in, just to see why they're making such a fuss.

Spread out on her bed is a blue gingham dress. I recognize it immediately—it's what Dorothy wears in *The Wizard of Oz*. But *this* Dorothy doesn't get a short-sleeve white blouse to put under her jumper. Instead, the dress on Simona's bed is cut low enough to bare her breasts. The skirt is short too; it barely reaches mid-thigh. The outfit comes complete with hair ribbons and bobby sox and stiletto-heel ruby slippers.

"What the—" I start to say, but Pavla is already squealing.

"Halloween!" Her accent draws out the word. "Master's party tonight, with all his special guests!"

Simona and Rosa nod wisely; they've been here long enough to celebrate the holiday before. The rest of us are more leery as we follow Pavla to her room.

Her bed is draped with a version of Audrey Hepburn's dress from *Breakfast at Tiffany's*. The black sheath is cut to her navel, leaving nothing to anyone's imagination. Her shoes are black, and she has a wig and rhinestone jewelry.

Lilyana gets Marilyn Monroe's white *Seven-Year Itch* dress, made even sluttier by cutouts over the nipples. Marta has Bo Derek's swimsuit from *10*, cut lower in the top and higher on the thighs than the original. Rayna receives an abbreviated version of Jane Fonda's costume from *Barbarella*, and Rosa gets Princess Leia's *Return of the Jedi* slave outfit. Each costume comes with a wig and shoes. Of course, no one gets underwear.

I head to my room with trepidation. The other women hover in my doorway as I see Herzog's idea of a good time.

Catwoman. The latex suit glints beneath the overhead light, looking too small for a woman half my size. The neckline will stretch to the top of my throat; my arms and legs will be fully covered. A corset lashes across the belly, tight, tight, tight. There are cut-outs for my breasts and a gap giving access to my pussy and my ass. My shoes are thigh-high boots that end in five-inch stiletto heels.

A matching mask has pointed cat ears and holes for my eyes. Metal rings loop beneath the trimmed edge for my nose, and it takes me a moment to realize I'm staring at an O-ring gag. Once I've put on the hood, my mouth will be forced open, my jaws restrained to keep me from biting down.

We're all knocked silent by the costume.

Sure, each of us will be dressed up like some horny teenager's wet dream. But the other costumes are good-natured. Almost fun.

Mine drips with danger. It's cruel, in a way that only Herzog could dream up.

Lilyana finally steps forward. She puts her arm on mine. "Alix," she says. "Be careful."

Before I can answer, Ursula fills the doorway, her heavy biceps jiggling as she claps her hands for instant attention.

“Go,” she says. “Dress.” Everyone, even Lilyana, scurries past her, rushing to their own party gear. Ursula holds up a tube labeled Silicone Lubricant. “I help,” she says.

And I suppose she is a help. She pulls my costume over my arms and legs with grim determination. She snaps the holes into place around my breasts, framing my nipples with German precision. She does the same around my waist, muttering over my waxed mound like she didn’t just strip it clean two days ago.

She waits for me to exhale before she tightens the corset, repeating the maneuver half a dozen times. I feel light-headed by the time she yanks on my first boot. Those get tightened as well, black leather laces cutting into my calves, my knees, my thighs. By the time she’s finished, I feel like a dozen saws are carving my body into steaks.

My lifeline buzzes from the bed, where I set it as Ursula spreads lube over my arms. I glance at the screen. *Dining Room*.

“Go,” Ursula says. And then, almost like she cares what happens to me downstairs, she adds, “Be good.”

I totter toward the steps like Bambi on his frozen pond. If I could just draw a full breath... If the shoes were an inch shorter... If my jaw weren’t extended in a parody of a pout, the O-ring gag tight against the corners of my mouth...

Herzog stands at the front of the dining room, wearing a tuxedo. He’s holding a pocket watch in one hand and a glass of whiskey in the other. “Late!” he bellows, and all eyes turn toward me.

It looks like our Halloween visitors have gotten an early start on trick-or-treating. I’m facing a dozen men, their flushed faces and ruffled hair making me suspect Herzog is handing out drug samples. More than one guest has a visible erection.

Who are these men?

How can they stare at me with open lust, like I’m a charcuterie platter for them to consume? How can they watch Herzog eye me with such measured menace? How can they

ignore my trembling knees, barely able to carry me across the room?

I sink to the ground in front of Herzog, honestly unsure how I'll stand again in these shoes. I plant my hands on either side of my cat ears. I push my elbows back to display my bare breasts in Presentation Posture.

"You're late," he announces again, slipping the watch into a pocket on his waistcoat. "What happens to slaves who are late?"

"They're punished." I say softly, my voice almost smothered by my latex prison. My tongue twists around the gag, and I slur the last syllable.

"I can't hear you," Herzog taunts.

"They're punished! Master!" I shout, gag be damned.

He throws his drink in my face. "Mind your tone, Slave."

My eyes burn as Scotch drips from my hood to my breasts. Herzog snatches something off the dining room table. I can't see what it is, but I hear it, whistling through the air. The cane falls squarely on my breasts, slicing into both nipples.

I can't help myself. I cry out as the force of the blow topples me to one side. A red line rises across my chest, fire gnawing down to my heart.

My howl enrages him more. "Stand, Slave!" he commands.

My thighs strain, but I can't get my feet under me. I have to put both hands on the ground to push up. That exposes my ass, and Herzog pounces before I can protect myself. A trio of lightning bolts explodes across my bare bottom.

I focus on standing, because that's the only thing that will keep him from carving me to the bone. "What do you say, Slave?" he demands, bending the cane between his hands, demonstrating its flexibility to his guests.

I know the answer I have to give. I hate him for it. I hate myself for it. But I force my pinned lips around the words and try to enunciate: "Thank you, Master."

“Who shows you mercy you don’t deserve, Slave?”

“You do, Master.”

“And what will you do for me, Slave?”

“Whatever you command, Master.”

The party guests are close around us now. They’re humming. Throbbing. I can smell them—cologne and sweat and a funk of sex. The pack stares at me, leering at the stripes Herzog left on my tits and ass.

But Herzog says, “I’ve brought other playthings for my guests.” He juts his chin toward the door, and I see my sisters, displayed in their classic-movie finery. “Girls,” he calls. “I trust you’ll make my friends happy.”

The guests crow as the other slaves move into the room.

Herzog pins me with his colorless eyes. “Slave,” he says. “It’s time you met my brothers. Jonas,” he says, using the German pronunciation and indicating the man closest to him. “And Ansel.” His gesture brings in a man looming near the table.

Jonas is a head shorter than Herzog, but he outweighs him by thirty pounds, every ounce of it muscle. His shoulders are far too broad for the tuxedo jacket he’s wearing.

Ansel is darker than his brothers—his close-cropped hair looks like burned wheat, and his face is swarthy. He stares at my red-striped breasts like an engineer calculating the live load of a bridge. His satin-striped tuxedo trousers are tented with a massive erection.

All three men have the same frigid eyes, a pale, pale blue that looks like it was stolen from a corpse.

“Gentlemen?” Herzog says, gesturing toward the door that leads to his private study.

I feel the blood drain from my face. I’ve been in that room before. Herzog pressed my cheek into the upholstery of a claw-footed chair as he rammed into me from behind. I honestly believed he’d use the fireplace poker all the ways he promised. My knees were carpet-burned for a week.

The study is private. The study is soundproof. My legs start to buckle as Jonas and Ansel follow their brother's lead. Herzog grabs my right biceps, pinching hard enough to bruise through the latex. "I told them I've trained you. Don't make me a liar."

By the time Herzog closes the door behind us, Ansel has stripped off his bow tie. His trousers are unzipped, his angry red cock bobbing in front of him.

Herzog laughs. "So eager, little brother! You always were the first to gulp down your cake."

Ansel says something in German, angry curse words I think, but they make both Herzog and Jonas laugh. Ansel's fury twists his dark face as he whirls on me. "On your knees, Slave!"

I obey, as if Herzog gave the order himself.

Ansel steps close, letting his pants slip to his knees. "Suck my twelve-inch cock," he growls.

It isn't close to twelve inches, but that hardly matters as he rams it past my gag. The metal rings saw into the corners of my mouth. Tears spring to my eyes, and I start to choke. Ansel laughs and grips my cat-eared hood. Squeezing hard, he fucks my helpless mouth.

I can't breathe. I can't swallow. Because of the gag, I can't tighten my lips to make him finish faster. I have no choice but to grab his hips, to fight for balance as he rapes my throat.

"*Hure*," he calls me. And *fut*. And *fotze*. The words boil out of him, faster and faster. He's pumping hard, fingers so tight on my head that I expect to hear bone crack.

I brace myself for him to come, knowing he'll expect me to swallow every drop. My fingers tighten on his hips.

And a fist crashes against my cheek. Blood bursts in my mouth, from the blow or the gag, I can't be sure. I'm knocked sideways to the floor.

Herzog's laughing like he's just been told the world's best joke. Ansel howls in pain, covering his spit-drenched cock

with both hands. Jonas shoves him out of the way.

Jonas is the one who hit me. Growling that I took too long to get his brother off, Jonas throws a beefy arm around me and drags me to my feet.

He used the time I spent blowing his brother to strip off his tux. His muscles look like an unhealthy combination of steroids and countless hours in a gym. He folds me over the arm of the claw-foot chair like I'm a paper doll. Before I can brace myself, he plows into my pussy from behind.

I was already having trouble breathing in my corseted catsuit. Now, with my belly pressed into the chair, I'm reduced to short, sharp gasps.

Jonas shouts something in German to Herzog. Herzog utters a refusal, but Jonas insists. The muscle-bound monster is still pounding into me when the office door opens. There's a flood of sound from the party outside. Jonas drills an elbow into my spine, holding me in place as he continues to pump away.

The door finally closes. "Here, you bastard," Herzog says.

Jonas pulls out of me with a grunt. "This'll ruin your chair."

Herzog shrugs. "She'll work off the cost of a replacement."

I manage to twist just enough to see what Herzog delivered. It's an object I've seen every day since I was freed from the Holding Room. It belongs in the kitchen, on the scrubbed wooden table where we women take our meals. It gleams with polished copper, a handle worn smooth from years of use, a spout that ends in a tapered point.

The olive oil cruet.

"Now all of us can play at the same time," Jonas says.

I bellow through my gag, wordless, desperate. I arch my back into the dagger point of Jonas's elbow. I kick blindly with my heels, praying I'll catch him. Shrieking like a banshee, I try to break free.

“Enough,” Herzog says. The deadly promise in his voice freezes me almost as quickly as the icy metal he presses against my cheek. My cat mask gives me just enough peripheral vision to see the gun in his hand.

I sink to my knees and freeze.

“That earns you a demerit,” Herzog says evenly, pressing the weapon into my face. At the same time, he jerks his chin toward Ansel. “There,” he says, indicating the ornate table beside the chair. “In the top drawer.”

Ansel obeys. “What is it?” he asks, peering inside a clear jar with a metal lid.

“Crash,” Herzog says.

The drug Herzog created in his illegal lab. The drug that stole my brother, that broke him so thoroughly he sold me to this monster.

Herzog makes a show of opening the jar. He takes a lifetime to select a slip of tissue-thin paper. He displays the cartoon graphic of an explosion, with the word *CRASH* written in bright red.

“A double dose, I think,” Herzog says, adding a second slip of paper.

He drops it in my mouth, and there’s nothing I can do. My tongue works to reject the poison, but I don’t have the range to spit. The paper melts in my saliva. I have to swallow or choke.

The roof of my mouth is numb in less than a minute. I hyperventilate, my lungs squeezing to draw a full breath, and maybe that’s what makes the drug work so fast. I blink, and my eyes are closed for minutes, or that’s how it seems when I finally remember to open them.

My arms are made of lead. My legs are concrete. My head is as heavy as a treadmill.

Jonas clicks his tongue against the roof of his mouth, the sound of a man calling his dog to heel. Herzog taps my cheek with his gun. “Presentation Posture, cunt,” he says.

It takes forever to plant my hands on my head. My elbows feel disconnected from my body. I try to work out how to push out my chest, how to display my cane-striped breasts, according to the rules.

Jonas clicks again and grabs my wrist, dumping me over the arm of the chair. He digs his elbow into my spine, pressing hard enough that I hear something pop.

Once I'm pinned, he rams the cruet past my puckered ass. Forcing it deep, he tilts the copper pot high to fill me. The oil quickly turns to slime as he savages my back passage with his angry cock.

Ansel joins in, kicking my legs wide and giggling as his older brother barks instructions on double penetration. He's excited by the oil, by the slickness, by the mess.

Herzog seizes my cat mask in both fists, slamming his dick past my pinned lips. He hits the back of my throat until I gag.

I'm stretched between the three of them, pushed and pulled and pinned. I'm christened in sweat and blood and oil. I'm begging, screaming, ripping into a million crimson pieces.

An angel descends from the ceiling. Her wings are a color I've never seen before and she's singing in a language I knew before I was born. She shows me how to unzip my spine and leave my body. We dance out the window and up a rainbow path to the moon. She feeds me strawberries that taste like diamonds.

I weep because Trap fed me strawberries.

Trap kept me safe.

The men finish in the shell I've left behind. But Herzog offers them poppers and they find new ways to move me, new ways to use my empty body. After Herzog treats them to a new drug called Stag, I feel the heels of my boots shoved into places they were never meant to go.

My angel folds me in her wings and sings a silent word and I dissolve into the dust that existed before the universe was born.

TRAP



The speedometer clocks ninety as I clear the last of the traffic outside Philadelphia. I know I'm begging for a ticket, but I don't give a fuck. I just sent Asher his last check—a cool fifty grand. It wasn't the son of a bitch's fault he couldn't dig up more on Alix.

He got me her undergraduate transcript. And a sequence of prior addresses, each apartment more run-down than the last. He interviewed a couple hundred people—neighbors, professors, fellow students, even the woman who ran the greasy spoon where her brother worked, till he was fired for showing up high for the fifth day in a row.

No one knows where Alix might be living.

No one knows anyone who might be her friend.

More than once, Pete's told me to drop it. He says I look like a stalker. He says if she wanted to see me, she knows exactly where to find me. No private investigator needed.

But I know something's wrong.

Sure, I'd like to think I've got a magic cock, and no one woman could possibly stay away after a night of being drilled by me. But what happened that night was more than a great fuck.

I told Alix things I'd never told another living soul. And she trusted me too. She tore down walls she built for herself; she let herself be a different woman with me than she'd ever been before.

But when she fled down my driveway, she was desperate. Terrified. Not of me, I'm certain of that. She needed to get to something. Someone.

To the last person who saw her alive that night.

Alive—that's the word that scrapes my brain raw, every time I think it. Because Asher's turned over every fucking stone in the country. Alix isn't hiding anywhere.

And that might mean all my searching is in vain. She might be gone forever. She might be dead.

Fuck.

I pound my thigh with my fist, hard enough to bruise.

I've got one card left to play. One interview I told Asher not to make. And I refuse to let myself think about what I'll do if it yields nothing.

I take the exit off I-95 and start to make my way along surface streets. My phone chimes in with soulless directions through the Maryland suburbs far north of DC—turn left, turn right, turn right again. Before long, I'm in a neighborhood of huge houses on gigantic lots.

When my phone announces *arrived*, I'm in front of some architect's wet dream of a castle. I can see three turrets from the circular driveway. The front of the house is a mess of brick and stone and siding. The roof breaks into a dozen peaks and slopes, and the windows are every shape and size.

I slam the car door and stalk across the flagstone driveway. When I push the doorbell, it sounds like a thousand church bells echoing inside the house.

It takes a couple of minutes, but the door finally swings open. No one has to slip a security chain, and I don't hear a deadbolt turn. Out here in the lap of fucking luxury, no one gives a shit about security.

Of course I recognize the guy who greets me—Robert Key. Bob to his friends. Asher got me his picture, along with profiles of every partner in his law firm. But more than that, I see Alix’s high cheekbones in Key’s face. He has her hair too, even if his is thinning, chestnut turning gray. He also has her eyes—the golden brown of a good aged whiskey.

Those eyes narrow as he takes in my dark suit and narrow black tie. He glances past me to the Range Rover, its black side panels gleaming in the sun.

“I’m sorry, Officer,” he says. “My son isn’t here. He hasn’t lived with us for years, and I don’t have a clue where you can find him today.”

“I’m not looking for your son,” I say, handing over one of my business cards. “I’m trying to find Alix.”

His mask slips for a fraction of a second, but he locks it back in place before he tries to hand me back my card. “I don’t know where she is either.”

He steps back and starts to close the door, but I block him with the heel of my hand. “Please, Mr. Key,” I say. “I’ve driven all the way from Delaware. Can I at least ask a few questions?”

Before he can answer, a woman appears behind him. She’s wearing a black turtleneck sweater and wool pants. Her hair is frozen in an iron wedge, and her makeup looks like it was applied with precision lasers.

“What’s going on, Bob?” she asks her husband.

“Nothing,” he says. “This man is trying to find Alix. I told him we can’t help.”

Interest flashes in the woman’s eyes, the same attention a mountain lion pays to a deer. Bob might be ready to send me on my way, but she has other plans. I take advantage of her hunger, passing her another card. “If I could just have a minute, Mrs. Key?”

She actually takes a moment to look at my credentials. I don’t know what catches her attention first—the *President and Chief Executive Officer* below my name, or the diamond logo,

or maybe she sniffs out that “freeport” means money. She dissects my bespoke suit, and her quick glance at the Range Rover leaves dollar signs in her eyes.

Setting her manicured talons on her husband’s sleeve, she says, “It can’t hurt.”

Bob clearly feels differently. But Mrs. Key—Candace, according to Asher’s report—is pulling him back, gesturing for me to step over the threshold into the marble foyer. “Please,” she says, waving me toward a formal living room. “Make yourself comfortable. I’ll just get us some coffee.”

“That won’t be nec—” I start to say, but she’s already heading down the hall to the back of the house, presumably to the kitchen.

Bob grimaces but leads the way into a room that looks like no one’s ever set foot in it. I’m pretty sure those green leather chairs will break under my weight, so I opt for the straight-back gray couch. A leather-bound globe looms in the corner, and each of the four side tables holds its own glass and chrome statue. I feel like I’m in a fucking museum.

I wipe my palms on my thighs and tense my wrists. The Beast gnaws on the edges of my brain, telling me I never should have come here. I never should have left the freeport.

Alix’s father purses his lips, like he’s about to ask me a question. Thinks better of it. Sits back and stares out the window. Turns to me again. Gives up and throws a desperate look toward the hallway and the kitchen.

I could throw him a line. Lie and tell him Alix and I are old friends. Clean things up a bit—a lot—and say we’re dating.

Fuck that. He cut Alix out of his life. I’m not going to work real hard to make him feel better now. Grimacing, I wait for a cup of coffee I never asked for and have no intention of drinking.

A century or two later, Candace is back with a tray, balancing a carafe and four tall coffee cups in a china pattern I

should probably know is very expensive. “Cream?” she asks as she starts to pour. “Sugar?”

“Black is fine.”

That’s the way she takes hers, which I could have guessed. This isn’t a woman who indulges in extra calories. Her fingers brush mine when she hands over my cup, and I grit my teeth together, grinding out a five-count that shoots arrows into my temples.

Tom gets a shot of cream in his coffee and a stingy spoonful of sugar. From the look on his face, he wants more, but he’s afraid to ask.

I only have a moment to wonder about the fourth cup on the tray. Candace has already poured and is adding a thick layer of cream to it when another woman walks into the room.

She’s got Candace’s sharp nose and pointed chin. She’s wearing a sweater that looks like it shrunk in the wash and leggings that don’t do her ass any favors. She missed a hank of hair when she pulled back her ponytail. I *think* she’s aiming for “athletic and sporty” but I can see lines on her face, like creases from a pillow. It’s 11:30 in the morning, and I’d bet a month of freeport profits she just hauled her ass out of bed.

“Ava!” Candace says warmly. “We were just about to talk to Mr. Prince.” She turns hawk eyes on me. “Ava is my youngest daughter. Alix’s sister.”

“Stepsister,” Ava corrects, pounding the first syllable.

Candace covers up a scowl before she says to me, “Ava has a degree in economics from Harvard. She wrote her thesis on currency exchange in third world countries.”

Developing countries. I keep my correction silent because I don’t give a fuck about Ava’s credentials.

Candace points with her chin to the couch, instructing her daughter to sit beside me. Obediently, Ava takes her coffee and perches on the next cushion. She takes a dutiful sip before saying, “My mother says you run a freeport up in Delaware. That must be *fascinating* work.”

Like mother, like goddamned daughter. Ava's looking for a sugar daddy to rival what Bob spends on Candace.

The women watch me like man-eating gazelles, but I turn my head to bring Bob into our cozy little chat. "I don't want to keep you," I say. "But I'm very eager to find Alix. I hope you can give me an idea of where she might go if she needed to get away for a week or two."

Candace dives in before Bob can answer. "Why *Ava* is visiting *us* for a week or two! Just a bit of vacation. You know how stressful things can be in investment banking."

Ava's eyebrows knit in an expression that's probably supposed to show she's world-weary. She overshoots, though, and looks like she's holding back a fart.

I ignore both women and say to Bob, "Maybe you have contact information for some of Alix's friends?"

Candace doesn't miss a beat. "*Ava* has *dozens* of friends. Here in Potomac, in Cambridge, in New York City... She makes friends wherever she goes. Don't you, sweetheart?"

Ava agrees that she's a friend-making machine. I ignore her obedient enthusiasm, closing my palm around my coffee cup and trying one more time. "I know you and Alix are estranged," I say to Bob. "I wouldn't be here if this wasn't important. I'm very worried about her. I'll do anything it takes to find her."

Candace barely lets me finish before she says, "*Ava—*"

"With all due respect, I don't give a flying fuck about *Ava*." I use my boardroom voice, perfectly calm, but *Ava* gasps. Candace looks like I slapped her. Bob clears his throat and says, "Now, see here—"

I cut him off, too. "I won't pretend to know what made you cut Alix out of your lives."

That's a lie. Thanks to Asher, I'm pretty certain the Keys cut her off because of her junkie brother. But no one jumps in to give me an explanation. Not even an excuse.

I push myself to my feet. “If you hear from Alix, or if you think of anything that might help me find her, please give me a call immediately.” I put another card down in the middle of the coffee table. “Day or night. Anything at all.”

I’m halfway to the foyer when Candace says, “*Ava*, dear. Why don’t you show our guest to the door?”

“Don’t bother,” I say, lengthening my stride. From the strangled sounds behind me, Candace is giving her daughter further instructions on how to snare a mate. I don’t look back, half afraid I’ll see Ava whipping off her sweater and leggings. The door closes behind me with a satisfying thud.

Fucking animals.

Maybe I had this all wrong. Maybe the Key family didn’t throw Alix out. Maybe Alix ran away from them full-speed, willing to do anything to escape her carnivorous stepmother.

Back in the Range Rover, I start the engine and head back to the freeway, retracing my path through wealthy suburban hell.

This is it.

I’ve failed.

I’ve chased down every loose end, every hint I’ve ever had about Alix Key.

I’ve lost her. And the cavern that yawns inside my chest feels deep enough, dark enough, to crawl inside forever.

Torturing myself, I replay every word we shared that night, four months ago. In Debasement. In my car. In my home.

She was nervous in my kitchen. I made her wait there, made both of us wait, until she was sober enough to give consent to all the things I wanted to do her. Needed to do.

She babbled a little, never dreaming what would happen upstairs. She applied what I now know is her expertise about psychology. She said I could grow my business if I understood my clients’ needs. “Invite your best customers to spend time together,” she said. “Keep it exclusive. An even dozen.”

I laughed at her. But she answered like Diamond Freeport was the most important thing in her world. Invite my richest clients into my private life. Make them feel special, she said, and they'd be mine forever.

I tried to make her feel special. Even with the Beast screaming inside my skull—*especially* with the Beast screaming—I worshipped Alix's body.

Now she's gone, and I can't see a path to ever getting her back. But I can follow through on her idea. What did she call it?

The Diamond Ring.

Fuck it. I owe it to her to try.

I punch a button on the dashboard, and Pete answers before the first ring ends. "Here's what I need you to do," I say, without any preamble. The call lasts until I reach the freeport gates.

ALIX



DAY 157

The house has a sick bay, which I never found when I learned how to meet Herzog's calls on my lifeline. The room is larger than the Holding Room, but not by much. There's a hospital bed, and monitors, and cabinets filled with medical supplies.

At first, Dr. Collier visits every day. He shoots a syringe into my IV, something that forces me into shadowy darkness. He says it's better that way, staying sedated while I detox from the Crash. I'm left with terrifying dreams—that I'm roasting in a furnace, that my body is turning inside out, that every one of my muscles is linked to an electric generator. Between puking and screaming, my throat is ground to raw meat.

Excruciatingly, Dr. Collier only doses me with painkillers after the Crash has left my system—fentanyl at first, then morphine, until he steps me down to tramadol.

He cuts back his visits to every other day, then every third day, and finally once a week. He removes my stitches long before I think I'm ready, but he says I'll heal better that way.

Judging from the view out the window, I'm on the third floor of the house. I've never been up on this level before.

This must be where Herzog lives. I don't see him the entire time I'm recovering, but I can see the crows from here.

Marta brings me food every day. She shakes her head when I ask her questions, even though I know she understands me now. She sat in on our English lessons, same as the other women.

One morning, I wake to snow falling. It looks like it's been coming down all night, judging by what's collected on the bare branches of the trees at the far end of the clearing.

Ursula appears in the doorway. "Come," she says. "Dr. Collier say you better."

She takes my arm and half carries me down a hallway to the staircase. All the doors are closed as we pass. I wonder if Herzog's bedroom is behind one of them.

The women wait for me outside my room on the second floor. Lilyana pets me like I'm a wounded animal. Rosa has made me a card—I assume she negotiated for paper and a pen from one of her *gadzhe*.

Ursula finally shoos all of them out. She plucks a blue smock from my closet and gestures for me to give her my hospital gown. As I hand over the green and white garment, I see my lifeline, waiting on my nightstand. I doze off after I slip it onto my wrist.

But at night, I have a much harder time sleeping. At night, all I can see are Herzog and his brothers lurking in the shadows, waiting to savage my body. At night, I can't remember my angel.

I wake the other women, screaming.

After two sleepless nights, Lilyana comes to my room, carrying her pillow. She slips into bed beside me, spooning me with an arm folded around my belly. She mutters something in Bulgarian, and I drift into a sleep so deep I can't remember my dreams.

In the morning, Lilyana and her pillow are gone. But she comes the next night, and the next, and soon I don't have to

worry if she'll be there. I know she will, and I'm unspeakably grateful.

Herzog gives me two weeks before he summons me.

When the lifeline buzzes, I glance at my destination. The library.

I make my way downstairs as quickly as possible, but it takes me far longer than my allotted ninety seconds. Herzog waits impatiently, staring at his pocket watch and tapping his foot. When I step into the room, he plants his fists on his hips.

Sinking onto my knees, I put my hands behind my head.

He nods and gestures toward the couch. I sit on the middle cushion until he scowls and says, "On your back."

I lie down, and he unzips his pants. He doesn't bother taking them off, just climbs on top of me and pumps away. It's like he's doing some boring, mundane duty—filing tax returns or signing paychecks.

I stare at the bookshelves beyond him, thinking that I'd like to read the book about Van Gogh in Arles. I feel Herzog pause in his push-pull rhythm. Every muscle of his body tightens. He thrusts one more time and comes.

I wait until he's zipped his pants before I sit up and twitch my smock into place.

And just like that, we're back to the beginning, with Herzog testing me. He wakes me in the middle of the night. He hides from me in the house, moving from room to room as I respond to his summons. He assaults me with offhand efficiency, using objects when his cock fails him.

I know I can't refuse him. He'll just find another way to torture me. But after a particularly painful interlude with a paperweight, I decide to take back control.

That night, at dinner, I choose not to eat.

Marta gives me a curious look as she clears our plates from the table. My pork tenderloin has gelled on the plate, thick slices of meat congealed under gravy. I haven't touched the potatoes either, or the roasted broccoli with its balsamic glaze.

I skip breakfast the next morning, telling my traitorous stomach it doesn't want the bacon that glistens on my plate. I reject the minestrone soup for lunch, along with sourdough bread, fresh from the oven.

I've done this before, years ago. When I started college, I was overwhelmed—by classes, by living in a dorm, by being surrounded by fellow students every hour of every day. My life spun further and further out of control.

Then, I set new rules for myself, limiting the food I ate in the dining hall. I decreased my intake gradually, first cutting out desserts, then leaving half of every portion on my plate. I ruled out wheat, then all carbs. I cut out dairy.

In the end, I lost thirty-five pounds and was down to a single apple and eleven cashews to sustain me each day. Leo saw what I was doing and forced me into student counseling.

But Leo is dead now. And I'm not a student anymore.

My hunger strike is absolute. I eat no food at all. I do drink water at every meal because I know I'll kill myself in just a few days if I don't.

For the first seventy-two hours, I'm wildly hungry. But after that, my body seems to accept it won't be getting any food. I settle into a new balance. My head feels light if I stand up too quickly, but other than that, I suffer no ill effects.

Ursula finds me in the library. I'm reading a catalog from a Matisse retrospective at the Museum of Modern Art. The colors are brilliant in the late winter sunshine that streams through the window.

"You must eat," she says.

"No thank you."

She crosses her arms. "Mr. Herzog say. You eat or he make consequence."

It's the longest word I've ever heard her say. I shake my head, though, and reply, "Thank you for bringing me the message."

Another two days pass. I've lost weight. I can feel it in my hips, see the slight sag as my smock droops over my breasts.

I show up for every meal, drink my water, and watch the other women eat. They're silent at the table now. Wary. We never went back to English lessons in the morning, and I wonder how much they've forgotten.

When I show up for dinner, forty-eight hours after Ursula's warning, there's an empty place at the table.

"Where's Lilyana?" Simona asks Ursula, who is standing at the head of the table.

"Sold," Ursula says, staring straight at me. "Mr. Herzog sold her. And he can sell any of you too."

I grip the edge of the table to keep from swaying in my seat. My teeth start to chatter, and I realize my bones have been replaced by ice. I drain my glass of water and excuse myself, going to my room.

That night, I can't fall asleep, which is just as well, because Herzog summons me to the study at two in the morning. He's replaced the claw-foot armchair.

After a perfunctory fuck over the arm of the new chair, he says, "Lilyana went to my poppy grower in Afghanistan."

I don't respond. I don't even know if I believe him.

"Abdul-Fattah wanted a woman who speaks English. She'll teach his lieutenants. If she survives the welcome party."

Still, I hold my tongue.

"You will not win," Herzog says. "You have no power here. What do you say to that?"

"May I go to my room now, Master?"

He shoves the ottoman into me, hard. "Get out of my sight, you skinny whore."

