



SIMRAN

MEANT TO BE
DUET
BOOK II

She will always be

MINE

SHE SPLINTERED MY HEART INTO PIECES AND
ONLY SHE WILL PUT THEM BACK TOGETHER.

She will always be
MINE

(Meant to be duet)

BOOK 2

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She will always be mine (Meant to be duet #2)

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*To all those fighting their feelings for
someone they shouldn't want,
this one's for you.*

AUTHOR'S NOTE

Dear readers,

Some of you have been waiting a long time for Riaan and Nyra's happily ever after, I want to thank you for your patience and love as I gave them the conclusion they deserve.

Though things are going to be a lot worse and laid with thorns and monsters alike before they both find their way back to each other. So, I hope you're in for a wild and dark ride.

If you don't have any triggers and want no spoilers, then skip the content warnings below and proceed to the chapters.

Content warnings: Blackmailing, mention of sexual assault, violence, harsh language attempted rape and mention of mental health. Strong sexual scenes including themes of BDSM, degradation and foul language. If any of these is a potential trigger for you, please take precaution and protect your mental health first.

Playlist

1. Do I wanna know? – Arctic Monkeys
2. Didn't I – OneRepublic
3. Steady (feat. Tory Lanez) – Bebe Rexha
4. 2 Souls on Fire (feat. Quavo) – Bebe Rexha
5. Still Alive – Flora Cash
6. Back to you – Selena Gomez
7. Hold On – Chord Overstreet
8. You broke me first – Tate McRae
9. Uncover – Zara Larsson
10. Helium – Sia
11. Hurts Like Hell – Fleurie, Tommee Profitt
12. Counting crimes – Nessa Barrett
13. Junoon – Mitraz
14. Kina Chir – The PropheC
15. Kiss Me – Ed Sheeran
16. Wicked Game – Ursine Vulpine, Annaca
17. No Sweat – Ilkay Sencan
18. Big Girls Cry – Sia
19. Under the influence – Chris Brown
20. Devil Devil – MILCK
21. Streets x needed me (Remix) – Doja cat and
Rihanna

Dictionary

1. Baccha – Kid
2. Di – Respectfully greeting an elder sister.
3. Pandit – Priest at Indian weddings
4. Beta – Kid
5. Lehenga – Indian traditional wedding dress

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Chapter One

NYRA

Secrets have a way of coming out when you least expect them to.

Or at least, at the worst possible time.

We think we are in control, but it's only an illusion. A false sense of security. It hides the truth that we are merely fooling ourselves. We don't realize until it's too late.

In a blink of an eye, we're caught red handed without an escape. Just like I am.

Still as a statue.

Barely breathing.

I always imagined what it would be like if my worst fear ever came to light. I would feel the ground shaking beneath my feet, feel the crash of falling as it spiraled into me while my heart would thunder inside my chest.

Tonight, I realize I was dead wrong. It was only a silly nightmare of a little girl because the reality is much worse. Daunting. Heartbreaking.

Instead of hearing the roar of chaos, the dead silence greets me while my entire world crumbles into pieces around me.

Instead of feeling the wild beating of my heart, I feel the numbness soaking deep in my bones.

There's no crashing or trembling, but the heavy sound of time standing still as I stare into my mom's eyes while her hand flies to her mouth. It was only a matter of time until my dirty, forbidden secret came out, but I never expected it to be like this.

Shock spreads across my mother's face as she staggers back on her feet. I recognize that haunting look on her face.

It speaks volumes of my mom's worst fear becoming reality. Not mine. It's her heart thundering out of her ribs after finding me in the arms of my cousin.

Meanwhile, I can only watch the play of emotions on her face like the roll of a dice.

Disbelief.

Horror.

Disgust.

And finally... a mixture of shame and anger.

It cuts me to imagine what she must be feeling, catching me kiss Riaan, my much older cousin, who may as well be my own brother in her eyes.

Because that's how close our families used to be. No person, let alone a mother, will want to see their daughter in the arms of a man who couldn't be more wrong for her.

Not just wrong, but forbidden in every sense.

I'm disappointed that a little part of me hoped she might accept us. Help us. But seeing the look on her face, my hope crushes and dies a slow death.

It doesn't hurt any less even though I expected it. I no longer see the adoring and loving look she used to greet me with. There's a shadow in her eyes, put there by her own fucking daughter.

Everything happens in slow motion, like an ugly train wreck. Riaan is yet to completely let me go.

My hands are still twisted in his shirt, holding on to him like an anchor. I know I should shove him away, put some

space between us and try to control the damage, but my body isn't cooperating with my head.

It seeks the comfort, the safety only he can provide, and that thought brings another wave of agony.

Besides, what difference will it make?

"I said let her go, Riaan," my mom commands in a steel voice.

When neither of us budge, she steps forward and rips me away, pulling at my arm roughly. Sensing the tension and not wanting to piss her off more than she already is, Riaan loosens his grip. He does not completely letting me go, as if afraid he might lose me forever.

Everything in his expression and tense body screams the opposite. This isn't how I imagined tonight to go.

So many questions run through my mind.

When did she come to Pune? Will she ever forgive me? Will she tell my dad, my uncle, and my aunt? Have I lost her trust completely?

If she won't be on our side, then did Riaan and I ever stand a chance?

"Mom, please let me explain th—" I finally find my voice but she cuts me off.

"Not a single word right now. Go to your room before anyone sees you," she barks at me angrily. "I'll come find you after I'm done talking to Riaan."

She pulls my arm in her rough grip once again, until Riaan has no choice but to comply so as not to hurt me. It didn't matter, though, the pain inside my heart is already wounding every inch of me.

I have never seen my mom so mad at me. It's a side of her I never saw in the last eighteen years of my existence. Even when she scolded me, she was never this cold or enraged.

Fear takes root deep in my bones at the coldness in her voice and expression.

I can feel my control slipping through my fingers like sand.

“Just listen to me,” I plead with her again.

I’m afraid to leave her alone with Riaan. What if he tells her everything? She needs to know we have ended things between us, or that I have. She won’t believe me if he gets inside her head.

He will never deny his feelings for me because unlike me, he isn’t afraid or ashamed of anything. If it were up to him, he would have claimed me in front of the whole world without caring about the consequences.

Which is why I have to protect him. I would die if I’m the reason he loses everything he has carefully built.

His reputation. His respect. His business. Everything.

“Did you not hear me, Nyra? Is this what you do with my trust? If I hadn’t come here on time, who knows what would have happened,” my mom accuses. “Just do as I say or I’m going to tell your father,” she threatens, and all the fight leaves me.

Oh God! What have I done? My mind screams while my body trembles in fear. I have already betrayed the one person who has always loved me unconditionally and I know I can’t hurt my dad the same way.

Feeling hopeless, I look over my shoulder at Riaan. His face is completely blank, eyes an inky pool of blackness. I wish I could read his mind. But he looks so far away.

Broken yet cold.

A sudden realization hits me that I’ll never find the comfort that I am desperately craving at this moment from him. It only makes me cry harder.

Still, I try to convey to him with my eyes not to tell my mom—his aunt—everything. I wait but he doesn’t give anything away and my shoulders sag in defeat.

In one single night, I have managed to destroy two of the people I love the most in the world. Even if they forgive me someday, I know I'll never be able to forgive myself.

Just as I was fixing everything, it all had to fall apart. I already broke us and now I might have done the same to my own family.

With each step that I take, emptiness starts to sink in my heart.

The farther away I go, the more I descend into a void of darkness and hell.

I keep going until I'm only a mere shadow of myself, trapped beneath all the lies and the secrets.

Silent tears that I can't seem to stop, run down my cheeks as I take the stairs downstairs without making too much noise, so the others in the house don't wake up or, worse, catch me while I am an utter mess.

There won't be a plausible excuse to give that will explain why tears are streaming down my face, or why my makeup is smeared makeup, or the fact that my whole body is shaking and sporting an army of goosebumps.

Just as I'm about to turn a corner, I smash right into a wall of muscle in the middle of the dark hallway, and a choked gasp slips from my lips. I feel suffocated and scared that everywhere I seem to turn, a bigger threat is looming to pull me under and grasp me in his deadly clutches.

“Nyra.”

My breathing marginally calms down when I hear Zain's deep voice and as dim light pours out of one of the bedrooms down the hall, I'm able to make out his sharp features and notice a dark glint in his eyes as he watches me from head to toe.

He takes in the wetness on my face, my heavy breathing, and when they land on my fingers clutching my dress in a deathly grip, I instantly let go and straighten up.

“What are you doing up so late in the middle of the night, little sister?”

The calmness in his voice puts me on edge, like he’s not at all surprised to find me here. But the aggression and eagerness in his eyes suggests he was waiting for me to show up.

I squirm under his gaze and decide on how to answer his question. He already hates me for loving his older brother and would like nothing more than for us to break apart.

Then, after what feels like an eternity, I realize I don’t owe him any answers.

Steeling my spine, I reply, “None of your business, Zain.”

I try to step past him, but his chilling words stop me in my tracks. “Did you not like your surprise?”

My stunned gaze collides with his.

He set us up.

The glee I see in his expression renders me speechless and I feel betrayed. The weight of my emotions tries to take me under but I hold up with the adrenaline running through my veins.

Because no matter what, I cannot let him see me fall and gift him the satisfaction.

“You sent my mom up there, didn’t you?” He stays quiet but his silence is all the answer I need. “How could you let her find me with Riaan, Zain? You know it would devastate her. When did you become so cruel?” My voice breaks at the end as I remember my mom’s face staring back at me.

“It had to be done,” he calmly states.

“Did you bring her to Pune?” I ask in disbelief. I can’t believe the lengths he would go to for what he thought was right.

“It was her own idea, Nyra. She just needed a little push.” He steps closer to me until I’m backed up against the

wall behind me and leans down. “You’re the only one to blame for the hurt you’ve caused her tonight. She needed to see who her daughter really was. You and Riaan are so blinded by each other that you don’t even realize it will never last. There’s no happily ever after for your love story.”

“I don’t even know you anymore.” Sadness laces my voice.

He stands up taller, his guard up, as he says, “All you need to know is there are no lengths I wouldn’t cross to protect my brother. Whether or not you believe it, it’s for your own good too.”

I don’t recognize the man I see in front of my eyes. There’s no sign of the brother who used to tease me, laugh with me, or cared for me.

I’m really scared of Zain for the first time in my entire life. The last person I thought I would ever fear as I hear the malice in his voice, and the determination shining bright in his eyes, reflecting hate for me and protectiveness for Riaan.

Most importantly, it’s the power behind his words that forces me to face the truth that... *He* is right.

Then there’s another truth, which he doesn’t realize while blindsided by his rage and righteousness, that Riaan will never forgive him for the part he played in ruining us.

I’ll have to bear the burden of putting a divide between the two brothers for the rest of my life.

My sins just keep piling up.

While I watch them fall like dominoes...

Everything clicks in place.

When it rains, it pours.

“The joke’s on you, Zain. I already let go of him before my mom even showed up.” He blinks back in shock at hearing my words, but I’m not finished. “So why don’t you run and pick up the pieces of his broken heart?”

I leave him standing in the darkened hallway as I walk away. I was stupid to think of a world where Riaan and I could be together without any consequences. Now, I'm left standing against the whole world all alone.

Pushing open the door to my bedroom, I go and sit on the edge of the bed while I impatiently wait for my mom, and stare hard at the open door, willing her to hurry and praying she gives me a chance to explain.

Every second that ticks by puts me on edge and drives my anxiety up a notch. The silence lets my imagination run wild, each thought more horrific than the last.

Is this the end? It sure feels like it.

Will I never see Riaan again?

Am I going to be miserable and alone for the rest of my life?

When I came here tonight, I only had one single thought. To end it with Riaan before it got messy and our lives became entangled more than they already were.

I always knew a time would come when he and I would have to part ways, but it was supposed to be on our terms. I hate that the decision was cruelly stolen from me because of someone holding my secret as leverage over my head.

I was cornered, forced, and blackmailed.

An invisible gun was being pointed at my back.

Even though I gave them what they wanted, the feeling of being trapped doesn't go away. If I ever want to get rid of it, I need to find the person behind all of this.

Because when it comes to the monsters hiding in the shadows... they always come back for more.

I foolishly thought that maybe I could find out who the person blackmailing me is and then figure out how to ask Riaan for his forgiveness. I was praying it would give us a fighting chance to be together, but that was before my mom caught us red-handed.

The way she reacted gave me my answer that even if I was successful, there is no happily ever after for us. It's just like what Zain said—and now, I hate him even more.