Rosa is the next to go. And three days later, Pavla and Simona, sold together to a Mexican supplier.

At dinner that night, over a rib-eye steak, Rayna begs me to reconsider. She calls me selfish and cruel, words I taught her myself. She says she hates me.

She's gone by noon the following day.

That leaves Marta and me. I'm pretty sure Herzog will never sell Marta; he needs her to tend to the next woman he imprisons in the Holding Room.

Herzog summons me to the library again. I sway when I assume Presentation Posture, and for just a moment, I think I might black out. Herzog pinches my arm, like he's the wicked witch in *Hansel and Gretel*, measuring my body fat. Snorting in disgust, he orders me to unzip his pants and suck him off.

I fumble the zipper three times, and he cuffs me on the side of the head. "You're playing a dangerous game, slut," he says after he's fucked my mouth.

I stare at the shelves. There's a book on Andy Warhol, and I think about the artist's tomato soup cans. I shouldn't read that book while I'm on my hunger strike. The thought makes me laugh, which earns me an open-handed slap from Herzog.

"You'll eat your dinner tonight. Or else." He leaves the room before I figure out if I need to respond.

I refuse my dinner.

The next morning, Marta is gone. Herzog sold her, after all.

He stands at the head of the table. Ursula serves me scrambled eggs and hash browns, a mountain of food. I don't even look at the plate. It's been twenty-one days since I've eaten. My stomach doesn't remember how to beg for food.

Herzog can hurt me. He can kill me if he wants. But I pretend to be disinterested as I raise my glass of water. I close one hand over my flat belly and drain the glass with a dozen quick swallows. I try to ignore the flat, metallic taste on my out-of-practice tongue.

I realize my mistake as I return the glass to the table. I miss, and the weight of my arm drags me to the floor. I need to

push myself upright. I need to drag myself back into my chair. But my muscles refuse to obey.

This is more than three weeks of starving myself. This is more than losing fifteen pounds on the crashest of all crash diets.

Herzog drugged my water.

He kneels next to me. When he wraps his fingers in my hair and pulls my face up to his, a tiny corner of my brain wonders when my hair grew that long. He tightens his grip, yanking hard, and my eyes start to water, even though the rest of my body is paralyzed.

“That’s your second demerit,” he growls.

When he opens his fist, my head slams hard on the floor.

“Dr. Collier,” Herzog says, and he must have moved to the end of a tunnel, because his voice echoes from very far away. “She’s ready for surgery.”

ALIX



DAY 179

I'm back in the hospital bed.

It takes me three tries to surface. The first two times, I'm overwhelmed by the glare of lights and the chirp of monitors and the jagged pain in my chest.

The third time, though, Dr. Collier stands beside my bed. He calls my name insistently, until I open my eyes. "Welcome back," he says, as if I've been enjoying a cruise in the Caribbean.

"I... Wh..." I can't force sound from my parched lips. The doctor raises a foam cup and fits a straw between my lips. I concentrate and manage a single pull of cold water. "What did you do to me?" I whisper.

Just that simple question sets my chest to throbbing. I look down, but my green-and-white hospital gown is snapped closed. An IV line runs into the crook of my right arm.

"Me?" Dr. Collier says. "I fed a tube through your nose and down to your stomach. I've administered three doses of nutritionally complete isocaloric food replacement with a high content of whey protein and soluble fiber."

By concentrating hard, I parse all his words. He force-fed me. “Why does that make my chest hurt so much?”

“That has nothing to do with me,” the doctor says. He’s checking the level of the plastic bag suspended behind me, the one that’s dripping into my arm. Now he turns a lever, cutting off the flow. I stare as he eases a long needle out of my vein. He folds my arm double, putting pressure on the puncture wound until he can tape a bandage to my arm. Only then does he say, “That’s Dr. Smythe’s handiwork.”

“Who’s Dr. Smythe?”

“The finest plastic surgeon money can buy,” he says. And then, with the delight of a man who’s made a clever joke, he adds, “At least the finest one whose mouth can be shut with an extra hundred grand.”

“What did he do to me?” I demand, panic painting my vision red.

“Calm down,” Dr. Collier says.

“What the hell did you bastards do to me?”

Dr. Collier has retrieved a syringe from the table under the monitor. “Don’t make me put you out again,” he says. “I just removed your IV. You don’t want this directly in your arm.”

He’ll do it, too. I know he will. I force myself to take a deep breath, even though my lungs feel like they’re on fire. Another. A third. And when I know I can keep my tone even, I say, “Tell me what Dr. Smythe did.”

“A simple procedure most women would be happy to receive, especially free of charge. Dr. Smythe performed a bilateral breast augmentation with silicone implants. Your incisions—”

Vomit scores my throat. Dr. Collier is ready with a plastic basin, catching the sick before it streams down my front.

A boob job.

They butchered me. They hacked me open and shoved things into my body. All because Herzog said they should.

Dr. Collier says something about longer incisions because I have silicone implants, not saline. About substantial swelling and bruising. About three to five days of pain management. Wearing a support bra for fourteen days. Refraining from sexual intercourse for fourteen days. Not lifting anything heavy for four weeks.

I hear him. I hear all of it.

But I can't think of anything to say. I can't think of anything to do. As I lift the hospital gown and stare at the bandages wrapped around my swollen chest, something snaps deep inside of me.

Herzog has finally won.

TRAP



F a la la la fucking la.

I'm supposed to be in the holiday spirit, but all I want to do is hibernate back at the freeport. But as Pete reminds me on a daily basis, we need new clients if my three-year growth plan will work out. It's all well and good to have a Diamond Ring for my elite customers, but if I can only scrape up a couple of self-made billionaires, I might as well shut down the freeport and get a real job.

Which is why I'm standing in the atrium of the National Gallery of Art, sipping bad champagne and looking like I give a fuck.

The museum is decked out for Christmas. The Mercury Fountain is surrounded by poinsettias, blood-red leaves crowding the steps amid a forest of skinny pine trees and fuckloads of holly. It's all been trucked in for the season. I wonder what landfill will get the stuff on January 2.

But I'm not supposed to be the voice of doom and gloom. Or even the whisper of cool practicality.

I'm supposed to be glad-handing my way around the room, meeting the museum's richest donors. I'm supposed to listen

to stories about ski chalets in the Alps and winter retreats to Cape Town and how hard it is to find good help these days.

And then, when there's a pause in the conversation, I'm supposed to casually mention the freeport and invite them to come see our facilities if they're ever up in Dover.

Fuck that.

I toss back the last of my cheap champagne and set my glass on a passing waiter's tray. If I don't hit traffic, I can be home in two hours.

I'm halfway to the door when a man steps in front of me. His tux is clearly hand-tailored, cut to fit his tall, thin frame, and he moves like he's used to wearing the thing. His short blond hair makes me think he's military. He has the eyes to match—a blue so pale they look almost white, narrowed just enough to make him look deadly.

“Mr. Prince,” he says. “You're not leaving so soon?”

I catch a whiff of an accent—German, I'm pretty sure. Pete's given me a list of donors to schmooze. He even made me memorize vital stats on most-likely new clients. This guy isn't on the list. But if the freeport's taught me one thing, it's how to smell money. And this guy reeks of it.

He holds out a hand, and I don't have a choice. I shake with my right and tap a quick tonic for the Beast with my left, barely touching the satin stripe on the leg of my trousers. The guy's grip is hard, aggressive even, even though his face stays perfectly calm.

“You've got me at a disadvantage,” I say. “I don't think we've met?”

“Not yet,” he says. “But my people said you'd be here. My name is Herzog. Klaus Herzog. Perhaps I can steal a moment of your time?”

He gestures toward a marble railing, away from the fountain, the poisonous plants, and the crowd. The noise level drops as we pass the columns that line the atrium. Standing at the railing, I realize there's a two-story drop to the museum's

lower level. For just a moment, I wonder what it would take to toss a guy over.

Taking a full step back from the edge, I look up at Herzog. I'm just in time to catch an oily grin before he schools his face to calm indifference.

“What can I do for you, Mr. Herzog?”

He pins me with those creepy eyes. “I believe you might have a solution for a small problem I've encountered with my importing business.”

“What do you import?”

“This and that,” he says with a casual shrug. He might as well put up a billboard—*Illegal Activity Taking Place Here*—not that anyone is paying attention to our private conversation. “My portfolio is quite diverse. But the matter of most immediate concern involves a painting I recently acquired.”

One thing about running a freeport: you learn a lot about art. One of my clients can sell a masterpiece to another client for a hundred mill and no one pays a penny in taxes—so long as the painting never leaves the premises.

That sucks for museums and interior decorators, but it's pretty much a field day for billionaires making investments in art.

“What sort of painting?” I ask, because Herzog's still waiting.

Most of my clients like to brag a bit. Who the fuck am I kidding? They all like to brag. A lot.

“Dutch,” he says. “Golden age.” He moves his hands, showing the approximate dimensions—around two feet square. “Oil on canvas. You know the type—an interior, two women, a harpsichord. From Delft.”

There are a lot of Dutch Master paintings out there. Rembrandt churned out more than three hundred. But there's something about Herzog's casual phrasing—especially that *Delft*—that convinces me I know exactly which painting he's talking about.

Johannes Vermeer. *The Concert*. It was stolen from the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston back in 1990 and hasn't been seen since.

Because that's another little trick of freeports—we don't make our inventories public. And the vast majority of high-value paintings that have been stolen over the past fifty years aren't hanging on the wall in some James-Bond-villain lair. They're being held as assets, the same as gold ingots.

And if Herzog really has *The Concert*, he's holding a quarter of a billion dollars—in a package the size of a Monopoly board.

"I'm accustomed to working with Geneva," he says.

Geneva Freeport is the oldest and largest in the world. Their warehouses are rumored to hold a hundred billion dollars worth of art. "They've got a great reputation," I say.

"I'd rather not send this painting overseas," Herzog says. And then he lands the kicker: "But I need it in storage by the end of this year. For...accounting reasons."

I may not know Klaus Herzog, but I know his type.

He's used to getting his own way. He expects—and receives—special treatment. People kiss his ass. Slip him past velvet ropes while the little people wait in the cold. Let him into the pussy parlor at the back of the club.

Because this motherfucker has got money to burn.

"As you know," I say, figuring a few strokes will warm him right up. "It typically takes a month or more to arrange transportation for a rarity like yours."

Neither of us has said the artist's name. We haven't given any specifics at all. But we both know what we're dealing with.

I go on, like I handle this type of prize every day. "You'll need to work out transportation on your end—crating it and finding an appropriate escort. Security detail, too."

He nods, because all of that goes without saying.

“And I’ll need to work with my conservators to verify the ideal temperature and humidity. Set up your private gallery within the freeport. Manage security on my end—biometric access at the front gate and to the warehouse building overall, along with your specific space.”

Another nod. He accepts that I can do all that.

I say, “Add in the legal paperwork and take into account the holidays, when everything takes three times as long...”

“I understand I’m demanding a lot,” he says. “Of course, I’d pay for whatever inconvenience I create.”

Bingo.

Herzog just offered me a Christmas present—all wrapped up with a golden bow.

I wasn’t bullshitting—it *is* a lot to pull together in the ten business days before the end of the year. But clients like Herzog have a way of growing their portfolios. And if I don’t ask too many questions, don’t look too closely at what goes in and out the front gate, don’t sniff the money that changes hands...

Klaus Herzog can make me a very wealthy man.

Strike that. He can make me a much wealthier man than I already am.

I have to say, “May I ask? How did you learn about Diamond Freeport? I’d love to thank one of my existing clients, if that’s who made the connection.”

Herzog’s smile is as cold as his eyes. “No client. But your name came up in casual conversation five, six months ago. I’ve had my business colleagues check out what you’re doing. Consider me very impressed, Mr. Prince.”

I take a risk, gambling that his European formality has unbent here in the States. “If we’re doing business together, the name’s Trap.”

“Trap,” he says, like he’s sipping Dom Perignon.

“I’d love to show you around the freeport. Any chance you can visit next week? My people can help out with the local airfield, if you want to fly in.”

“I won’t need the jet,” he says. Neither of us comments on the fact that I assumed he had one. Nor does it escape my notice that he doesn’t say *where* he lives. He might be based here in DC, or maybe New York. That’s one of the reasons I chose Dover—easy access for a good chunk of the East Coast. But having taken my bait, he pushes: “Perhaps Monday afternoon?”

“I’ll clear my schedule,” I say, because I will. And because this type of client likes to know he made me do that. I gesture back toward the atrium, and the thinning crowd of art lovers. “I’m glad I decided to be here tonight.”

“So am I, Trap. So am I.” He extends his hand and I shake, automatically telling the Beast to go to fucking hell. As I tap out a quick release with my left hand against the balustrade, Herzog says, “And I suspect that’s the first of many things we’ll find we have in common.”

ALIX



DAY 365

I can't believe I've been here for a year. Herzog celebrates my anniversary by throwing a party—just him, me, and his brothers.

They haven't seen me since I earned my double-D cups.

Ansel says I look like a cow.

Jonas asks if I'm going to be a good girl, or should they keep Dr. Collier on hold?

Herzog just watches, beaming with pride as I follow every command they dream up.

TRAP



Pete's waiting in my office, his expression as dark as the coffee in my cup. Before I can gulp the caffeine I need to make it through today, he starts in. "He's insane!"

"Who's insane?" But I already know the answer. There's only one client who gets under Pete's skin like this.

Pete's been lobbying for me to drop Herzog from the moment the guy walked through the door. Pete didn't like his attitude from the get-go. And he likes Herzog's business dealings a whole lot less. I know the guy's a drug kingpin. Every cent of his money is dirty. But if I throw out every freeport client who's broken the law...

Pete says, "Herzog wants an EV port installed in the garage."

I shrug. "We should have done that a long time ago. Half the Diamond Ring drives Teslas."

Pete knows when he's lost an argument. He moves on to his next grievance. "He's hosting a dinner for a Saudi prince next week. He demands the kitchen be made halal."

"Can we do it, given the timeline?"

"Well yes, but—"

“Then get it done. That Saudi prince has a few hundred relatives who might do business with us if they know they’ll be taken care of. Make sure Chef Jean-Yves finds the right suppliers for next week’s meals.”

Pete sighs in exasperation, but he makes a note on his ever-present phone. I can appreciate his frustration, but the Saudi dinner is a great sign. Herzog must plan on selling one of his paintings, and the buyer will have a multimillion-dollar tax incentive to keep it here, becoming yet another freeport client.

“What else?” I ask, because Pete’s still standing there, shifting from foot to foot. We’ve worked together for long enough that I know he’s bracing himself to give me his real beef against Herzog.

“It’s Sam,” he says.

“Sam Mott?” She’s our tax lawyer, the linchpin of everything the freeport does. She’s smart, dedicated, and willing to look the other way when our business interests shift a little too close to shady.

“Herzog consulted with her on his Saudi deal.”

I shrug. Our clients regularly use our legal services. That’s one of the reasons they pay us millions.

“He pushed back when she gave him a hard no on smuggling assets out of the freeport. Asked where she went to law school. Said he’d report her to the bar for ethical violations.”

“He’s only been with us, what? Seven months? He’s testing the waters. Seeing how much he can get away with.”

“You think Sam doesn’t know that? She’s tough as a Kentucky Derby jockey. So when she says she won’t be alone in a room with him...”

My anger is immediate. If Herzog laid a fucking *finger* on her... “What did that cumstain do?”

Pete shakes his head. “She told me in confidence.”

I reach for my phone.

“What are you doing?” Pete yelps.

“Getting Sam in here. I need to know the details.”

“Dammit, Trap!”

I watch Pete weigh his loyalties. I win, which is no surprise. Pete’s the most dedicated employee I could ever hope for.

He finally says, “Sam and I worked late after Cole Wolf sold that Cezanne last week. He gave her a bottle of Chivas, and she was good enough to share.”

Pete had been the middleman, identifying an outsider who was interested in making the purchase. The upshot was the freeport landing another billionaire client. I’d paid Pete a hefty bonus. It hadn’t crossed my mind to throw in a bottle of booze.

“Herzog was here all week,” Pete said. “Scoping out the sale. Checking up on me. Sam says he put her through her paces, too, testing her on German tax law, on EU privacy standards, a bunch of other bullshit.”

“He’s a client,” I sigh. “That’s what we do.”

“Sam says he caught her in her office one night, around nine.”

“Clients aren’t supposed to be in the office tower after hours,” I say, like Pete needs the reminder.

“That’s what she told him. She says he just stared at her, with those weird white eyes. And when she stood up and told him he had to leave, he said something about liking her shoes.”

“Her *shoes*?”

He shrugs, his hands expressing frustrated confusion better than any words.

I sigh. “I can’t eighty-six a client over a comment about —”

“That’s why she didn’t come to you,” Pete interrupts.

I know the law—hostile work environment and sexual harassment and all that crap. Sam teaches a mandatory workshop for all freeport personnel, every spring.

And I know the freeport only exists because entitled billionaires have rules they need to bend. Break, even.

And I know Herzog's an asshole, likes to throw his weight around, makes sure everyone here knows he's the one in control while he hints at the security force he's got behind his drug empire.

I've always known my money is dirty. I'm on target to be worth a billion by the end of next month. Motherfuckers like Herzog come with the territory.

"Make sure Sam's never alone with him. And hire a concierge—male—to shadow Herzog every minute he's on freeport property. Tell him it's a service we're providing our biggest clients."

"You think he'll buy that?"

"Cocksuckers like him *expect* to be treated special."

"Do you think *Sam* 'll buy that?"

He has a point.

"If she thinks you're patronizing her—" he warns.

"We'll burn that bridge when we get to it."

Pete grumbles, but he makes another note.

He's halfway out the door before I stop him. "Pete?"

"Yeah?"

"Thanks."

"For what?"

"Someone's gotta tell me when my ass is showing. Now get the hell home. Michael's gonna think you got locked in one of the galleries by mistake."

I make my own note once he's out of my office. Pete Miller is long overdue for a raise.

ALIX



DAY 730

Two years.

I used to wonder when Herzog would bring another woman to the Holding Cell, but now I know he never will. I'm the only slave he'll ever need.

This year, we celebrate my anniversary by Herzog bringing me to his bedroom. It's the first time I've ever seen his private quarters. The first time he's used the tools he keeps behind a secret panel in his closet.

I scream for mercy because I know he likes that.

I beg to be set free, because there used to be something to live for outside this house.

I think he'll send me back to my room on the second floor when he's done. But he tightens his chain around my neck and he pinches my clit in his pliers and he whispers that I'll be his forever.

And for the first time in seven hundred and thirty days, I truly believe him.

TRAP



“**L**ast matter of business,” Pete says.

It’s about time. Our weekly catch-up meeting has lasted two and a half hours longer than the sixty minutes we budgeted. I remember when we used to tie up every loose end in the same time slot and still had time for a couple of beers.

Pete sifts through a stack of papers, choosing one from the middle and passing it over to me. “Senator Jackson was sentenced this morning. He’ll be spending the next five years in federal prison, thanks to his little tax fraud scheme.”

“If he’d taken our advice...”

Pete waves a hand. We’ve both been saying the same thing since the former CIA director was arrested on a midnight raid of his Hilton Head estate. “Obviously,” Pete says, “he won’t be in the Diamond Ring anymore.”

We let him keep his status while his case was still pending. Innocent until proven guilty, and all that. Or maybe we didn’t want to throw stones, given our own glass houses. But Pete’s right. It’s time to announce Jackson’s replacement in the inner circle.

And Pete won’t like my choice. “I’ll call Herzog myself.”

Pete laughs, thinking I'm kidding around. But when he realizes this isn't a joke, he says, "You can't be serious."

"Serious as the IRS."

I gesture to the office around us. My Patek Philippe watch glints in the overhead lights. The same lights shine off the Jura coffeemaker on the sideboard, the three-thousand-dollar machine that made the coffee Pete drank without a thought. I've got seven cars in the garage beneath the office tower, and my Maybach is parked in the bay behind the house.

I say what shouldn't be necessary. "Klaus Herzog has made me a very wealthy man. It's time for me to return the favor."

"Klaus Herzog has made a fortune selling illegal drugs."

"How many times have we been through this? Carl Braxton makes drones that kill civilians in war zones. Bob Marcus's fast-food empire made half the country obese. Steve Torrington made his fortune selling little old ladies insurance policies that'll never pay out. It's not our job to judge our clients."

"Herzog isn't just selling drugs. He's *designing* them. He's got a staff of scientists whose sole job is figuring out ways to addict children when they're most vulnerable."

"Allegedly."

"You think those reports are lies?"

"I don't care. I *can't* care."

Diamond Freeport was built on the blood of African children. How the fuck can I play morality police now?

Pete looks desperate. "Okay," he says. "I get it. We work with bad people. But Herzog is a different breed of bad. He's just...*off*."

"I can't make business decisions based on 'off.'"

"Invite the guy into the Diamond Ring and you invite him into your *home*. You're *choosing* to spend time with him, time

you aren't required to spend. Time you could be checking your bank account, to see if you've hit your second billion yet."

"That's enough," I say. I purposely keep my voice level, barely more than a whisper.

But Pete blanches. And I don't even have to point out he's got a few million of his own that came from the freeport's questionable sources.

"I'll call him myself," I say.

Pete nods.

"Now get the hell out of my office. I have a freeport to run."

He leaves. And I tell myself I have a dozen very good reasons I can't call Herzog right away.

Because Pete's right about one thing: Herzog *is* dangerous. A hell of a lot more risky than anyone else in the Diamond Ring. A lot less predictable, too.

But I make the call before I call it quits for the day.

And Herzog sends a chill down my spine when he says, "Thank you, Trap. I've been looking forward to this for a very long time."

ALIX



DAY 1095

Master comes into the library while I'm lying on the couch, reading a coffee-table book about Picasso. I slide to my knees automatically, cupping my head and displaying my chest.

I hoped I was done for the day. He's already summoned me three times—once to suck him off while he ate breakfast, once for him to come between my breasts after a hard game of tennis, and again to give him my ass after his sauna and a shower.

This has been his pattern for months. He poses me like a rag-doll multiple times in a single day. He finds new ways to hurt me, creative ways to break me, if I had any will left to break. He uses me more and more often, finally reaching the point where his cock can't respond.

That's when he invites a special guest for me to entertain. He calls them Counselor and Your Excellency, Your Honor and Your Lordship. They play ruthless games, all these men. They require brutal tools. Master likes to watch.

After, Master gives me time to heal. Sometimes, I can finish a dozen books in the library before he's back for more.

“Do you know what yesterday was, Slave?”

Yesterday was the day he kicked me in the belly, hard enough that I vomited my breakfast. No reason; he was just breaking in new shoes. He ordered me to submit to Ursula’s waxing too, clean Brazilian, front and back, even though she groomed me just three weeks ago. He went for a drive in the afternoon, taking the Lamborghini. He left the garage door open and the keys to the Maserati lying on the kitchen table.

He’s been doing that for months now—leaving car keys around. First it was the Jeep. Then the Tesla. Now, it’s always one of the high-performance sports cars.

I could get farther in one of those before he caught me.

But I avoid the keys like they’re made out of molten lead. Master wouldn’t kill me if I tried to escape. He’d do something worse.

I haven’t seen Dr. Collier in four months, not since the Counselor visited. I haven’t had stitches since January. That’s a record, and I’ll do anything not to break it.

All of which means I don’t have an answer to his question. “No, Master,” I say. “What was special about yesterday?”

“It was your birthday, Slave.”

He’s waiting for me to say something, so I try, “Thank you, Master.”

He scowls. “So that means today is…” He waits for me to complete his sentence.

“Whatever you’d like it to be, Master.”

He gives me a sharp glance, like he thinks I’m being smart. I used to enjoy pushing the line, burying my rebellion in answers that sounded just submissive enough to satisfy him. He beat that out of me, sometime in the last twelve months.

“Today is your third anniversary serving as my slave.”

“Thank you, Master.” I hope that’s enough. If he wants to fuck me in honor of the day, I will of course. I’ll do whatever he wants because I don’t remember how to fight.

“I thought it would be appropriate to have a little celebration.”

“Yes, Master.” I look around for whatever dark plans he’s made.

“Go to your room and get dressed,” he says. “We leave in an hour.”

“Yes, Master.”

I head upstairs, vaguely aware that this is what I longed for years ago. I wanted Master to take me out of the House. I thought I could run away. I thought I could escape Master forever.

I know better now.

I turn the corner into my room and freeze when I see what’s on the bed. It’s the Marilyn Monroe dress Lilyana wore, that Halloween night two and a half years ago.

But this isn’t Lilyana’s dress. Lilyana’s dress was a lewd joke, the halter fitted with cutouts to display her bare nipples. My dress is more modest. My nipples will be covered. The halter is tailored for my D cups, too.

Beside the dress is a platinum blonde wig, styled into chin-length waves of hair. There are shoes as well, four-inch white sandals.

Ursula comes in as I stare at the costume. “Come,” she says. “You hurry.”

I follow her to the bathroom. She works on my hair first. It’s shoulder-length now, dark and heavy as ever. There might be a way to slick it back, to pin it down, but Ursula isn’t taking chances. She hacks it off as if I’ve just emerged from the Holding Room, and she shaves me bare.

After my scalp is toweled dry, Ursula applies an elasticized cap, taking care to smooth out any gaps. She shakes out the blonde wig, fluffing the waves with her fingers. At her gruff command, I lean forward, and she centers the front of the wig on my forehead. She smooths it over the cap carefully, making adjustments as she goes.

“Is good,” she says. “Human hair.”

I’m not sure how to respond to that. But when I stare at myself in the mirror, the wig looks natural.

Ursula does my makeup next—matte foundation to emphasize my pallor, followed by careful contouring to build up the apples of my cheeks. She narrows my nose. She sketches in heavier eyebrows than my own, emphasizing the arch with fawn-colored pencil.

She uses just a quick brush of mascara on my lashes and the most subtle gray on my eyelids. My cheeks are barely ghosted with pink powder.

My lips take almost half an hour to make perfect. She outlines them in pencil first, then fills them in completely. Only when she’s satisfied with the primer does she paint on the scarlet lipstick, using a brush. She has me blot by kissing a Kleenex, and then she repeats applying the color. When she’s satisfied, she sets the shade with powder, barely dusting on a translucent layer to seal my lips.

She presents a small plastic case and opens it to reveal a pair of bright blue contact lenses. I blink hard when she puts them in. My eyes water, and I hope Master won’t be too disturbed when I blink.

For the last step, Ursula presses the tip of an eyebrow pencil against the bottom of my left cheek. When she steps back, I’m branded with Marilyn’s famous beauty mark.

“Come now,” she says, shooing me back to my room. “Hurry. Get dressed.”

She helps lift the garment over my head. She orders me to lean forward so she can settle my breasts into the halter. She smooths the pleated skirt, yanking it twice to settle the dress’s waistline over my well-padded hips.

Of course, I’m not given panties.

Ursula snaps earrings onto my lobes, ignoring my catch of breath at the pain of the heavy clasps. She lines up my shoes and offers a rough hand as I step into the spiked sandals.

They'd be easier to wear if there was a strap around my ankles. Ursula has me walk down the hall, all the way to the bathroom and back. She scowls, but I get the hang of gripping them with my toes. I hope Master will be pleased.

“Okay,” she says, after a top-to-bottom appraisal. “You go. Be good.”

I walk down the stairs, trailing my hand on the railing. Master is waiting in the foyer. The stark black and white of his tuxedo sets off the gold of the pocket watch in his hand.

I'm late. Despite Ursula's best efforts and my obedient submission, I'm late. Stomach churning, I sink to my knees on the hard marble floor, automatically placing my hands on my head and displaying my chest to Master.

“Yes, yes,” he says, his voice thick with annoyance. His fist clenches, and I brace for him to hit me. Instead, he says, “Let's go.”

He leads the way to the garage. I'm surprised when he takes the Mercedes EQS. I don't remember the last time he drove it.

I settle in my seat, taking care to gather my skirts against my knees. The door is heavy, but I get it closed before Master slips behind the wheel.

“There's a blindfold in the glove box,” Master says.

“Yes, Master,” I say. Obediently, I take it out. He waits impatiently while I slip the elasticized band over my head. I take care not to jostle my wig.

When my eyes are covered, he reaches across and pinches my left nipple, hard. I gasp, more in surprise than in pain. My nipples have lost a lot of sensitivity since the surgery.

I think Master is testing me, to see if the blindfold truly works. Apparently, he's satisfied, because the electric engine purrs to life. I hear the garage door open, and then the car moves over gravel.

The car fills with music—Bach, I think, but I don't know the piece. Master raises the volume, and I can no longer hear

the gravel, or anything else about the road beneath us.

We turn from the driveway onto a road, and another, and another. And then I think we must be on a freeway because Master drives for a very long time without another turn.

I keep my hands folded in my lap, trying not to think about the last time Master had me dress in a costume. I want to please him. I want to do what's right. But I'm terrified that I'm about to end my streak of days without seeing Dr. Collier.

TRAP



Pete knocks on the doorframe of my home office. I barely look up from my spreadsheet to ask, “We’re all set then?”

He closes the door and crosses to my desk. “I quit,” he says.

For a split second, I think he’s joking. But he’s never had a poker face, and he’s dead serious now. I tug at the starched collar of my tuxedo shirt and ask, “What the fuck?”

“I quit,” he says again. He places his passkey on my desk, the master that gets him into every nook and cranny in the freeport. He adds his ID card and the key to his company car—the Audi he picked up from the dealer just last month. In case I had any doubt, he puts his phone on top of the pile.

“I know the last few months have been crazy,” I say. “We shouldn’t have broken ground on the new building before we filled the facilities position.”

“It’s not the new building.”

“I understand it’s hard to get the Dover municipal people in the same room as the FAA pencil-pushers, but once the new airfield’s open, everything will run much more smoothly.”

“I don’t care about the airfield.”

“When you took this job, you didn’t have to worry about supervising staff. We can work with HR and figure out some other way to handle annual reviews for your people.”

“This isn’t about my fucking staff.”

The word—fucking—hits me like a haymaker to the balls. Pete’s worked for me for over five years, and I’ve never heard him swear. The word should be a warning, but I shift into hyperdrive, like I can bully him into changing his mind.

“Well then, pick up your goddamn crap and get back in the game. The Diamond Ring will be here in half an hour, and—”

“They’re here now.”

“What?” I check my watch. “It’s twenty to six. They’re early?”

“Not all of them. Just Herzog.”

This shit again. “Pete, goddammit... I know you think I shouldn’t have let him in the Ring. And I admit, he has a way of pissing off everyone else in the group.” We still don’t know what he said to the sommelier last month to make her leave. I’m not saying I made a mistake, but... “I can’t throw him out now.”

“He’s gone too far this time.”

“Oh, for Christ’s— I did what you wanted. I sent the entire freeport staff home early. No one’s around to get their precious *feelings* hurt. And I think the twelve of us in the Ring can sit down to one fucking dinner without World War III breaking out.”

“Thirteen.”

“What?”

“Thirteen of you. Sitting down to dinner.”

“What the hell are you talking about?”

“Herzog brought a guest. A woman. And when she didn’t get out of his car fast enough, he punched her in the ribs. He dragged her by her arm, and he pushed her down on the hood of the car, and he...he...he took her from behind. In full view

of the office tower. That's what he wanted—for everyone to watch.”

My stomach's tight, and I want to say Pete's lying, but I know he isn't. I try, though. “He's yanking our chain,” I say. “Pissing around our territory, just to prove he's the big dog.”

“I knew you'd say that.”

“We don't even know who the woman is. He probably hired her for the night. She's in on the joke.”

“And I knew you'd say that too.”

“Then what am I going to say now, you sanctimonious little prick?” Anger rushes out of me before I can stop myself. Hurt flashes across Pete's face. There's a split second when I might be able to tell him I'm exhausted, I'm still jet-lagged from Monday's trip to Paris, I'm worried about filling the new conservator job, I'm... whatever it takes to keep him here.

But then it's too late.

It's been too late from the moment I shook Herzog's hand at the National Gallery.

“Good luck, Trap,” Pete says. “You'll need it.”

He leaves without another word.

I stare at my spreadsheet, the numbers melting into meaningless pools. I want to roll back the last half hour. Change the words. Erase the facts.

But all the money in the world can't buy the impossible.

The doorbell rings.

This is what I wanted. This is what I've built. Twelve of the richest men in the world, having dinner in my private home, so I can prove to them they're doing the right thing, earning me billions.

No staff. No outsiders. Just me, serving dinner to a dozen of my closest friends.

Pasting on a smile that feels like a snarl, I stalk to the door. Sawyer Best is first in line, gray hair immaculate against his

impeccable tuxedo. Cole Wolf is behind him, a rebel in black jeans and a turtleneck. Steve Torrington, Braiden Kelly, Carl Braxton—I've never known the group to be so punctual.

I brace myself for the usual handshakes as they file in. The Beast yanks my chain, and I set my jaw, determined not to embarrass myself by tapping relief before the guys make it into the dining room. Braxton slaps me on the back, though, nearly shattering my resolve.

He's barely moved on when Herzog steps to the door. "Trap," he says, sparing me a tight, toothy smile. "I hope you don't mind. I brought a guest. Trap Prince," he adds by way of introduction. "Candi Cain."

There's a challenge as he says her name. A *push*. He's certain someone's already filled me in on his breaking the rules—bringing her here, fucking her in the courtyard.

He's testing me.

But I shake his hand because he's my client, and I don't have any choice. And then I turn to the woman, the whore who cost me the best Chief Operating Officer I ever could have wished for. I start to say something, *welcome*, maybe, when she looks up from the hands she has clasped at her waist.

Alix.

My heart attempts to displace my sternum. My tongue freezes in my mouth. I can't move a muscle, can't smile, can't speak, can't begin to say or do a thing.

But she extends a hand like a debutante at a garden party, fingers curled and dainty, like she isn't sure if she wants me to shake or kiss her knuckles. The Beast howls as I settle on a quick shake.

And that's when I realize I'm wrong.

It isn't Alix who greets me with fingers as limp as month-old celery. It's a woman who looks like her. A woman with a rack three times the size of Alix's. A woman with apple cheeks and a narrow nose and a chin more rounded than the one I see most nights in my dreams. A woman with watery blue eyes.

Alix would never submit to a cocksucker like Herzog. She'd never let a man fuck her in a public courtyard. And dress her up like motherfucking Marilyn Monroe?

Never.

Alix has guts. She has courage. She came to my house to get what she wanted. She's not some beaten down whore hired out for the night to satisfy a heartless billionaire's warped sense of humor.

Plus, the Beast roars like a monsoon at the touch of Herzog's woman. It claws at my brain, whispering about how many men have had her, how many diseases she has, how many germs she carries.

Alix tamed the Beast. Alix is nothing like Candi Fucking Cain.

But I say, "Miss Cain," in a formal voice, proving to Herzog I can take a joke.

He smirks, and I wave them both into the dining room.

Three years ago yesterday—that's when I brought Alix here. That's the only reason I was confused. I'm lonely and broken and another man's whore makes me realize everything I've lost.

The Beast snickers as I square my shoulders. Before I can head into the dining room, the doorbell rings again. I open the door, and there's the rest of the Diamond Ring—five billionaires laughing and talking. Arsene Dubois jokes that I've got a real future as a doorman, if the freeport thing doesn't work out. He should know, with his chain of international hotels.

I follow them into my own home, feeling like a stranger. Feeling like the night is slipping away from the luxurious dinner I planned. Feeling like anything might happen, now that Herzog's here with his living, breathing, dirty joke.

ALIX



When Master took off my blindfold, I didn't know where I was. He asked me if I was surprised, and I said, "Yes, Master. Thank you for the surprise."

But I must have answered wrong. Master got out of the car and stomped around to my side and pulled me out. He shoved me against the hood of the car and fucked me, because that's the only thing I'm good for.

As my face pressed into the hot metal, I realized I was staring at a familiar office building. I twisted my neck, and I saw a new building. It used to be a construction site.

Master punched me when I tried to look the other way. But I knew exactly what I'd see—a wall of white brick. Windowless. Pure.

Master slammed into me from behind. "How do you like your surprise now, Slave?" I didn't realize I was crying until Master pinched my neck. "Ruin your fucking makeup, and I'll gut you in his bed."

I bit my tongue, hard. I stopped my tears. I waited until Master finished before I asked, "How did you find him?" Trap. I meant Trap.

“Leo’s phone.” Master tucked his cock back in his pants. “I had to break three of his fingers, but he unlocked it before he died.”

I did this. I was the reason Leo’s fingers were broken. I was the reason something terrible was about to happen to Trap.

Master pinched my chin between his fingers. “You came to me stinking like cum. You’ll pay for breaking my rules the rest of your life. And tonight, Travis Fucking Prince pays for what *he* did.”

I didn’t know Leo had promised me to Master. Trap never even met my brother. But Master didn’t care.

“Let’s go,” Master said. “Be good, Slave, or I swear to God, I’ll cut off his cock and make you eat it raw.”

When Trap opened the door, I thought he recognized me. I thought he saw past the costume. But my mind was playing tricks, because Master said my fake name, and Trap accepted it.

Now I’m inside the house. I can see the kitchen where Trap fed me strawberries. I can see the stairs that lead up to his bedroom. I can look out the wall of windows at the summer night, the green, green grass that stretches forever to a line of trees.

There are twelve men here—Master and Trap and ten others who move with the swagger of billionaires. They all see me. They all know I don’t belong, but not one of them will cause a scene. No one wants to break the rules of their private, exclusive club.

For half an hour, the men talk—about business, about vacations, about meals they’ve eaten and wines they’ve drunk. Master keeps a tight grip on my elbow, never letting me get more than a foot away. Trap makes sure everyone has their drink of choice. Master tells him I don’t need a thing.

Finally, Trap ushers us into the dining room. He looks at me and gestures toward the table, which is set for twelve. “Let me get another chair,” he says.

“That won’t be necessary,” Master says. He takes his seat, a place of honor next to the head of the table, at Trap’s right hand. As Master pulls his chair up to the table, he points to the space between him and Trap. “Kneel, Slave,” he says.

The other men don’t like that. They look away. They raise their voices. They pretend they have very important things to say. But no one tells Master to stop.

I’m good at following the rules. I don’t push Master too far. When I follow the rules, I don’t have to see Dr. Collier.

I kneel.

An uneasy silence settles over the men. Trap says, “Klaus...” but he doesn’t finish the sentence.

Master says, “Travis.” That does finish *his* sentence.

I recognize the warning in Master’s tone. If Trap pushes things, Master will demand payment. And Trap won’t foot the bill. I will.

I lower my head to study my hands, which are clasped at my waist. Let the men think I accept this. Let them believe this is what I deserve. Let Master be content that I’m following his rules.

Trap mutters under his breath. I can’t catch the words, but they don’t matter. I close my eyes, willing him to let it go, to accept that Master has the right to do whatever he wants.

I nearly weep in relief when Trap leaves the dining room to get something from the kitchen.

He comes back and places something at the far end of the table. Returns to the kitchen. Places something at our end. I don’t look up. I can’t. But the men exclaim in good-natured surprise.

Trap has set out two mountains of seafood. From the exclamations, there are oysters and clams and mussels, lobster and shrimp and Alaskan king crab. Trap makes one more trip to the kitchen and returns with a tray of shot glasses.

He circles the table until each man is served. When he stands beside me, he hesitates and I risk a quick glance to beg

him to hold his peace. He starts to say something to Master. But Master settles a hand on the back of my neck. He pinches me hard at the base of my skull. Trap swallows whatever he was going to say.

Instead, he raises his shot glass. “To the Diamond Ring!” he says, and he tosses back the clear liquor.

Diamond Ring. Those were the words I used when I sat in Trap’s kitchen. I’m the one who suggested gathering his richest clients. I’m the one who said he could grow his fortunes by treating his best prospects like kings.

The men echo his toast and toss back their own shots. I remember the drink Trap poured for me, three years ago last night. Belvedere—clean and cold and pure.

The Diamond Ring falls on the seafood towers, filling their plates like wild animals scattering their kill.

Now Trap sits beside me. I know I should bow my head. I should study my hands. I should make myself invisible, to save myself, to save him.

But Master is busy savaging snow-white crab from scarlet legs. He’s not bruising my neck with his claws. So I stare straight ahead, studying the table like my life depends on it.

I haven’t seen a table set like this in years.

Here in the civilized world, a spray of candles anchors the center of the table. There are tea lights and votives and tapers, all of them white, all of them set in silver holders. The china is white as well, salad plates centered on silver chargers, with bread plates off to the side. There’s a forest of glasses—water and white wine and red—and enough cutlery to feed an army. My eyes are dazzled by the candlelight reflecting off salad forks and dinner forks, butter knives and salad knives.

And steak knives.

Each place is set with a heavy sharp-edged knife, the blade nestled close to the charger.

Those knives look sharp enough for Ursula to use as razors. Sharp enough to slice a sheet of paper. Sharp enough to

kill.

My head fills with the buzz of a million bees. This is how my lifeline jangles, summoning me to yet another violation.

What if I'm not strong enough? What if I'm too slow? What if I draw a knife on Master and he wrestles it away from me?

He won't hesitate to slice through the breasts he paid for, to carve away my nipples like bloody fruit. He'll plunge that knife into my pussy. Into my ass. He'll put it everywhere he's put his cock, and he'll turn me into literal mincemeat.

The thought of the pain freezes my breath in my chest. My heart pounds so hard I know Master will hear. He'll turn toward me. See me. Know.

And that's why I have to do it.

Because in the deepest corner of my brain, I know Master is going to kill me. He hasn't done it yet, by miracle or luck. I didn't die when he fed me to his brothers. I didn't die when he pimped me out to all his special guests.

But one day—maybe even tonight—he'll go too far. He'll smother me, or my heart will give up, or I'll bleed out from wounds, internal or external. It'll be too late for Dr. Collier.

The Diamond Ring's conversation is louder now. The men are joking. Talking about business. About the money Trap's made them and all the deals they hope to turn.

Trap won't look at me. He's anchored his attention on the man to his left, a bearded giant with sky blue eyes and the lilt of an Irish brogue.

That's good. That's exactly what I need—for Trap to be unaware.

Master is relaxing too. Maybe it's the food. Maybe it's the shot Trap poured for everyone, or the wine that sparkles in his goblet.

Master picks up his glass and turns to his black-clad neighbor. He leans back in his chair in a way I know in my

bones—he's going to lecture the fools around him, tell them all the ways they're wrong.

He takes a breath.

Points his finger.

Purses his lips.

And I snag the knife from Trap's place setting, whirling toward Master and using my momentum to rise from my knees to gain the best angle.

I'm holding the knife with my left hand—I have no choice. I grip it like it's the last lifeboat on *Titanic*. This is my only chance. If I don't kill Master, he'll destroy me.

I unzip his throat, slicing down to the soaked red velvet beneath his flesh. I start at his right ear, pushing down, pulling across, raking the knife toward my own body. I dig deep, levering all my weight, because I don't know how to find the arteries, where to slice the veins.

Blood fountains beneath my blade.

My face is soaked. My hands are soaked. My chest is soaked. The snow-white front of his tuxedo shirt floods into a scarlet sea.

His lips move and a horrible sucking sound bubbles from his throat. I've cut his windpipe, almost through to the back of his neck. He tries to speak again, but I've stolen his words forever.

I stand and shift the knife to my right hand, feeling it slip, feeling it slide. I grip the handle tighter. I cover my right hand with my left to steady the blade.

I stab Herzog between the legs, not caring if I cut cock or balls or thigh or belly.

His ice-blue eyes roll back in his head. His body spasms. The stink of shit mixes with the copper-salt of blood. I stab again and again and again, until the corpse that held me prisoner finally slips to the floor on a river of its own foul slime.

TRAP



Sweet holy fuck.

Herzog's body slumps to the floor, entrails spilling from the mutilated mass between his legs with a sickening splash. The sound echoes in my dining room, wet, obscene. Every man in the room is staring at Candi Cain.

At Alix.

Her chest heaves like she just sprinted up Everest. Her wig slipped off in the middle of her attack; its platinum strands look like a scarlet mop beside Herzog's gaping throat. She's got some sort of cap on her head, covering her bare scalp.

She lost a contact lens during the attack. She's staring at me with one blue eye and one brown. "No," she says, and I don't know if she's ordering me or warning me or if she means something else entirely. Her voice is deep, hoarse. It pulls something inside me.

This is the woman I've been looking for, for three full years. This is the woman I lured to my bed, thinking I'd use her to meet my own dark needs. This is the woman who met me at every shadowed turn that long, long night, giving even more than I demanded—until she fled at midnight.

I can't imagine the hell she's lived since then.

The Alix I knew was unbelievably strong. She showed up at Debasement, intent on seeking her own pleasure. She came to my house, game for almost anything. She followed my instructions to the letter, even using the safeword I gave her.

But Herzog destroyed all that. He turned Alix into a toy he could fuck on the hood of his car, in full view of every window in the freeport. He dressed her up like a goddamn blow-up doll. He made her his slave.

And the motherfucking kicker is, I let him do it.

I let him pull me aside at the National Gallery fundraiser. I gave him access to the freeport. I invited him into the *Diamond Ring*, goddammit. Fuck. I let Pete *quit* instead of accepting that Herzog was the sort of sick bastard that needs to be put down for the safety of any decent human being.

I let Herzog earn me my first billion dollars, and I might spend the rest of my life fighting to scrub away the stink.

Adrenaline cramps my muscles, slowing time. It feels like a hundred years have passed since I opened my front door and invited in the devil. Somehow, impossibly, the room is still frozen. The rest of the *Diamond Ring* still gapes. Herzog's guts are still slipping onto the floor. Alix is still staring at me, eyes as empty as a zombie's.

"No," she says again, and this time she keeps repeating the word, a rough whisper, over and over. I don't know if she's saying no to Herzog or no to me or no to the bloody horror spreading out around her.

She's staring at me, past me, eyes as dull as some stuffed animal's in a museum. I wonder if Herzog drugged her, if that's how he kept her in line. I want to get rid of that goddamn blue contact, pop it out of her eye, crush it forever.

"Alix," I say, praying for a flash of recognition when she hears her name.

Her fingers tighten around the knife.

"Alix," I repeat.

She doesn't hear me. She doesn't see me. But her wrist flexes, and I can tell she's finally remembered her weapon. She could launch herself at the slab of mangled meat she's left on the floor. She could spring at me before I can tell her how I searched, how I tried to find her. She could turn the knife on herself.

"Ella," I say, using the name she gave me that first night, the one she chose, like it's a code between us.

That wakes her. She blinks, and a look of horror kindles behind her mismatched blue-and-brown gaze. Her right hand tightens around the knife. Her left clutches her belly, like she's holding in some unbearable pain. Red stripes of gore melt into the fabric of her costume.

"Trap," she says. Her voice is soft, unbelieving. She sounds like she's just woken from a dream and isn't sure if I'm real or not. She looks from me to the blood-slicked knife in her fist.

"I'm here," I say. "Ella. Alix. I looked for you so long, and now you're here too."

She drops the knife.

I launch myself over Herzog's body. My arms fold around her like iron straps, tight like I'm trying to pull her inside my chest. She's shaking, hard enough to rattle her teeth, and I spread one hand over the back of her head, pressing her into my shoulder, even though her body is as rigid as a lamp post.

I'm saying something, the type of meaningless words I'd use to comfort a terrified kitten. I should have found her. Should have taken her away. She's safe. It's over. I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I'm sorry.

Her shoulders yield a fraction of an inch—a tiny trust that I'd never feel if I weren't trying to swallow her body with mine.

And the Beast drives a mountain-size wedge into that sliver of a gap. I'm not allowed to touch another person. I'm never allowed.

My heart seizes in my chest, sharp enough to make me grunt. My lungs fill with concrete, so thick and heavy I can't sneak in a gasp. My skin is on fire, like someone soaked me in gasoline before they lit a match.

I want Alix.

I need her.

I need to protect her.

But the Beast roars.

My head rings like someone shoved it into an industrial-strength washing machine and turned on the spin cycle. The Beast drips black tar over my vision, burning away the fear in Alix's mismatched eyes. It pierces my palms with flaming spikes, goes after my arms, my chest, every part of me that's pressed against Alix.

Somewhere in the darkness, Alix whimpers, and I'm scaring her and I hate myself and I'm broken. I push her away, because I'll die if I hurt her, because *I'm not Herzog*.

The Beast devours my brain, demanding its due.

TRAP



I crash to my knees. My fist lands in slime—Herzog’s blood? Herzog’s guts? Herzog’s mutilated cock and balls? Acid floods my throat, choking me, burning away whatever makes me human.

It’s not blood that feeds the Beast. It’s germs. Illness. The certainty that blood carries death and destruction, a virus or bacteria that will rot me from the inside out.

The Beast’s foul breath scorches my face. Its claws rake my chest. It stinks like twenty years of nightmares, two decades of terror.

But I’m not a twelve-year-old boy anymore. I’m not trapped in a metal hut. I’m not controlled by a man who valued diamonds more than the safety and sanity of his only son.

I force my eyes open. I command myself to take a breath. Another. A third. I wipe my hand clean on the carpet and pay the Beast’s dues, punching the floor with a closed fist—once, twice, three times, four, five.

I plant one foot on the floor to kneel, and I push myself until I’m standing.

I brought Herzog into my home. I was blinded by cash. I wanted him in my Diamond Ring.

Maybe, just possibly, I can redeem that choice. I can use the Ring to make things right—for me and, if there's any sort of merciful God anywhere, for Alix too.

I turn toward Braiden Kelly, the man who sat to my left before this nightmare began. "Get her out of here," I say. I jut my chin toward Alix, shutting off the part of my brain that wants to scream about the contaminated blood on her dress, on her arms, on her hands. "Upstairs," I say.

Kelly acts with the efficiency I'd expect from the head of the oldest Irish mob family on the Eastern seaboard. Like a stevedore clearing the docks, he sweeps one arm under Alix's knees and folds the other around her back. The Beast rumbles as his tuxedo is immediately ruined by gore, but the creature only feasts on my brain. It lets the other man go.

My stripped-off tie hits the floor before Kelly gets to the first stair. My jacket is next. I yank my blood-stained shirt over my head, not caring when my diamond studs go flying. Stepping out of the circle of gore, I kick off my shoes, ignoring the fact that they land on Herzog's corpse.

Each gesture pushes back the Beast a little more. Each item shed removes the threat of contagion, the danger of disease.

I stalk to the head of the table and flex my stocking feet in the clean rug there. My toes curl five times, measuring out the Beast's price. The animal in my brain growls but accepts that I've followed its rules. For now.

Back in control, I waste a moment debating whether to call Pete Miller. I need him back on the job. But the man was loyal to me for six years. It's not fair to drag him into this. Not when he was smart enough to get out before the shit hit the fan.

I draw a deep breath before I look down the table to Sawyer Best.

The former military interrogator has made a fortune with his consulting firm. Sawgrass gets the job done—whether

that's toppling military dictatorships in countries no one can place on a map or providing white-hat hackers to Silicon Valley's largest corporations.

"How long before you can get a clean-up crew here?" I ask.

He answers without hesitation. "We can get the body out by midnight." His dark eyes flash beneath his silver hair as he surveys the room. "Clean up will take longer. Noon, if you're willing to replace everything—carpet, flooring, Drywall, furniture, lights. We can swap out for top of the line down the road."

I try to see the room the way he does. Jesus Christ, Alix made a mess.

Alix. I should be with her.

I can't be with her. I have business to handle first.

Her first strike turned Herzog's carotid into a geyser. When the asshole bucked in reflex, his arterial spray arced from the wall behind him to the chandelier overhead. Blood spattered every candle in the center of the table.

Well, fuck it.

I chose the table and chairs because they're sturdy enough for a dozen men to sit down for a steak dinner without anyone worrying about rickety furniture. I waited six months for the set to be made in a North Carolina workshop where the upholstery was stitched by hand.

The floor is knotty pine. The rug is an antique Turkish kilim. The globes on the light fixture were blown by hand in Italy.

I wave a hand. "Get rid of it," I say. "All of it."

I read up on Best before I ever let him through the freeport's front gate. I have no doubt his Sawgrass force can scour the place clean enough to pass a Luminol test from Interpol, the CIA, or Dover Delaware's finest.

They have to. Alix's life—her freedom—depends on it.

Alix...

Not yet.

Best nods, his silvered beard making him look like a pirate. He pulls out a phone and heads into the kitchen. I can hear his voice, but I can't make out specific words.

I turn back to the table, to nine waiting men. In a perfect world, we'd move outside to the patio. I'd pour the good stuff, and they'd drink till their memories of the slaughterhouse in here were blurred. I'd put them up in the freeport guest cottages overnight, maybe longer, and I'd talk to each of them, find out what it would take to buy his silence.

This isn't a perfect world.

I want them out of here. Now.

"Gentlemen," I say, taking the time to meet the gaze of every man around the table. I see shock. Disgust. Gage Rider—owner of the Atlantic City Aces hockey team—is staring at the blood spray on the wall with professional admiration.

I force my voice to sound like I'm talking about something boring—a new facial recognition system for the warehouse or an auction of early Apple computers. "I remind all of you of the non-disclosure agreement you signed upon joining the Diamond Ring."

These men are used to making million-dollar deals every day. Antifreeze flows in their veins. I decide to seal the deal before anyone asks questions. "Of course, Diamond Freeport will provide you with an inconvenience fee for your time this evening. My Chief Operating Officer will see to it that one million dollars is transferred into each of your freeport accounts by tomorrow morning. I'll reach out next week with details about our July meeting."

My Chief Operating Officer. That was rich. My COO quit three hours ago, when he saw Herzog fuck Alix in the courtyard.

Alix...

The need to see her is a physical thing, compressing my chest like a thousand-pound weight.

At least my words are working. The men file out of the room like tame lions in the circus. Some look at the mess that was Herzog. Most focus on the door, like they're already calculating how to invest their windfall.

No one tries to shake my hand.

The last to leave is Cole Wolf. The tech mogul is glaring at his phone. Stopping safely outside the circle of blood, he scowls at his screen. "Motherfucker..." he mutters. And then he meets my gaze with narrowed gray eyes. "I can't do this on my phone. Where's your closest encrypted computer?"

"What are you doing?"

"Crypto transfer."

"I said you'll get your million by—"

"Not that. Herzog's Mercedes is sitting in your driveway. Who knows how many cameras he drove by on the way here? We can't delete all that footage. But we can say I bought the car after some intern drove it down here."

Admiring his attention to detail, I lead the way into my office. At my gesture, he takes a seat and calls up a freeport computer screen I've never seen before in my life. As his fingers fly over the keyboard, I ask, "What do we say when someone asks where the intern went?"

"How the fuck do we know? Maybe someone followed him down from— Where's Herzog's base?"

"New Castle County, I think. Outside Wilmington."

Wolf shrugs. "So the intern's return trip followed him down. We don't know who it was. We never saw the car. Or maybe he got picked up by a fraternity brother here in Dover; they headed out to score some pussy with a bonus from his boss. How far are you from the train station?"

"Twelve miles. Maybe thirteen."

“The intern might be training for a marathon. He could have run to the station and paid cash for a one-way ticket back home.”

“At night?”

“It’s summer. Light out till after nine.”

I know that. I know it because light lingered the night I brought Alix here, three years ago. I watched the sunset on her hair as I ordered her to strip for me. As I sent her to my shower.

Alix...

My hunger is a physical ache in my gut, one no surf and turf dinner could ever fill.

But Wolf pushes his point. “We don’t know about the intern and we don’t care. The Merc just has to be transferred free and clear.” He angles the screen to show me a waterfall of numbers.

“And you just happened to know Herzog’s crypto account?”

“*You* just happened to know it. That’s a security flaw for the freeport. I’ll send you a patch tomorrow.”

He logs off and stands.

“What the fuck will you do with a brand-new Mercedes?”

“Keep it at the airfield. Makes it easier to fly in for freeport business.”

“You came up with that just now?”

He shrugs and offers a toothy smile. “Some of us are gifted that way.”

“Jesus.” I shake my head, wondering how many other loose ends I’m missing.

But Wolf is already moving out of my office. “Best!” he calls into the kitchen. “Any problem with my taking this fucker’s car key?”

Sawyer Best snaps into his phone, "I'll call you back." He comes into the dining room. Barely glancing at the body, he says, "Better to keep all his shit in one place."

"I just bought his car."

Best nods. "Easier than trying to scrub cameras." Why is everyone else thinking about these things more clearly than I am?

Best squats beside Herzog's body and shoves a hand into a mangled pants pocket. It only takes a moment before he shakes his head, and then he ransacks the other pocket. The keychain he pulls out is sticky with blood. The Beast growls deep in my brain as he wipes it clean on the carpet before tossing it to its new owner.

"Would be a shame if you accidentally put it through the washer when you get home," Best said.

"It'll run me what, for a new one? Two, three hundred?"

"Extra, if they overnight the replacement."

"Cost of doing business with a cocksucking asshole."

Best grunts agreement as he climbs to his feet.

Wolf leaves. Best's phone rings, and he answers with a curt, "Speak." After a few seconds, he fires back a reply, apparently demanding a different electrician. Before the guy on the other end can respond, Best shoulders his phone and says to me, "Go on. I've got this." He turns his back and repeats his demand for Sparky.

He's right. He's got this. Just like Wolf has the car.

That means there's nothing left for me to do. Nothing to keep me from Alix.

I take the stairs two at a time.

ALIX



My guard is making a point of staring at the tiled wall. His hands hang loose at his sides. His face is relaxed behind his full, dark beard. But I've spent the last three years memorizing the actions of violent men, and I know he's watching me out of the corners of his cobalt eyes.

He spoke to me when he carried me upstairs, calling me Colleen and telling me I was safe now. He set me gently on my feet in the shower and backed off to his place by the door.

I try for the third time. "You can go now."

"I can't do that, Colleen."

"That's not my name!" I say in frustration, exasperated by the only phrase he seems to know.

His smile is quick. "Not Colleen. *Caillin*. It's Irish, for girl."

"I'm not a girl."

"I know that." He glances at the front of his shirt, stained with Herzog's blood. I can see where my head pressed against his shoulder, and the print of my body down his front.

I fold my fingers into fists, my stomach churning as dried blood flakes to the tiled floor. "Please," I say. "I want to wash

this off.”

“Be my guest.” He gestures toward a stack of plush towels. “But I’m not leaving. Himself wants me to keep you safe.”

“And keeping me safe means staring at my tits?”

“Keeping you safe mea—” He breaks off, mid-word.

I hear Trap, even though he’s on the other side of the tiled wall. “Thanks, Braiden. I’ve got her now.”

My guard—Braiden—steps out of the doorway. I can just make out some whispered conversation between the men. The carpet’s too thick for me to hear Braiden leave.

My throat closes as Trap takes his place.

He’s stripped to his trousers. His breath is coming fast; I watch his taut belly rise and fall like he’s just finished a workout. He lowers his head and runs a hand through his hair, ending by tensing his fingers at the back of his head.

Three years have changed him. Not as much as they’ve changed me, I know that. But the whiff of danger that drew me to him in Debasement is sharper now. He carried himself like a boxer before—tight, commanding, carefully under control—but now I can picture him in an MMA cage. No holds barred. Fighting for his life.

He lowers his hand to his side and taps a quick rhythm against his thigh—one, two, three, four, five.

He’s staring at the blood on me. I watch his eyes go from my ruined dress, to the V of my throat, to my face. He barely hesitates over my swollen chest, over the boobs Herzog forced on me. Nevertheless, the heat of a blush rises from my heart to the tips of my ears.

I know what happened to Trap when he was a boy. I know what it cost him to deal with Herzog’s mutilated body. But the only thing I’d do differently if I had another chance, is to cut off Herzog’s dick and shove it down his throat.

Still, I say, “I’m sorry.”

I’m sorry I’m testing him.

I'm sorry I'm not the woman who stood in this shower three years ago.

I'm sorry I didn't fight harder when I found a stranger in my apartment, when I woke up in the Holding Room, when I measured out each and every day in the prison Herzog called home.

"You have nothing to be sorry for," Trap says, his voice as rough as a kitchen grater. He clears his throat, but instead of talking more, he fishes into his pocket and produces a pair of black silk gloves. He pulls them on like he's taking medicine. Only after he's protected does he reach for the tap on the wall.

The rainfall shower head is as glorious as I remember. There's some sort of circulating pump, because the water streams out instantly hot. I gasp as it cascades over me, finally tugging loose my skewed, stained wig cap.

The water runs pink down the drain.

My once-white dress weighs more than the *Titanic*. I gather the skirts, layer after layer, like the world's filthiest joke. I pull them up, over my belly, over my inflated chest, over my head. The halter bodice follows and just like that I'm standing naked.

I'm waxed, of course, smoother than Trap demanded when I stripped for him three years ago. I watch him realize that. And he sees the bruise across my belly, deep purple where Herzog landed a kick just yesterday. And then he sees my other scars, the crisscross record of a madman breaking down my soul.

I close my eyes. I don't want to know what horror looks like. Or pity. Or disgust.

With the world blacked out, I shiver under the steady stream of water. "Can you make it hotter?" I ask.

The words are barely past my lips before a liquid comforter cascades from the shower head.

"More," I say.

He gives me what I need.

“More,” I sigh, and the water rises to a heartbeat shy of scalding. Steam billows off the tile walls. My skin feels plumped. Stretched. Filled for the first time in ages.

I don't see Trap move across the tiled shower room. I don't see him reach for the bottles on the shelf. I don't see him pour shampoo into his palm.