However, even if I'm so angry with my brother right now, I can't think about anything except for confronting my mother. As if willed by my imagination, the door slams open as she briskly walks in, her face a mask of shame and anger and just below the surface, something close to dread.

It breaks my little heart to see her like this, knowing I'm the one who caused this, even if Zain is partly to be blamed.

"I'm taking you back home," she announces while nodding to herself, agreeing with whatever thought just crossed her mind. Yet, she doesn't meet my eyes as she continues, "Tomorrow, we'll go pack your bags from the dorm and take the next flight far away from here."

"Mom!"

Her gaze finally cuts to me and she pauses her pacing. Now that she's looking at me intently, the words are all jumbled in my head and I don't know what to say.

I'm pretty sure my eyes are puffy and red, burning with unshed tears. But instead of taking me in her arms—the way she always did whenever I cried—she remains standing away from me.

"I knew it was a mistake sending you here all alone." She shakes her head in disgust. "Now look at what happened. Kissing your older cousin... Don't you have any shame, Nyra?"

My chin drops and silent tears fall down my cheeks. "I-I am so sorry, Mom."

Suddenly, she's in my face, holding my shoulders back, and demands, "Did he force you? He brainwashed you into thinking it was okay, didn't he?"

"Wha— No, Mom." I push her away and stand up. "He's not a predator. He never forced me, okay! We love each other."

I gasp when my head snaps to the right, registering the fact that my mom—who has never raised a hand on me—slapped me across the face.

Shock and pain has me motionless against the onslaught of emotions I feel in the moment. Guilt like never before slams into me at the fact that I pushed my mom so hard that I lowered her to do this.

“This better be the last time you ever whisper those words out loud, Nyra.”

When my gaze slips back to her, her face pales and it’s not just anger in her eyes that stares back at me, but fear and panic that sears me to my core.

Yet I can’t find it in me to back down because no matter the harsh consequences, there’s one promise I’ll never break to Riaan and that’s not letting anyone taint our love for each other, even if it led to us being apart.

“It’s the truth,” I darkly growl. “I love him more than life and not even you can convince me otherwise. Hit me, hide me, or kill me but I’ll never stop loving him.”

I expect another slap when I watch her hand clench into a tight fist but she holds herself back and sucks in a breath.

“You are never seeing him again, Nyra. Distance is what you need to understand it’s not love but toxic infatuation you hold for him,” she says as she glares at me, but I see the moisture in her eyes. The sadness and the pain she’s trying to hide behind her anger. “He’ll never be yours.”

Her words hit me hard.

They rip my heart out, letting it bleed on the floor.

As the last tear dries on my cheek, I smile sadly and murmur.

“He never was.”

Chapter Two

NYRA

Mornings are supposed to be a fresh start.

A new beginning.

A ray of hope.

Yet it's the last thing I'm feeling as I gaze at the morning sky through the window in my room.

Usually, my mind is all fuzzy and relaxed as I come to my senses and slowly become aware of my surroundings. Those few seconds when you are unaware are like a small reprieve from the chaos and mess in our lives until it all comes flooding back.

Today of all days, I needed those seconds so fucking badly to forget about last night. But my mind wouldn't even allow me that. Sleeping was out of the question as I kept tossing and turning the whole night.

Every time I closed my eyes, flashes of Riaan's eyes or my mom's horrified face would haunt me. So, I spent the whole night wide awake while staring at the ceiling as silent tears spilled down my cheeks and soaked the pillow underneath.

I realized the weight of my actions and its consequences yesterday when my mom slept with me in the same room so she could keep an eye on me, proving without words that I have lost her trust completely.

If she wasn't so hell-bent on keeping the secret from everyone else, she would have taken me home last night. I

could see it in her eyes, but the fight to keep the pretense that nothing was wrong won.

Just until a week ago, my mornings were the best part of my day because as soon as I woke up, a sweet text from Riaan would be waiting for me.

If we spent the night at his apartment, then his chiseled face would be the first thing I saw. Sometimes, he would just be lying next to me and other times, he would be staring into my eyes hungrily from between my thighs right before he would eat me for breakfast.

My body has become so attuned to his that even now, my arm is stretched to my right, hoping to feel him, only to find the bed empty.

Like someone carved out a piece of me.

Stole my air that I needed to last.

Breathing yet dying inside.

I'm heartbroken all over again, knowing he's in the same house yet miles away. Despite the fact it's my aunt's home, he never missed a chance to sneak into my bed to touch me, hold me and kiss me.

Does this mean he's let me go? Isn't that what I wanted when I broke things off with him last night?

I'm the only one to blame because if I hadn't uttered those cruel words, not even my mom knowing the truth could have stopped him from being by my side right now. I should be glad that my plan worked.

Then why do I feel the need to throw up?

Then there's a small part of me that just wants to say fuck it and run back into his arms and confess everything that I'm burying inside to him. But my heart that wants to protect him, is stopping me from doing exactly that.

I cannot cave in now. Besides, the damage is already done. I can still feel the burn of his touch as he roughly pushed me away when I said I wish I didn't love him.

My entire body is so heavy and numb as I gather the courage to get out of bed ever so gingerly and embrace the challenging day ahead of me. I cannot believe that in few short hours, I'll be far away from here. From Riaan.

I stare at the door longingly while I'm alone in my room, hoping he'll enter, even if it's to lash out at me. I'll happily take anything he gives me as long as he's close. I just want to see him one last time before I leave.

Suddenly, the door jerks open and my stomach bottoms out as my eyes search for the person on the other side, praying that it's him.

Instead, it's my mom who enters the room with her suitcase in one hand, looking freshly showered and dressed in one of her kurtis. Her beautiful face is a mask of nothingness. Cold. Emotionless.

Turning toward me, her gaze takes in my rumpled state and bloodshot eyes, courtesy of me crying the whole night.

"Get ready. I'll wait for you here," she orders sharply and I flinch at her tone.

She emphasizes the word *here* so I know as long as we are in the same city as Riaan, I'm not allowed to be anywhere alone. Not even deserving of basic privacy. Still, I can't blame her. When I stay motionless, she scolds me in a hard tone.

"Hurry, Nyra! Your aunt is waiting for us downstairs."

Before I do as she says, I ask the one question that I can't hold myself back from asking any longer. "Will you tell her?"

My voice comes out nervous and low as my hands twist the bed sheet in my fist while I wait for her to answer.

My aunt has treated me like her own daughter since I have been away from home and I can't imagine the devastation it will cause her to know what went on under her roof. I'm scared I will never be allowed to come back here, effectively ending any ties I have to Riaan.

I desperately wish my mom would just tell me what's going on in her head because I can't handle her silence and angry taunts.

How long can she behave like this without hearing my explanation? Because if she believes pretending like it didn't happen will make it all go away, then she's only fooling herself.

"No." Her clipped reply pulls me out of my troubled thoughts. Holding my gaze, she continues in a nonnegotiable voice, "This disgusting transgression of yours dies here, Nyra. Do you even realize what you've done? In what world did you think it would be all right to kiss your cousin? I didn't know I had to teach you the difference between siblings and other men." Her voice raises at the end and doesn't drop until she realizes somebody could hear her.

She stares at me incredulously and with that same tormented look in her eyes. This time, it takes her a bit longer to hide the look and a knot forms in my stomach at what it could possibly imply.

Is she that horrified of what I've done? Have I really done something so terrible?

I shudder at the thought of how she'll react if she found out I lost my virginity to him as well. I still haven't found the courage to ask her what she said to him after she ordered me to run to my room last night.

"I never saw him as my cousin, Ma." I tell her the honest truth and every muscle in her body goes rigid. "I only ever saw him as Riaan. The man who loves me."

A second later, she's in my space and tilting my face up with her tight grip on my jaw; there's no mistaking the raw anger in her unblinking eyes and firmness in her low words.

"The only kind of love that can exist between you two is the kind of love siblings share, Nyra. Nothing more, nothing less." Once she releases her tight grip on my jaw, she twists away from me as if she can't stand to look at me, and utters,

“The sooner you accept that, the better. Otherwise, the consequences will be too dire.”

“You don’t think I know that?” I reply back, even though my instinct is to scream. “Don’t you think I have tried to bury these feelings for him? That it’s killing me to see you hurt or the fact that there’s a constant pain in my chest every time you stare at me with those blank eyes? I never wanted you to find out like this. I was ending it last night, Ma.”

There’s a tightness in her shoulders as she faces me again and for the first time since coming here, she stares at me softly and lovingly, despite the shadows of hurt and distrust still evident in her eyes. Before I can soak it in, though, her eyes go back to being vacant and dull while her voice comes out soft and emphatic.

“Love like yours can only end in pain, she murmurs. “Or scars too deep to heal.”

As soon as those words leave her lips, she goes back to ignoring me while she busies herself with rearranging the clothes in her suitcase that are already perfectly organized.

Feeling tired to argue, I grab my extra pair of clothes that I brought with me and go into the attached bathroom to shower. While my body goes through the motions like a robot, my mind is imprisoned in the memories of the last time I was here.

Riaan had sneaked in while I was taking a bath, and I can almost hear his voice ordering me to get on my knees so he could fuck my mouth with this thick cock until his cum had coated my throat. His hands were so rough and greedy as he used me for his pleasure. I could still hear his grunts filling my ears as if it only happened yesterday.

My nails had left scratch marks on my arms in an effort to keep my hands to myself until he allowed—or more like *ordered*—me to touch him. Once he was finished, he took me into his arms and finger-fucked my pussy until I came all over his hand while the taste of his cum embedded itself in my mouth.

Now, I'll never get to touch him. The emptiness of the bathroom leaves me with only the shadows of our past. I already know no other man will ever compare to him. And if I can't have him, then I'll brokenly survive with his memories because no one can ever steal them away from me.

After all, you only get one soul mate.

And Riaan is mine.

When I get out of the shower, I hear my mom talking on the phone in the corner of the room with her back turned away from me. I slow my steps and lightly shut the bathroom door behind me so as not to alert her.

I hold my breath as I listen to her and when she says my dad's name, my heart beats faster in pure fear. Because while she may hide it from everybody else, she has never kept any secrets from my father, which is why I can't help but panic.

"We'll reach home around midnight," she says, as if I need another reminder. Her voice is smooth and calm as she talks, and then she abruptly pauses while my dad responds from the other end. "What do you mean I shouldn't bring her back?"

Judging by her reply, I'm fairly certain she hasn't told him. Otherwise, he wouldn't be questioning her decision to bring me home. I relax while her spine stays rigid as she replies in a soft tone, "She isn't doing great, honey, and I'm worried about her. Maybe if she spent some time with us, she'll feel better. You know how it is. Being away from home can be hard and scary at first."

The lies spill from her mouth easily, even though half of it is true. I remember how she was against the idea of me living in a big city alone, despite knowing I had family here.

She had tried so hard to guilt-trip me into not moving, going as far as to telling me to not even apply to the university here. At the time, I thought she was just being an overprotective mother, afraid to see her child go, so I didn't think much of it.

But as I observe her right now, it's almost like she foresaw something terrible was coming. Maybe there was more to her reluctance than I first imagined.

It raises so many suspicions in my head, providing me a momentary distraction from the other chaos trying to claw its way back to the forefront of my mind.

My hackles rise when she harshly snaps, "I told you sending her here was a mistake." I become even more scared when her grip on the phone trembles as she pauses before replying, "Nothing happened, but I'm not going to wait until it does to protect my daughter."

A little too late for that.

It takes all my strength not to crumble into pieces as sorrow stabs me in the chest at the pain behind my mother's voice.

In my haste to keep myself standing, my right hand collides with the lamp on the table beside me, making it crash onto the floor with a loud bang. I look up in time to see my mom swiftly turn around while her eyes narrow at having caught me eavesdropping on her conversation.

"We'll see you tonight, honey," she smoothly answers while her eyes stay pinned on mine. "Love you too."

"How long are you going to keep the truth from Dad?" I ask as soon as she hangs up. "It's the middle of the school year and I'm going to miss my classes."

"You should have worried about your studies before you decided to kiss your cousin, Nyra," she snaps. "I'm not letting you out of my sight until I'm convinced you've moved on from Riaan and your sick little crush on him. Even then, I'm going to keep you far away from that boy because I neither trust nor respect him anymore. As far as your father is concerned, he will never find out." she viciously sneers, ripping my heart out of my chest as she sneers, "I don't think you can handle losing both of your parents' love and respect."

By the time she's finished speaking, I realize the full extent of my punishment. It's far more severe and harrowing

than I imagined it would be.