But I smell the rosemary when he slips behind me—sharp and clean and cool, exactly the way I remembered.

I shudder when his fingers touch my bare scalp, a convulsion that ripples from the crown of my head to the arches of my naked feet. An animal sound tears from my throat, something between a cry and a moan. I catch my breath like I can keep this single moment suspended in time forever.

It's been three long, desperate years since anyone touched me with care. With respect. With concern.

He's standing close enough that the drenched wool of his trousers brushes my ass.

Impossibly, I want him.

I need him.

He's the truth that kept me sane when Herzog tried to tear me apart.

But I know the words we whispered in the dark that summer night a lifetime ago. I know the monster that eats his brain. And if he thought I was dirty before Herzog ruined me, he knows I'm filthy now.

Used. Abused. Most likely crawling with disease.

I'm so revolting he can only bear to touch me with his soaked silk gloves.

Nevertheless, his fingers work the lather over my non-existent hair. Suds slip down my too-large breasts.

Incredibly, my body remembers the other things Trap did with his fingers, when he tied me to his massive bed. For the first time in more than a thousand endless nights, something

flutters deep inside the hollow between my legs. It feels like hope. It feels like freedom.

Behind my closed eyes, I can picture Trap's muscled chest. I can see the curls of dark hair, the hard seeds of his nipples. I lean back, trusting Trap to be there.

He freezes.

Every muscle in his body turns to stone for the time it takes him to mutter, "Jesus fucking Christ." Then he tears away from me, twisting like a seal. He grunts as he slams his fists into the wall, working an invisible speed bag—five, ten, fifteen, twenty blows.

Shame courses over me as he purges my corruption. The fingers of my right hand spread helplessly in front of my monstrous tits. My left hand shelters my slick mound. I double over, like I might be able to escape down the drain, washed away like Herzog's blood.

"I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry." I don't realize I'm saying it until the water abruptly turns off. "I'm sor—"

"Stop it!" Trap bellows.

I crouch on the tiles, covering my head with both arms.

"That motherfucking, cocksucking *asshole!*" Trap explodes. He sloshes over to the door, ignoring the drag of his ruined pants as he snatches up a towel. He thrusts it at me, hard, fast, and I snag it to keep the thirsty terry from falling to the floor.

He waits until I'm standing, until muscle memory takes over, and I start to dry my shoulders, my arms, my chest. Then he turns his back on me and yanks at the fly on his pants like he's trying to skin a panther. He shucks the trousers and his boxers, kicking them to the wall, hard. I get the quickest glimpse of his bare ass before he tightens a towel around his waist, cinching it like he's sealing a vacuum in space.

He drapes another towel over his shoulders and stands there, head lowered, breathing like a bull. I wrap my own towel around my chest, holding the end close beneath my right arm.

“I’m sorry,” I say once more.

He whirls to face me. “I never want to hear those words from you again. Understand?”

His barked question feels like a slap, a command. In the last three years, I’ve been given a lifetime’s worth of orders. But maybe this is different. Maybe this is what I need.

When Trap took me home from Debasement, I was unbearably naive. That night, he delivered his commands like bullets. He told me when to strip. How to wash. When to offer up my wrists and ankles to his cuffs.

And in exchange, he freed me. He broke down walls I didn’t even know I’d built.

It’s terrifying to think of trusting him again. To trust any man.

But I have to try. Because otherwise, I should have just stayed Herzog’s slave until he killed me.

I manage a tiny nod. Agreement. Acceptance.

“Say it,” he snaps.

“I understand.”

“Then let’s go,” Trap says.

Another command. I follow him into the bedroom. I stop beside his bed.

But Trap doesn’t pause beside the massive iron footboard. Instead, he pads across the room, and out to the hall. Obediently, I trail behind.

He leads me to another bedroom. A guest room, complete with its own king-size bed, with a mahogany headboard and matching nightstands. There’s a dresser and a vanity; I see both of us in the mirror.

He points at a closed door. “Closet,” he says. And at another. “Bathroom.” He pulls back a sky-blue comforter to reveal a frozen pond of clean sheets. “Get some sleep,” he says. “We’ll talk in the morning.”

And before I can think of a reply, he stalks out of the room, closing the door behind him.

Silence presses in on me. Standing in the center of the room, staring at the clean white walls, I'm suddenly so exhausted I can barely stay on my feet. I force myself to pad into the bathroom. There's a white terry bathrobe hanging on a hook behind the door. I swap my towel for it.

A tray rests beside the sink, holding a clean glass, a toothbrush, and a fresh tube of toothpaste. I brush my teeth, taking care not to look at myself in the mirror. I wipe my mouth on the hand towel and stagger back to the bedroom.

The sheets sing to me. I lay my robe across the foot of the bed and climb onto the mattress. I curl up on my left side, pulling the top sheet, cotton blanket, and comforter up to my chin. I think I'll fall asleep before I can take a dozen breaths.

But the instant my eyes close, I'm back in the dining room. I'm kneeling beside Herzog. I'm eyeing Trap's knife. And then I'm slicing, severing, stabbing, over and over and over again as endless buckets of blood rain down.

I roll onto my back. I stare at the ceiling. I try to sleep again, and when the waking nightmare starts anew, I switch to my right side. The silent movie in my head begins to play before I close my eyes.

But then I realize what this room is lacking. I know exactly what I need.

I slip out from under the sheets and pad to the door. I open it, pushing it all the way back on its hinges, so it seems like nothing is there, like I have no protection from the hallway, from anyone who wants me to do anything anywhere in the house.

Back under the covers, I tighten the fingers of my right hand around my left wrist, imitating the stranglehold of Herzog's lifeline. And then I slip into deep, dreamless sleep.

TRAP



I spend the night downstairs, watching Best's crew work. He's true to his word, and the body's gone by midnight. The two men who carry out the zipped bag have the tight-lipped look of soldiers. The silver Sawgrass logo glints on the pockets of their black uniform shirts. They call me sir and don't ask questions.

A moving crew arrives by three, four men with the same military precision. They sweep everything on the dining room table into sturdy cardboard boxes—china, crystal, and silver, along with burned out candles. Napkins and the tablecloth get smashed on top of the dried-out remains of both seafood towers. They take my liquor as well, not bothering to empty the bottles, along with the wine I had breathing in Riedel decanters.

The table goes next, and all twelve chairs. They move out the sideboard without clearing the drawers. The kilim rolls into a tight tube, bloodstains hidden inside.

The knotty pine floor is ripped up a few minutes after sunrise. The walls are knocked down to studs an hour after that. The noise is bad enough that I retreat to my office. Alix's room is at the far end of the second floor, but I'm sure she must be awake.

By noon, the house smells like paint, the new walls dry to the touch above perfectly serviceable oak plank flooring. A different moving crew brings in a clean-lined table with a dozen matching chairs, carting out protective plastic and crates. They match the liquor I had on hand, bottle for bottle, pouring off different amounts so nothing looks new.

The room looks like something out of a furniture catalog, or one of those long-term hotels for traveling business executives. It's conservative. Boring.

But there isn't a drop of blood in sight.

I send the last guys home with the dozen porterhouses I planned to cook last night.

After locking the front door behind them, I head back to my office. It only takes a few minutes to transfer funds into my clients' freeport accounts—one million dollars each, as promised, tagged as a semi-annual refund for overpayment of processing fees. I double the payment to Best, adding a note about services rendered.

There are a few loose ends. Herzog entered the compound last night using biometrics. A couple of the security cameras must have caught him forcing Alix on the hood of his car. At least I'd already sent home freeport staff, in what I'd thought was an excess of caution.

I shoot an encrypted email to Cole Wolf, asking him to wipe the tapes before he installs the security patch he mentioned last night.

And that's it. I couldn't keep Alix from falling into Herzog's trap, but I can damn well make sure she never pays a penalty for putting him down. Murder is easy to cover up when you have billions to throw at the problem.

Easier than figuring out what to do with the woman hiding in my guest room.

First things first. I place a few necessary phone calls. Then, upstairs, I make a pitstop in my bedroom. I collect a pair of sweatpants and a black T-shirt. She'll swim in them, but

they're better than nothing—which is exactly what she owns right now.

I'm surprised to find her door open when I reach the end of the hall. I expected her to be sleeping—or, at least, pretending she hasn't heard the ruckus of rebuilding the dining room.

She's wearing the white bathrobe, like she's a guest in a hotel. She's sitting in the chair in front of the vanity, her palms pressed flat in front of her. She's staring into the mirror, but her gaze is a million miles away.

I clear my throat softly.

She jumps like I fired a Taser into her chest. Without saying a word, she crashes to her knees on the floor between us. Her fingers lace behind her head like she's been busted by the Feds, and her elbows arc back toward the wall. The robe falls open to reveal those perfect tits, high and round above the ugly purple bruise that spans her belly.

“What the fuck?” My words sound like an accusation. My brain catches up with my mouth before I can say anything more stupid.

Herzog trained her.

He broke her like she was a wild horse.

He shattered the proud, self-protective instincts of the woman I met in Debasement, and I'm not sure there's enough left for me to patch her back together.

Her cheeks flush, and she pulls the robe closed, all the way to her chin. Climbing to her feet, she says, “I'm sor—” but she catches herself before she finishes the banned words. “I was just...” She gives up and shrugs. “Habit.”

Fuck habit.

If she had to fight to tell me that much, she's going to shit over the questions I have to ask next. I'm not sure if I'm thinking of her or myself when I say, “There's a fresh pot of coffee in the kitchen.”

I hand her the clothes and leave the room, giving her the privacy she deserves. She takes long enough dressing that I'm

afraid she won't come downstairs, but she finally does. I hope it's because she actually wants a cup of coffee, and not because she thinks I'll beat the crap out of her if she stays on the second floor.

I make a point not to glance toward the dining room.

As she settles onto a stool at the kitchen counter, I pour us each a mug. "Hungry?" I ask, like a thousand other questions aren't rabid-dog scratching at my brain.

She shakes her head. I pass her a plate of scones anyway. Pete brought them yesterday when he delivered the supplies for last night's dinner.

She takes one tentatively. I wonder if she's thinking about the first time she ate at my counter, three years ago. She was drunk then. I fed her till she sobered up, at least enough to consent to the depraved things I made her do.

Now, she tears off a tiny corner of pastry and slips it past her lips. That one taste, though, is enough to change her mind. She moans a little and takes a real bite, leaving crumbs at the corner of her mouth.

If the Beast didn't have my balls in a vise, I'd lick away those crumbs. I'd flick my tongue over her lips like a promise of every last perverted thing I want to do to her.

Speaking of perverted... I don't want to ask her, but I have to know. "So," I say, trying to make it sound like I'm talking about sunshine and fresh-baked cookies and fluffy kittens. "What happened?"

Her face falls, and there aren't enough scones in the world to make this story one I can stomach. When she stays silent, I decide to go first.

"I tried to track you down," I say. I don't want to scare her—not any more than she already is. But I want her to know I tried. I want her to know she's safe now.

She probably thinks I ran a Google search or two. But as I tell her the whole story—the cab company, the store where she bought her shoes, the university—her eyes get wider and wider. She gulps when I tell how I learned her name, and she

shakes her head when I describe her fuckface stepmother, pimping out her stepsister.

“But that was it,” I finally say. “I hit a dead end and no amount of keeping Asher in cigars was going to do me any good.”

I hope she’ll smile. Or maybe even laugh. But she knows my cards are on the table, and now it’s her turn. It takes her a while to show her hand.

“He was waiting for me, when I got home.”

“Herzog.” I make it a statement, so she doesn’t have to.

She shakes her head, a single sharp toss. “One of his dogs. And my brother. Leo.”

She pauses, for long enough that I think that’s all I’m getting. But then she swallows hard and says, “When I woke up, I thought I was having a nightmare. Then I knew I was living in Hell.”

It takes her a long time to tell the story—two cups of coffee and another scone and a half. I can tell she skips over parts. She bites her lip each time she decides to spare me, or maybe she’s sparing herself.

I’m lucky Leo’s dead, because I don’t have to kill him. I’m even luckier that Alix murdered Herzog, because if she’d left the job to me, I would have started by fucking his ass with the goddamn steak knife. By the time I was done with the cumwipe, Best’s clean-up team would have needed to burn the freeport to the fucking ground.

I don’t know what to say. There’s no way to comfort her. No way to rub out the past three years. But I glance at the clock and realize I don’t have to say anything at all. “Drink up.” I nod toward her mug. “Dr. Williams will be here in fifteen minutes.”

Her face turns to stone. “I don’t need a doctor.”

“Don’t worry. He’s used to making house calls.”

“I’m not worried. I just don’t need to see him.” Her jaw is set so hard she sounds like an actor in one of those ancient

black-and-white movies.

“He’s on my payroll,” I say. “You don’t need insurance.”

“That’s not it!” She’s trembling like I’m shoving her into a cave full of snakes.

I try to keep my voice calm. Logical. But I hate that I’m doing this to her. “He needs to look at that bruise. You could have internal bleeding.”

She caws, a single bark of laughter turned sour by the tears glinting in her eyes. “I’ll live,” she says.

“After what you’ve been through...” I start.

“I’m fine.” She cuts me off.

But the Beast gets wind of what I haven’t managed to say. It howls, long and loud, and when I answer, my voice is harsher than I ever meant to be. “You just told me Herzog fucked you.”

She glares at me, but the effect is ruined when a single tear spills over and runs down her cheek.

I’m desperate. I have to be, or the Beast is going to eat me from the inside out. “And other men, too.”

“I’m fine!” she insists.

“You could be pregnant,” I say. The Beast growls, because it doesn’t give a fuck about babies.

“I’m not.” She clutches her biceps hard enough that her knuckles stand out like giant pearls.

I have to shout to be heard over the Beast’s roar in my brain. “You could be sick! HIV. The clap. Hep C. Crabs.”

I’m right. I know I am. But I feel like I’m hurting her more than the bastard who turned her into a slave. The silence after my shout cauterizes my ears.

I try again, my voice deadly calm. “I need you safe. Healthy.” *Clean*. “You have to see a doctor.”

She’s sobbing now, crying in earnest. “I know... You’re right... But please... Not a man.”

It's a good thing Best's crew carted Herzog out of here by midnight. Because if his body was still in the next room, I'd shit in every one of his gaping wounds.

But I nod like everything's fine. "Of course," I say. "Not a man."

She wipes her eyes with her fists. Fighting to sound sane, I head to my office to call Williams and tell him to send someone else. A woman. Someone who won't terrify Alix more than she already is.

ALIX



I do it because Trap makes me. I close my eyes and hold my breath and let Dr. Hanson take her swabs. Based on rapid results, she gives me three types of pills. Full analysis will take a week, and she might change my drugs then.

She asks if she needs to leave meds for Trap. For just a second, I think she's assuming he gave me the clap. Then, I realize she thinks we're fucking now. I shake my head and say, "He's clean."

She believes me, or at least she seems to. She waits until I'm dressed again in Trap's over-size clothes and then she says, "What happened to you would be traumatic for anyone. If you'd like to talk to someone, I can recommend some good therapists."

"I'm fine," I say.

"You have no reason to be ashamed."

"I'm not."

"If you'd like to file a criminal complaint, I can work with you to make your medical records available to the police."

"I'm not going to the police."

She doesn't like that answer. She wants me to get help. But when I make a fist, I can still feel my knife pushing into the meat between Herzog's legs. I've already gotten all the help I'll ever need.

After Dr. Hanson leaves, I stay in the guest room, sitting on the edge of the bed and staring at my amber pill bottles. I know what it means, that I'm infected. I know Trap's phobia, the things he's never told another soul.

He won't want to throw me out, but he won't be able to help himself. I'm his greatest living nightmare, a perfect reminder that germs lurk everywhere.

I'm pretty sure he'll lend me money to cover first and last month's rent somewhere in town. I think he'll get me a phone, too, let me pay him back once I find a job. If I agree to keep my distance, he'll probably let me sleep here tonight. After all, that's the best way to get my diseased body out of his house for good.

He clears his throat from the doorway, and unlike earlier today, I'm able to stifle the urge to assume Presentation Posture. I wonder how long he's been standing there. How lost in thought was I, not to hear him climb the stairs or walk down the hall?

"Dr. Hanson told you?" I ask, hoping she broke the bad news.

He shakes his head. "She said to talk to you."

Damn patient confidentiality. I used to care about it, back when I thought I would be a psychologist. Now, I'd be willing to pay the doctor a year of my nonexistent salary, just to have her say the words I have to squeeze out. "She's treating me for a few things," I say, making it sound like I have a hangnail and chapped lips. Maybe a sunburn.

He shrugs, like that's what he expected. "Do you want me to take you to your family?"

"You met them," I say, because it isn't polite to call someone bat-shit crazy.

"I think your father would want to know you're safe."

“My father has done whatever his wife wants for more than a dozen years. He wouldn’t care about what happened to me.”

Trap nods, like that’s how every family works. “Then I guess we should get going,” he says.

So much for him letting me stay here tonight. There’s a homeless shelter downtown. It’s the middle of summer. They’ll probably have a bed. But I play out the rest of our little charade. “Going where?” I ask.

“New York City,” he says, and I don’t understand, because if that’s a joke it’s the worst punchline I’ve heard in my life.

It’s not a joke.

Trap gestures for me to precede him out of the guest room. We make a quick stop in his bedroom, where he retrieves a pair of flip-flops from a closet the size of my long-since abandoned apartment. He hands them to me.

“Not my size,” I point out.

“Better than going barefoot.”

Neither of us mentions the sky-high heels I wore here. Come to think of it, I haven’t seen those shoes, or my Marilyn Monroe dress, or my wig cap. Trap must have disposed of them when he bagged Herzog’s body.

I know a normal person would hesitate from saying that—*bagged Herzog’s body*. A normal person would feel remorse at taking another human being’s life. Maybe even feel regret.

But Herzog broke something inside of me long ago. No matter how many swabs I submit to, no matter how many pills I take, I’ll never be normal again.

I take my time on the stairs, concentrating on not tripping over my borrowed shoes. The challenge is heightened by the amber bottles of pills I still carry.

Downstairs, Trap ducks into his office. He comes out with a tote bag, the sort of thing that’s given away by the million at trade shows and conferences. It’s embossed with the Diamond

Freeport logo, the letters D and F wrapped around a stylized black diamond.

He hands the bag to me, and now I have a fancy purse to match my designer shoes. I dump in my medicine and sling the bag over my shoulder. I don't have anything else to take with me—no wallet, no phone, no hint of my life before Herzog.

Following Trap out to the garage, I'm overwhelmed by a sense of *deja vu*. But that's not right. I actually *have* been here before—the night I met Trap in Debasement. I expect to see his electric blue Porsche, but he must have traded that car for the massive black Range Rover that looks like it was carjacked from a presidential motorcade.

He opens my door and waits for me to climb inside. It takes me three tries to figure out the best way to haul myself up the metal mountain. If he gets impatient, he doesn't show it. He certainly doesn't help by placing my hands on the best handholds. There isn't a chance in hell he'll actually touch me, offer me a boost.

Once I'm settled, he crosses to the driver's side. He eases into his own seat like a cowboy hitting the Chisholm Trail. He backs out of the garage, negotiates the heavy freeport security at the front gate, and we're on the open road.

I can't believe how fast the car goes. Herzog kept me blindfolded for the entire ride to Dover. Otherwise, it's been three years since I've been in a moving vehicle. I gasp each time we pass a car on our right. I flinch at every overpass.

We reach the Dover airfield in just a few minutes.

"You were serious?" I say. "We're really going to New York?"

"Why would I lie about that?"

Because you want me out of your life. Out of your house. Because you need to be safe.

But I don't say any of that. It's been three long years since I've made decisions about my life. I think I've forgotten how.

I expect Trap to walk over to one of the small planes scattered across the tarmac. Instead, we walk to a hangar on the far edge of the field. An actual jet waits outside.

“Mr. Prince,” says a man in a pilot uniform, straightening to shake Trap’s hand. If he notices Trap tap out a five-point release against his thigh, his eyes don’t flicker. Instead, he gestures to the plane. “I just completed my walk-around. We’re ready for you and your guest to board.”

I knew Trap had money. I just didn’t understand how much.

I feel like I’ve been transported into another world, a fairytale life where a co-pilot materializes from the cockpit and a flight attendant approaches with a professional smile. Bottles of chilled Berg water glisten beside upholstered leather chairs. We’ve barely cleared the runway when we’re served a full meal—a perfect wedge salad with the best blue cheese dressing I’ve ever had, filet mignon with béarnaise, and a raspberry-draped cheesecake that almost makes me believe in God.

The fantasy doesn’t end when we land in New York. A car waits to drive us into the city. The uniformed chauffeur doesn’t blink at my unconventional clothes; he just hands me into the back of the limo like I’m on my way to the Oscars.

I should say something to Trap, make some sort of small talk. But I’m gaping at the skyscrapers in the distance, then the George Washington Bridge, then the canyons of the city.

Taking the jet saved us at most an hour over driving from Dover. Trap Prince is a man who’s willing to spend a fortune on saving an hour. I wonder if he was that way three years ago. I wonder how he’s changed since Debasement.

We cross Central Park and hit Fifth Avenue. It’s early evening on a Sunday, and most of the stores are closed for the night. I’ve never followed high fashion—Wal-Mart and Target have been more my speed—but I feel like a child looking into Santa’s workshop.

Our driver pulls over to the curb, blocking traffic for long enough to help me out of the car, across a puddle, and onto the wide sidewalk. Even after Trap comes to my side, I'm looking around like a lost sheep.

A bronze-and-glass door opens in front of us. The lettering on the door says Gallagher Samson, surrounded by scrolls.

"Mr. Prince! I hope your trip wasn't too difficult." The woman who greets us looks like someone's grandmother, or maybe a retired kindergarten teacher. She's wearing a practical lavender dress with a large pink bow at her throat. Her snow-white hair is piled in a loose bun on top of her head. Her smile makes me think about fresh-baked chocolate-chip cookies.

"Mrs. Gallagher?" Trap says.

"Please," she answers. "Call me Martha. And this is?" Her twinkling eyes invite me into a confidence, like a shared story over afternoon tea.

"Alix," I say. "Alix Key."

"Welcome, Alix. Please, both of you, come in."

She locks the door behind us and ushers us down the boutique's main aisle. A luxurious fitting room stands open at the back of the store, equipped with a loveseat, a coffee table, and three full-length mirrors. A pair of rolling racks display an entire wardrobe of clothes.

I'm still gaping as Martha ushers Trap to the loveseat. She gestures toward a glass and decanter on a side table. "Mr. Miller said you were a rye man?"

"I am," Trap says.

Martha pours him a generous glass, taking care to put the decanter close to his elbow. "Help yourself to more," she says. And then she turns to me with a self-deprecating little laugh. "Mr. Miller wasn't sure what you would enjoy, but I figured champagne is never a bad thing."

There's an ice bucket on the coffee table, along with a crystal flute so delicate I'm almost afraid to hold it. When

Martha pours the sparkling wine, I catch a glimpse of a gold label. Veuve Clicquot.

“Now then,” Martha says after I take my first sip. “I understand you’re looking for a full wardrobe?”

“I—” I start, but I realize I don’t have a clue how to answer.

“That’s right,” Trap says easily, covering my confusion. “Why don’t you assume Alix needs everything. We’ll mostly be staying around the house, but we’ll need a couple of things for the office, and for some evening events.”

House.

Office.

Evening.

He says it like he’s browsing through his calendar. But I feel the words like he’s handing me a winning lottery ticket.

He wants me to stay.

Me, the woman who murdered a man in his dining room, not twenty-four hours ago. Me, the woman who was used as a sex slave by the most sadistic bastard in the world. Me, the woman so unclean he can’t bear to touch me.

“Trap...” I don’t have a clue what else to say.

He looks past me to my fairy godmother. “Let’s see what you’ve got, Martha.”

ALIX



Martha has sundresses. Linen slacks. Silk tops that glimmer like sunset. She has jeans and cotton sweaters, khakis, and unstructured blazers. She has dresses that would be perfect in a boardroom, along with summer-weight wool pantsuits. She has seven little black dresses and a trio of evening gowns that make my eyes pop—sapphire and ruby and emerald, each with a different neckline and striking, dramatic skirts.

After a moment's hesitation, when I have to confess I don't have any underwear, Martha produces panties and a bra. They're plain cotton—not a bow or a scrap of lace in sight. I feel whole for the first time in three years.

When Martha sees the massive purple bruise across my belly, her lips purse. She glances at Trap, almost too quickly for me to notice. A minute or two later, she edges me around one of the rolling racks, calling my attention to the neckline of an evening gown. While we admire the hand-sewn beadwork, she leans close and whispers, so softly I can barely imagine the words, “Are you safe?”

The clothes blur, and I have to bite my lip to keep tears from actually trickling down my cheeks. But I clutch her hand and squeeze hard. “Yes,” I say, just as softly as she spoke, so she'll believe me. And then I mouth, “Thank you.”

I expect Trap to be bored. He sits on the loveseat, right hand holding his whiskey, left arm draped over the back of the couch. His ankle is crossed over his knee. He's relaxed. Attentive. Pleased.

But his eyes narrow when I pluck at the bodice of a sundress. He catches me again, tugging at a scoop-necked top. He frowns when I reject a short-waisted tight-knit sweater.

I want clothes that hide my too-large breasts, not ones that emphasize them. I want to ask Martha if she has a burka, or maybe a tent. When I set aside a tailored feminine oxford with an endless line of buttons down the front, Trap deposits his glass on the table with a jarring clank.

"Lingerie," he says, when Martha turns to him with raised eyebrows. "Panties. Bras." He directs a pointed look toward my plain cotton underwear. "Better than those."

"Of course," Martha says, completely unfazed. "Why don't you take a stroll to the front of the store, and we'll take care of that right now?"

He growls, but he's not about to challenge Martha on her own turf. She waits with a sugar-sweet smile until he fills his glass and stalks out of the room. Martha produces a tape measure from a hidden pocket and asks me to raise my arms. She measures me as efficiently as the doctor completed her invasive work this morning. "Wait here, dear," she says.

She returns with her arms full of underclothes. There's a mountain of lace, an entire forest of bows. Under Martha's expert guidance, I'm outfitted in everything from sweet pink innocence to black-and-red seduction. Everything's beautiful. Everything's tasteful. As with all the other clothes, there isn't a price tag in sight.

Martha produces the last item when my back is turned but when I see it, I gasp out loud. It's perfect—better than the all the rest of the treasure trove.

She hands me a sleek, black sports bra. The straps cross over my back in a defiant X. The instant I settle my breasts into the cups, I feel supported. Powerful. Safe.

After that, it's just odds and ends. Silk pajamas, styled for a man but cut for my figure. A soft cotton sleep shirt that hangs to my knees. A negligée with a matching see-through robe.

Martha lets Trap back into the room when we get to the shoes. I wear jeans and a soft Henley, confident in the refuge of the sports bra. Martha works tirelessly, swapping out sizes, finding a lower pair of heels. When she's finished, I'm ready for anything from a day at the beach to a night at the opera.

"That just leaves the evening gowns," Martha says. "Have you decided, dear?"

I shake my head. I love the blue one, its single strap embracing my left shoulder. But the red one is stunning with a slit cut up to my thigh. And that shade of green has always been my best color...

"Take them all," Trap says.

"Of course." Martha beams. "And where would you like these delivered, Mr. Prince?" Martha asks. There's no way we can fit everything into the car, even if the chauffeur comes back for rock-star parking at the curb.

Trap gives her the address of his home at the freeport. I'm watching closely, but I never see him hand her a credit card. The only thing Martha does at the register is retrieve a shopping bag and several sheets of silver-colored tissue paper. She wraps a pair of khakis and a casual top.

Trap asks me about the daisy-print sundress left on a rack with other discards, and I tell him I prefer the cut of the green one. He says, "You can have both."

"I don't need both. Really. This is all too much."

He shakes his head. "It's not enough."

Martha materializes at my side before I can argue. "Here you go, dear. A little overnight bag." She winks as she passes me the shopping bag.

I thank her, wishing English had more words, because the ones I know aren't nearly enough for everything she did for

me today. Trap shakes her hand as we leave, and I'm surprised he makes the contact until I see him hand over several folded bills. He taps out his penance on the hood of the waiting limo as the chauffeur helps me into the car.

"Ready for dinner?" Trap asks.

Before I can say a word, my mouth opens on a tremendous yawn. I'm embarrassed, and I try to hide behind my hand, but Trap laughs. "I'll take that as a no."

"I shouldn't be this tired."

"*Shouldn't* has nothing to do with it." He projects his voice to the driver. "We'll head home."

I was expecting to go to a hotel—the Four Seasons or maybe the Ritz. But Trap has that beat. He owns a penthouse apartment in a towering building on the west side of Central Park. A doorman greets him by name. An exclusive elevator opens into a private foyer.

Private jet. After-hours boutique shopping. A penthouse apartment that looks like a movie set. My mind is officially blown.

Trap shows me around the kitchen, telling me to help myself when I get hungry. The open floor plan includes a living room the size of a baseball diamond, looking over the park. A hallway leads to more private space—Trap gestures to his bedroom before opening the door to mine. We're high enough in the building that I can see all the way to the river. I wonder which of the sparkling lights mark the airport where we landed hours ago.

"Sleep in," Trap says. "I have to be back at the freeport by tomorrow night, but we can take our time in the morning."

"Will do," I say. Because that's a lot easier than *thank you for all of this*. Than *how can this be happening to me?* Than *what can I possibly give you in exchange for all of this?*

He heads back to the room he called his office.

Alone, I peek inside the bag Martha packed for me. There are the khakis and top, exactly as I expected. Plain cotton

panties and a sports bra that matches the one I have on now. But she included the negligée too, its champagne froth glistening in the overhead light.

I think about pulling the shades, but we're at the top of the highest building between here and New Jersey. I take my time removing my new clothes, folding each item like it's a precious artifact.

I shiver when I slip the negligée over my head. It's so light that I barely feel it kiss my skin. When I look down, my breasts are framed by lace panels so sheer I can make out the dark circles that shadow my hard nipples.

Hard nipples.

I already know these breasts aren't as sensitive as the ones I was born with, the ones Herzog mutilated to make me his perfect slave. He could pinch these new ones with all his evil force, and I barely felt a thing.

But the negligée's soft touch awakens me in a way I didn't think possible. I brush my palm over the silk, feather light, and I feel the tightening of those hard buds all the way to my core.

I do it again. A third time. And each stroke feels like a tiny wave, lapping against my clit.

I haven't touched myself in three long years. I haven't imagined using my broken body for pleasure.

But now I slip a finger underneath the soft lace hem of the negligée. I part my folds, timid as a virgin. I'm astonished to find I'm wet, slick with a need I thought I'd lost forever.