Every time my mom will smile or laugh, stare at me adoringly or speak to me, I knew it was all for show. A mockery of our relationship.

To keep up the façade in front of everyone that I'm her dutiful daughter, while behind closed doors, I'll be the daughter who caused her suffering, shredded her trust, and destroyed our bond.

Nothing hurts me more than knowing this is my new reality and that I have got no one to blame but myself.

Now the only question remains... How long until I find redemption for my illicit love?

Chapter Three

NYRA

There are times when it feels like every bone, muscle, and skin in our body is a tangible thing and not our own.

Almost like being trapped inside someone else's body.

Or worse, like a ghost residing there.

Suddenly, we are wading through the onslaught of emotions, trying to control and remind ourselves it's just us. It's the same feeling running through my veins because I have never been so attuned to my body than right now.

Maintaining my balance on the stairs as I climb down them is a struggle, as if my legs will give out from under me anytime. Keeping my composure is even more of a hardship as laughter and voices from the kitchen and dining area drift into the hallway and pierce my ears.

The closer we get, the faster my heart beats, as if it will fall out of my chest at any moment. I have walked through these walls so many times now and yet it doesn't feel the same.

Maybe it's because of the fact that I can no longer hide in the dark anymore and have to face my family while pretending like nothing is wrong. As if my world hadn't just turned upside down last night, caught in a blaze and burned to ashes.

I desperately want to run and hide in a corner because I don't think I can handle sitting across my aunt and uncle, especially Riaan, and not burst into tears. The thoughts reverberate through my head as I follow after my mother quietly.

My mom must sense the oncoming panic and the breathlessness in my ribs because she stops just as we descend the stairs and twists around, looking me up and down.

“Smile, Nyra,” she says in a low voice. “Just like you’ve been perfectly doing this whole time.”

Her words, even though whispered softly, cut through the air and land like a punch, making me flinch. It makes me want to curl up into a ball and cry.

With each passing second, I become more and more scared of my mom because she’s making me feel every slash and burn of her anger. I’m beginning to believe she won’t be satisfied until I hate myself for falling for Riaan. She’ll push and scorn until it starts to feel like I made a mistake.

If that’s her plan, she will fail.

I want her forgiveness, but not at the expense of regretting my love for Riaan.

Straightening my spine, I search for the strength I don’t possess and pray I can just go through the day without losing my sanity. I’ll smile and nod until I have convinced my family—including myself—that my world is perfectly fine and standing strong against the storm that’s attempting to tear it down.

Though, as soon as we round the corner, I’m not prepared for the *tornado* that is Riaan.

He’s more powerful than any storm ever could be.

My steps falter and my heartbeat picks up when I find him sitting causally, yet alert at the head of the dining table while wearing an expensive dark gray suit.

It molds to his broad and muscled physique, and appears as if it was personally tailored for him because there’s not a single pin or wrinkle out of place.

His sinful aura and presence is something I’ll never get used to because it has the power to render me speechless and trembling, even after all this time.

Riaan's the kind of man whose impact only heightens each time you cross paths with him.

He skirts the fine line between a beast and a gentleman.

He toys with you and makes you wait while he decides to strike you or charm you. Riaan is the type to hold you at the edge of precipice with no choice but to be his willing captive.

My nervous eyes clash with his and I'm taken back to the flashbacks of last night on the terrace. The raw pain and betrayal on his face, the press of his lips against mine, and his hands pulling me closer.

It all comes flooding back and I have to tear my gaze away from his, unable to handle the simmering rage I sense in his now tensed shoulders, which reveals the fact that he's stuck in the same turmoil as me.

To anybody else, he's still calm and composed, but I know better. It's all an act, meant to fool everyone.

He's always been good at hiding his true intentions and always staying one step ahead. It's one of the qualities that make him dominating and feared. The only difference is that I was never on the receiving end of it. But standing few feet from him... I finally am.

The shock of it rocks me to my core.

Only because I never saw it coming.

And that's *dangerous* to both my heart and soul, as it means he doesn't trust me anymore. In his mind, I'm the girl who stomped on his heart, didn't believe in him, and ultimately broke the one vow I ever made to him: To never stop fighting for *our love*.

As if I'm possessed, my gaze raises back to his and find him already watching me. Only now, there are no shadows or tension in his body. I might as well have imagined it before. The intensity and intent behind his eyes have me spellbound yet high-strung.

Satisfied that he has my attention, he leans forward and steeples his fingers on the surface in front of him while his

eyes assess me from head to toe.

They don't merely see beneath the surface but penetrate deep into parts of my soul I desperately want to keep hidden.

His possessive yet icy gaze roams over every inch of my face and takes stock of even the slightest of emotions swirling in mine. Sorrow. Longing. Fear. *Lust*. There's no denying our palpable chemistry is as all-consuming and commanding as ever.

It breathes a life of its own.

He lowers his eyes in a manner that is so painstakingly slow at my slight intake of breath and then moves his gaze down to my chest, which was heaving from both desire and nervousness.

I can lie about not wanting to be with him, letting him slip through my fingers, but not the craving I have for him, which he knows very well. Clearly, he's playing and poking at my one and only weakness.

He's not even hiding the fact that he's blatantly checking me out while my mom seethes from beside me.

He's unafraid and unapologetic.

His actions conveying without words that I have unleashed the beast. The one he tightly kept the reins on and only let out when I pushed him too far.

Averting my gaze, I focus my attention to my aunt and uncle, who are busy talking to each other, oblivious of the tension swirling in the air. There's no sign of Zain around us. I'm grateful for that single mercy because while Riaan will never harm me, no matter how angry he's at me, the same cannot be said about his younger brother. These days, he's a loose cannon. Unrestrained and vindictive.

A shudder racks through my body as I remember his betrayal from last night, making Riaan's eyes narrow into slits.

In that exact moment, my uncle's gaze lands on my mom and I standing at the entrance and a wide smile graces

his lips. Immediately, I mask all the emotions that Riaan evoked inside me just a second ago and easily tip my lips up in a fake smile while my mom does the same.

“What a pleasant surprise, Sara!” exclaims my uncle, pulling my aunt’s attention to us, and she covers the distance between us with her arms wide open.

As soon as she’s close, she pulls me into a warm hug and I have the urge to not let go because since last night, I’ve been craving solace and comfort that I can no longer seek from my mother. But all too soon, she pulls away to turn toward my mom and repeats the same.

“It’s so good to have you here, Sara,” says my aunt warmly. “I’m always telling Rohan how long it’s been since you visited us and that we should invite you,” she says while pointing toward Uncle, who nods in agreement.

“We’ve always wanted to come but Rohan’s work always got in the way,” explains my mom politely.

My aunt pulls me closer and leans her head against mine in a sweet gesture as she replies, “Well, now that your daughter is here, you have no more excuses. I expect you to stay with us more often. I miss spending time with you all.” Then turning to me, she excitedly asks, “So, did you like your surprise, darling?”

My body tenses and my smile comes out awkward, although my aunt doesn’t notice as I lie in a cheery voice, “Of course! I couldn’t believe my eyes.” I look at my mom when I say the next words, “She might not believe me, but I needed her badly this past week. I-I missed her.”

For a split second, her eyes soften and stare at me warmly before she looks away. It’s true that I missed my mom when everything was crumbling around me.

The cruel messages, fighting my feelings for Riaan, and feeling so lonely. I had never felt so suffocated and even though things have only gotten worse, a part of me feels free from the burden of constantly lying to her.

My future may be uncertain and bleak but at least she knows now.

“Aww, sweetie,” whispers my aunt. “I didn’t know things were rough with you. You could have come to me.”

I wipe away a lone tear that falls from my eyes as I grin. One would think I would have run out of tears by now but I’m proven wrong. They are seemingly out of my control. I twist toward my aunt to assure her.

“It’s okay. I’m better now,” I lie once again and she nods before giving me a bright smile.

I almost forget my uncle and Riaan are still in the same room when I look up just as my aunt shifts to the side.

Uncle Rohan has a comforting smile on his face while his older son’s face is a blank mask, yet my heart thunders just the same.

I know he heard every word I said just now and I realize my mistake. My slipup inadvertently gave him confirmation that his suspicions are correct.

I’m a *liar*.

And I’m hiding dark secrets.

My mom clears her throat to pull my attention away from Riaan and stares pointedly while distracting my aunt. “Let me help you with breakfast. I told you to wait for me.”

“Oh shush,” says my aunt. “You enjoy spending too much time in the kitchen. It’s my turn to take care of you now.”

She’s right because my mom loves to cook and if there’s one thing she loves even more, it is feeding others. Sometimes, we literally have to pull her out of the kitchen and force her to eat. My mom shakes her head with a laugh at my aunt’s chiding and it sounds so genuine that I can’t help but stare because it’s been so long since I heard the sound.

The three of us walk farther into the room and as soon as my mom is close, my uncle stands up from his perch and moves forward to pull her into a warm hug.

My eyebrows pull into a frown when I see Mom become tense as soon as they embrace.

“Time passes by so quickly.” My uncle reminisces when he pulls away. “Can’t believe both of us have grown up kids now. We’re lucky they are as close as we used to be.”

He doesn’t even realize he’s unknowingly stepped on the wrong nerve because my mom looks close to fainting as her face pales and she becomes still as a statue. I’m about to come to her defense by pulling my uncle’s focus, when Riaan beats me to it.

“Please don’t bore us with tales of your childhood, Dad,” he says dryly. “We’ve heard them enough times now.”

Uncle easily becomes distracted as he turns to Riaan and replies to him. I step toward my mom and rest my hand on her lower back so that she snaps out of the shock and I count my lucky stars that my aunt missed the whole exchange. She has her back turned away while she moves in the open kitchen, preparing breakfast for us.

My mom’s reaction scared me to death, indicating she’s not as fine as she’s pretending to be. It takes her a few seconds before she’s relaxed and calm.

“Sit down, everyone,” instructs my aunt as she brings the plate to the table. My mom moves to help her but my aunt holds her arm and asks her to go sit comfortably.

I have noticed my aunt can be assertive when she wants to be, and there’s no budging her. It reminds me of Riaan because he’s the same way, charming and getting others to do his bidding.

I feel his eyes on me like a constant heat source, watching me like a hawk as I take a seat at the table, intentionally sitting away from him with my mom on my right and an empty chair on my left.

I don’t want to see Mom faint for real this time if I make the mistake of going near him, even though him staring isn’t any better.

“Did you get a chance to meet Zain before he left, Sara?” asks my aunt.

“Oh yes!” my mom answers while passing the toasted bread around the table. “I had to thank him for booking my flight so I could surprise Nyra. You’ve raised him well.”

I see Riaan pause from the corner of my eye, processing my mom’s words, which were meant more for his ears rather than my aunt’s. He remains still, but only for a split second before he takes a sip of his coffee.

His movements are calm and methodical, but only I can sense the calculative look behind his eyes.

I mask my emotion when he tilts his face toward me with scrunched brows as if I’ll spill the message behind my mom’s answer.

I must not have hidden the guilt well because his fist resting on the table tightens and I have to take measuring breaths. If he learns that Zain sent my mom on the terrace to catch us, it won’t end well. All it will take is one single push to send him reeling into rage and his brother will bear the brunt of it.

Their relationship is already tearing at the seams and they wouldn’t be able to survive this. My mom, blinded by her anger, doesn’t realize she’s crossing a line in spite of being unaware.

“When did he book your flight, Auntie?” he asks, his voice holding an edge.

Riaan is no less sharp than a shark in this moment.

This man was sniffing for blood so he can attack.

He’s on the hunt. If I’m not too careful, he’ll *pounce*.

Please don’t say anything, Ma, I pray in my head. Otherwise, he’ll figure out the truth. If it’s after Zain confronted him, then he’ll realize his brother planned it intentionally. I won’t be able to fix the damage it will unleash.

“It doesn’t matter.” I exhale in relief at her reply but tense when she continues, “What’s important is that I got here

just in *time*.”

Riaan gives a chilling smile that I feel down to my bones, as a shiver races down my spine. It even makes my uncle and aunt pause and stare, but he quickly masks it, slipping back to his charming self.

Meanwhile, my heart races a mile a minute because this whole morning is turning into a landmine, one more wrong step and it'll explode any second. If he and my mom spend any more time together, their animosity won't stay hidden.

While Riaan has his emotions under control, I can sense my mom losing her calm façade while sitting across the man who kissed her very forbidden daughter.

She can dictate my behavior and influence my emotions, but not his.

Every time she'll strike, he'll hit back twice as harder.

He won't even lose his breath while using her taunts and threats against her. Now, I regret not warning her. Then again, she never gave me the chance.