I close my eyes. I slip a finger deep inside. I rub my thumb against my clit, surprised to find it hot and hard. With my other hand, I cup my heavy breast, bending down to breathe on my nipple through the gauze of my gown.

And I hear Trap swear in the doorway: "Sweet Jesus fuck."

TRAP



She startles like a guilty thief.

Her knees start to bend; I see her instinct to take that fucking position. She catches herself, but the look she gives me grabs me by the balls.

Fear.

Embarrassment.

Shame.

One hand's shoved up her pussy. The other's holding her tit like she just discovered it's there. And she's looking at me, *pleading* with me, begging me to forgive her. To tell her she can stay.

She has no idea how hot she looks in that barely-there scrap of lace. No clue how quickly her flushed face makes me hard. I've already forgotten her head's been shaved. She's just Alix. My Alix.

She straightens and wipes her fingers on her thigh.

I know I should wait for her to make the first move after everything she's been through, but my body doesn't listen. I cross the room before my big brain can tell my little one to go to hell. I fold my palm behind her neck, planning to bring her

close for the type of fantasy kiss I've been beating off to for the past three years.

Her mouth opens to me, hot and wet. Her tongue meets mine, vibrating with a needy little mew that rises in her throat. She tastes like champagne and she feels like a dream and my cock is so hard it hurts.

The Beast explodes.

Its claws close around my heart, ripping that pulsing muscle to shreds. It tears open my lungs, leaving me gasping like a gutted fish. I stagger back, like Alix has turned radioactive.

Her hands fly up, reaching for me by instinct. It's like she doesn't know the broken thing that chews away my brain. The fingers she had inside her sweet snatch glisten. For just a heartbeat, I think about licking them clean. The Beast lances a cramp through my belly, so sharp I fall to my knees.

All these years, it's been telling me lies, bellowing that the world is full of sickness and rot. But this time, there's a kernel of truth in its howled warning. It's not Alix's fault—none of this is—but an actual doctor has said she's sick. Herzog poisoned her, and the fucking Beast won't let me get close enough to decide to take the risk.

"Fuck!" I bellow, slamming my fist into the floor. It hurts, a lot, but it's the only way I know to tame the fire that's killing me. I punch again, three times, four, five.

Alix cringes, arms half-raised to protect her head. I've terrified her, and I hate myself, but there's no other way to strangle the animal in my head.

I force myself to my feet. I stagger back toward the door. I brace myself on the frame, gripping the wood with both hands so she can see them. So she can know she's safe.

"Don't stop," I say. "Keep doing what you were doing when I fucked everything up."

She shakes her head, a bright red flush flooding her face. She's breathing fast, like she needs a paper bag before she

hyperventilates. She's embarrassed that I caught her; she looks like she wants to die.

Then why the fuck did she leave her door open?

"I didn't mean to—"

"Stop," I interrupt, because that's as bad as saying she's sorry.

Her lips clamp closed. But my single word of command steadies her. She takes a breath, a real one. Holds it for a few seconds and exhales through pursed lips.

She's spent the last three years taking orders from a sadistic shitstain. It doesn't make sense that she wants to be bossed around now.

But I don't need her fancy psychology classes to know that following orders means she isn't responsible. Whatever happens isn't her fault. She's innocent, just doing what she's told to do.

She needs that.

And I can give it to her.

"Get on the bed," I snap.

She moves without hesitation, scrambling to the center of the king-size mattress. I think about getting equipment from the other bedroom, from the bottom drawer of my dresser, but I don't want to waste the time.

I don't want the Beast fucking with me, either.

"Pillows behind your head," I snap. And after she complies, I bark, "Lean back! Knees up!"

Her nightgown falls back around her waist. I meant to get a shot between her legs, but she pins her knees together. That's okay. She won't hold out for long.

"Put those two fingers in your mouth," I say.

She doesn't ask which ones. She knows I'm talking about the hand she had inside her.

"Show me how good you taste," I say.

She hesitates, and I take a step closer to the bed. Hurried, like she thinks I'll attack her, she glides her fingers in and out of her lips, moaning like a porn star.

“Cut it out,” I order.

She shuts up, but she doesn't stop moving her fingers. And something must click, because she changes her pace. She slows down. She purses her lips. Her tongue gets in on the action, and her knees start to relax. I move to the foot of the bed.

“Show me your new tits,” I say.

She freezes, but only for a second. After all, I spent the last three hours watching her try on clothes. She was covered; Martha Gallagher saw to that. But Alix knew my eyes were on her the entire time.

Tentatively, she pulls her nightgown out from under her ass. She has to use both hands to work the fitted top over those huge globes.

Herzog was a fucking maniac. I don't know—don't *want* to know—why he forced her into a boob job. It's clear she hates the results. Her knees are pinned again. She's staring at me, the nightgown bunched beneath her chin, begging without words.

She's waiting for an order. Whatever I say, she'll do it. I'm certain of that.

“Suck them,” I say.

“I can't—”

“Do it!”

She cups the right one with both her hands. She has to raise her head from the pillow, has to crane her neck, but she brings the nipple to her lips.

Her tongue flicks out, a scared velvet mouse. And just like that, her nip turns to stone. She gasps, shifting her hands to bring that hot button closer. Her lips close over it and she pulls hard.

My cock turns to iron in my shorts.

She works herself hard, lips and tongue and teeth. This time when she moans, it's the real thing. Without my telling her, she shifts to the other boob. She sucks it even harder.

I work the button on my jeans and lower my zipper. I'd give just about anything to straddle her hips, to cover her hands with mine, to meet her tongue at the hard, hot peaks.

Instead, I grab my cock and balls, wincing as I work them over the band of my boxers. I can feel my pulse pound all the way up my shaft.

I watch her play, see her figure out how to raise both boobs with her forearms. She flicks one nipple with her thumb and forefinger. She brushes back and forth over the other, using her fingernails to make it even harder.

This is the woman who called out her safeword when I pinched her tit three years ago. The shit she survived—and the surgeon's work—have reset her tolerance for pain.

I want her to push those incredible boobs together. I want to plow that groove with my cock. I want her lips to meet my head, to suck me off the way she's working on herself.

I have to settle for yanking my own dick, hard.

She's gasping, she's moaning, and it's all real, this time. Her eyes are squeezed shut, like she's concentrating on a drumbeat only she can hear.

But she isn't rising any higher. She's not going to get off just by working her tits.

So I tell her, "Play with your clit."

She shifts attention immediately—no hesitation this time, no argument about what she can and cannot do. She bucks the first time she reaches between her legs, but it only takes her a moment to build a rhythm.

"Open your legs," I say.

And that must be another thing she really wants to do, because she slides her heels apart, lets her knees fall open, and

gives me a perfect view of the heaven I can't have.

She's soft and pink and wet enough to shine in the overhead light. The sight of her makes my balls jump and I have to catch my breath. She's shaved clean, no, waxed, because no blade scrapes that close, and I realize she's taken it all off, every hair, front and back.

The whole time I've been staring, she's been playing with her hard, needy pearl. She uses one hand to frame it, fingers pulling back its hood. The other hand rubs hard and fast, moving up and down, up and down, then lingering in a circle.

I shuck my jeans and boxers and climb onto the bed so I'm kneeling in the tempting V of her legs. I can't do more. I can't eat her out, the way I'm dying to do. I can't take over the song she's playing on that swollen nub. I can't sink my cock into her tight, hot slit and ride her till she screams my name.

But I can say, "Fuck yourself. Use your fingers. Fuck your pussy hard."

She thrashes her head in refusal. "I won't... I can't—"

"You can."

But she shakes her head. Fierce. Angry. "I can't come." She gasps. "I haven't... Not since... With you..."

Three years of torture. Three years of shame. Three years with no release. Yet another mark against Herzog, on the long list of crimes he'll never make up for.

"I'm here now," I say.

"But—"

"Fuck yourself," I order again. "Use your fingers," I repeat. "For me."

She starts with her index finger, sinking deep. I see the flex of her wrist, and I know she's scraping the starburst of nerves on her inner wall. I watch her thumb curl in, tapping at her greedy clit.

I tighten my own grasp, pulling my cock hard. It's hot and heavy against my palm, and I know I'm three good strokes

from spurting all over the bed.

Alix doesn't wait for my command. She adds a second finger.

I force myself to take my time, stroking long and slow, from the root of my shaft to the tip.

She adds a third finger. The thickness makes her whine, changing the angle of her hand, making her pump faster, harder, closer to the edge. She's close, so close. Her mouth stretches into a desperate O. She straightens her legs. She points her toes.

But no matter what she does, she can't tip over the edge.

Tears leak from the corners of her eyes. She wants this. She needs this. But she can't give it to herself.

Holding myself back, I grit out a single word: "Come."

Her hand plunges home. Every muscle in her body tightens. She teeters on the cliff for one endless moment.

And a scream tears from her throat.

It's a wordless cry, the sound of victory. Her pussy lips begin to flutter around her soaked fingers, and I win my own private war. Cum arcs out of me in thick, heavy ropes, onto her hand, onto the smooth stretch of her mound, onto her belly to cover the ugly bruises Herzog left behind.

Only when I'm pumped dry, utterly empty, do I push back with both hands. I find the foot of the bed, but my legs are shuddering too hard for me to stand. I sit on the edge of the mattress, breathing like a racehorse, praying I haven't pushed her too far, too fast.

This isn't what I wanted. What I thought I needed. But it's what the Beast let me have. It's the right thing for now. And tonight, that has to be enough.

ALIX



I wake slowly, wrapped in the scent of coffee and the heat of tangled bedclothes. My first thought is that I'm dreaming. If I keep my eyes closed, if I breathe deeply, if I blank my mind to reality, I can stay in the perfect world of sleep.

Sleep isn't safe, though. Dreams are dangerous. I curl my fingers around my wrist, making sure my lifeline is in place, so I'll know if Herzog summons me to any corner of the house.

My wrist is bare.

I sit up with a start, throwing back my sheet and a feather-soft blanket. My heart pounds as I look around the strange room. I've never seen this bed before, those windows, that door.

And then memory washes over me. Herzog is dead. I'll never wear a lifeline again. I spent my first night as a free woman in the guest room of Trap's mansion, and then he took me to New York City.

I have a new wardrobe, finer clothes than I've ever owned in my life.

I slept in a penthouse apartment, one with better views than I've seen anywhere outside of a movie.

I had sex.

Sort of.

I stretch, feeling the pull of overused muscles in my legs and deep beneath my belly. I press my palm to my breast, and the silk of my negligée slides over sensitive skin. I flush, remembering all the things Trap ordered me to do, all the things I *did*. When I drag my hand down my face in shame, my fingers smell like sex.

Trap brought me a washcloth from the bathroom. He waited while I cleaned myself, wiping my own juices from between my legs before I washed off his sticky cum. He watched me pull my sheer nightgown down, tucking away my savaged breasts, hiding my belly and the lazy heat between my thighs.

Once I was safely covered, he brought the sheet over me, tucking it in beside my shoulders. He smoothed the blanket over me as well. When he left, I asked him to leave my door open. If he hesitated, my eyes were already closed, so I couldn't tell.

He's out there, somewhere in the apartment. That's why I can smell coffee.

Three years ago, I ran away before midnight. We never shared any morning-after awkwardness. I didn't need to worry about what to say, what to wear, whether he would take me back to bed.

Now I delay all those things and more by taking a shower. When I'm clean and dry, I pull on the clean underwear Martha packed in my overnight bag. The sports bra gives me an immediate jolt of confidence. The khakis and top fit like they were tailored just for me.

I pad out to the kitchen in bare feet. Central Park stretches beneath me, its deep green punctuated with roads and paths and fountains I've only seen on TV. A mug waits beside the coffee maker. A plate holds a couple of muffins and a scone, along with little pots of butter and jam.

Suddenly, I'm ravenous. I devour one of the muffins straightaway, morning glory, so full of fruit and nuts that I don't need any accompaniments. I wash it down with coffee, then take a slightly more controlled approach to finishing off a lemon-blueberry scone.

Washed. Dressed. Fed. I bolster my courage with several sips of the best coffee I've ever drunk in my life, and then I've run out of excuses not to find Trap.

He's in his office, of course, at the far end of the hall he showed me last night. The door is almost closed; there's only a gap of an inch or two. As I approach, I hear his voice, pitched low like he's trying not to wake me, but filled with urgency nonetheless.

"Dammit, Pete! I thought we were past this."

He's silent for a moment.

"Of course I listen to you," he says. "I take everything you say very seriously."

Another pause.

"What do you want me to tell you? You were right. I was wrong. I never should have invited Herzog into the Diamond Ring. And once he was there, I should have listened when you said he'd—"

Pete—whoever *he* is—must have a lot to say, because Trap doesn't talk for a very long time.

But finally he says, "But when you took my call yesterday, I thought—"

Pete obviously interrupts him.

Trap tries again. "Your advice about Gallagher Samson was right—"

Another interruption.

"No, no," Trap insists. "Martha was perfect. I couldn't have asked for anything more."

Pete says something short. Something that leaves Trap sounding absolutely exhausted.

“If it’s money, I’ll raise your salary.”

Pete clearly doesn’t want a raise.

“Choose your title,” Trap bargains. “Whatever you want.”

Pete doesn’t want a new title.

“Vacation days, corner office, free reign to hire and fire—”

Pete clearly cuts him off to say no.

Trap clears his throat. “If you change your mind, you know my door is always open. All right, then. Best to Michael. Goodbye.”

I give him a minute before I knock on the door, pushing it open with a smile that’s supposed to say I’ve never dreamed of eavesdropping on any phone conversation anywhere, anytime.

“Good morning,” I say, and then I’m off and running. “When you said ‘sleep in’ I obviously took you at your word, because I don’t remember the last time I slept in so late. And the water pressure in that shower—I could have stayed in there forever. I’ve never felt towels like that—they could double as mattresses they’re so thick. And those muffins—I don’t know where they’re from, but I could seriously eat one every morning for the rest of my life and never get tired of them.”

I force myself to stop. It’s a good thing I brought my mug with me. Otherwise, I’d have to look directly at Trap. This way, I can study the way the rich brown coffee reflects the light from the window. Surely that’s fascinating enough to hold my attention for, I don’t know.... A century or two?

“Good morning,” Trap says, and I’m pretty sure he’s laughing at me.

The silence stretches between us for too long, and something snaps inside me. I’m back to babbling again. “I’ve been to New York before, but only on a school trip with choir. We performed at Lincoln Center, which was amazing, but I haven’t had a chance to see anything else in the city. We didn’t get to see any museums at all, which my father said was a crime, and we could only look at Central Park as we drove by. It’s incredible to see from up here. I can’t believe how green

the grass is, this late in summer. I would expect the heat to have burned it to a crisp by now.”

“Heat, huh?” He’s definitely laughing at me.

My cheeks start to burn. I consider the merits of launching into another monologue—maybe I can come up with something about the subway. That would be fascinating.

Instead, Trap says, “Alix. Look at me.”

I tear my eyes away from my mug just long enough to meet his green-brown gaze. Then I’m back to studying my coffee, and the strange way my knuckles are turning white against the mug.

“Look. At. Me.”

Each word is a command, unbearably heavy and absolutely clear. I don’t have an option. He’s taken away all of my hesitation. Burned off all my resistance. I don’t have to think, don’t have to decide, don’t have to figure out what’s right and what’s wrong.

I look at him.

“Good girl,” he says.

Once upon a time, I would have flinched at being called a girl. I would have reminded him that I’m a woman, a full-grown adult with my own obligations and responsibilities. I’m strong and independent and one hundred percent under my own control.

But he called me *good girl* the night we met.

Now the words lick at something deep inside me. They ignite a flutter that steals my breath away. They make me think of every other command he’s given me—three years ago, last night—and how he’s taken care of me every time I’ve given him even a sliver of my trust.

“I needed last night,” he says, as simple as saying he needed water to drink or oxygen to breathe. “So did you.”

I want to deny him. I’m embarrassed by what we did, by what I let him order me to do. I take too long blinking, and I

picture myself cradling my absurd breast, stretching my neck, sucking on my own nipple—all because Trap told me too.

“Say it,” he orders.

I could lie.

Or I can give in and do what he commands because it’s what I truly want to do. I want to say it. It’s the truth. “So did I,” I say.

As if that settles something, he turns to his desk and picks up a trim white box. He passes it to me, and a whole host of protests flood my brain. He’s already given me so much. I shouldn’t be taking more from him. He doesn’t know me. He doesn’t have any reason to do anything for me. We spent one night together; that shouldn’t mean he has to take care of me forever.

“Open it,” he says.

I do.

There’s a gleaming new phone nestled inside. It’s top of the line, with more camera lenses than I’ve ever seen on a handheld device. It’s light in my hand and small enough to tuck into my pocket. A card in the box lists a 302 phone number—Delaware.

“I can’t—”

“Stop.” His voice sparks with warning.

“It’s too—”

“Stop,” he repeats, with more heat.

I stare at the box. Someone—probably the salesman at whatever store he plundered so early on a Monday morning—has written Trap’s last name in capital letters on the lid. I’m sure he had the phone delivered the same way he had someone bring us muffins and scones. Just an everyday perk of being a billionaire.

“Thank you, *Prince*,” I finally say.

“You’re welcome,” he says. And then he adds with something that sounds like real pleasure, “*Princess*.”

The word sounds suggestive on his lips. Possessive. Like he knows it comes with a whole new list of commands, and he's certain I'll follow every one.

Before he can act on that, though, the phone rings on his desk. It looks like the sort of console that belongs in the office of a corporate president, full of lights and buttons that can probably manage an army. Silver letters flash a name I heard at Trap's dinner party: Sawyer Best.

Trap drops his index finger on a blinking red light. "Sawyer," he says by way of greeting. "I have Alix here."

A confident baritone comes over the speaker. "Hello, Alix. Trap."

"We're still in New York," Trap says. "Any problems with the work back home? Your men did an excellent job on the overnight."

The overnight. That must be the work that transformed Trap's dining room from a slaughterhouse to something that could be featured in a photo spread of *Architectural Digest*. I know I should feel guilty for what I did to Herzog, but I can't summon even a hiccup of shame.

"They're moving ahead with the upgrades," Sawyer says. "Replacing the short-term fixes. First up is lighting—both the chandelier and the wall sconces."

Trap makes a wordless noise, the type of sound that lets Sawyer know he's listening.

"We just need to know what to do with the surveillance you had in place. My guy says he's never seen anything like it. Do you want to go back to whoever did your original work? Or have us install a standard system?"

Trap's face goes flat as he says, "Surveillance."

Sawyer helps. "The cameras in the chandelier. That 360 coverage was pretty ingenious. Who did it for you, anyway?"

Trap's voice sounds like an arctic storm as he says, "I never installed surveillance in my own dining room."

TRAP



I'm already texting my pilot, telling him we'll be wheels up within the hour. My demand hatches a flurry of emails about meals and drinks and any other extras I want on the plane. I ignore them, because who gives a fuck about food when there's a war going on?

Because that's what this is—war. I just don't know who my enemy is.

The logical thing to do is to call Pete back and get him over to the house while we're flying home. But Pete made it perfectly clear this morning that he's not coming back. He helped with my little shopping spree because he felt bad for Alix, but he refuses to have anything else to do with the freeport.

We'll see about that later. Everyone has his price.

For now, I'm hamstrung. Aside from Best's crew, no one else has keys to the house. No one else has *ever* had keys to the house. But somehow, someone got a state-of-the-art surveillance system installed, without my having a clue.

"Fuck, fuck, fuck," I mutter, finally looking up from my screen.

Alix is staring at me with eyes that have gone too wide.
“That dinner was recorded?”

“We don’t know that,” I say.

“Was it just sound, or video too?”

“I don’t know.”

“Who put it there?”

“I don’t know.”

“What are they going to do with it?”

“I don’t know.” And then, because she’s clearly starting to panic, I say, “Don’t worry, Princess. I’ve got this. Everything’s going to be fine.”

The nickname doesn’t calm her. “You can’t know that. *I’m* the one who killed Herzog.”

And I’m the one who’s an accessory after the fact. Me and ten other members of the Diamond Ring. But my saying that will probably push her right over the edge. Instead, I say, “Get your things. We need to go.”

She’s ready in less than a minute.

I drum my fingers against my thigh the entire time we’re in the limo. I’d pay Charles to go faster, but there’s no getting past the bumper-to-bumper on the GWB. Alix is huddled by her door, eyes closed like she’s praying to wake from a nightmare.

Right about now, I’m regretting taking the plane. If I had my own car, I could be half-way to Delaware by now. Sure, I might pick up a few speeding tickets on the Turnpike, but who the fuck cares?

I took the plane because I wanted to impress Alix. I wanted to show her a good time. Take her mind off Herzog and the freeport and everything else.

Fuck.

We finally get to the airfield and the jet finally takes off and we finally land in Dover. I gun the Range Rover, covering

the seven miles to the freeport in a record four minutes.

I'm a little surprised the biometrics accept my input—I half-expected my adrenaline to trash the readings. But the main gate opens and my security chief, Clyde McGregor, is waiting outside the front door of the house. Alix trails behind me like my shadow.

“Mac,” I say by way of greeting.

“I canna be yer Chief o’ Security if ye let in fookin’ strangers without my knowin’.” His accent is thick as oatmeal, a sure sign he’s pissed with me.

“Acknowledged,” I say instead of wasting time reminding him who signs the paychecks around here.

“If ye—” He registers my giving up and bites off his protest.

“Is the Sawgrass team inside?”

“Aye.”

He follows me in without waiting for an invitation. Alix slips in behind him. The three of us march straight to the dining room. Sawyer Best looks up from the laptop he’s planted on my dining room table.

“I thought you were in New York,” he says.

“I was.”

He raises his eyebrows but doesn’t waste time commenting. Instead, he casts a probing look at Mac. I make quick introductions. “Sawyer Best—one of our Diamond Ring members and a consultant on my renovations. Clyde McGregor, Diamond Freeport Chief of Security.”

They shake hands, then Best turns his attention to Alix. “And?” he asks, without a hint they’ve ever met before.

He’s good. In a perfect world—the one where an international drug lord wasn’t murdered in my dining room Friday night—Best never would have seen Alix before this morning. I introduce them with the most casual tone I can muster. “This is Alix Key. An old friend.”

Alix catches on without a visual hesitation. She shakes Best's hand like they're strangers.

Satisfied, Best waves us around the table, so we can see his computer screen. There's some sort of diagram at the top, then a long scrawl of numbers.

I push it back to him. "What does it mean?"

"It's output from the devices we found." He points to three tiny cameras on the table, each with a nest of trailing wires. "They're top of the line—high resolution, motion detection, audio enabled."

His tone of voice says he's holding something back. "But..." I prompt.

"But they can't transmit very far. These might reach the main road. But your staff at the gate would have noticed a panel van pulled over for hours at a stretch."

I don't like the alternative conclusion, but I have to say it. "Or someone inside the freeport is receiving the transmissions."

Best's face is grim. "What type of security screening do you do on staff?"

"Apparently not enough." I turn to Mac. "Let's get a sweep of all freeport buildings."

Best says, "The receiver won't be big." He gestures with his hands. "It probably looks like a walkie-talkie."

Mac growls. He knew exactly what it would look like. Best's description was for my benefit. "I'll get on it," Mac says. His accent has faded. He's back in control. Before he leaves, though, he turns on his heel. "Probably not a bad idea to screen all staff. We can call it an annual security update. Call everyone in for a little one-on-one evaluation."

"Do it," I say.

After he leaves, I say to Best, "You're sure there aren't any more?"

“My guys did a full sweep, once we knew what we were looking for. I took the liberty of going over the entire house.”

“And?”

He reaches into his pocket and pulls out another handful of bugs. Their wires trail as he dumps them onto the table. “Kitchen. Living room. Your office.”

“Fuck...” I breathe out the word. “But nothing upstairs?”

“This is it.”

Then whoever had me under the microscope was looking for a business advantage, not personal dirt. That might be a comfort to some men. But to me, it’s a fucking red cape. I’m ready to charge, to destroy something. Everything. Which might account for my pissed-off tone as I ask, “And you didn’t mention that in front of Mac because?”

“Because I’m confident that no one in this room right now is responsible for running this surveillance operation.”

“And you think Mac is?”

“I think it’s time you considered the loyalty of every single person who has ever set foot on freeport property.”

“That’s hundreds—”

“And the sooner you find out who wanted to spy on you, the sooner you can make sure none of them has anything they can use.”

He glances at Alix then. We both do.

Her face is pale. She knows exactly what’s at stake here.

“They’re after trade secrets,” I say. I can’t be certain *what* the fuck they want, but I need to scrub away the panicked look in Alix’s eyes. “The freeport’s transactions are completely hidden from the outside world. Someone’s trying to do some insider trading.”

Best’s smart enough not to contradict me out loud. And I owe him one, because Alix nods like she believes me. Like I’ve got everything under control. Like I’ll keep her safe. Which is a damn good thing. Because keeping her safe is

suddenly more important to me than protecting all the freeport assets in the world.

ALIX



I want to be terrified, but Trap clearly has everything under control. I trust him. I have to.

After Sawyer Best leaves, I head up to the guest room. I intend to set up my new phone, but I end up taking a quick nap instead. I'm exhausted—despite the news of the spy cameras downstairs, despite the excitement of my wardrobe arriving from New York, despite my desire to spend every waking minute at Trap's side.

I sleep for nearly a week.

I'm embarrassed by my needs, but Trap repeatedly tells me he understands. Without being specific, without ever mentioning Herzog's name or commenting on what I did to save myself, Trap says I've been through hell and it would be a miracle if I *didn't* crash.

So, I sleep.

And I eat simple comfort foods that Trap has delivered to the house—ramen noodles and Kraft macaroni and cheese and more pints of Ben & Jerry than I should admit. I spend hours on my phone, watching videos and scrolling through social media, stunned by how many references I miss to things that became popular while I was locked away. I stare at the car key

on my dresser, the one to Trap's Porsche, which he said I could use if I need to go anywhere. But I have nowhere to go. No reason to leave.

Oh—and I drink.

It's not like I'm blitzed, even by bedtime. But in the course of the week, I work my way through Trap's fifth of Belvedere. And when the bottle is magically replaced downstairs, I start in on the new one. Mostly, I pour a couple of shots into cranberry juice and sip for the hour before I go to sleep. That's when I take my medicine, too, the pills Dr. Hanson gave me.

The alcohol keeps my nightmares at bay. Trap helps too. He comes into my room each night. He sits on the edge of the bed and asks me about my day. He tells me about his—about how Mac has screened every employee and searched every office in the freeport, about how Trap has checked and re-checked and re-re-checked every room in the house with Sawgrass and two other security professionals, about how he has personally reviewed the front-gate cameras and found no hint of any suspicious vehicles camped out to retrieve data from the surveillance equipment the night Herzog died.

Trap thinks the bugs were planted by a former freeport client, Senator Thaddeus Josiah Jackson. Senator Jackson was the director of the Central Intelligence Agency before he was elected to represent the people of South Carolina.

Senator Jackson is serving five years in federal prison for tax fraud. Trap booted him from the Diamond Ring the day the jury returned a guilty verdict. The senator definitely knew people who could install technology like the transmitters Sawyer found. He probably had the work done when Trap had biometric locks installed on all the doors.

Once a spy, always a spy. Chances are, no one's been monitoring the bugs for months. Maybe even longer.

So I'm safe. Jackson doesn't know the extraordinary steps Trap took to cover up my crime. Whatever trade secrets the senator might have captured, he knows nothing about me.

I should feel relieved. But I know Trap and I have to talk about other things. More important things. We need to acknowledge—out loud—the bond we both sense, the connection that’s so strong it feels like we’ve known each other forever.

We need to talk about sex.

He makes me feel things I’ve never felt before. Three years ago, he gave me words I’d never imagined using. He was the first man who made me come.

And the night we spent in New York was every bit as magical. After three years as Herzog’s slave, I couldn’t fathom ever getting pleasure out of this tortured body again. But Trap proved me wrong. His kiss woke me. And even when his own demons dragged him away, he found a way to give me back my joy.

Now, my insides melt a little whenever I think about the things he ordered me to do. I’m embarrassed by the specifics—sucking myself, splaying my legs, adding fingers to satisfy my greed.

But I’m even more ashamed—actually, I’m horrified—by something else. Trap issued orders, and I complied. No. I not only complied. I *reveled* in submitting to his commands.

How messed up am I, that that’s the only way I could orgasm—after being held prisoner by a man who did nothing *but* order me around? Am I broken forever? Will I spend the rest of my life being the object of some man, mindlessly waiting for him to tell me what to do?

I’m ruined in ways that can never be healed.

So that’s another reason I stay in my bedroom so much. I need to figure out some new way to live my life.

Part of me knows I should go back to Sherman University. I completed all the coursework for my PhD before Herzog kidnapped me. All I have left to do is finish writing my thesis.

Once upon a time, my research seemed important. I was going to find new ways to treat addicts. I was going to help my brother.

But Leo is dead. Saving him is impossible. And despite years of living with him, of watching him fight his illness, of taking course after course about the physical, mental, and emotional impact of addiction, I never truly understood the monsters my brother fought.

Every single day of my three years with Herzog was an object lesson that addiction can be stronger than a sibling's love. I know that now—in my bones, in my nightmares, in the scars that mark my body.

I no longer believe my psychology work can make a difference. Obviously, it can't help Leo. But now I don't believe it could ever help anyone else as lost as he was.

Which means I need to find something else to do with my life. And every time I try to come up with something, I realize how completely cut off from reality I've been. Not just the past three years, but long before that. Ever since I let Leo isolate me from my boyfriend, my friends, and my family.

So the more I hide in Trap's guest room, the more I feel like a freak. I need to do something. I need to change something.

It takes all the bravery of a warrior when I finally walk downstairs and turn left—toward Trap's office—instead of right, toward the kitchen. I don't let myself glance toward the dining room at all.

Once again, Trap is on the phone when I hover in the doorway. He waves me in, gesturing toward one of the chairs across from his desk. His conversation doesn't seem to be going well.

"I understand that you expected Pete Miller to take point on this—"

He tries again: "I assure you, I have my best people working on it—"

Again: "I know you're taking a huge financial risk—"

One more time: "I'm absolutely aware that—"

The fourth time that he's cut off, I think he might throw the phone across the room. His knuckles turn white, and I can practically hear him counting out loud for patience.

"That's not a fair characterization," he finally says, after the person on the other end of the line takes three solid minutes to make his point. And then, before another tirade can begin, he says, "Let's do this. I'll get you a formal announcement by close of business today. After you approve it, we'll circulate it to freeport clients, and you can reach out to your own contacts. We'll go from there."

Another long speech from whoever he's talking to. "I understand," Trap finally says. "Absolutely," he fits in after another minute. "One hundred percent," he manages after an even longer pause. "All right," he eventually says. "Close of business today."