I'm still sitting on pins and needles, waiting to see if he'll let it go or reply to her.

When his gaze lands on mine, I stop breathing.

Time stands still as he toys with us. I can feel my mom start to relax, assuming he's backed down, but it's exactly what he was waiting for, to let her think she won.

I plead with him with my eyes but fail when he slowly stands up, a beastly glint casting over his sharp gaze.

“Nyra,” he says my name. I tremble and he smirks coldly. “A word.”

Then, he *attacks*.

“Alone.”

Chapter Four

RIAN

Control is the only thing I thrive on.

It gives me a sense of purpose and made me who I am today. So, when someone attempts to steal it from me, I obliterate them. If anyone dares to come in the way of what I want, whether family or friends, they become my enemy.

You push me and I won't just push back—I'll *destroy*.

Until now, I kept a tight leash on my need to dominate, only setting it free when necessary.

However, the second Nyra stepped into my life, it ran wild and animalistic.

She brought out the beast in me and I let her rule it with her heart, her body, and her soul. It fed on her closeness, her happiness, and her beautiful submission.

Then out of nowhere, she decided to rip herself away from me and now it can't be contained.

It's roaring and hungry for her.

Standing at the head of the table, I stare down at her, waiting to see what she'll do, but we both know, she'll obey. If she doesn't, it will raise questions that she desperately wants to avoid and cannot afford to answer.

Beside her, my aunt becomes still and throws daggers at me with her annoyed gaze. I have to hold back the snarl fighting to come to the surface as I maintain an easy grin on my face, mostly for my parents' sake.

Nyra's sudden decision to end our relationship is something I saw coming, which is why it left me wounded and mostly angry at myself. It was in the way she was behaving the past week, throwing little signs and hints, like her reluctance to meet, texting me less and less, and making false excuses.

Instead of demanding answers, I waited and watched her slowly pull away.

Instead of running after her, I gave her space.

Deep in my gut, I know something pushed Nyra into making this choice.

Or was it *someone*?

It's very obvious that she's spilling lies, which isn't shocking, but the desolation and hint of terror on her face, is what I'm unable to forget. It's stuck in my head like a clot. Even the timing was all fucked up.

It almost felt like a setup, a trap, but I can't tell who is behind it.

Who would have the motivation to do it?

The more I think, the more I regret not trusting my instincts. I should have just made Nyra stay with me while I chased away her fears.

My mistake was letting her have the control, hoping she'll fight for us, because it was the last thing she needed.

Nyra is strong, but also fragile and naïve. She's fiercely protective of those she loves and sometimes that very strength becomes her weakness.

If her mom hadn't seen us last night, I would have kidnapped Nyra and had the truth pulled out of her by now.

I could still do it, but the damage and hurt it will cause her is the only thing stopping me. In the end, I want her mother's blessing for when I make Nyra mine again. Because it's what she would want and I don't have the power to deny her anything.

“Nyra,” I say again as she remains mute, staring at me with wide eyes.

I see the struggle on her face while she’s stuck between a rock and a hard place. If she follows me, she risks upsetting her mother. If she doesn’t... well, it’s not up to her. Because one way or another, she’s coming with me. *Alone.*

She did the talking last night, signing her choice.

Now it’s my turn.

“Riaan,” says my mom. “Let her at least finish her breakfast first.”

My aunt also hurries to add while she nods in agreement, and it’s almost funny watching her face, assuming she’s got the upper hand. “Yeah. We are already running late to visit her campus and pack her bags.”

Nyra watches my face, expecting to see shock at the news of her returning home tonight—or should I say her prison—for however long her mom desires.

Maybe I’ll have to kidnap her, after all.

It’s beginning to sound like a real possibility and a very *tempting* one.

If someone knew the truth and were watching me, they’d say I’m being disrespectful and cold toward my aunt, considering I touched her daughter while knowing she was off-limits. Forbidden. They’ll see me as a cruel, vindictive asshole. As opposed to someone who regrets their choices, and apologizes to earn her forgiveness.

It’s only because they wouldn’t understand the love I possess for Nyra is something beyond my control.

Hell, love is too weak a word.

It’s this sick need I have for her that knows no bounds, no sense, and it doesn’t matter whether she’s close or miles away, it only grows each second.

Our kind of love doesn’t have a name because it’s not ordinary love. It’s raw and haunting. Insane yet ethereal.

Hiding it from the world—when all I want I do is shout about it—enrages me.

She's my reason to exist. To live.

Without her, I'm adrift.

Every time I stare at her mom, it's a punch to my heart and a constant reminder that someone has taken my reason to breathe. There finally stands a person between her and I, and all it makes me see is red.

When I look at her, I don't see my aunt, who watched me grow up, but an enemy. An obstacle. The one person whose presence only further drives a wedge between Nyra and me.

Naturally, I won't allow that to happen.

No matter how long it takes.

"She won't be long," I finally reply to reassure them and solidify it further. "Besides, I have a meeting to attend myself."

Nyra looks at me and then her mom, whose nostrils flare in defeat. Accepting I won't budge, Nyra gives up and pushes herself off the chair. She doesn't meet her mom's eyes as she speaks to her in a soothing and placating voice. "I'll be back soon and then we can leave."

I clear my throat when she doesn't move fast enough, my body fighting the instinct to grab her arm and immediately have her to myself.

It's the first time that we are in such close proximity and I haven't gotten a taste of her lips or her cunt. Maybe that's why I couldn't stomach the food in front of me without tasting her first.

When she moves in the direction of the hall, I follow after her while I gaze at her back with hunger and impatience. I intentionally walk behind her—close but not touching—so she can feel my eyes on her, and a knowing shiver races down her spine.

“Upstairs,” I order sharply when she bypasses the stairs to walk in the direction of the drawing room. I know she’s thinking it’s a safer option and that way, her mom can keep an eye on us.

Too bad, I don’t plan to make this easy on her.

She twists around to face me, almost running into my chest before pulling back at the last second. Her pretty yet sad eyes meet mine when she looks up and utters, “Riaan. My—”

Something inside me snaps at hearing my name on her lips, which is spoken in a trembling voice, and I grasp her elbow and yank her against my front. All the pent-up rage, frustration, hurt, and yearning comes boiling to the surface.

Leaning down into her face, I speak low as I ask, “Are you scared of being alone with me, Nyra? Afraid I’ll tear out all your lies and demand the truth?”

Her terrified gaze looks behind me to make sure nobody is following us while I have her trapped against me. She feebly attempts to pull away but I hold on tight, her fight no match for my strength.

“Answer. Me,” I growl until our eyes connect.

“No! Now let me go,” she whispers. “Please.”

“You want to talk in the drawing room?” I ask as I let go her and step back. She nods apprehensively at the sudden calmness in my tone, so I shrug my shoulders. “Fine then.”

She visibly relaxes and just as she turns around to walk, I halt her with my next words that only she can hear, “It’s funny you think having them close will keep you safe. I know you don’t want me anymore, but have you already forgotten what kind of man I am, Nyra?”

Stepping behind her, I run the back of my fingers down the length of her spine. “You chose to let me go, your mom now knows the truth. Don’t you realize what that means?” With my voice hardening and dropping an octave, I continue, “It means there’s nothing stopping me from claiming you in front of everyone. Nothing’s stopping me from letting them hear that every inch of you belongs to me. You made a very

bad mistake, baby. You were the only one standing in my way, so if you're not mine anymore, I no longer care if the world knows about us."

Swiftly, she twists back around and glares at me accusingly, but underneath I see glimpse of fear—the kind that makes her pussy wet—and it's quite an electrifying sight to behold because since the moment I laid eyes on her this morning, she looked dull and lifeless.

I hated every second of it. I'm pleased to know that she isn't completely broken despite everything that happened last night.

While I'm enjoying her pissed-off face, it's only a fraction compared to the anger I'm feeling burning in my veins.

"The choice is yours," I speak, a smug grin spreading on my lips. "We're going to talk about last night either way."

"I told you there's nothing more left to say, Riaan." She lies almost robotically. "We are over."

I ignore the ache in my chest that her words deliver with a punch and focus on her. People have a tell or a nervous tic whenever they lie or skirt around the truth. Either they don't meet your eyes, speak low, or something else, but Nyra has none of those. And yet I know she's lying.

It's because she goes completely still and composed when she's not telling the truth, which she never is when she's relaxed. She's always energetic and fluttering around like a butterfly.

"I would believe you if that's what you really wanted and the more time you waste arguing with me, the longer it will take for you to run back to your mom."

She jerks back as if she forgot what she promised her mom before coming with me. With one last scathing look my way, she makes her way to the stairs as I climb after her.

If someone would have told me a week ago that it will come to this between us—standing against each other—I

would have laughed or most likely hurt them for uttering those words.

Then destiny decided to make a cruel joke because here we stand.

The moment we are inside my bedroom, I shut and lock the door behind me. I remain standing at the entrance while she has her back turned away from me to avoid staring at me. Maybe she's afraid I'll break down the walls she's erected between us.

The silence is thick around us as neither of us make a move. I'm holding myself back because every instinct in me is roaring to force her to confess that she's still mine.

To beg her to take me back.

She's the only woman to exist who can bring me to my knees.

"Look at me."

I leave no room for disobedience as I order her and slowly, she twists to face me, yet stubbornly not meeting my gaze.

"Eyes on me, Nyra." I demand. "Now."

Her soulful eyes—that always betray her true emotions—rise slowly, and I can finally breathe.

The anger, which was there moments ago, is gone and instead, she looks small and so breakable.

Now that it's just us, I allow myself to truly stare at her like I couldn't in front of my family downstairs. I'm not denying I didn't ogle her in her pretty floral summer dress that left her thighs bare for my hungry gaze while also doing the perfect job of pissing off her mother.

It was all about sending a message so she knows that no matter how many threats she throws my way, I'm never letting her daughter go.

Not in this lifetime.

Or any other.

As I watch her, I'm awestruck by her innocent beauty just like I was the second I laid eyes on her at the club.

Nyra is stunning in a way that has the power to illuminate everything around her, even the darkest of souls.

She's a ray of light in this gloomy world.

It was also the first thing that pulled me to her. And her warmth and pure heart when she comforted me after my grandma died.

Today, that same spark is missing from her and I want to find out the person behind it so I can end their measly life while I spit on their grave for dulling her shine.

Nyra must see the murderous rage on my face because she gasps and staggers backward. All morning, she's hidden herself behind a mask of fake happiness and even now, she's hiding beneath those layers. My only thought is that...

I violently want to rip away those layers. Until she's stripped of her defenses.

I want to see the woman who melted for me. The one who craved me and kept loving me even when I cruelly pushed her away all those years ago. Because the one standing before me isn't her.

She isn't my Nyra.

She isn't my sassy girl.

She can shield herself all she wants when we aren't alone but never when it's just us.

Because if she's determined, then I'm a savage.

And the only way she's getting out of this room is until I have seen the real her. Standing taller, I stare her down and she visibly trembles.

"Go wash your face."

Chapter Five

RIAN

“What?” She stares at me, dumbfounded, like my words suddenly don’t make any sense.

Her expression says she expected me to pounce on her as soon as I got her alone, away from the prying eyes of our family.

She desperately tries to speculate my intentions but fails while I continue to wait patiently. Slowly, my impatience shows when she doesn’t move to do as I say.

“Nyra.” My voice is a low growl.

She jerks back at my warning, her eyes going wide as they clash with mine, snapping out of the trance she got absorbed in as soon as she heard me.

“I thought you wanted to talk,” she retorts, stubbornly refusing to move and crossing her arms in defense.

The woman doesn’t know when to stop. Since last night, she’s been testing my tolerance, almost as if she wants to face my wrath and bear the consequences.

Keeping my gaze pinned on her, I smooth my hand down my chest until I reach the button of my suit jacket and slide it open, revealing my gray silk shirt underneath.

When I quietly take it off my shoulders and lay it on the chair beside me, she goes utterly still and looks nervous.

Her tongue peeks out to wet her lips when I open the cuff link on my wrist with deliberate slowness and take my time rolling the sleeve upward to showcase my arm. I do the

same on the other arm while she swallows in fear and tries to step back on unsteady feet.

“Wh-what are you doing, Riaan?”

My only response is to smooth my brow as I stay quiet and then in two long steps, I cover the distance between us.

Her fingers are twisting the hem of her short dress, only making it tighten around her round thighs. Her fist hits my chest as I take her elbow in my grip and pull as I walk us toward the bathroom.

“You’re not fucking me while our parents are downstairs,” she chokes out, and I give a low chuckle.

“Didn’t stop us before. In fact, it only made your cunt drenched and begging for my cock. You certainly weren’t so concerned when I finger-fucked your virgin hole on the balcony with my brother a few feet away from us.”

Her face instantly pales and it makes me pause, a frown forming between my brows. I’m about to ask the reason behind the stark fear etched on her features when she goes back to struggling in my grip, harder this time. I save the information for later and focus on tackling one problem at a time.

Meanwhile, she pushes her feet into the ground with all her weight as she weakly attempts to pull away.

I would find it cute if I wasn’t so upset and mad at her.

Having had enough with her bratty attitude, I halt and wrap my hands around her tiny waist and pick her up. I roughly pin her back against the wall and push my hips against hers until she’s trapped under my arms.

Our breaths mingle as she huffs, her chest heaving uncontrollably. Cupping her chin, I tilt her face until she’s staring right at me.

“You’re forgetting the rules, my little liar.”

Her body trembles underneath mine and goosebumps rise on her skin. Understanding dawns on her flushed face as

the meaning behind my words sink in, drowning us in the memories of the night at the club.

She tries to close her eyes but I slide my grip down her throat and press against her pounding pulse to hold her attention.

“You run, I’ll chase you.

“You lie, I’ll teach you a lesson.

“You disobey me, I’ll punish you. You may have broken your vow but I still own you, Nyra. You’re all mine.”

Silent tears run down her soft cheeks and I watch them land on her full upper lip. Just a small tilt of my head and I could taste it. Taste her *pain*. But I resist because I have more pressing needs that cannot wait.

Besides, she doesn’t deserve my softness, my kisses... my love, not after she viciously tore out my heart without trusting me with her fears.

At least not so soon.

I’ll make her suffer for the agony she’s putting me through. I won’t be satisfied until she’s walked through fire and hell to earn my trust back. She splintered my heart into pieces and only she will put them back together.

“Riaan,” she murmurs, pulling me out of my dark thoughts. I ignore her while my fingers loosen from around her neck to let her slide down the wall and once she’s regained her balance, I push us inside the bathroom.

I shove her until she’s standing against the sink, her hands landing on the marble so she doesn’t collide against the edge. My body blocks her when she tries to move, effectively trapping her.

She looks up into the mirror and stares at me when I remind her again, “Wash your face, Nyra. I want your makeup off.”

“Why?”

“So I know you’re aching as badly as me and feeling as miserable as me. I want to see beneath the sick charade you’re hiding behind. I want to see why you chose to descend us into the pits of hell when you could just be with me.”

“I-I’m sorry, Riaan,” she says in between sobs.

“No. You’re not,” I murmur, and then promise, “but you will be.”

Snatching a facecloth from the counter, I lean forward and wet it under the running water from the tap.

Nyra fists my shirt while shaking her head and the more she fights, the more I believe she doesn’t want me to do it because it’s her layer of defense. Although her tears are doing a fine job, I’m still not satisfied. It’s still not enough.

Gripping her chin once again, I hold her still as I softly clean her face and at the first swipe, my vision goes red.

Darkness swarms in.

The moment she feels me go still, her shaky hand tries to cover the evidence, but I forcefully slap it down and trap both her wrists between our bodies.

Fixated, I dab the wet cloth again and again under her eyes, down her cheeks, until her natural pink skin peeks out.

Light, fading marks mar her beautiful face.

I grit my teeth as I stare hard at the sight of fingertips imprinted on her right cheek, wishing my eyes were playing a trick on me.

“She hit you,” I solemnly state.

As if my words triggered her, she falls apart, crying harder against my chest as if she can’t hold it in anymore.

I know I wanted to see her hurt just a moment ago, thinking it would make me feel better, but seeing her like this, I have never felt so helpless or angry at myself. I’m thundering inside while my sweet Nyra breaks down before me.

“Baby,” I soothingly whisper while tightening my arms around her, protectiveness chasing away my anger, knowing

she needs me.

Her tears always used to sate the animal in me and now, I hate them more than anything in this world. A close second to my hatred for my aunt. I shouldn't have left her alone with her mom.

My hands ball into fists at the thought of Nyra going back home with her because I won't be able to protect her, just like I couldn't protect her last night. If she raised her hand against her daughter once, she'll do it again. The thought alone sends me into a tailspin.

In my haze, I don't realize I'm crushing her too hard in my arms until she looks up at me through blurry brown eyes.

I push her hair away from her face and cup her cheek, breathing easy when she allows me to do this instead of pulling away. I swipe the remnants of her tears away with my knuckles even though my gaze remains stuck on the marks.

"If it was anybody else, I would have cut their hands off. Followed by a slow, tortuous death," I threaten. "She's lucky she's your mom, because it's the only reason she's still breathing."

I feel her shudder under my fingertips as she stutters, "Yo—you can't just say that, Riaan."

"It's the truth."

"You're not going to hurt her. Promise me." When I don't, she fists my collar and shakes me. "Say it. You're scaring me."

"I won't make a promise I know I'll break if she so much as lays a finger on you again."

"She's my mother."

"And you belong to me."

"Stop being so unhinged, Riaan," she snaps, and her voice lowers to nothing but a whisper. If I wasn't standing so close, I probably wouldn't have heard her next words. "Why can't you just let me go?"

“It’s impossible,” I answer anyway, leaning down until our foreheads touch. “I always knew loving you wouldn’t be easy, but I made a vow. To love you, to protect you, to fight for us and above all, and to never let you go.”

Her heart beats in harmony with mine as she utters, “Loving me will destroy you.”

“If it means you’ll stay, then wreck me all you want, baby,” I whisper back.

For a few lingering seconds, our eyes remain locked as we breathe each other in and soak in each other’s warmth. Hope rises inside my chest that maybe I got through to her.

I’m waiting and longing to hear her say we’ll fight this storm together, but all too soon, a shadow casts over her face and I just know... I lost her.

This time when she pushes at my chest, I step away from her.

Because each time she rejects my love, it hurts and burns worse than the last.

Each time she denies me the truth, my heart gets cold.

We don’t deserve to part like this and yet for the life of me, I cannot understand why she’s doing this. I know her better than anyone else and her unexpectedly pulling away from me is raising red flags, and I feel a sinking feeling deep in my core.

More than anything, she’s protective and fierce, so something huge can only make her react this way. Or maybe someone. Whoever it is, they have sunk their claws in too deep.

But who is she protecting.

Is it herself? Or me?

If Nyra won’t confess, then I have other ways that are darker and more persuasive. When it comes to her, there are no lines I wouldn’t cross. Worlds I wouldn’t tear apart. I won’t stop until I have uncovered every single piece she’s holding close to her heart.

I also know that as long as she is here, she will be holding me back. My mind and heart will always be stuck on her. I need distance. And when the time comes, I'll finally claim and own her in front of the entire world.

Until she's finally *mine*.

Chapter Six

NYRA

The second Riaan pulls away, I feel the loss like losing a limb. It's far more painful with an emptiness settling in my core.

The distance he puts between us feels like thousands of miles and countless oceans apart, when in reality, only a few feet separate us, but it doesn't feel that way.

The pleading look he gave before his walls came up will forever be stuck in my head. He was giving me a lifeline, one last chance for us to become one again, but I couldn't take it.

I did the right thing, I tell myself.

Despite the fact that it's making it so much harder to breathe, to not run into his arms again, I grab the countertop behind me with my hands so I don't fall down under the crushing weight of his cold stare.

All softness and protectiveness is gone from his eyes, as if I imagined it. Though only madness remains in those dark pupils, fear is the last thing running in my veins. At this point, I'm just depressingly numb. Crushed.

Until he proves me wrong.

"If I were capable of anything besides loving you, Nyra," he confesses, "hating you would be so easy." If *heartbreak* had a sound, this would be it. "I'd be lying if I said the line isn't blurring."

I believe him right down to my soul and even if I wanted to ask for his forgiveness, it's too late. So, I stay quiet and look anywhere but at him because there's nothing I could say that will get rid of the ache and dilemma he's feeling.

My silence must have given him the answer he needs because without another word, he briskly walks out of the bathroom.

I twist around to stare at my reflection in the mirror, looking awful and beaten down. Crying has made my eyes puffy again while traces of mascara run down my cheeks. My fingers touch the marks that my mother's harsh slap left and shame burns me all over again.

I wish Riaan didn't have to see it because his reaction left me terrified to my very marrow. I had never seen him pulsing with anger that made every muscle in his body tensed and aggressive. His gaze was murderous. There's no other way to describe it.

I was scared he was going to run after my mom, and I believed him when he said the only thing stopping him was the fact that she was my mother and I loved her. I always knew he had this possessiveness and intensity below his rough and charismatic exterior, but actually hurting someone—my own mother—it was quite frightening to think about and further solidified the fact that he was dangerous. Riaan is so fucking scary that it was almost unbelievable.

Did he keep it caged or was I too blind? Worse, did I bring it out of him?

He doesn't realize he proved that I made the right decision. The longer he stays in the dark, the better it is for us. He's already suspicious of me, which he made very clear with his actions so far.

It's not enough, though, because he's like a hound and will never stop hunting until he catches my lies. I don't even want to imagine the maelstrom he'll bring if he knew that someone was blackmailing me. Nothing will stop him from spilling blood.

It will be the death of me.

Of us.

Our life will never be the same.

So, how do I stop him from coming after me? I thought breaking up with him would work, but it only managed to do the exact opposite.

My defenses are no match for his tenacity. Bloodthirsty.

My only hope remaining is that with time while we stay apart, he'll forget and lose interest. That's unlikely, I know! But what other choice do I have? All I know is that now more than anything, he can never find out the truth.

Splashing my face with water one last time, I step out of the bathroom and stop short when I find Riaan standing with his back to me near the window, looking out.

I assumed he would be long gone by now but I'm surprised he's still here.

My gaze—always hungry for him—takes in his strong, veiny forearms while he has his hands pocketed. His dark gray shirt stretches over his back muscles that used to bear my scratch marks from when he pounded into me ruthlessly, making me cry out from the pleasurable pain.

He's undeniably power personified.

I would have begged him to fuck me one last time if I wasn't so certain that he'll yank the secrets out of me.

When he's inside me and I'm surrounded by him, I have no control over my senses, least of all my thoughts.

He turns me into nothing but a needy little girl, who is only desperate for his cock, the pain he delivers, and the pleasure he draws out of my body.

He must sense my heavy stare on him because he turns and faces me while I wait for him to speak. I don't know what is left for us to say.

Are we destined to always be unfinished business?

It's the only explanation why something or someone keeps ripping us apart every time we get closer. They say if you truly love someone, all the forces in the universe work to unite you together.

Then why is it not the same for us? Is our love so flawed? Ugly?

My thoughts get interrupted when Riaan decides to move closer, an inscrutable look on his chiseled face. His aura suddenly becomes dark and fierce, making my heart beat violently.

“You made your choice last night,” he says, “Do you want to hear mine?”

It's a rhetorical question so I remain still, waiting and dreading at the same time. Our precarious future hinges on his words and if it's not what I seek—him accepting we're over—then it would be dangerous. He would burden me with yet another hard decision.

I have to swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat when his lips tilt into a cruel and knowing smile.

“It's not what you think,” he says, as if he read my mind. “Miles apart or not, you'll always be mine.”

“I don't know what you mean,” I lie.

“Just so you know, Nyra, I'm counting each of your lies,” he growls in warning. “You'll be punished for each one.”

“I'm not yours to touch anymore.”

“That's another.” Before I can retort, he beats me to it, “You always make the mistake of thinking you're in control when it comes to us, baby. It's my fault for letting you believe that. But never again.”

His voice holds a dominant edge that he only ever used in bed while he had me tied up and bound. An involuntary shiver races down my spine and my thighs clench under his scrutiny.

He looks threatening and possessive as he backs me into the wall but doesn't touch me at all. His words alone is

holding me in a chokehold, and it feels as if invisible strings are pulling at my heart.

“Until now, I let you decide the pace of our relationship. I foolishly thought it was enough. That my love was enough, but you disappointed me,” he accuses. “I wish you had killed me instead.”

“No!” I gasp, and I try to touch him but he pulls away, not allowing me to comfort him while my hand falls back down by my side. The way he says it hits harder than any slap my mom could give me, and feels sharper than any knife could stab me.

“Just because I broke up with you, doesn’t mean I have stopped loving you, Riaan,” I whisper brokenly. “My heart will always belong to you. We were together on borrowed time and only fooling ourselves thinking our love would be enough when there is no future for us.”

“It’s because you never gave us a fighting chance,” he shouts. “You made the decision all by yourself, and I’ll never forgive you for it.”