He slams the receiver down with enough force that I expect the plastic to crack. He pushes himself out of his chair and paces behind his desk like a caged leopard. His fingers are stiff when they rake through his hair.

"Bad day at the office?" I say, trying for a bit of humor.

He whirls like he's going to holler at me, but he catches himself before the first word crosses his lips. "Jim Farquhar," he says. "One of my oldest clients. He has a Monet stored here in the freeport. He needs to sell it, and Pete was going to run an auction."

"But Pete's gone—" *Because of me*, I'm going to say, but Trap cuts me off.

"I don't have anyone on staff who has a clue how to do this. But Jim Fucking Farquhar won't take 'no' for an answer."

"Can I see it?"

"The painting? It's locked in Farquhar's gallery."

"You can't get in?"

"Not without a retina scan and a heat-sensitive fingerprint."

“But if Pete was going to do the auction, he must have pulled together information about it.”

Trap gestures at his computer in frustration. “I already pulled his files. He left notes. But no details.”

“Did you check his office?”

Trap’s ready anger flashes again, the beginning of a hot reply. But he smothers it to say, “I’ve looked at everything online.”

But Pete might not have kept all his material online. The words hover on my lips, like one of the freshman psychology lectures I mastered years ago. I could tell Trap about different working styles. About how some people are visual learners; others are auditory, kinesthetic...

But Trap doesn’t have the patience for Psych 101 right now. So I just say, “Humor me. Let’s check out Pete’s office.” When he still hesitates, I add, “I need to get out of the house anyway. I’m going stir-crazy.”

And that white lie works. For reasons I don’t dare look at too closely, Trap is willing to take action for *me*, even when he doesn’t think it’ll help solve *his* problem.

I’m surprised by the strength of the summer sun when we step outside. The air is heavy with humidity, the sky a hazy gray. The heat feels good, though, like it’s drawing something poisonous out of my over-air-conditioned skin.

It only takes a couple of minutes to walk to the freeport office tower. Trap is lost in thought. I let the silence grow between us, concentrating instead on not looking at the curve of driveway where Herzog parked his car, threw me over the hood, and raped me.

Trap works the biometric lock and holds the door for me to precede him into the building. He greets the armed guard at the reception desk by name, and he signs me into the visitors book, completing each entry in the log even though he could easily bypass the rules.

On the sixth floor, we pass a large corner office, and I see Trap’s name beside the locked door. The next one is Pete’s—

name tag still in place, but door open, all traces of personal belongings gone.

A wire rack sits on top of the credenza, filled with manila folders. Each one has a handwritten label—Health Insurance, Kelly Security Upgrade, Martinson Foundation. And there, toward the back—Farquhar Auction.

“What the fuck...” Trap breathes, as if he’s never seen paper records before.

I swallow a grin and open the file. “Oh!” I say, startled by the photo clipped to the left side of the folder. “One of the water lilies!”

Herzog’s library had dozens of books on Monet. The water lilies became my favorites—those floating greens and pinks and blues... So quiet. So calm.

“You’ve seen it?” Trap asks.

“I’ve seen dozens of them—in books. Monet painted more than three hundred. This one is middle period—you can tell by the colors and the brushwork. It’s one of the big ones.” I point to the ruler that Pete, or someone, conveniently included in the photo. Closing my eyes, I try to remember a document in Herzog’s collection, a pamphlet from Sotheby’s, filled with handwritten notes. It stuck in my memory because it seemed so impossible: “A similar painting sold at auction in 2021 for seventy million dollars.”

“Seventy—” Trap looks far more impressed with the Impressionist masterpiece.

I sift through the folder and find Pete’s notes. “See? Seventy point three five. Plus the buyer’s premium—twenty-five percent paid to Sotheby’s.”

Trap shakes his head. “How the fuck did Pete convince Farquhar to let us do this?”

I flip a few more pages. “For one thing, he told Farquhar he could set a high reserve.”

“What does that mean?”

“If the bidding doesn’t reach a certain amount, the painting doesn’t sell. Ordinarily, there’s a risk setting too high a reserve. The seller can’t turn around and hold another auction too soon. Buyers would worry there’s something wrong with the work.”

Trap catches on quickly. “But if we’re keeping things quiet at the freeport...”

“Exactly. If we can’t meet the reserve, Farquhar can still take his Monet to New York without tainting the pool of prospective buyers.”

I get to the end of the folder without finding one important page. Frowning, I go back through the documents, taking time to study each one more closely.

“What are you looking for?” Trap asks.

“Receipts. A sales history. That’s the provenance for the painting—proof it wasn’t stolen.”

“Don’t bother,” Trap says.

“What?”

He shrugs like I should already know this. “Freeport clients aren’t always on the up and up.”

“But the value of the painting depends on proving a chain of ownership.”

“Or Farquhar might not be able to sell at one of the big auction houses?” Trap’s lips twist into a wry smile. “How do you know all this, anyway?”

I wipe my palms against my jeans. “I spent a lot of time reading about art in Herzog’s library.”

Whatever Trap thinks of that, he scrubs his conclusions from his tone. “Then you can do this,” he says. “You can take over the Farquhar auction.”

I laugh. “I don’t have the first clue how to do that.”

“Neither did Pete,” Trap says. “He was going to wing it.”

Wing it. To auction a painting worth seventy million dollars.

“I’ve never even *been* to an art auction.”

“Find one. I’ll fly you there tonight.”

“People go to school for years—”

“Figure out who teaches the classes, and I’ll get them here for a crash course.”

“Buyers trust the big names—Sotheby’s, Christie’s—”

“We’re Diamond Fucking Freeport. There’s a built-in tax incentive for the painting to stay on the premises. We’re offering millions of dollars to trust our fucking name.”

The entire idea is crazy. I can’t become an art expert overnight. There’s no way we can run a successful auction with zero background.

But if I fail, the reserve clause will kick in. Farquhar can take his painting to New York to see what he can get without a proper provenance. No one can possibly get hurt by my trying.

“Come on, Princess...” Trap says, like he’s trying to lure me onto a roller coaster. And, honestly, I’m intrigued—excited—for the first time in nearly a decade.

“Okay,” I say, after a pause that seems to last for hours. “Let’s do it.”

TRAP



Well, shit.

Over the past six years, I've watched Pete Miller juggle a dozen freeport balls at a time. I just never realized there were twenty others he kept going behind his back. He's only been gone ten days, and I'm already swamped with details he used to handle.

A squabble over offices because the junior conservator needs access to northern light to do her job properly.

A dispute between security guards over who is being assigned more evening and weekend hours.

A confrontation with the receptionist who arrives late every morning by exactly seventeen minutes.

Planning the fucking end-of-summer company picnic.

I decide to hire a head of Human Resources; that'll resolve the current emergencies. Now all I have to do is find time to review resumé's, call folks in for interviews, and settle on a likely victim.

Fuck.

I should make another hire too—one of those auction experts I've told Alix to consult. I can pay enough to lure one

from a prestigious New York job. Hell, if I run into trouble, I'll get someone from London. Paris, in a pinch.

But I don't want to do the logical thing.

I want to keep Alix happy.

I want to see more of her unchecked smiles. I want to see the enthusiasm that brightened her voice when she told me about Monet, about past sales, about how much Farquhar's painting might bring in.

She learned all that crap in Herzog's library. His books were probably the only thing that kept her sane over three years of abuse. I'll do just about anything to give her a way to use that knowledge. Nothing can ever make up for what she's been through, but this is something concrete I can try.

Even *I* know these aren't the auctions you see at a farm or a ranch, with some guy in a ten-gallon hat holding a microphone and rattling off words faster than any human can understand. Instead, these are the fancy events where everyone dresses like they're at a formal dinner party. People hold up paddles and the auctioneer nods discreetly and millions of dollars change hands.

It turns out some of the lesser auction houses offer online access to their sales. Alix studies a number of those without ever leaving the freeport. She goes up to New York half a dozen times for in-person events. I offer to send her by jet, but she opts for a driver. I give her an American Express Black Card and let her make her own decisions.

She's home each night.

I want to eat dinner with her. I want to tell her about my day and ask about hers. I want to pretend the last three years never happened, and we've been working together every one of those missing days, that we've grown the freeport together.

Who the fuck am I kidding?

I want to bend her over my bed and fuck her hard from behind, spreading my hand across the flat of her back to push her ass up so she takes me deeper. I want to fuck her pretty little mouth until I shoot against the back of her throat,

watching her eyes water as she swallows every last drop. I want to grab those enormous tits, push them against my cock and fuck the tight, hot crease until I come all over her face.

I want to fuck her a thousand different ways.

I know I'm not some white knight with a superhero cock. I'm not going to heal her with my magical cum. But if I give her what she needs while I'm taking my own, she'll be that much closer to forgetting the animal she killed in my dining room.

I don't do it. I need her to take the first step, to tell me she's ready. Because once I get my hands on her, I know I won't be able to stop. Not until she plays out every filthy fantasy I've jerked off to for the past three years.

Big talk.

Because the Beast howls when I even think of running my palm over her short, velvet hair. It claws my stomach every time I picture my fingers pitted in her flesh. It stops my heart when I imagine her wet hot pussy seizing tight around me.

So Alix and I live like brother and sister. Like a monk and a nun, sworn to some goddamn higher god. Like sweet virgin children.

And I'm one cold shower away from blowing all my good intentions. Exactly the way I imagine her plump wet lips blowing me.

ALIX



I cancel two appointments with Dr. Hanson because I have to travel to New York. That's the only reason. My schedule change doesn't have anything to do with her stark white coat. Or the stethoscope she loops around her neck. Or the swabs I know she'll take, invading my privacy all over again.

But I've finished the course of all three drugs she gave me. I owe it to myself to know if I'm over this, or if Herzog gave me some hideous drug-resistant strain of something that will require still more treatment.

So I pull up my big-girl pants and invite Dr. Hanson to the house. Two of the tests are rapid results. Within half an hour, she tells me I'm safe. The other will take ten days. My only option is to wait.

To distract myself, I research the season's most anticipated auction—a treasure trove of post-Impressionist masterpieces. I spend the day of the sale in New York, attending the auction like I have every right to be there.

The art is stunning—Tahitian dreamscapes by Paul Gauguin, Georges Seurat's circus performers defined by millions of tiny dots, and landscapes painted with flat broad brushstrokes by Paul Cezanne. The most valuable painting of the day is a Van Gogh—a vase of irises that vibrate with

urgency, deep purples and greens leaping out from a bright orange background. It goes for ninety million dollars.

Heading back to Dover, the back seat of the executive limousine is filled with art books. I've ordered them by the dozen since Trap hatched his crazy plan. There's something comforting about their weight, about the slick pages and bright shiny colors, about escaping into masterpieces from decades past.

The limo's bar is well-stocked as always, fresh ice glistening in the insulated silver bucket. I pour myself a much-deserved vodka on the rocks. A squeeze of lime fills the car with the bite of citrus. I've opened up the day's auction catalog to review my pre-sale notes when my phone rings.

My stomach clenches when I see Dr. Hanson's name. I think about letting the call go to voicemail. Instead, I gulp my drink and press the green icon, accepting the call. "This is Alix Key," I say in my most professional voice.

"Good news," the doctor says. "Your test came back negative."

The roof of my mouth starts to tingle in relief. I didn't realize I was close to tears until I have to swallow three times. But I manage to say something, and it must be appropriate, because Dr. Hanson reminds me that I should use protection with any new partner, and I can make an appointment with her if I have any concerns about contraception, and she's still happy to give me those names of colleagues if there's anyone I'd like to talk to.

"Thank you," I say, to all of it.

When she hangs up, I pour another drink in celebration.

I'm thirstier—or more relieved—than I thought, because that one is gone by the time we reach the Thomas Edison rest area on the New Jersey Turnpike. I nurse another drink until we get to the outskirts of Philadelphia. I'm down to ice cubes on a third by the time the limo pulls up to Trap's home.

The driver helps me carry the books into the house, which I really appreciate because I'm pretty unsteady on my feet. I

thank him and tell him I'll see him on Thursday for the last auction I'll be studying.

I wave goodbye from the front door. As the car drives off, I glance at the office tower. The light is off in Trap's office. He's in Wilmington, at a Chamber of Commerce meeting.

Inside the house, the wall of windows looks out over the back of the freeport's property. The sun hovers just above the treeline, setting late on this July evening. Shadows stretch long across the grass.

My stomach swoops as I remember the first time I took in this view. I'd worried then that someone might see into Trap's second-story bedroom. I'd thought that being watched by a stranger was the worst thing that could ever happen to me.

Trap refused to accept my fear. He tied me to his bed. He paid for the contact, of course, tapping out his five-point code to appease his compulsion. And then he stood over me, stroking his cock until he came all over my belly. For the first time in my life, I felt like I was beautiful. Like a man could truly desire me.

I want that feeling again. I want to see Trap's face tighten. I want to watch him tumble over the edge. I want him to fuck me no matter what he needs to do to protect himself from the horrors in his past.

I could ransack his dresser. I know that's where he keeps his toys, the tools that trick his mind into believing he's in absolute control.

But I want something different. I want something special. Something that's *him*.

I head upstairs and into Trap's closet.

His dress shirts hang on the rod, white and blue and black, perfectly pressed. I could wear one when I greet him at the front door. Leave the buttons open. Wear nothing underneath. Or better yet—wear my sexiest lingerie beneath, the tiniest scrap of satin and lace that Martha Gallagher found for me.

Before I can choose a shirt, though, I see the rainbow display of Trap's neckties. I run my fingers over the silk.

There's that swoop again, that breathless tightening deep inside me.

This is what I want.

This is what I need.

I grab a handful and walk back to the bedroom.

But first, I need to set the scene. Leaving the ties on the bed, I head back to the top of the stairs. I take off my blazer, the jacket that told the auctioneers I was a respectable businesswoman who could be trusted among polite society. I let the jacket fall over the top three steps.

My skirt points the way down the hallway. My top follows. I cheat a little, heading into my bedroom to retrieve my sexiest bra and my skimpiest panties. I place them with care, doing my best to make them look like casual discards.

I return to my bedroom to remove the underwear I actually have on. On my way to my hamper, I catch my reflection in the window. It's dark enough now for me to see a shadow image of myself. I'm startled by the over-generous curve of my breasts. My hair is all wrong, too, cropped short in a way that was never meant to be fashionable.

Suddenly, I'm back in Herzog's mansion. He's got me tied to an iron frame in his office, punishment for failing to convince a Russian oligarch that I was a terrified virgin submitting to a man for the very first time. Herzog has fastened evil black binder clips to my nipples. He's plugged me, front and back, with a two-headed dildo too large to give any human woman pleasure. He's struck me with a cane, making me count out loud, forcing me to beg for more when I choke on the tenth wicked slash. He leaves me on the frame for two full days, making me drink the piss that drips down my legs when I can no longer hold my bladder.

I shudder back to the present. He's dead. I'm free. He can never hurt me again.

But I'm shaking so hard, I can't stay on my feet. I stagger over to my bed, reaching blindly for the vodka on the

nightstand. I don't bother with a glass, don't even think about finding ice. I gulp from the bottle, three huge swallows.

Fire burns in my belly. I breathe through my teeth until my scorched lungs release. I blink hard, testing the darkness behind my eyelids.

Herzog's gone. For now.

Before another nightmare sparks my brain, I hurry back to Trap's room.

The bed is huge. I need to daisy-chain the neckties together, linking them in soft rainbows. It takes me a few minutes to figure out how to make a loop for my ankle, how to fasten the restraint to the iron bed. I repeat the process three times—for my other ankle, for my left wrist, for my right.

I tug away the coal-black comforter and the summer-weight blanket, taking the top sheet for good measure, and I toss all the bedding onto the closet floor. After crawling to the center of the mattress, I put my feet in the bonds, tightening the loops and pulling hard to test my handiwork. My left wrist settles into its restraint, my right hand fumbling to yank everything tight.

I slip my right wrist home. It's a lie—it's not actually bound tight. There's no way I can secure all four of my limbs completely. But I loop my fingers around the silk of the tie, holding fast.

Spread-eagled on the bed, I raise my head. I can see my feet reflected in the windows. I can make out the outlines of my legs. Everything else is lost in shadow.

I'm breathing hard. At first that's because of the effort to build my restraints, the energy it took to tie myself into place. As I settle onto the mattress, though, my breath comes fast for another reason.

I'm excited.

My nipples are tight, hard peaks mocking the memory of my hot tongue, my greedy lips. Restrained the way I am now, there's no way I can suckle myself.

But the thought of what Trap ordered me to do sends a lazy weight circling below my belly. The thought—or is it memory?—of his fingertips tapping my clit makes me groan.

I close my eyes, waiting, waiting, waiting. But I've had too much to drink. The bed starts to spin, floating somewhere between the floor and the ceiling. I open my eyes wide and concentrate on the line at the top of the windows.

I don't know how long I lie there. I try counting, but numbers are too slippery. It's dark outside now. It must be eight thirty at least. Maybe nine. I can't twist my neck far enough to see the clock on Trap's nightstand.

Absurdly, my stomach growls. I didn't eat dinner when I got home. I didn't have a real lunch either—instead, I gobbled a protein bar between auction lots. During an afternoon break, uniformed waiters passed trays of appetizers. I ate a couple of foie gras crostini, a dried fig smeared with blue cheese, and pair of smoked salmon canapés.

I think about the dark chocolate Trap fed me the last time we were in this bed together. My mouth waters, and I have to swallow hard. Hunger twists inside me, an aching need almost as strong as the pulse between my legs.

That's when I hear it—the front door opening. “Alix?” Trap calls, but I don't answer. I hear him on the stairs, his footsteps heavy. I know when he finds my blazer; I hear him pause. Another couple of steps—he must be at my silk top. A guttural growl, and I know he found my bra.

I raise my head, just as he moves into the doorway. I see the instant his eyes go wide. I hear the sharp intake of his breath as he takes in my arms, my legs, my entire body offered up to him, restrained with the ties from his closet. I barely make out his whispered curse, or maybe it's a prayer: “Sweet fucking Christ.”

TRAP



I grip the doorway with both hands and take in the feast Alix has spread just for me. Her toes curl, like they've gone shy. Her legs are splayed wide enough that her sweet pussy is framed—dark hood above, purple-edged lips. Her belly is scooped, rising and falling with her rapid breath. Those unbelievable tits ride high.

Blood rushes to my cock so fast I feel light-headed. My jeans tent like I'm some high school kid standing in front of the class, trying to give an oral presentation to the entire cheerleading squad.

Alix stretches her neck, tucking her chin to meet my gaze. If *I'd* set this scene, I would have given her a pillow, something to make her a little more comfortable. But comfort wasn't what she was after, not with all the work she did to tie herself up.

“What's up, Princess?” I growl, doing my best to ignore the Beast prowling around the back of my skull.

“I'd say *you* are.” She nods toward the zipper that's about to burst open on my jeans.

The words are a little too fast, but I tell myself she's nervous. The Alix I picked up at Debasement—Ella—could

never have done this for me. I hate that she had to suffer Herzog's fucking torture to get to this point, but I have every intention of rewarding her for her courage. Twice, at least. Three times, if she'll let me. Four, if I'm really lucky.

I move closer to the foot of the bed, admiring the view. When I finally I tear my gaze away from that slick, ready slit, I make sure to settle my attention on her face. "Tell me what you've got planned, Princess."

"Whatever you want. Whatever you tell me to do."

The words are wrong—not *what* she says, but how she says it. Too fast. Too...soft, like the letters are collapsing around each other.

Her eyes are dilated, but that might be because the lamp on my nightstand doesn't throw a lot of light. Her cheeks are definitely flushed. I chalk that up to excitement, but I suspect there's a bit of embarrassment in the mix.

The Beast growls as I take off my shoes and I follow its rules climbing onto the bed. I don't touch her with my bare hands. I just swing a clothed leg over her body so I'm straddling her. I keep my weight on my knees, leaning forward to plant my hands on either side of her close-cropped head.

The Beast whines, pacing in its cage. It lunges forward, then back. But it can't attack me outright because I haven't actually done anything it forbids.

Yet.

I lower my head and kiss Alix. I don't try to tease her, don't lick along her lips, don't ease her open with soft little nibbles. I ravage her, crushing her mouth with mine and ramming my tongue deep. I want to own her while I can, possess her in the seconds before the Beast explodes. I want to taste every inch of her, swallow her moan and feel her breath hit the back of my throat. I want to consume her.

Until my tongue hits a wall, the same one that slams my nose the first time I inhale.

Alcohol.

Not just a hint, a shot downed for courage when she first came up with this crazy idea. She smells like a fucking still. I rear back, rolling away to put half the bed between us.

“What’s wrong?” she gasps. And I hear it again—the too-fast words, the slur on the *s* she has to fight for.

“You’re drunk.”

“M not.” Her anger flashes hot, as much an admission as the stink of vodka.

“Jesus Christ,” I mutter, pushing myself off the edge of the bed.

For once, the stupid Beast in my brain is anesthetized. I’ve beaten it at this game before. The first night I had Alix here, I gave her a shot before I kissed her. I told myself—told the Beast—it was like field medicine in a war zone.

But there’s a difference between one shot and whatever Alix downed while she was dreaming up this stunt. I stomp to the foot of the bed and tug at the bonds around her ankle. I can’t see what she did to make the knots, how they pulled so tight. But I’ve got a Swiss Army knife in my nightstand that makes short work of the mess. To hell with the fucking tie I cut in two.

I slice through the bonds on her other ankle, sacrificing another goddamn tie. Her left wrist is next, and I order myself not to watch her arm collapse on the bed, all the strength bled out of it. It drops next to her quivering tit and despite everything, I have to fight the urge not to fall on her, not to pull that boob into my mouth, not to suck her, lick her, bite her till she screams my name.

Goddammit. I storm around the bed, but she slips her right wrist out of its sling, leaving the silk chain to hang from the bed like a flag of surrender.

Sitting on the edge of the mattress again, I drop the knife between my feet. I plant my elbows on my knees, lower my head, and breathe hard. My cock is finally getting the message, slower than I’d like, but at this point I’ll take whatever I can get.

I hear her scramble toward the headboard. I risk a glance over my shoulder to see that she's hunched up. Her chin digs into her kneecaps, and her fingers lock around her ankles.

A decent man would pass her a sheet, or even a blanket. I'm not decent, but I look around all the same. Where the fuck did she put everything when she stripped the bed?

I stagger to the bathroom and rip one of the over-size towels from its hook on the wall. I throw it at her as I stalk past the bed. I keep on walking till I'm standing in front of the wall of windows.

I want to look outside, want to see the trees, want to stare at anything but the fucked-up shit inside this room. It's dark out, though, and all I see is the bed reflected back at me. I tell myself not to watch as she pulls the towel around her shoulders. As she slides off the mattress. As she does her best to cover up, standing beside my bed like she isn't shaking from head to toe.

"What the fuck were you thinking?" I finally ask.

"I was *thinking*—" She gives too much emphasis to the word. "That you'd be excited to see me after a long day's work. I was *thinking*—" Yeah, still too much. "That we both know how to make this work. I was *thinking*—" Her voice actually breaks across the word. "That if you just tell me what to do, if you order me around, you can get over being so disgusted by me."

"I'm not—"

"Stop!" she hollers, and it's the loudest sound I've ever heard her make. My ears are still ringing when she says, "You haven't tried to fuck me since we got back from New York! And I get it. You told me what happened when you were a little boy. You're terrified of germs. That makes me your greatest nightmare in the world—after everything Herzog did, after what the doctor found. But I'm clean now. I'm safe."

I want to tell her she's wrong. None of this is her fault. I don't care what Herzog did to her, what he made her do.

But I can't lie. The Beast won't let me. The same way it won't let me fuck like an ordinary man.

"You're not my nightmare, Alix." I can't say the rest to her reflection in the window. I need to face her. Need to tell the truth. "I've wanted to fuck you every night you've been in this house. I've stayed awake in here, thinking up new ways to make you scream. But that's the thing. I'm not a nice man. I'm not good. If I'm going to fuck you the way I need to, you have to be able to consent."

"I *do*! I consent!"

"Not when you're drunk."

"I don't have any limits with you!"

"You do," I growl.

She drops the fucking towel, spreading her arms wide in an invitation I can't accept. "No," she lies. "I don't!"

My cock surges again because it's a fucking moron, but I've got enough brain left to prove my point. "Fine," I say. "No limits." I pick up my knife and close the distance between us. "Here," I say, handing the blade to her. "Cut off your fucking hand!"

She gasps, but I can't leave things there. I force her to take the knife, folding her fingers around the bright red grip. The Beast goes fucking nuts, and I spin away, punching the wall till my knuckles split.

"Trap—" she starts, like there's anything she can say to make this right.

But I'm not through. She has to get it. Once and for all, she has to understand. "Slice your mouth open, Alix. Ear to fucking ear. Not going to do that? Okay, then. Carve my name on your tits. Each letter, big as your hand." I loom over her, shaking my bleeding fist. "Not going to do that either? Then give me back the knife. Let me do it. Because you don't have any fucking limits, right?"

Tears stream down her cheeks. "Stop it!" she cries. "You don't mean it. You don't want to do that."

“But what if I did?” The Beast is screaming inside my skull, saying I’m not safe, even though I’m not even touching her. “What if I order you to do something you would never, ever agree to if you were sober? What if I need it? I’d be raping you, same as Herzog.”

“You wouldn’t,” she pleads between ugly sobs. “I trust you.”

“Fuck your goddamn trust.”

I don’t know if she really doesn’t get it, or she’s just so horny she doesn’t care. But I know how to make her see the truth.

She’ll hate me forever, but at least she’ll be safe. I’ll never be able to hurt her. Me or the Beast that manages my so-called brain.

I lower my voice because what I’m about to say is too important to shout. I look directly in her whiskey eyes and say, “No wonder your brother was a junkie.”

She cuts off a sob, mid-hiccup. “What?”

“Leo. How’d it work? You and him against the world? Did you tell *him* you trusted him, no matter what? Did you tell *him* he could never hurt you bad enough you’d have to run away? You were his enabler, Alix. You’re the reason he never had a chance to get clean.”

“That’s a horrible thing to say!”

“It’s the truth. For someone who supposedly studied psychology, you’re the most fucked-up person I’ve ever met.”

For just a moment, every molecule in her body freezes. She looks like a statue of a woman, as lifeless as any of the art treasures stored away in the freeport galleries.

But I watch her shake off my words. She squares her shoulders. Raises her chin. She stalks past me, and I think she’s through with our fight. She’ll cross the hall, go to her own bedroom, slam the door, and that’ll be it.

But she pauses on the threshold before she leaves my room. She swallows hard. And with the impossible dignity of

the very, very drunk, she says, “I know you, Trap Prince. I know that in the morning, you’re going to blame all this on your fucking Beast. But here’s the truth, and it’s not going away when the sun comes up: You’re the goddamn animal.”

ALIX



I'm shaking so hard when I get to my room that I can barely close my hand around the doorknob. All these days, all these nights, I've left the door open because that's what felt right. That's what I learned at Herzog's, that's what seeped into the memory of every cell in my body.

But tonight, I close the door. I open a dresser drawer and grab a pair of plain cotton panties. I pull on one of my sports bras, settling the crisscross straps over my back as if they can hold me together. I find a plain black T-shirt and a clean pair of jeans.

When I'm dressed, I dig out the silver bag that Martha gave me, the night I left her store. I cram in a couple of tops and a pair of khakis, some underwear and socks. I take the Diamond Freeport tote bag Trap gave me for that first trip to New York and I ransack the bathroom, tossing in my hairbrush and my toothbrush, shampoo and conditioner.

I snag the key to the Porsche from the top of the dresser.

I'd die before I'll admit it out loud, but Trap is right. I'm too drunk to drive. But I cannot stay in this house another night.

I maneuver the over-powered sports car out of the garage and through the freeport property. I hesitate when I get to the main road that leads into Dover, but I can't go back. Not now. Probably not ever.

I blast the air conditioner, hoping the icy air will sober me up. I lean forward, clutching the steering wheel like it's the only thing between me and eternal damnation. Keeping one eye on the speedometer and the other on the road, I cautiously make my way to the north side of town.

I navigate a strip of fast-food joints and cheap motels, pulling into the parking lot of the last one before the Wal-Mart.

I can't escape Trap. It's his car I park in the asphalt-covered lot of the Dover Lodge. It's his card I use to rent a room. It's his clothes, the clothes he paid for, that I carry into that room.

But I can slip home the security chain on the door. I can crawl under the quilted bedspread. I can cover my head with one of the flat foam pillows. And I can pry open the lock clamping down my emotions, smashing the rough pillowcase into my face and sobbing until I fall asleep hours later, completely, utterly, exhausted.

TRAP



It takes about fifteen minutes before I'm pissed with myself for never putting a tracker on the Porsche. Alix must not have been pulled over. The cops would have been here in no time, reporting my car stolen.

But fuck me, if I can figure out where she went.

Her shithole apartment is long gone. She hasn't made any attempt to see her pansy-ass ex the entire time she's been here. Ditto, the Maryland family that cut her off.

I'm pacing the kitchen, watching the sun come up, when I realize I've got the answer, as close as my computer. All I have to do is log on to my Amex Black and see what's been charged overnight.

There it is. The Dover Lodge, one of the roach motels north of town.

She doesn't belong there. She belongs in the penthouse suite at the Four Seasons.

But Alix doesn't want the Four Seasons. She doesn't want anything associated with the past three years—Herzog, the freeport, me.

You're the goddamn animal.

She's not wrong. I want to go over to the Dover Lodge and tear the fucking door down. I want to carry her to the shower and push her up against the wall, drown us both in the hottest water the hellhole can provide. I want to fuck her till she screams my name, then get down on my knees and eat her out till she comes again.

The Beast rolls over in my mind, opening one eye like a dragon about to annihilate a virgin sacrifice. My bleeding knuckles already ache. I try to hold back, try to stay in control, but the compulsion takes over and I punch my mahogany desk. Again. A third time. Fourth. Fifth.

Fuck the goddamn motherfucking cocksucking Beast.

Fuck Alix.

Fuck me.

ALIX



In the morning, I wake with a pounding headache, a dry mouth, and an almost overwhelming physical need to return to the freeport. A couple of Tylenol help with the first problem, and a gallon of water slurped from the flimsy plastic cup in the bathroom helps with the second.

I debate climbing in the Porsche and driving home, to help with the third.

Home.

When did the freeport become home?

On the one hand, the mere thought is ridiculous. I've lived there less than a month. I've slept in the guest room. Most of my clothes are still in bags from Gallagher Samson.

But there isn't a place on earth that's ever felt more *right*. From the opaque stone wall that faces the rest of the freeport to the curving line of windows looking out on the lawn in back, from the sleek modern design to the masculine furniture... Trap's domain is where I belong.

Except for the fact that Trap and I said horrible things to each other last night.