His anger brings out my own frustration and it comes pouring out of me, “What do you want me to do then, huh? Go against our family? Do you honestly believe your parents wouldn’t react the same way my mom did?”

“They are not the ones I can’t survive without. You are,” he admits roughly. “It’s you who breathes air into my lungs. It’s your soul that brings light to my dark one.”

Running his thumb across my lips, he whispers, “Why don’t you get that?”

“It’s easy to say this now but when it’s years down the line and our family isn’t talking to us, you won’t feel the same way,” I say the harsh truth and his hand drops to his side.

“If only you had given us a chance, I would have proved you wrong.”

I have to tilt my head when he stands to his full height, no longer leaning into me, and hardens his imploring gaze.

“You said it yourself. Your heart will always belong to me. I just need to tear down these walls, and I promise you I will.”

“You can’t because my mom will never send me back.”

“You’ll be back, Nyra,” he swears and the next second, a dangerous glint takes over his entire face. “The moment you step in my city again, I’ll be by your side in a heartbeat and the rules will be changed. You thought I was ruthless before, it’s nothing compared to the beast you’ve just woken. You will have no choice but to submit to me. Mind, body, and soul.”

“I might never come back, Riaan,” I reveal my worst fear, but he only smiles while his eyes hold a violent promise. “Maybe this is the end.”

“This could never be the end, baby. It’s written in the stars,” he promises. “And whether it takes months or years, I’ll be waiting.”

Chapter Seven

RIAN

Walking away from Nyra is the hardest thing I have ever done, especially since nothing ever fazed me anymore.

I always had a plan of how I wanted my future to be, but she eviscerated all my plans in the blink of an eye the moment she stepped into my life.

She was the one I never saw coming.

The complication I didn't foresee.

Nothing is ever simple with her, there's always hindrances—each one grimmer than the last—waiting for us. I just never expected her to be the one.

Breakfast must be over because I don't hear any chattering, nor do I hear clanking sounds coming from downstairs, which also leaves me surprised her mom didn't come to steal Nyra back straightaway.

Meanwhile, I'm still fuming while my mind plays the image of those marks on her face. I understand anger and feeling let down, but to raise a hand on her, I won't let that shit slide.

The thought rages in my head as I make my way to my aunt in the guest bedroom she's staying in. I wish I had stopped her like I wanted to, like the last time she and I talked.

"How dare you touch my daughter?"

I pull my gaze away from Nyra's retreating back to stare at my aunt. I'm too stunned, too raw and hurting, to reply back to her. I stare down at my empty hand that held hers

just a lingering breath ago and I close it into a fist. As the shock and the devastation wears off, an emotion she never made me feel rises from deep within me. A toxic mix of fury and betrayal.

How the fuck could she do this?

Her voice still echoes in my ears, telling me what we have is wrong and wishing she never loved me... every word that spilled out of her lips felt like a slash on my skin and scarred my soul.

She viciously pulled the rug out from beneath me, and I know it's all because she let her fears win.

Her promise was a lie.

She was never going to fight for us. Still, if nothing else, she at least owed me the truth.

“Riaan!”

My attention is drawn back to my aunt. Another complication that I didn't need. Timings are always a bitch and never in my favor.

I mask all my churning emotions and keep my face neutral while hers is red and seething as she stands tall. Nyra gets her beauty from her mom, who is just as petite but a harder and mature version of her. I have always respected her and found her sweet and super caring. But now, I can sense it all vanishing as she stares at me accusingly.

“I love her,” I reply truthfully, because there's no other explanation to express what I feel for Nyra.

Though it only seems to infuriate her, Nyra—naïve at heart—always believed that our family may accept us even if it took years but I never held that illusion.

Unlike her, I knew they would be the first to stand in our way, fighting tooth and nail to keep us apart, and tonight, all her beliefs were shattered. Crushed.

I was prepared and she was not.

“I want you far away from her. You aren’t allowed to look at her, let alone breathe in her direction, and you most certainly won’t touch a single hair on her head ever again,” she threatens.

Her fierceness, though expected, has me pulling up short and observing her deeply. Underneath her warning, there’s something else fighting to come to the surface.

It’s in the way her eyes have glazed over, the trembling in her hand as she points her fingers at my chest, and the slight pale color of her face. It’s as if she’s staring at me but seeing someone else.

“Auntie!” I call, worry lacing my voice.

She focuses back on me and lines crinkle her forehead. As she narrows her gaze, I notice that the haunted expression from seconds ago has disappeared.

“Do you understand?” she demands. “There’s no way she touched you willingly.”

I hate the implication behind her accusation. It’s as if she’s saying that I forced myself on her daughter. I might be a lot of things but I’m not a predator. Instead of saying that, however, my anger gets the best of me and I piss her off even further by lashing out.

“Why don’t you ask your daughter? She never complained when I touched her.”

Her small hands ball into fists and she looks close to hitting me but controls herself. Backing down has never been in my nature, especially when something or someone reminds me that Nyra and I can never be together. My mind immediately wants to annihilate them until they are no longer in my way.

Why does it matter if she’s my cousin?

When in my heart, the last thing I feel for her is anything brotherly. Something I never felt in the last two years.

“No one will believe your word against mine if I told everyone what I just saw, Riaan. Your hands were on her and

you were forcing my daughter, who is your much younger sister,” she warns in an intimidating tone. “Don’t for one second think I wouldn’t destroy your future to protect my Nyra.”

If only she knew that Nyra has already done the worst damage that could ruin my life and her threats hold no light to them. No power. In fact, she would only be helping me because then, we wouldn’t have to fight or hide our feelings. I’m about to tell her exactly that, when she suddenly gets in my face.

“How long has this been going on?” She asks in a low voice as horror etches itself all over her features. “Were you together when we came for your grandma’s funeral?”

“No.” I was too damaged and she was too young. Still, there’s no denying I craved her then and it was hard to keep my distance from her. “I didn’t touch her until she came here.”

“But you wanted her,” she guesses, and I don’t deny it, making her pale and murmur, “How did I not see it? I should have never let her come here.”

Her hand comes up to her mouth as if she’s about to throw up, but then she twists away from me and paces back and forth. She keeps mumbling something that I can’t hear and I wish I could read her mind. My own thoughts are running in a chaotic circle and a part of me wished for this night to end so I can run after Nyra and make her see that we belong together despite the circumstances we were born into.

“I never forced myself on her,” I softly and solemnly say because I’m sensing it’s her most important concern. Because every time there’s a mention of intimacy, the blood drains from her face and she loses herself inside her head. When she stops and turns to me, I reassure her, “I would never.”

“Says the man who shouldn’t have wanted her in the first place,” she blames. “Just because you’re sick in the head, I wouldn’t let my daughter become like you too. I’ll make sure she’s purged of the feelings she has for you and sees the monster that you are—one who manipulated her into believing this is all right.”

I'm tempted to tell her that it was her daughter who chased me first but I relent. It won't matter to her that I pushed her away because her mind is already set. I'm the man who corrupted her daughter.

Then, with one last scathing look, she turns around and walks away.

Too bad she doesn't know that monsters—who love unconditionally—always win.

As I recall the conversation from last night, I curse at myself and wish I didn't say some of the things I said so harshly and unapologetically.

Maybe then, I could have protected Nyra and my aunt wouldn't have been so angry to take it out on her. Nevertheless, it won't ever happen again.

She accused me of being a monster so it's only fair I show her just how menacing I can be.

I'm sitting in a chair in the corner with my legs crossed as I hear the water running in the bathroom and wait for my aunt to come out. She steps out as she's drying her hands and instantly jumps in fear when I clear my throat to get her attention, the towel dropping to the floor.

Once the shock wears off, she straightens her body and glares at me while demanding, "Where is Nyra?"

"Obediently waiting for you," I reply while smoothing my tie. "Don't worry, I didn't touch her."

"I told you to stay away from her. Do that again and I'll tel—"

"Your threats don't scare me, *Auntie*," I cut her off and tilt my lip to the side, "Want to know why?" She glares and I take it as a sign to continue, "Because it's nothing but empty words. You'll never tell the truth."

"You're wrong."

"We both know I'm not," I taunt, followed by a low and mocking chuckle. "Otherwise, you would have done it last night as soon as you caught us."

“You have some nerve.” She bristles.

I slowly rise from the chair and walk toward her until I’m sneering down at her. “I’m only stating the truth. You threaten to ruin my life by telling everyone what you *think* you saw, but it will also bring the same fate to Nyra. Her innocence and reputation will forever be ruined. No one will believe that she didn’t want me too, despite what you might claim. Unless you’re willing to risk it all, I suggest you stop with the threats.”

Simmering with aggression, she grits her teeth and her hands ball into fists, to which I narrow my gaze and taunt, “Do you want to hit me too?”

She must see it in my face because she blinks back in surprise and swallows. The fear evident in her eyes sates my anger, and I tilt my head. “I don’t appreciate anyone laying a finger, let alone raising a hand on what’s mine, and make no mistake, Nyra *is* mine.”

“She’s my daughter and you don’t get to tell me how I treat her.”

“I’m only going to say it once so you better listen carefully.” I ignore her words because they mean nothing to me. Getting down at eye level with her face, I make sure she feels my wrath as I issue her a warning, one full of promise that she better follow if she values her life. “You will never lay a hand on Nyra ever again. If I find out you did, I will hunt you down and take her with me right in front of you, making your worst nightmare come true. So, I dare you to touch her again because unlike you, my threats are very real.”

She stands motionless and terrified like she’s seeing me for the first time. She wants a monster, fine. I’ll just let it out to play.

By now, she should know that what I feel for her daughter is no joke.

I’ll be the shadow that will never stop haunting Nyra.

Retreating away from her, I walk out of the room without looking back. The second the door whooshes shut

behind me, I find none other than my temptation standing outside with her hand covering her mouth and her eyes wide. I don't need to ask to know that she heard every single word. It's better this way anyway.

She should know the man she'll be coming back to.

One that doesn't care about the line between right and wrong until it ceases to exist.

Someone willing to burn down the world... just for her.

Chapter Eight

NYRA

Today has been such a whirlwind that it has taken a toll on my body and my head, it feels as though I'll die out of exhaustion alone. It's been even more draining emotionally that I'm feeling all over the place.

When Riaan caught me eavesdropping on him and my mom, I was still in shock to say anything to him but the vicious yet possessive look in his eyes told me everything I needed to know.

Only time will tell whether my mom will heed his threat or if he just made the coming days worse for me.

Once he was gone, my feet stayed rooted to the spot and I never went inside to confront my mom, scared of her reaction. Instead, I waited in my room until she came with her remaining bag and half an hour later, we left after saying goodbye to Uncle and Aunt, who were reluctant to let us go, but my mom was insistent.

The rest of the day passed by in a blur with her coming to my campus, stuffing my suitcase with clothes, few important books and meanwhile, I was glad that we didn't run into Monica in my dorm because she would have guessed something was terribly wrong.

I was picturing things to be different, I would have loved my mom to meet my best friend because she adored her

whenever they chatted on one of my video calls.

We would have had so much fun hanging out because my mom has always gotten along well with my friends even the ones from back in school. Now, I wonder if we will ever get that chance.

This isn't how I imagined we'd spend time when Mom visited me in college. She didn't even look twice at my room, the family picture I hanged on the wall over my bed, or scolded me for the mess in my closet, which she never let go unnoticed.

It was like she couldn't bear to be there and just wanted to leave. It devastated me in a way I can't explain. All too soon, we were at the airport, buckling ourselves into the seats and flying back home.

Everything hits different the second we land and take a cab afterward. There's the familiar rush of the hominess that never fades away and is always there waiting when you come back to your hometown.

I don't realize how much I missed the smell of my city, the common streets and quiet tranquility, until now, as I'm bombarded by it all. Although smaller compared to Pune, my city is no less beautiful and instantly, a tiny part of me finally feels at peace.

"When your dad asks, just tell him you felt homesick." I blink at hearing my mom's voice. "No mention of Riaan in the house. I never want to hear his name come out of your mouth unless you want your father to learn the truth."

The last thing I want is that to happen so she has nothing to worry about. Still, I nod just to confirm that I heard her.

As long as I'm here, my priority is to fix the damage to my relationship between my mom and me because the constant tension is hurting us and slowly killing me. I have to find a way to earn her trust back. If we don't, then it won't be long until my dad and my younger sister, Priyanka, start to notice it too.

“Give me your phone.”

I stare sharply at her. “What! Why?”

“So I can make sure you are not in touch with your *cousin*,” she snaps, stressing the word cousin like some sort of psychological trick. “You may be home but it doesn’t mean I won’t keep an eye on you. If I catch even a small hint that you are talking to him, I’ll send you to a place where he will never find you.”

Sucked out of my mind by her threat, I reluctantly give her my phone. My breath is lodged in my throat and I let it go in relief when she doesn’t ask for the password and just shoves it inside her purse.

My phone was my only lifeline to Riaan but more importantly, it was the only clue—connection—toward my blackmailer.

How the hell am I supposed to find him now?

I have to think of a way to get it back because what if he texts again and I don’t see it in time. These people could easily mistake my silence for defiance and I won’t be able to stop them from releasing the picture. Some might say I’m making a big deal out of nothing. It’s just a random picture of two people out on a friendly dinner. All they would need is one close glance at the way his hand is on my hip, my fingers digging in his hair, with our lips millimeters apart to know it’s so much more. Even the desire is apparent in our eyes.

Besides, even if it gets leaked, nobody can tell we’re cousins except our family—our relatives. It will only take one person to recognize us and to spread it so fast that my head will spin. With a family as huge as ours, it’s bound to happen and when it’s an Indian, the scandals spread like wildfire and the judgment is tenfold. Riaan and my parents will be shunned in the blink of an eye.

Then my sacrifice—the pain and the separation—will be all for nothing.

It leads to another disarming conclusion... *He and I never stood a chance.*

I was too naïve to believe otherwise.

The stopping of the cab pulls me out of my dark realizations and I stare at my beautiful two-story home through the window.

It didn't always have a second floor with separate bedrooms for me and my sister, and also a guest room. It was years later that my parents built it with their savings once my father got promoted to a higher position in his firm. I can still remember the pride and happiness I saw on their faces after it was finished.

The sun has settled by now so all the lights are on, making the house look brighter and welcoming.

Despite the circumstances, I'm so happy to be here and a small smile plays at my lips.

It feels like ages since I last smiled genuinely and before my mind can take me back to happy memories of Riaan, when I was the happiest, I push it down.

Sighing at my ping-pong of emotions, I slide the door open. Before I have even taken a step outside the cab, the front gate of my house bursts open and I watch Priyanka come stumbling out with a huge, delightful grin on her face.

The force of her hug, as soon as she wraps her arms around me, knocks the breath out of me and I can't help but laugh at her excitement and the love that pours out of her.

She and I have always been close—only three years separating us—even though we didn't talk a lot after I went to Pune. Sneaking midnight snacks, staying up late and gossiping, all those memories come rushing back full throttle. I haven't been a good sister while I was gone.

I spent half my days focusing on classes while the rest was spent obsessing over and craving Riaan. I let him become my entire world, my days starting and ending with him.

“I missed you so much, Di,” she cries, making me feel guilty. I promise to myself I will make it up to her now that I'm here.

“Me too, Pri,” I say, hugging her tighter and soaking in her warmth. “I’m back now and I can’t wait to spend time with you. It feels forever ago.”

She pulls back, our fingers interlocked, and smirks. “It is. I’m dying to hear all about Pune, your college, your friend Monica. Everything!”

I try not to let the smile die from my lips as I listen to her, wishing I could confess everything to her. I just know in my heart she will be the one person who wouldn’t judge me but I also can’t bring her into all this mess. She’s too young to be burdened with it anyway.

It dawns on me that nothing will be easy even while I’m here, so, I need to harden myself if I want to survive the next few weeks. I can’t faint every time someone mentions Pune.

“Let her get inside the house first, Priyanka. We’ve had a long day,” my mom points out, making our heads jerk toward her. “Come on, help me with the suitcases.”

“Wow. How long are you planning to stay, Di?” Pri questions while staring at my luggage in surprise. “Won’t you miss your classes?”

How do I tell her that it’s not a normal, friendly visit? And more like my imprisonment for the coming weeks or however long Mom sees fit. Instead, I roll my eyes at her and joke, “Is that your way of saying I should go back soon?”

“Of course not.” She laughs.

I playfully narrow my gaze and suspiciously ask, “Did you hog my room while I was gone? ’Cause if you did, I’m throwing out all your stuff. It’s still mine.”

“Then I’ll burn all your books.”

“You wouldn’t dare!” I warn. My romance collection is very sacred to me and I don’t even like anybody touching them unless they are a fellow bookworm. Only then I would trust them to hold my books because they’ll know how to treat them right. That’s why I keep my bookshelf locked away and I don’t care if that makes me look like a lunatic.

It's mostly a precaution in case anyone snooped and saw the kinky and smutty stuff I read. Though, lately, I haven't picked a book since I was too busy living it and I can safely say that reality is—*was*—so much more naughty and filthy.

Riaan has totally ruined me for all men, fictional and otherwise.

“Hey! Already daydreaming about your book boyfriends,” Priyanka teases as I blink back to focus. Oh yes, she knows all about my edgy taste in romance and I even managed to get her hooked to the ones that are age-appropriate. Thankfully, she prefers e-books, so she doesn't bother breaking into my sacred stash of paperbacks.

“Shh...” I nod behind her. “Don't let Mom hear you.”

“Oh relax! Mom is cool.” *Not anymore*, I want to say.

I notice the missing tension and scowl on my mom's face as she wheels the suitcases inside. It could be because of coming home or she's just that good an actress.

Maybe it's a little bit of both. Whatever the reason, I'm just relieved and praying for things to be smooth sailing from now on. Pri and I take the remaining bags and walk side by side.

“Where's Dad?” I ask.

“He decided to cook for you both.” The worried expression on my face must be comical because she laughs loudly. “Relax, it's just noodles since it's the only dish he doesn't burn.”

“Thank God! I love his enthusiasm but we cannot afford to have another fiasco like the last time,” I reminisce.

Our dad is a hopeless romantic at heart and loves the ground that my mother walks on. He's all about extravagant gestures and surprise date nights, but on one Valentine's Day, he decided to take it up a notch, planning something he usually doesn't do, and it was to cook a special candlelit dinner for Mom.

Even Pri and I encouraged him and offered to help, which he refused and proceeded to almost burn down our kitchen right before our very wide eyes. Mom was super pissed and Dad's only saving grace was that he wanted to surprise her. It has now become a common joke among us.

Stepping inside the threshold, I walk down the short hallway, past the living room, and go straight toward the kitchen. The second my gaze lands on Dad with his back turned while cooking on the stove, I call out, "Papa!"

"My sweetheart! Come here," he says lovingly, twisting around to face me.

I don't waste a second running into his open arms and inhaling his familiar scent while immediately feeling protected, like nothing could touch me as long as he's here.

I can proudly say that I'm my daddy's little girl while Priyanka is closer to Mom. Something they always tease me about.

When I pull away, he stares down at me while his hands cup my cheek like he always does whenever he's worried about me. "*Bacha*, why didn't you tell me you felt homesick? I could have brought you back on the next flight."

Tears gather in my eyes at the concern in his voice and words get stuck in my throat. Shame and guilt burn in my lungs for having hurt him even though he doesn't know.

What if it was him who caught me with Riaan on the terrace? Would he still love me? Be proud of me? I don't even want to imagine what he'd do.

"I thought I could handle it."

"Doesn't mean you have to do it alone. Always talk to me if something is upsetting you, Nyra," he says while rubbing my tears away. "Never be afraid to ask for help, even when you're older. Okay?"

I nod and then with a mischievous and confident smile, he points at the stove. "I cooked your favorite soupy noodles. Want some?"

“Sure, Dad.”

“Where’s your mom and little sister?” he asks while serving me a bowl. “Priyanka is always glued to her phone these days. Maybe now that you’re here, she’ll stop.”

“Don’t know about Mom but Pri just went to my room to drop off the suitcase.”

Just then, Mom steps into the kitchen and walks over to my dad to kiss his cheek while he wraps his arm around her shoulder, keeping her glued to his side. “Missed you, love.”

“I was only gone for a day,” she reminds him with a laugh and he shrugs.

“Doesn’t matter.”

Riaan used to stare at me the same way and butterflies would take flight in my stomach.

It’s hard not to imagine our love getting stronger and more possessive the older we got, just like my parents, who I can’t help but gaze at in envy.

It’s always been my dream to get married one day with the man of my dreams and spend the rest of my life with him while growing older together.

My heart always knew Riaan was the one and I felt lucky to have found him, just not lucky enough to keep him.

Aren’t we supposed to have the same happily ever after?

I always said our love is written in the stars... but will they ever align?

Chapter Nine

NYRA

“Is the library really as big and beautiful as in the movie?” asks Pri.

It’s a little after midnight and neither of us is in a hurry to sleep anytime soon, too content and excited to gossip and spend time together after months apart.

We are both lying side by side on my bed, our feet kicked up against the wall and our hair hanging off the edge.

My sister says in this position, the blood flows back to our head and is very healthy for our hair. So even though I wanted to roll my eyes, I did as she asked because she kept staring at me expectantly until I couldn’t take it anymore.

She is obsessed with yoga and believes it is the cure for everything, tempting me to ask if there is one for a broken heart.

“It’s much prettier in person,” I answer, making her jealous of being in the same campus where her favorite movie—*Bodyguard*—was shot.

“I knew I should have asked Mom to take me.” I’m thankful for the darkness so she can’t notice the color draining from my face, or hear the pitter-patter of my heart inside my chest. I really need to get a grip on myself.

“Maybe next time.”

“You bet,” she replies. “Monica sounds super hilarious, though. You guys clicked so instantly from what I learned

from Mom. What did she say when you told her you were coming home?”

“Mom and I left in such a hurry that I never got to tell her,” I answer with a wince. “Maybe my warden will let her know.”

Monica is going to be worried I left without a word, unless she still thinks I’m staying over at my uncle’s place. I planned on calling her as soon as I got home to let her know that I’ll be gone for a few weeks and inform my professors about the same.

But I never expected my mom to confiscate my damn phone, even took my laptop to her own room. I’m going to need both back at some point.

“Figures,” Pri murmurs before trailing off with, “Mom was crazy restless.”

In a flash, I sit up on the bed to look down at Pri, who suddenly looks tired and yawns, but my question startles her, “What do you mean?”

“About Mom?” Her brow furrows and I nod. She stares at the ceiling as she explains, “You already know how reluctant she was to send you away. And after she heard you crying on the phone, it only motivated her earlier decision. She became so hysterical, repeating she made a mistake, couldn’t protect you, and wanted to fly right away that Dad had to calm her down. It was just so strange to see. I’ve never seen that side of her before. But the next day, she was back to normal.”

The more I listen to her, the more a slow burning kind of dread takes root inside my chest, raising unwelcoming doubts and fears. It unfurls like hot lava that I don’t have the power to control or stop. That inexplicable look in her eyes right before she slapped me, I realize I wasn’t imagining it.

In fact, it was exactly how Pri described it... hysterical and triggered. It was more than just the shock of catching me with Riaan.

I’m certain she’s harboring a dark secret. Something *unsettling*.

But what could it be? Do I even want to find out?

An hour has passed since Pri went to her bedroom to sleep while the same eludes me as I lie awake, my thoughts drifting off to Riaan, now that I'm alone with no one to distract me.

Being in my childhood room, my safe haven, after so long is bringing back all the countless memories. Some playful and some naughty. I'm once again my sixteen-year-old self that used to lay in bed and daydream about him.

Though the longing is much more palpable than before and the love is no longer unrequited.

I have spent hours endlessly obsessing over Riaan by stalking him on social media for a tiny glimpse of him. It was the only way to sate my addiction, my burning curiosity, and obsession. I was a lovesick fool, unable to cure myself of my crush on him so like a compulsion I had no control over, I fed the unhealthy hunger inside me.

Sometimes my desire for him became so unbearable, that I would give in and touch myself, imagining it was his fingers circling my clit and pinching my nipples until I came with a cry and my panties were left soaking wet. But as soon as it was over, the shame and guilt would come back with a vengeance.

My love for him back then was forbidden yet innocent,
Naïve yet intense...

Nothing more than a hopeless dream.

Every single day, I prayed for him to want me, desire me just as badly, and love me back, but maybe I shouldn't have wished so hard.

Maybe it was always supposed to be an untamable fantasy.

Because each time we crossed paths, it never lasted. It was a sign all along from the universe, telling us not to defy the odds and create what is never meant to survive.

Yet I fought against it the second we collided again, only to get ripped apart once more.

The distance away from him is making me realize the true depths of the consequences of falling for him, the obstacles standing in our way and the many lives it will affect.

It was like I was suddenly bombarded with the reality of us.