He knew exactly how to cut me. He understood precisely which words formed the greatest fear of my life. And still he said them, knowing the truth is a million times worse because Leo sold me, Leo's dead, and I can never make anything right with him, ever again.

And even if there were some way for me to get past that, what would I gain? Trap will never get over what *I* said. Not with his pride, not with his stoic power.

Nevertheless, I check my phone, just in case I'm wrong.

Nothing. No missed calls. No waiting messages. And I can't blame lack of a signal—I'm staring at four solid bars.

I'm swamped by a wave of overwhelming sorrow. It feels physical, like an elephant crushing my chest, like my brain being squeezed by a vise.

I miss Trap.

I miss the freeport.

I miss Leo.

He's been gone for three years, and I've never let myself think those three words. But they're true. I miss my brother. I miss my twin.

It's not that simple of course. I don't miss the desperate, conniving man who sold me to fulfill his own unspeakable debts. And I don't miss the lying addict who pretended to pay our rent while he converted our hard-won cash into drugs. I don't miss the needy brother who spun through the revolving door of rehab clinics eight times in as many years.

But I miss the twin who could read my mind. Leo knew what I was going to say before my sentences were halfway out of my mouth. He understood when I was happy and when I was sad. He felt my loneliness, deeper and clearer than I could ever explain it to anyone else.

If Leo were here, he'd buy me a mint brownie Blizzard at the Dairy Queen down the street. He'd make me a cup of Raspberry Zinger tea, making sure it didn't brew too long, to the point where it was too sour to drink. He'd find soothing

videos on his phone, the sped-up ones where people decorate a six-layer cake or paint a perfect landscape with cheerful, calm confidence.

I could do all those things for myself, but they wouldn't be the same. Because it's not the actions that make everything better. It's the fact that someone cares enough to *do* them.

Leo's gone, and no one's going to take care of me that way, ever again.

It's hard to find a silver lining in my brother's death at the hands of the madman who held me captive for more than a thousand days. But maybe... Just maybe...

My family cut me off because of Leo. My own father said he'd never speak to me again.

But now that Leo's gone, maybe I can pry that door open. Maybe I can build something new with my family. Maybe we can start again.

I tap out the number for my father's office without letting myself think too much. Those ten digits are engraved on my brain. My mother made Leo and me memorize them in case we ever needed help in an emergency.

"Martens, Talley, and Key," says the receptionist, halfway through the second ring.

"Robert Key, please," I say, just like I have a right to be placing the call.

"Whom may I say is calling?"

I don't have enough confidence to tell her the truth. I don't have faith my father will answer. I give her the first lie that comes to mind. "Ella Prince."

"Just a moment please."

There's a click, and I'm treated to a snippet of *The Four Seasons*. Spring, I think, and I hope that's a good sign. The steady drip of violins is cut off by my father's voice. "This is Robert Key," he says.

I recognize the burr of annoyance; he doesn't recognize my fake name, and he doesn't want to waste his time. I open my mouth, but no sound comes out. I swallow. Clear my throat. Try again. "Daddy," I finally choke out. "I'm in trouble."

There's a pause, and I imagine he's as overwhelmed by emotion as I am. I picture him sagging in his office chair. Wiping a hand from his forehead to his chin. I hear him inhale, getting ready to speak.

"You know better than to call here," he says. "I can't help you. Not anymore." He ends the call without another word.

I stare at my phone until the screen goes black. And then I sit in the Dover Lodge, looking at nothing, because I have no idea what I'm supposed to do next.

TRAP



I'm in the gym downstairs. Metallica's making my ears bleed, the volume so high the floor's shaking beneath my weight bench. I'm flat on my back, pressing fifty pounds more than I should even think about trying without a spotter.

I've already put in ten miles on the treadmill. Spent twenty minutes trying to annihilate the speed bag. Started with a hundred crunches, a hundred squats, a hundred fucking burpees.

I thought about going to the krav maga dojo, but I didn't trust what I might do to a sparring partner. Didn't trust what I might let some guy do to me because I'm a sorry motherfucker who deserves it. And the idea of pounding out penance to the Beast made me want to puke.

So it's one in the morning, maybe two by now. Nothing I've tried is getting me any closer to dreamland.

If I fall asleep, I'll dream about Alix. Dream about her swallowing my cock. Dream about her sitting on my face. Dream about bending her over the weight bench here and taking her up the ass.

Fan-fucking-tastic. Now my dick is hard enough to lift its own goddamn weights.

But the truth is I won't dream about fucking Alix. I'll dream about destroying her. I'll dream about saying the words I know will slice her heart in two. I'll dream about watching her turn to stone, watching her walk away because I'm the biggest asshole she's ever met.

I try to be a good man. I ask what Dad would do, then do the opposite. Make the right choice almost all the time, that way.

I know I'm messed up. I need things no normal man needs. I'm a monster.

You're the goddamn animal.

The Beast slithers through my gut, the reason everything I touch turns to shit.

I stagger off the bench and limp into the shower room, six jets and a rainfall shower head. I turn them all to ice. I force myself to stand there until my boner dies. Until my teeth start to chatter. Until my whole body shakes, head to toe, so hard I think I might slip and fall and maybe that would be better because I could crack my head open on the tile floor and be done with this fucking mess of a life.

I towel dry like I'm trying to peel off a layer of skin. Drag myself upstairs. Collapse on my bed.

Try not to think about Alix or the auction or Alix or the tax bill or Alix or the Diamond Ring or Alix or Alix or Alix...

ALIX



I finally leave my room when my stomach starts to ache with hunger. I'm actually *shaky* when I test the doorknob, making sure the room is locked behind me. Not that there's anything worthwhile for anyone to steal.

I could take the Porsche, but that feels ridiculous. Instead, I walk across the parking lot to the main road. I've got my choices of fine dining establishments—Burger King and Wendy's to my right, McDonald's and Taco Bell to my left.

For just a moment, I consider going to Taco Bell because it was Leo's favorite. I come to my senses, though, and soon I'm eating a Big Mac and fries, washing down the grease with a Diet Coke.

I stare at the bright golden arches in the window, reluctant to go back to my dark little motel room. I have to do something soon. I can't keep living off Trap's credit card.

A sign on the counter says McDonald's is hiring. Maybe the low-stress job would do me good. I could use the time to regroup, to figure out what I really want to do.

As I consider asking for an application, a woman storms up to the counter, slamming her tray onto the shiny metal surface with enough force to send her soda cup flying. "I

said,” she bellows, “No *pickles* on my burger. Are you some sort of retard?”

The old woman behind the counter doesn’t even react. She just calls over her shoulder, “Remake on number eleven. No pickles.”

“Don’t bother,” says the over-privileged customer with anger issues. “I’m late for yoga class.” She storms out the door as the defeated clerk cancels the remake order.

So much for a non-stress job.

Maybe I should go back to school. Dr. Hanson could write a letter of explanation. I could present it to the Dean of Students at Sherman. Get enrolled again and take a few months to finish my dissertation.

But what good that would do? Even if I complete my work, even if I defend my thesis to the satisfaction of the Psychology Department, even if I earn a shiny new diploma suitable for framing, I’ll still have to find a job using that degree.

And formal classroom psychology sure hasn’t helped me in the past three years. It didn’t help Leo. Trap either.

I’m no closer to figuring out a solution by the middle of the afternoon, even after refilling my soda twice. I trudge back to the motel, where I turn on the TV and flip channels for hours, waiting to be tired enough to fall asleep.

TRAP



I meet Farquhar outside his private gallery in the main freeport warehouse. We're three stories underground, safe from fire, a flood, or a nuclear blast. When he sees me step off the elevator, he slips his phone back in his pocket.

We shake hands, because that's what civilized businessmen do. As he leans forward for the reader to scan his retina, I shove my fist into my pocket, squeezing out a rapid pattern for the Beast.

The gallery has been tricked out in mahogany and leather—Farquhar's choice, just like all my clients get to decorate their private space. He waves me to an over-size armchair, saying, "Let me get the Monet."

I sit while he crosses to the wall that's been finished with high-end storage slots—nothing a painting can snag on, nothing to spike or stain or spill. An easel already sits in front of my chair, and I glance at the painting on display.

Hell.

Bloody, stinking, steaming hell.

Part of my brain knows it's just canvas on stretchers. But I'm staring at a rib cage, broken open and stripped of skin.

Raw meat rots in angry slashes of red and white, shot through with evil patches of green.

My stomach twists and my lungs close and I'm catapulted back thirty years in time.

I'm trapped in a metal hut. The Congolese sun beats down on the roof. Waves of heat ripple through the dusty air. It might be cooler near the door, but I'm not allowed to leave the taped-in square on the packed-earth floor.

If I leave the square, I'll get it, Dad said. Ebola. The disease that killed the people stacked on the broken-down tables across the room.

They *were* people. Some were men and some were boys and all of them worked in the diamond mines. But now they're stinking bags of meat, some of them broken open, leaking dangerous blood.

Dad said I'll only get sick if I touch them. He left me five jugs of water and a stack of brown plastic bags labeled MRE.

I've got my backpack, too, the blue one he got me before we got on the plane because Spider-Man is for pussies. My backpack is full now, and Dad said I have to keep it with me, no matter what happens.

He said he'd come get me, as soon as it's safe. He doesn't know the sounds the bodies make. He doesn't know how bad they smell.

Mom always said when I was scared, I should take a box breath. Count to five breathing in. Count to five holding it. Count to five breathing out. Count to five waiting.

Box breaths help. But they're not enough. I need to keep my food and water safe, so I tap the MRE bag five times before I open it. I stir the spaghetti five times while I heat it, and another five before I take my first bite. I tap my water bottle five times before I take a drink.

I wait.

I eat.

I drink.

I sleep.

And ten days later, when I'm out of food and water, when I'm certain I'm the only person left alive in all of Congo, the door to the hut opens.

The bright sunshine makes my eyes water. I'm not crying. Only pussies cry. But I blink hard, as fast as I can because I can't believe I'm being rescued by spacemen.

Two of them enter the hut. White spacesuits cover their entire bodies. They're tied to their ship with dark blue coils that stretch out behind them. I can hear them breathing, slow and loud, and I can't believe they speak English, but one of them says, "Holy shit! There's a kid in here. Alive."

The next month's a blur—Dad never wakes up from his coma and I wait out four weeks of quarantine and soldiers finally drive me to Kinshasa in a Jeep that smells like gasoline. I meet dozens of grown-ups who have no clue what to do with a white kid who got through the Mpala Mine Ebola outbreak without getting sick.

Finally, they send me home to Mom. No one wants to ask a skinny, traumatized boy to hand over his backpack before he leaves the country. There's no TSA screening for military flights.

I end up with ten pounds of high-quality rough diamonds worth a hundred million dollars. But that's not all I've got.

I've got the Beast, living deep inside my brain.

It never lets me forget those bodies, rotting in the African heat. It howls when I touch a stranger. It rakes my brain at the slightest threat.

I barely keep it tamed with the old rituals. Five taps. Five punches. Five anything in a desperate bargain to keep my twelve-year-old self alive.

"Here we go," Farquhar says, emerging from the storage section with a huge painting. It's a swirl of pinks and purples, of soft greens and blues. It looks cool and inviting. Safe. He leans it against the wall as he takes the red-and-black horror off the easel. "A lot easier to look at than this one, huh?"

“What *is* that?”

Farquhar shrugs, turning the nightmare toward the wall. “Chaim Soutine. *Carcass of Beef*. He used to pick up fresh blood from the slaughterhouse to get the right color. Neighbors used to complain about the stench.”

“Sick motherfucker,” I say.

“Makes me remember I’m mortal,” he says. “Keeps me humble.” He wrestles the water lilies onto the easel. “So, what do you think? What’s a fair reserve price?”

I’ve got Pete’s notes. I’ve done a little research on my own, following up on Alix’s lead.

Jesus. Missing Alix feels like a physical ache. It hooks beneath my ribcage, yanking hard enough that I try to push it away with a quick five-point tap.

I tighten my fingers into a fist and come up with a number, bullshitting my way through the rest of my meeting as if I give a damn about Jim Farquhar and his fucking water lilies.

ALIX



I spend a week in the motel. I eat so much fast food that I start to dream about green salads. I watch so much TV that I consider ordering a treadmill for the room.

In the end, I have a list of things I know I'm never going to do.

I'm not moving back to Maryland to rejoin my family.

I'm not getting a job at McDonald's, serving burgers and fries.

I'm not going back to school to finish my dissertation.

I'm not becoming an astronaut, or a veterinarian, or an Olympics gold-medal ice skater—all the things I dreamed of being when I was a kid.

I have a much shorter list of things that have made me happy in the last three years.

Art—studying it, seeing it, learning how to sell it.

And Trap.

The art thing makes perfect sense. I don't need my psychology courses to tell me I found comfort in beautiful things when I was trapped in a nightmare. I don't need to

justify why I find specific paintings beautiful, why I can spend hours getting lost in a single work of art. I don't even need to explain the excitement I feel about the challenge of selling art, of convincing a buyer to raise his bid, of sensing when the crowd is willing and when it's reached its limit.

There's a power there. A strength. I can glimpse my potential for an all-new life.

It's the Trap part of things I can't explain—to myself or to anyone else.

He hurt me. He intentionally said things he knew would destroy me. He didn't care about ripping out my heart.

But no matter how much I think about that, I feel about Trap the same way I feel about art. There's a power there. A strength. I can glimpse my potential for an all-new life.

After three years as Herzog's slave, I'll never be an ordinary woman. I'll never trust in normal family life—kids and carpools and soccer games.

I know how quickly life can change. I've seen pure evil.

But Trap has seen pure evil too. He's ruled by his own demons.

And despite that—or maybe because of it—I feel safe when I'm with him. Part of that safety is the bulk of Diamond Freeport, a modern castle secured with biometrics and an iron gate. Part of that safety is the security of billions of dollars, the freedom that comes from shopping sprees on Fifth Avenue, from chauffeured drives to auction houses, even from week-long stays in crappy motels where no one asks any questions or makes any demands.

But most if it is Trap himself.

His laser focus. His business judgment. His iron principles. His foul mouth.

His willingness to search for me after we spent one incredible night together. He scoured Dover. He confronted my ex. He visited my family. He looked and looked and looked when success seemed absolutely impossible.

One incredible night. Not even that—I ran out before midnight.

But he felt what I felt. We both knew those few hours were more than a one-night stand. They went beyond mere mind-blowing sex.

They were a bond.

A bond that couldn't be broken by a maniac. Or by ugly words said in a fight that never should have happened.

I've never been afraid of Trap.

I need him.

I love him.

But he's got the biggest test of his life coming up tomorrow, with the auction of Farquhar's Monet. The last thing he needs is me, stirring up his emotions, dragging up the compulsions that wrack his tortured brain.

I waited twenty-six years to meet him. I survived three years of hell to get back to him. I can hold out for twenty-four hours before I try to save our relationship. I owe him that much.

Even if it feels like I'll die, waiting.

TRAP



“Forty percent of the buyer’s premium,” I say. “And that’s my final offer.”

Pete laughs. “It’s not the money.”

“Fifty,” I counter immediately. “And I’ll guarantee a million-dollar commission, even if you can’t get bidding over the reserve.”

“That’s your problem,” Pete says. “You think everyone can be bought.”

“It’s worked for me so far.”

“Good luck. I really do hope the auction goes well.”

“Do you realize what you’re walking away from? Just give me tonight at the freeport, and you and Michael are set for life.”

“Michael and I are doing just fine. Plus, we sleep well at night.”

“Think about your kids. Are you really going to pass up this opportunity for Chase and Emma?”

“Keep my kids’ names out of your fucking mouth.” Pete’s words sizzle through my phone.

“I’m sorry,” I say, and I mean it.

There’s a long pause, but he finally sighs. “Here’s what you’re going to do,” he says. “Finish the auction tonight. Celebrate tomorrow, by having that butcher shop out on Hazletville deliver a couple of porterhouse steaks. Get a decent bottle of wine out of the cellar. Fire up the grill and cook yours till it’s leather because you’re a non-repentant caveman. Give Alix the medium rare she deserves and thank her for putting up with your miserable ass.”

“Alix isn’t here.” I wasn’t going to tell him. But the words are out of my mouth so fast that I wonder if they’re the reason I tried to bribe his ass in the first place.

“Oh, Trap.” He sounds so disappointed that I’m skewered with shame. “What the hell did you do?”

“Who says I did anything?”

“Oh God. It’s worse than I thought.”

Why the fuck am I having this conversation? If I wanted to feel like a miserable shitheel, I could just go stare in my own goddamn mirror. But I confess: “We got into a fight. And I said a bunch of shit I shouldn’t have said. She moved out a week ago.”

“And you haven’t called her because you don’t know what you’d say, and after seven days, it’s even more awkward than it would have been if you’d followed her out of the house and apologized, and you’re not even sure if you should say you’re sorry because you were right about what you said, or you were sort of right, or it seemed like you were right at the time. Christ! It’s amazing the human race has survived this long, with straight men calling the shots.”

His summary of my thoughts is so accurate that I don’t bother defending straight men everywhere. “So what do I do?”

“Call her.”

“And say what?”

“Start with ‘I’m sorry,’ like you did with me just now. I’m stupid enough to forgive you. Maybe she will be too.”

“And after that?”

“What is it with you?” I’m pretty sure he’s laughing at me now. I’m not sure I blame him. “Don’t write her side of the conversation. Apologize. Listen to what she has to say. Figure out the rest from there.”

“Yeah, yeah. Okay.”

“Say you’ll do it.”

“I’ll do it.”

“Promise.”

“I promise!” I shout, a lot louder than I need to. I think about asking if he’ll change his mind now, about the auction. But he’s already given me his answer, and it’s not fair to push him. So I tell him to go back to whatever fancy breakfast he’s cooking up with Michael, and I even remember to thank him before I end the call.

He’s right. I need to talk to Alix.

But I’m not going to call. For one thing, she probably has me blocked on her phone. For another, I need to see her face to face.

I have an idea for exactly what I have to do to win her back. But I better get moving. The auction is at seven tonight, whether Alix forgives my sorry ass or not.

ALIX



The auction is tonight. My phone has given me half a dozen reminders—check with the freeport facilities department to make sure the boardroom has been properly reconfigured, check with the caterers to make sure the bar is well-stocked and the passed appetizers are plentiful, check the sound system, the specially configured lighting, the heavy-duty easel, double-check the easel, triple-check the easel...

All of that is out of my hands now.

I turn the TV on, louder than it should be. I flip through stations, but this lousy motel doesn't give me a lot to work with. I try daytime talk shows for a while. Then I switch to news, until the doom and gloom makes me want to scream. I find an old black-and-white movie but I've never liked Westerns, especially ones where they ride horses into battle.

I switch off the TV. As long as I'm doing nothing, I might as well get ready to go back to the freeport. It takes me under three minutes to "pack", to fold my meager belongings and put them in the silver shopping bag that's standing in for my suitcase.

I could read a book.

Go for a run.

Log on to my computer and find an online course about computational physics, linear algebra, or programming artificial intelligence for fun and profit.

This is ridiculous. I should just go home. Back to Trap's house. He's probably not even *in* the house—if I know him, he's spending the day in the boardroom, going over the same details my phone keeps alerting me about.

When I pick up the keys to the Porsche, they feel *right* in my hand. Heavy. Important. I glance around the motel room one last time, making sure I haven't forgotten anything. I collect my phone and my shopping bag. I shoot the security chain on the door and turn the knob.

And I step back three feet, catching a little shriek against the back of my throat, because Trap is standing right outside, absolutely perfect and completely out of place in his expertly tailored tuxedo.

"I—" I start to say, but I realize I have no idea how to finish the sentence. "What—" I start again. "I mean, why—"

He looks at the bag in my hand. "Where are you going?"

"I don't know," I lie. But it doesn't matter, because Trap steps into the room, closing the door behind him. He's carrying a garment bag. A bright pink and white shopping bag dangles from the hanger. I recognize the logo from Daisy Chain, a place I used to go to for special splurges when I was a student.

Trap looks around the room like it must be hiding something, maybe a secret passageway to a luxury hotel suite. "You could've used the card for something a bit..."

"This was fine," I say when he trails off. He's being careful. Cautious. Like he's worried he'll break something if he says the wrong word. I understand, because I feel the exact same way.

I need to tell him I made a mistake. I need to say I'm sorry for calling him an animal, for fighting with him in the first place. I think about what I did, getting drunk so I could tie

myself up, spreading my legs without an ounce of shame, and my cheeks burn.

“I’m—” I start to apologize, but he talks at the same time. When we stagger to a halt, I say, “No. You go first.”

He swallows and looks around again. “Can I?” he asks, gesturing awkwardly with the garment bag. The room doesn’t have a closet, just a bare aluminum rod hanging by the bathroom. I wave toward it, but he frowns and lays the bag on the bed. Before I can say anything, he reaches into the pink-and-white shopping bag and pulls out a shoe.

It’s black. The heel is almost four inches high. The toe comes to a wicked point. It’s the type of shoe that might be seductive, if it didn’t have a scuff mark running the entire length of one side.

“I don’t understand,” I say, but that’s also a lie. Because I know this shoe. I *wore* this shoe. It’s the one I had on the night I met Trap in Debasement. It’s the shoe I dropped as I fled his house on my frantic trip to get home before midnight.

“All those months I tried to find you,” he says. “I couldn’t trace your home, your job, your family. Even your name was fake. But I had this shoe. I knew you were real. I knew I’d find you, somehow, someday, even though every lead I had was ice cold.”

I run my finger along the stiletto’s dirty scar. “You kept it? All this time?”

“It was all I had.”

It’s just a damaged shoe. There’s no reason I should be crying. But tears sting my eyes, and my throat aches with the effort to hold them back, and my breath shudders as I try to fill my lungs.

“I’m sorry,” Trap says. “I fucked up. I shouldn’t have pushed you away.”

“No! I totally blindsided you. What were you supposed to think, walking in to find this woman tied to your bed—”

“I thought I was the luckiest bastard in the world.”

My blush boils over, and I'm pretty sure I'm scarlet from the roots of my hair to my toes. "I was embarrassed," I admit. "Scared. And I *was* drunk. I never should have called you an ___"

He shakes his head. "I *do* blame everything on the fucking Beast in my head. I *am* a goddamn animal."

I want to reach out to him. I want to put my palm against his jaw, to tell him he's being too hard on himself. But I know that contact will set him off, will fire up the Beast. Touching him is the only thing I want to do, and it's the one thing certain to destroy him.

But he saves me from acting by saying, "I had no right to say the things I did. But I know what I need. And after everything you've been through, to make those demands... I was terrified you'd hate me."

"*I* made the decision to be there," I remind him. "Herzog never gave me the choice."

"Jesus Christ, you scare me."

"*I* scare *you*?" I'm shocked. He's a head taller than me, and he outweighs me by I-don't-know-how-many pounds. He can literally drag me off to his cave. He has enough money to buy whatever or whoever he wants and to hide whatever mistakes he—or anyone else—makes.

He meets my gaze and holds it. "I'm terrified of losing you. Of watching you walk out that door without me. Of seeing you weigh everything, balance everything, and realize that you're better off without trying to make things work in my fucked-up life."

"Trap..." I whisper, because he's reading my mind. He's saying the words I never figured out how to string together.

He goes on. "It doesn't make sense. I only got to spend one night with you before I lost you. But that night... Alix, I felt things I never felt before. I *trusted* you. I told you the truth, about Africa, about my stupid fucked-up brain. If any other woman in the world ran out of my house before midnight, I'd tell myself I was lucky to dodge a bullet. But

when you left... When I thought I would never see you again..."

He trails off, like his throat is too tight for him to scratch out another word. But the bravery behind what he said loosens something inside me. I hate needing to say my words. I hate that they're my life, what I lived through, what I did. But they're the truth, so I force myself. "When Herzog made me..." No. I'm trembling too hard to go on.

"Hush," he says.

But I have to say it. He has to know. "The moment I woke up in his crazy-ass prison, I thought of you. I held onto our night together. What we did. What you showed me was possible. You were the only bright thing I thought of for three endless years."

He touches me then. One hand cups the nape of my neck. The other folds around the small of my back. I only have a second to think, and then his lips are on mine—hard, soft, pushing, pulling, melting my body against his.

"Oh thank Christ," he breathes, and I swallow his words without managing more of my own. "Princess," he murmurs, and my knees buckle as he kisses me again, but the strength in his arms keeps me on my feet.

I don't know how long we stand there. I don't know what I have left to say, because I've forgotten every word of English I've ever known. There's only Trap—his mouth, his hands, his arms, his legs—Trap holding me together before I even know I'm flying apart.

Finally, he groans and pulls away, stepping just past the reach of my fingers. We're both breathing hard. His fist clenches, and I catch his rhythmic tic. I watch him complete his five-count penance. It's mesmerizing in its own way, the ripple of fierce energy as he yields to the compulsion. His furious relief once he's done.

"I can't do this here," he says.

"I know." I realize I'm rubbing my wrist. That's where I wore Herzog's lifeline. It's where I wrapped Trap's tie. It's

where Trap bound me with leather, the night he set me free. “I know what you need.”

“Bound, gagged, and gone by dawn...” He says the words like they’re a line of poetry he memorized years ago.

“What?”

“That’s what I promised the Beast. I’d bring home a woman. I’d tie her up, gag her. And get her out of the house before the sun came up. Those are the Beast’s rules for fucking.”

“I’ll do it,” I say. “Bondage. Gags. Whatever you need in bed. But there’s no way in hell you can throw me out in the morning.”

“I’m never letting you go again.” His words are simple. Easy. A promise and a prayer.

And I realize that whatever compulsions have driven Trap for years, I have my own now.

I need him.

I need his power and his rules.

I need his sharp commands that free me to do things I never dreamed I’d desire.

“But not yet,” he says.

Something closes over his face. Those are still his jungle eyes, watching every breath I take. Those are still his stern-soft lips, promising release with every syllable. But he’s cooler now. Utterly in control.

“Really,” I assure him. “I want to, I promise—”

“The auction,” he says.

The Monet. I’d completely forgotten it, my mind washed clean just by the feel of Trap, by his words.

But now I’m shoved back into the practical world. I glance at the clock on the nightstand. 5:07. I don’t know how time has melted away.

“Go,” I say. “Do it. I understand. I’ll check out of here tomorrow and—”

“No,” he interrupts. “You *don’t* understand. I’m not running the auction. You are.”

“I can’t—”

“You *can*,” he says, with absolute certainty, with the utter command that makes me melt beneath his touch. “You’re the one who’s studied this. You’re the one who structured the entire plan. You know what the painting’s worth and what every other auction has brought in for the past fifty years.”

I look down at my rumpled top, at my jeans, which could use a good washing. “I’m not ready. There isn’t time.”

He reaches for the garment bag he tossed on the bed a lifetime ago. “I brought you everything you need.”

I unzip the bag.

There’s the dramatic emerald evening gown Martha Gallagher chose for me in New York. Trap has raided my dresser drawers, choosing panties and bra, the black ones of course, with the tiny red bows. As I gape, Trap reaches into the pink-and-white bag from the shop in town. He pulls out a shoebox and opens it to reveal a pair of dangerously high heels, identical to the ones I wore to Debasement, but with no scuff in sight.

“I...” I trail off, not wanting to cry and spoil the moment.

“Get dressed,” he says. “You have an auction to run.”

TRAP



With Alix sitting beside me in the Porsche, I'm grateful I sent my driver home before I knocked on her motel room door. It's been months since I've driven this car, but it feels like more than that. It feels like I'm driving us home from Debasement the very first time.

But the Alix beside me tonight isn't the woman I took home from the bar. Sure, there are the surface differences. This Alix has short hair. Her wet-dream-worthy tits fill out a dress that reveals almost as much as it covers. She's plumper, and I can make out a patchwork of scars on her arms, her legs, on the pulse point in her right temple.

But none of that is the real change.

That first night, I had to ask if she was a virgin. She was eager and sweet and far too innocent to survive in my broken world.

Alix isn't innocent anymore. Her sweetness has mellowed to something richer, something so compelling I want to pull the car over and taste every inch of her right now.

She isn't eager—not in the hopped-up, desperate way she was when she first arrived at my house. Now, she's measured what she wants. She knows what she needs. She's completely

aware of what's waiting for her, and she craves it as much as I do.

But we both know how to delay our satisfaction.

We park in front of the freeport office tower. The greeter is there, wearing her tux, like I've ordered for all the staff. The boardroom is ready inside—perfect chairs, perfect lighting, and when Alix tests it, perfect microphone to pick up her throaty voice. The Monet is on display, pure pinks and greens, eye-aching blues and purples.

Just before the door opens for bidders, Alix turns to me. Checking the mic to make sure it can't pick up her words, she bites her lip and says, "I can't do this."

"You can."

"The Diamond Ring will be here. Those men saw me at my worst."

"I think you have that backward, Princess. They saw you at your fucking best."

But I see the ghosts start to haunt her. I imagine all the things she's remembering. "No," I say, with the firmness she's only heard from me in bed. "You *can* do this. You will."

She believes me because I'm telling her the truth. The door opens. The bidders arrive. Alix stands behind the lectern like she was born to this. That dress... Those heels... Her absolute confidence as she opens the bidding at a cool twenty million.

Cole Wolf raises his paddle.

She works the crowd like she's been doing this for years. She brings along half a dozen potential buyers, raising the price in easy increments. She drops in bits of information about the painting, how it's typical of Monet's middle period, which similar works are held in world-class museums, how it's part of a series capturing different angles of sunlight and changes in weather.

One by one, the bidders drop out, until only Wolf and a real estate king from Atlanta are left.

Alix presses for seventy-seven and Wolf bites.

She gives the Georgia guy a chance to respond, but he waves a hand in defeat.

“Sold,” Alix proclaims. “To Cole Wolf. For seventy-seven million dollars.”

The room fills with polite applause. Farquhar looks like he’s going to cream his pants. I nod to the caterer, and a dozen bottles of Dom are quickly popped and poured.

I catch Alix’s gaze across the room. She raises her glass to me, takes a single sip, and hands her champagne off to a passing waiter. I nod, getting the message like she’s hired a skywriter. Just for good measure, I tell the Beast it can go to fucking hell. When Alix slips out of the boardroom five minutes later, I want to follow, but I can’t walk away from being Diamond Freeport’s president and CEO.

It takes a full hour for the crowd to thin and another thirty minutes for Farquhar and Wolf to leave. I put Mac in charge, supervising the caterers’ final clean-up.

Finally back at the house, I expect to find Alix in the kitchen, but she’s nowhere in sight. Upstairs, I see that the guest room is dark. She’s not in my room either, but a soft light spills out of the bathroom, splashing toward the bed.

I strip my tie loose and toe off my shoes and socks. I drop my jacket on the floor.

She’s waiting for me in the shower. She’s stripped off the outfit I brought to the motel, every stitch of clothes. I don’t care about the dress, but I’ve spent hours arguing with the Beast about how I wanted to take off that bra, about what my fingers would do when they got beneath the lace of those panties.

At least she’s still wearing the shoes. Her legs are spread, just enough to keep her balance. Her chin is high. And those tits... Those magnificent tits... I know exactly how I’d use them if the Beast didn’t keep my cock in a vise.

She’s put everything she needs at her feet, surrounding herself with a circle like it’s all a magic charm to keep the goddamn Beast under control. There’s shampoo and soap,

shaving gel and a razor. She's about to ruin the blade on that thing, make it useless for my beard, and I can't wait.

I put my hand on the control lever for the water. "Those shoes will be toast," I growl.

"I don't think so." She makes a show out of walking toward me, every step a bid for seduction. I don't know what her reserve is, but I'll pay it. Pay it and a hell of a lot more.

When she's a dangerous handspan in front of me, she steps out of the shoes—right first, then left. She bends down to retrieve them, a graceful move where her knees fold and her ass glides out behind her. When her head is level with my crotch, she looks up at me through her eyelashes.

She knows exactly what she's doing. And when my cock rises in approval, a smile teases the corners of her lips.

She stands, shoes in hand, and says, "Let me put these somewhere safe."

I let her do it, even though all I want to do is shove her against the tiled wall. I want to free my cock and plant it in the soft curve of her ass cheeks. I want to fold one hand over her belly and one around her throat and take her from behind, hard and fast to prime her for the rest of the night I have in mind.

Predictably, the Beast howls.

So I let her put the shoes somewhere in the bedroom. I let her walk back into the shower. I let her take a position under the rainfall shower head, arms at her sides, chin defiantly held high.

"You remember our colors?" I ask.

"Green to continue."

She thinks she's being cute, or maybe being brave. But she has no idea what I need from her, what I'm about to demand. And a nagging voice whines beneath the Beast's rumble: Herzog's had her. He's hurt her. He's broken her for my type of needs forever.

"Yellow," I say. "When you need me to slow down."

She shakes her head, a tiny movement saying that won't happen.

“Red,” I say, because I need her to remember, even if she thinks she'll never need to tame me. “To stop.”

“Green,” she says, like we're having a conversation.

Fuck that, the Beast screams.

I crank the water, knowing it will blast her with ice for a few seconds before the circulating pump kicks in. I'm rewarded by the immediate pucker of those nipples, tight and hard, like lasers shooting for my dick.

“Shampoo,” I order as the hot water kicks in and steam begins to rise.

She takes her time pouring gel into her palm. She raises both hands to her head, working up a lather with all ten fingers. She starts at the front and works toward the back, closing her eyes like the foam itself is some sort of turn-on. When she finally rinses clean, the bubbles slide down her body, and she shudders.

“Soap,” I command, like I'm the one in charge. I want to lean back against the shower wall. I could unzip my pants. Take out my cock. Stroke it while she lathers up her body.

But the Beast, the actual one calling the shots, sinks its claws into my nutsack. I need to pay attention. I need to make sure she does everything right. Because if she fucks up, it growls, I'm in danger. If she's not clean, I could die.

More than three years have passed since she did this for me the first time, but she remembers. She washes her body—thorough, but mechanical, like her hands are something separate from her shoulders, from her belly, from those high, round boobs. She takes a little more time when she parts her sweet pussy lips and soaps her folds. She cocks a hip and reaches around, lathering her asshole.

She's serious. Careful. Intent. She's giving me what I need.

When the water runs clear, I snap out my last command for this stage of the night: “Shave.”

The first time I had her here, she had a full bush. I had to coach her on how to trim the hair, on how to move the razor from top to bottom. This time, she's almost clean before she starts.

I saw her mound when she showered off Herzog's blood. He kept her waxed, smooth as glass. The Beast cocks its head, intrigued. *Fuck you*, I tell it. It'll be hard enough to keep her from thinking of that sick prick when she's taking my orders tonight. Besides, getting wax right now would be more of a delay than my aching cock can take.

She finishes shaving and puts on a little show, rinsing herself clean. She doesn't need to frame her clit with her fingers like that. She doesn't have to bend over, ass high in the air. She doesn't have to do any of it, but she's clean enough for me to fuck, so the Beast doesn't complain.

"Get your ass out of there," I say, turning off the water. I toss her a towel and head into the bedroom, knowing she'll follow. I strip the bed down to its fitted sheet before she struts into the room.

I like her sass, knowing this is a choice she's making, that this is something she wants. The Beast, though, is prowling through my brain, reminding me that strong-willed women break the rules. They touch. They destroy.

"On your knees," I snap.

She obeys immediately. I regret the command when I see her arms start to rise, when she begins to plant her hands on her head. It's a reflex, one that Herzog drilled into her. I know he's the one to blame, but an irrational part of me wants to punish her—grab her arm, haul her up to the bed, hike her legs up and plant my cock deep inside her.

Like the Beast would ever let me do that.

I open the bottom drawer of my dresser and take out the first tool the Beast demands—an open mouth gag with shiny steel rings. I lay it flat on my palm and turn to show her what she'll take.

Her face turns white. It happens in an instant, her blood draining away so fast she has to steady herself with fingertips on the floor, then plant both palms as she shifts to all fours. Her lips are blue, like she's been stranded in a blizzard for hours.

“Red,” she gasps, the lone word desperate like a sob.

ALIX



I want to give him what he needs. Bound and gagged, he said. I heard him. I understood.

But I didn't know my body would reject any possibility of that open-mouth gag.

My years of studying psychology give me the tools to know what's happening. I suffered trauma at Herzog's hands. He used a gag just like that to drug me, to take away my will in the most horrible way possible.

My brain can tell me I'm with Trap now. My eyes can see him. My ears can hear his calm, steady commands.

But every cell of my body believes it isn't safe. I'm about to be drugged, poisoned. This time I could die.

I'm crouching on all fours like the wounded animal I am. I'm trembling like I just stepped out of an ice bath instead of a steaming shower. I want to tell him, want to explain, but the words are too terrible. They weigh too much.

Trap is frozen in front of me. His fingers folded around the gag the instant I used my safeword. He's hiding it from my sight, protecting me as best he can, but I read the doubt on his face.

He thinks this is so basic. If I can't take the gag, I can't do anything he needs me to do. I'm too fragile. Too broken to fuck.

But that isn't true. It's just this one thing. This one concrete link to Herzog, to the tool that led to my waking up in Herzog's hospital bed the first time.

I raise my head, forcing myself to take a deep breath. I can see the open drawer of the dresser behind Trap. I can make out other toys. There's another gag there. It has leather straps and buckles, and a bright red ball.

"That one," I say, pointing toward the drawer. "I can take that one."

I think he'll refuse. He wants to set the rules. He doesn't want me taking control. And I think—I *know*—he doesn't want to hurt me.

But the monster of his past won't let him move forward unless I'm safe. Clean. He needs my mouth stopped or he won't be able to get off.

"Please," I say. And I sit back on my heels. I meet his gaze. I let him know I'm strong enough to take the gag.

Trap mutters something he probably doesn't mean me to hear. He's talking to Herzog. Telling off his ghost.

But he swaps out the gags. He fits the new one in my mouth, and for a second I think I've made a mistake. The ball is bigger than it looks. I feel like I'm choking. My eyes water.

Trap adjusts the straps. Whatever he does stretches my lips, but the ball sits easier. As I stop panicking, I relax my tongue. I can breathe through my nose. I'm fine.

Trap's compulsions kick in; he had to touch my jaw, my throat, the back of my head. He taps his five count against his thigh, quick penance measured out against the satin stripe on his tuxedo pants.

Then he digs in the drawer, coming out with something black. It's the size of my fist and made of metal, with slits cut into the top. He shakes it once, and I realize it's a bell.

“Three shakes for yellow,” he says. “Drop it, for red.”

I nod, because I can't say a word. My fingers fold around the bell, and once again I feel strong.

“On the bed,” Trap orders. Before I can scramble to the middle of the mattress, he says, “Sit. On the edge.”

Obediently, I sit.

I watch as he selects another toy from the dresser drawer. When he turns back to me, he's holding something as long as his arm. It has cuffs, four of them—one on each end, and two in the middle.

“What?” he asks. “You've never seen a spreader?”

I shake my head slowly, almost grateful for my gag, because I don't have to say anything. I don't have to explain the lazy swoop deep inside my belly. I don't have to put words to my gratitude that Trap has come up with something Herzog never tried.

“Your ankles go in the outside cuffs.”

He hands me the device and steps back. I slip my right foot home, bending over to tighten the padded leather belt around my ankle.

“Tighter,” he commands.

I shift the buckle a notch.

“Another.”

I make the adjustment, cinching the cuff until it bites into my flesh. Trap finally nods his approval, and I fasten the tongue of the belt. Without waiting for his instructions, I bind my left foot into place.

The spreader is heavy; it must be made of steel beneath its leather padding. My feet are trapped, my legs stretched at a wide angle. A quick pulse flutters through my pussy as I realize I'd be completely exposed if I were on my back.

Trap must like what he sees. His erection tents his pants. His feral eyes gleam as he licks his lips. “Your wrists,” he

says, his voice so low I almost lose the words. “In the inside cuffs.”

I lean forward, bending my knees to reach the inside leather circles. I clutch my safety bell in my right hand, smothering it with my palm to keep it from jangling.

Once I’ve achieved the position, I don’t have any way to fasten the buckles. Trap steps forward and lashes my wrists tight, first the right, then the left. He pulls hard, harder than I did for my feet. My gasp of surprise sounds like a protest, and his eyes dart to my bell. I clutch it close, though, intent on making him understand I’m still game.

When he finishes positioning me, he has to tap out his compulsion, an emphatic five-count against his thigh. He groans a little as he does it, like the fabric pressing against his cock hurts him.

I’m poised on the edge of the bed. My knees are bent. My back curves forward. I have to raise my head to see what Trap intends to do next. Hunched, I watch him stalk back to the dresser drawer.

And when I see what he takes out, I squeal in surprise behind my gag.

It’s a dildo. Black. Realistic, with veins and all. Huge.

I know the size of Trap’s cock. I learned it in this room, years ago. I felt its tip against the back of my throat; I knew how full he could make me.

This toy is larger by half. It’s a monster. A joke.

“You want this, Princess?”

I shake my head. He glances at my fist, at the bell I hold tight. I clutch my fingers, the only way I have to tell him this is part of our game. I’m pretending. I’m playing.

“I can make you feel good, Princess,” he taunts.

He understands me. We both know the rules. I whine behind my gag, pleading with him to spare me from the massive dildo. Begging him to try.

He puts the toy on the rug between my feet and goes back to the drawer.

This time, he comes up with a bottle of lube—and yet another toy. It’s a vibrator, and it doesn’t look anything like a real cock. Instead, it’s the length of Trap’s forearm, fitted with a fist-size plastic ball. There are buttons on the side, three different speeds. A long cord ends in an electric plug.

The vibrator is something that can give me pleasure. Bring me joy. It’s another toy Herzog never dreamed of using.

“Please,” I try to say around my gag, and it comes out like a grunt. I hold my bell so tight I know my palm will be imprinted with its metal teeth for days.

Trap puts the lube between my feet and crosses to the nightstand. He plugs in the vibrator. When he unwinds the cord, each loop unzips something deep inside me.

Back in front of me, he places the vibrator beside the lube and the dildo. “One more thing,” he says, returning to the treasure chest. He rises from the drawer with a scrap of black satin. A blindfold.

Something else Herzog never used. He wanted to see my eyes. He wanted to read my terror.

Clutching my bell, I shake my head. This time, Trap doesn’t even glance at my hand. He trusts me.

And I trust him. I trust him enough to believe he’ll stop if I use our code. And that frees me to plead behind my gag, to beg in a way that lights a fire deep inside my belly. “No!” I moan, and we both know I mean yes, because I’m not shaking the bell. “Stop,” I cry, and we agree I want the blindfold. “Please,” I beg, and neither one of us knows if I’m saying *please stop* or *please do it* but it doesn’t matter because Trap knows what I need.

The blindfold slips over my eyes. I feel its straps around the back of my head, anchoring me, securing me. My nipples tighten, like they’re being kissed by satin too, and I squeal against the gag.

“Easy, Princess,” Trap says. His sleeves brush the insides of my thighs. I realize that he’s leaning close, gripping the metal bar between my ankles. He straightens and brings the spreader with him. I roll back onto the bed.

I bend my knees to relax the curve of my spine. My feet are hiked up to my bottom. My hands dangle, helpless, between my ankles.

Even with my eyes closed, I know my shaved pussy is completely exposed at the edge of the bed. Trap can see everything, my suddenly throbbing clit, my hot, needy lips, the tight pucker of my asshole. A blush floods my face, nearly as suffocating as the gag. My cheeks feel like they’re on fire.

This is nearly the position I awoke in, in Herzog’s Holding Room. I’m stripped bare. Utterly vulnerable. For just a moment, my fingers tighten around my bell; I’m ready to drop it, about to tap out.

But behind my blindfold, I hear Trap whisper, “Princess...” His breath is coming ragged and fast.

I’m not with Herzog. I’m with a man who has always protected me. Trap understood when I couldn’t wear the gag he wanted. He’s letting me control what we’re doing.

Trap is nothing like Herzog.

I force myself to accept my position. And, almost as a reward, I hear Trap work his zipper. A swish of cloth, and I assume he’s stepped out of his pants, his boxers too. He grunts in frustration, and I’m pretty sure he tears his shirt off overhead, not bothering to undo his tuxedo studs.

I picture his cock, jutting forward, finally unbound. I sketch in his hard lips and the determined set of his jaw. I imagine the wild gleam in his eyes as he fights his private demons.

What is he doing? Why is he waiting? Where is he standing, now that we’re both naked, both needy, both primed?

There’s a plastic pop and a liquid gulp and I waste a few heartbeats trying to figure out what’s next. Then, a slick pressure parts my pussy lips.

I want the heat of Trap's cock. I want the pulse of his heartbeat sliding into me. I want the velvet of his flesh against mine.

He groans and I know he wants all those things as well, maybe more than I do. But he's survived his own nightmares, and he lives by his own rules. He can't touch me, not without paying a price.

So it's not his cock I feel, it's the giant dildo he showed me. He slicked it with lube; that's the sound I heard. He's filling me with it, easing the wicked thing past my resistance. He's keeping an even pressure, ignoring my pretended protests, pushing me and splitting me and willing me to take on even more.

And the entire time, he talks to me. "You can take it, Princess. You can do this. You're strong enough. You're brave enough." And when I've hit my limit, when I know I can't handle more, he lowers his voice to a whisper. "My good girl," he says. "My sweet, beautiful girl."

My legs are tight, every muscle clamped in my effort to be the woman Trap needs me to be. My toes are pointed. My ankles strain against the spreader, fighting for freedom, desperate for release. I whimper as I stretch around the last glorious inch he has to give.

He pauses, and I feel the heat of his hand close to my smooth-shaved mound. He isn't touching me; he's not allowed to do that. But he's close, so close, and I'm begging him, pleading, with wordless sounds around the gag.

He eases the dildo back, unpinning the deepest places inside me. Before I'm ready, though, before I think I can bear it, he pushes in again. His pace remains steady, even as his own breath staggers.

Faster.

Harder.

More.

My belly tightens. My toes curl. I'm so vulnerable in this position, so open from the spreader. My fingers clutch around

my bell and I want to come, I remember coming, I know Trap's made me come before.

But the dildo isn't enough. It isn't Trap. It isn't the real cock I crave.

He's working me hard. I'm crying now, tears leaking beneath the blindfold. I want it. I need it—if I can't get the real release I long for.

Trap stops pumping the dildo, leaving the manufactured cock deep inside me. I pray around the gag, pushing out urgent, mewling sounds like I'm a mindless animal.

There's a vicious buzz and I flinch, but then Trap plants the business end of the vibrator against the dildo's flared base. Waves of sensation rock through me, echoing off my spine.

The pressure builds. I'm shaking, trembling through my arms, through my legs, through the desperate needy V that Trap has filled. I'm so close to the edge, so close to going over, but my body won't release me.

Trap changes the vibrator's speed, slows it down, and I can hear him over the raging hum: "...your sweet pussy. I want to suck your hard little clit till you see stars. I want to shove my tongue so far inside you..."

Every word wraps me tighter. I hold my breath. I bite my lips. I try and try and try but I just... can't... reach...

Trap shifts the vibrator. Holds it so the head hovers above my clit, barely, barely touching my most sensitive skin. I arch for the power, beg for the release.

He flips the speed button again, sending the motor to its fastest whine. My clit grounds the lightning, greedy, needy, almost, almost there...

"Come, Alix," Trap commands. "Come for me. Now."

TRAP



She breaks under the vibrator's touch.

Her ankles strain against the spreader. Her wrists fight her bonds. Her back arches, and her neck curves, and the red ball bobbles against her lips as she screams something that has to be my name, over and over and over again.

Her head thrashes like she's trying to toss off the blindfold, but I'm not ready to bring her back to earth yet. Instead, I turn off the vibrator, prepared to work with the dildo again.

Still on my knees, I reach for the veined black silicone so I can fuck her to a second peak. She's still coming though, clenching hard, and the force of those inner muscles pushes out the fake cock.

Warmed by her body, it glistens in my hand. I catch my breath at the sight, and the back of my throat is flooded by her sweet scent. She smells like the ocean, like salt spray under moonlight. She smells like freedom.

I buried my face between her legs three years ago—when whatever magic we shared anesthetized the Beast. I told her the truth about what happened in Africa, and some storm inside me finally blew out to sea. I ate her out until she screamed, and then she sucked me off, and we fucked like

rabbits—all of it amazingly, astonishingly, gloriously free of the Beast.

She's finally coming down. Those deep-throated screams are barely murmurs now. Her knees turn in, as close as the spreader will let her legs come to collapsing. Her hands are loose, her right fingers barely cupped around the bell.

Her pussy lips still flutter. She's a mess below her shaved mound, slick with lube and her own sweet juices. Leaning closer, I catch another breath of ocean. Without meaning to, I trace a finger along the top of the cuff that binds her ankle.

The Beast doesn't stir.

But Alix does. She breathes out a question, a tender little sound that whispers past the gag. I want to respond, but I'm not sure what the answer is.

I trace a finger down the inside of her thigh, following the long, taut muscle she's only starting to relax.

I expect the Beast's punishment to be sharp and fast, but it doesn't make a move. Alix, though, yelps, pulling her arms tight, even though the spreader holds her fast.

The motion brings my lips to her trembling pussy. Incredulous, not trusting this victory over the demon in my skull, I touch her clit with the tip of my tongue. Alix squeals and points her toes, shuddering hard when the spreader draws her up short.

The Beast does nothing.

It's banished, caged by the soul-deep knowledge that Alix is mine and I am hers and we belonged together three years ago the way we belong together tonight.

I slide my hands under her thighs, pulling her toward me, to the very edge of the bed. Ducking my head under the spreader, I bury my face in her snatch.

It only takes a minute for me to get her back to the edge. Tongue, lips, teeth—she responds to it all like she's a high-end guitar and I'm a rock star. One more stroke of my tongue, one more brush of my teeth against her clit, one more drink with

my greedy lips, and she's moaning harder than I've ever heard her, just a single syllable muffled by the gag. *Please, please, please. Or Trap, Trap, Trap. Or Now, now, now.*

I set her free with one sharp word, delivered with my thumb pressed squarely against her clit. "Come."

She does, heavy and hot and hard. Her thighs strain against the spreader, desperate to hold me close. She manages to grab my hair with one hand, pulling hard enough to hurt. I would complain, but I'm too busy riding her climax, working her with my mouth, teasing, teasing, teasing until I breathe the command one more time: "Come." And she drifts to pieces beneath me again, sighing this time behind her gag.

When she finally comes to rest, I undo the buckles on the spreader. Left ankle. Left wrist. Right wrist. Right ankle. I stand to pull away the tool, and then I ease her legs straight, supporting her as blood flows back through her legs.

Slowly, carefully, I lower her feet toward the floor. She moans a little, but she curls onto her side, pulling herself higher onto the bed. I move beside her, close enough to soak up the heat pouring off her spent body.

I slip the blindfold from her eyes. Setting it aside on the bed, I open the buckles on her gag, cupping the soaked red ball as I ease it past her jaw.

She blinks slowly, like she's awakening after a deep sleep. She works her mouth, stretching her lips, recovering from the gag. "Oh my god," she whispers. "Trap..."

I love the way my name sounds when she says it—like she's opening up a present. She's so soft, so warm, melted like sweet chocolate in the sun.

And I've got a raging hard-on that only gets worse when she sighs and settles her spine closer to my chest. I kiss the nape of her neck, barely brushing my lips beneath the edge of her short hair.

When I roll away from her, she makes a sweet little protest, but she's too spent to really complain. I stretch for my nightstand, pulling open the drawer to retrieve one of the

condoms inside. It only takes a moment for me to open the foil, to take out the rubber and suit up my eager cock.

Then I'm back to Alix. She sighs in contentment, cradling her head on one arm, wriggling close to my chest. I slip my hand between her legs, dipping two fingers into her close, wet heat. She pulls her knees a little higher toward her chest, giving me better access.

I ease my fingers free, ignoring her sleepy sigh of protest. Before she can truly rouse, before she can ask for more, I steady my grip on her hip and slide the head of my cock past her slick, ready folds.

She purrs. Her contented sigh vibrates through her entire body, thrumming against my chest. She shifts her ass toward me, and I take advantage of the new angle. Raising my knee to get the deep penetration I need, I sink all the way home.

I set a rhythm, slow and steady and deep. My hand moves from her hip to her tit, my fingers pinching and releasing her nipple in time with my strokes. She groans and rolls even closer to me, tightening her snatch around my cock. The new position gives me room to slip my arm beneath her, to grab her other tit. I could hold her like this forever.

But I can't control my pace. My cock wants more, faster, harder. My balls ache for the release I've denied them all night long.

I slip my fingers to the hot, wet place where we're joined. I find the tight knot of her clit, hard and waiting. I drive my dick deep and play a new rhythm against her, my index finger issuing the command I echo with a whisper in her ear. "Come for me, Princess."

She unfolds around me in slow motion. I feel the ripple start deep inside her, rolling, growing. She breathes my name, over and over, until she collapses into something even more raw, more basic: "Trap, oh Trap, oh my God, oh my God, God, God..."

My cock is buried in her heat, captured by the rhythm of her release. I reach for her tit again and find her rock-hard

nipple. The shudder that twists through her is even stronger, even deeper, and my cock explodes under the pressure.

It's more than three years since I've been with a woman. My quick hand is nothing like the heaven that surrounds me now. I bellow as I come, a wordless cry to the same god Alix called on, to the power of full release, to perfect sex.

My throat is raw. My lips are dry. My fingers burn like every nerve in my body is fried. And still she milks me, the aftermath of her climax drawing out every last drop I have to give.

I love this.

I love Alix.

I love Alix. I can't say that to her. I can't frighten her off. Not now, not when I finally have her back, after two weeks of fucking hell. But the words fill my brain, true in a way no words have ever been true before.

Finally, finally, finally my cock stops twitching. I need to deal with the rubber. I have to bring Alix a damp cloth. I'm dying for a tall glass of water, and I'm sure she is too.

I'll get to all of that. But for now, I'm going to lie here, holding on to Alix, drawing out this miracle for a few minutes more.

ALIX



I wake with the sunrise, a rosy glow flooding the windows and bringing color to the field of grass that stretches to the trees. Trap's arm is folded across my belly, holding me close.

We slept that way all night—well, as much of the night as we actually spent sleeping. I've never felt so protected. So safe. So treasured.

Trap stirs when I do. I'm already thinking about everything we have to do today. There's paperwork from the auction, legal documents to read and review. Someone has to check on the clean-up in the boardroom, make sure the space is converted back to its usual purpose. Trap made a comment in passing yesterday, that with what he was paying the caterers, he could afford to hire a three-star Michelin chef full-time at the freeport. I'd like to do the research on that, see if it really makes sense to have that type of firepower on site.

"You're gorgeous when you're plotting," Trap says. He's propped himself on one elbow. His hair is a mess. A fire sparks deep in his eyes, changing them from green to brown and back again.

"I'm not plotting!" I protest, even though I am.

"We punish liars around here."

“Punish?” I ask, making my eyes go round, all pretend innocence. “What type of punishment?”

In response, he cups my breasts and pinches my nipples to rock-hard points. Before I can make even a mock protest, he straddles me, his cock sliding through the valley he’s created. Already primed with a slick of pre-cum, he adds lube to the mix, groaning as he takes his first full stroke.

My hands cover his. I measure the tension in his fingers, in his wrists. I feel his excitement—impossible to fake.

I never wanted these breasts. They were Herzog’s idea of a joke. I’ve continued to mourn the body I lost.

But with Trap whispering filthy things as he drives closer to the edge, with his thighs turning to stone above me, with his fingers tweaking my nipples in time with every stroke, I finally accept what was done to me.

This is the body I have now. This is the body that kept me alive when Herzog did his best to destroy me, and this is the body that killed my tormentor. This is the body Trap craves.

And that certain knowledge closes some circuit in my body. I slip my fingers between my legs. The sweet, hot pain of my savaged nipples echoes in the heart of my clit.

I circle the needy pearl, pressing hard as Trap molds my breasts close around his cock. I tap myself as he strokes again. Another time. Once more. And then Trap pinches my nipples, and I pinch my clit, and he snarls the command I live for: “Come!”

He spurts on my chest. He paints my face. He rides me as I thrash, bucking under the force of my own shattering orgasm. It’s filthy and it’s hot and it’s endless as we clutch and we clutch and we clutch.

Centuries later, he smooths my face clean with a warm washcloth. He’s more gentle than he’s ever been before, and my throat swells with emotions that have no words. He feathers kisses against my eyelids, against the tip of my nose, against the corner of my mouth. I feel more valued, more cherished, more *loved* than I’ve ever felt in my life.

And I almost say it—*I love you*. The words are there. I just have to say them out loud.

He twines his fingers with mine. “Come shower with me.”

I chicken out. Instead of testing him with *I love you*, I say, “We’ll never get to work if we do that.”

“Who says we have to work?”

“Your banker. Your lawyer. Every client of the Diamond Freeport.”

“Spoilsport.”

I get out of bed, shaky on legs that have had such a workout in the past twelve hours. “I’ll meet you in the kitchen.”

Ignoring his groans of defeat, I head to the guest room. The shower in the attached bath is perfectly functional. That is, I get clean, which *was* my goal. Even if I’m more than a little wistful pulling on jeans and a plain black tee.

I start to slip my phone into my front pocket, but it’s out of power. I forgot to charge it overnight. I plug it into the cord dangling on my dresser. I can check email later. For now, I head down to the kitchen.

I can smell fresh coffee from the top of the stairs. Trap obviously showers faster than I do—at least when he doesn’t have any distractions.

He’s made himself useful in the kitchen. Thick slabs of toast are already spread with butter. He’s sliced peaches too; they’re arrayed on a plate like a fiery sunburst.

As he pours me a cup of coffee, I steal a slice of fruit. The scent of it hits me even before the velvet skin touches my tongue. The flavor is pure, sweet, tangy with stored sunshine, and the surge of saliva in my mouth is so strong it almost hurts. I lick the juice from my fingertips, not wasting a drop.

“Jesus,” Trap says. “Keep that up, and I’ll sell the fucking freeport. Then you won’t have any excuse to ever leave my bed.”

I laugh, but I take a step back from the counter. “Can I use your computer? I want to make sure there aren’t any emails about the auction.”

He shakes his head. “I’ve created a fucking monster.” But he waves toward his office. “Make yourself at home.”

I take my coffee with me. Settling into his desk chair, I move the mouse, bringing the login screen to life. My fingers fly over the keyboard as I enter my account. It feels like I’ve been working at the freeport forever. I don’t have to think as I open the mail program.

There are a dozen new messages. Most of them are freeport clients; I recognize the names immediately. A couple are from contacts in New York. Sotheby’s is announcing an auction of high-end watches. The Costume Institute at the Met is opening an exhibit about the use of gold in fashion through the ages.

The newest email, though, sends a lead ingot directly to the pit of my stomach. The From field is displayed in bold: *Klaus Herzog*. And the Subject reads: *Your Account is Overdue*. There’s a long series of numbers after the words.

Trap comes into the room as I click on the link. “Okay,” he says. “Maybe you’re right. Selling the freeport is a little extreme. But when you give me back my computer, I’m booking us a getaway weekend. What do you think? Bora Bora? An overwater bungalow, no clothes—”

His voice fades away.

The email contains a video, set to play automatically. I stare at the screen in horror, unable to believe what I’m watching.

We’re in Trap’s dining room. The table is set for twelve. A dozen of the richest men in the world are gathered around, enjoying oysters and champagne. I’m kneeling near the head of the table.

I grab Trap’s knife.

I launch myself at Herzog.

Blood.

There's so much blood.

I'm covered in it, soaked head to toe, and still I hold the knife, stabbing at Herzog's crotch again and again and again. The camera catches me in profile. My twisted face. Those ridiculous breasts. The billowing dress that starts out white but rapidly turns dark.

Someone says something, finally drawing my attention. I look up from the ruined body beneath me, turn toward whoever's speaking, and the video freezes on my full face.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Trap says, here and now, in the present.

Something about his impotent anger finally frees my hand. I scroll through the email, past the now-still image of me covered in Herzog's blood, clutching the knife like I'm about to attack the camera.

There's a message below, three simple sentences.

"This video goes to one hundred media outlets, the Dover police, and the FBI at 11:59 pm on August 15. The only way to make it disappear is to deposit one billion dollars in the Credit Suisse account designated in the subject field above. In addition, we require a climate-controlled private gallery within the Diamond Freeport suitable for storage of up to one shipping container of pharmaceuticals."

A countdown ticks at the bottom of the email, seconds peeling off with every breath I take.

I have fourteen days before my life is destroyed.



Thank you for reading *Rough Diamond*. I hope you enjoyed reading my love story with Trap Prince as much as I've enjoyed sharing it with you. Our story continues in [Conflict Diamond](#), a Kindle Unlimited read.

[One-Click Conflict Diamond Now!](#)

If you have any trouble tapping on the next book, please type <https://alixkey.com/KI2US> into your phone or computer browser.

BONUS SCENE



Remember how Trap spoiled me rotten, taking me on a shopping spree at Gallagher Samson?

Want to see what Trap was thinking before, during, and after that scene? (You know Trap—his version is wildly different from mine!)

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alix Key was born in Potomac, Maryland, where she grew up making her twin brother and all her dolls act out her favorite fairytales. When an all-grown-up Alix discovered that very real dangers lurk in the woods, she figured out how to rescue herself. She now lives outside Dover, Delaware with her own Prince Charming. When not writing dark romance, Alix serves as the Chief Operations Officer of Diamond Freeport.

You can learn more about Alix at her website, www.alixkey.com.

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