All this time, I was being selfish and blinding myself to the unflinching truth. Though none of it will convince me that loving Riaan—my cousin—is wrong except that it can only exist in the dark.

My plan to win him back once everything calmed down, the shadow no longer a threat, feels so bleak now and so fucking stupid and naïve. I'm powerless unless I suddenly possess magic to fix us because the cold truth will still remain... he will always be *my cousin*.

A relationship with him taboo and extremely forbidden.

Illicit and unacceptable in any lifetime.

Despite spending the past few months getting to know Riaan, there was one thing I never told him. Sure, we shared all of our deepest, darkest desires and confessed our love until no secrets remained between us, but this is one I would bring with me to the grave.

I kept it to myself because it was too intimate, too soul-baring. I never wanted to bring it up because I feared it would scare him so I held it close to my heart.

It was about a time when I thought he would never be mine.

When I was younger and my obsession for him had no bounds.

My heart begins to thunder behind my ribs as I swing my legs off the bed and slowly edge closer to my bookshelf in the corner.

Unlocking it and sliding the glass door open, I pull out the front two novels until I can see through the space where I secretly stash a small notebook with a blue cover.

A little bit of dust has collected on the corners so I clean it with my fingertips, the ghost of a bittersweet smile dancing on my lips.

It looks like any other personal diary that has worn down over the years but mine is nothing like that. It's so much more. A naked, raw window into my soul that bled for Riaan, and long before I knew I had a crush on him. It's dedicated to him, confessions written like love letters but not quite.

I guess a part of me never saw him as my cousin from the start.

He intrigued me in a way I couldn't explain and all I ever wanted was to be closer to him and never as a sibling.

The little notebook in my hand encompasses all the confusing emotions he evoked inside me from the first time he entered into my life.

I was only eight when I laid eyes on him and it only took one glance for me to get sucked into his orbit. But then I started to crave his friendship, to turn his scowls into smiles and be his partner in crime as he played pranks on Zain.

I was devastated when he left but I held hope that he would visit again, only for it to crash and burn as years passed by.

But those three days were enough for him to seal a permanent place in my heart.

That night, I sat and wrote everything down because I was afraid I would forget the way he made me feel. I didn't want to miss even the smallest of moments while he was here. It was only supposed to be that one time until I met him again but slowly, it turned into a ritual every time I missed him.

If he sneaked in my head even for a fraction of a second, I would run up to my room and pour it out on the pages.

If I dreamed about him, I would write about it as soon as I woke up.

If something made me think of him that he might love, I wrote it.

As I look down, the pages have frayed over the years but still remained intact. I can't help grazing my fingertips over Riaan's name written on the first page inside.

Just reading it makes my heartbeat skip faster, for the butterflies to dance and sing around in a circle in my stomach.

I bring the notebook with me to the bed and lie down while switching on the lamp on my bedside table. Once I was comfortable, I breathlessly turn to the first chapter.

Riaan just left and I want to cry. I wasn't done hanging out with him and I wanted more time with him. Just today, he had started to smile at me and always included me in pulling funny pranks on Zain. Our house has never felt so quiet and depressing. Or maybe it's because I'm mad at Uncle and Aunt for leaving so early. I totally have to convince Mom that we all should go next time to Pune. Then I will try with all my might to get a full-blown belly laughter from Riaan.

I read the rest in a blur and I can't count how many times I giggled or laughed, especially the time when we shut the door on a smug-looking Zain's face. Without waiting, I turn to the next page.

It's been two years since I last saw Riaan or heard his smooth voice. Uncle and Auntie never visit us anymore and every time I try to ask my parents why, they either shush me or lie saying they are busy with work so they can't come. I only ask because I want to see him and make sure he hasn't forgotten me. I always suggest we could go visit them but my parents always sends me back to my room without answering. Then one night, I heard them talk about some fight with Uncle. I realize that's why they were no longer talking to us.

Does this mean Riaan hates me too? Or does he miss me? I have so much to share with him. I found one show where four friends pull pranks on one another and it immediately

made me think that he would love it. Plus, it will give him more ideas to do the same to Zain. But maybe now that he's turned eighteen, which I saw on his Facebook post, he doesn't care about stupid tricks. God! He'll think I'm childish. I wish I was older...

I can still remember the devastation vividly when I realized he will never come back and that I might never see him again. It was at this point that I turned into a complete stalker and slowly formed a crush on him.

I'm going to straight to hell. It's a fact. A sealed deal. Because I'm attracted to my much older COUSIN! I got a freaking CRUSH! That's what he has become to me. I'm almost sixteen and instead of finding a cute boy from my class, I'm doodling Riaan's name and obsessing over how freaking hot he keeps getting the older he gets. It's unfair. Somehow over the years I spent thinking of him, these confusing feelings sneaked in and made their home inside my heart.

Am I fucked up in the head? Are the nerves in my brain wired wrong? It's the only legit explanation why I'm feeling this way.

Those intense narrow eyes, the ever-present scowl on his lips that takes his broodiness to a whole other level... I just can't rid of the tidal wave of lust he brings me. Those muscles, though... they star in all of my fantasies. I swear I didn't know they existed on a normal man who wasn't a celebrity or a model. I have become so addicted to him that I can't even go without staring at his pictures ten times a day, sometimes even more. I wish I could hear his voice. I bet it's throaty and chocolaty.

Despite being related, he's basically a stranger to me. Maybe that's why I feel the way I do. Just hearing his name has butterflies taking flight in my stomach and a tingling sensation forming between my thighs.

I only know I want more... I'm too far gone.

It's like I have floated back to the past as I read each word. I'm reliving it all over again like it was just yesterday. These are not just words but my deep and dark confessions.

An unsuspecting love that blossomed in the wrong heart for the wrong man.

I should stop because I know what's coming next before I even turn the page.

He broke my heart. Walked right over it. The worst part is, he doesn't even know it. I could make excuses that he is grieving after losing his grandma but I'd be lying. I also can't blame him. Just because I fell for him, doesn't mean he's screwed up in the head like me. I'm the abnormal and sick one to want him that way.

But it still crushed me to hear his cruel, impassive words. They cut me open. I wish I had the power to go back in time and not kiss him. Not desire him. I wish I could fix what's broken inside of me.

Why did I ever think he could want me back? I hate him!!!

He doesn't deserve me anyway...

I realize now, that I never actually hated him. I was only disappointed, but I did struggle with not being able to make sense of my feelings. It still remains a mystery why we lust after each other.

Before I drown into the dark pit again, I close the notebook and will the tears to go away. I suck in a deep breath to calm the ache spreading through me.

This was all too much to take in. Reading about myself over the years as I slowly fell for Riaan has opened up new wounds.

Loving him has wrecked me.

Beyond repair.

And the only cure that can fix me is the one I can't have.

Chapter Ten

RIAAN

Distance makes the heart grow fonder.

Fucking bullshit. I want to find whoever said that and choke them until they take their words back. Nothing about being miles apart is fun or worthwhile.

Instead, my heart has gone cold, making my demons come out to play.

My business is the only thing keeping me grounded and not tear the world apart until Nyra is back by my side, right where she belongs.

I miss her so fucking much that it's a miracle I'm still breathing and restraining myself from taking the next flight to her home.

It only took a week for my mind to become a chasm of chaos from constantly thinking about her. It doesn't matter if I'm alone or surrounded by my team, not a single second goes by when she isn't holding my thoughts hostage.

Each millisecond feels like a hundred years have passed since I last held her in my arms and saw her smile.

Is not being together killing her too?

Are her days as lonely and nights as long as mine?

Does her mom treat her right? Is she safe?

These are the thoughts that plague my head and heart the most. Mornings are the worst because as soon as my I wake up, I want to text her just like I did every other day.

They started as a battle as she fought her feelings for me but I was relentless. I wanted her to know that I wouldn't stop until I made her mine, to remind her she belonged with me.

I also selfishly did it so she'd be distracted with thoughts of me and blushing the whole day.

I'm still distraught by her decision and promised myself that I would harden my resolve and not continue our ritual, as a way to punish her. I know how much she loved them. I also know there would be a sweet teasing smile playing on her soft lips.

One time, I couldn't resist sending her one while she sat on my bed as I got ready. It was the day after she spent the night with me.

The second she glanced down at her phone, she flushed red from head to toe. I had told her I'll have a taste of her pussy before she left for her classes.

I was so wrong to believe I could hold on because it only took half a day for my resolve to crack and crumble. I keep staring at the text I sent a week ago with no response back from her.

ME: I'm counting down the days till you're back in my arms, my little liar.

You should too.

She has no clue the night I sealed her fate with mine as I took her virgin cunt and made it bleed on my cock, I saved her number as *MINE*.

It only felt right.

Meant to be.

“Should I set up a final meeting, Riaan?” asks Snehil, my assistant. Like I said, I can’t get rid of Nyra from my head. It’s impossible.

I told my assistant to call me by my first name—instead of Sir or Mr. Ahuja—from the first day I hired her two years ago when my company’s name took off and I needed someone to manage my calendar.

I expect the same from my team because they all are close to my age and I don’t need some formal tag to assert my authority and demand respect. They already know not to cross me and how much I don’t like my time being wasted.

“Set it up for tomorrow morning,” I curtly reply. “I don’t want to delay it any longer.”

“Done.”

“Did you make all the arrangements for the Reet brothers?” I ask next.

“The hotel bookings at the JW Marriott were made after I confirmed the dates with their manager. They will be leaving the day after the show. Our team is also keeping track of the ticket sales which went live on the website yesterday.”

“Good. What about on social media platforms?”

“The posts have been shared on the Reet brothers’ page as well.”

Snehil is very professional and efficient and always finishes her tasks on time. Even the clients love her, which is why I keep her with me in the meetings often as she makes them feel welcome.

One of our biggest events this year is the performance of the Reet brothers at none other than Nyra’s university for their yearly festival. I never told her because I wanted to surprise her and also show off my company that I built with my blood, sweat, and tears.

The Reet brothers are a dynamic singing duo that has taken Bollywood by storm. Their songs are at the top of every hit music list and they will be going on a world tour next year.

That's why it is such a big deal for me to make their show successful because it will take my company to the next level.

They will be performing in two months and I'm hoping Nyra will be back by then. I remember her telling me she has never been to a concert and I just knew I had to be the one to make it happen for her.

Nodding at Snehil, I dismiss her. "Let me know if anything changes."

She's almost to the door when she twists around. "I forgot to tell you, your mom called my desk phone since you didn't pick up your cell. She said it was important."

"Thanks. I'll call her back."

The second I'm alone, I call my mom since she never calls my office even if it's urgent.

Maybe it's because I haven't been home in over a week, which wouldn't have bothered her as I have done the same in the past. Then again, I was suddenly visiting home often—the obvious reason was Nyra—that Mom doesn't know. I saw the happiness on her face every time she saw me on the other side of the door, and now I feel a little guilty.

"Mom."

"Where have you been, Riaan?" I wince upon hearing her worried voice. "Are we back to your old habits?"

"Work has been hectic, Mom," I give the plausible excuse. "I have meetings with new clients every other day."

"While that's amazing, don't push yourself too hard."

"I'll keep that in mind," I reassure her. "Now tell me what was so urgent?"

There's heavy silence on her side and I sense her hesitation. Now, I'm the one who's worried so I ask in a soft voice, "Ma, talk to me."

She sighs before replying, "I feel like you're hurting and keeping secrets from me, *beta*. Did something happen?"

You were quite upset when you left last weekend. You know you can talk to me about anything, right?”

Should I tell her? She will eventually learn the truth and I would rather she find out from me than from somebody else. But not until I have fixed the existing mess and have Nyra by my side so we can tell my parents together.

She can disapprove, hate, or disown me afterward but I won't disrespect her by letting her find out about us from someone else like my aunt did.

I realize I have been quiet for too long so I clear my throat, but she speaks first anxiously.

“Does it have to do with Nyra?”

My grip tightens on my phone as soon as I hear her name slip from Mom's mouth and I'm left stunned, but I recover fast. Even though she hit the mark, it could mean for a hundred different reasons and not because she suspects there's something more between us.

I appear outwardly calm and keep my voice impassive as I reply, “Why would you think that?”

“Don't act aloof with me, Riaan. I'm your mom and I know you,” she scolds. “The tension was pretty obvious between the two of you after the conversation you had with her alone. You better not have hurt the poor girl.”

My mother never minces her words and can be bluntly honest at times. She's usually right but she couldn't be more wrong today. I may have hurt Nyra in the past but I would kill myself before I repeated it ever again.

“Don't worry, Ma. My mood had nothing to do with her so please relax,” I lie to calm her down. I can breathe easy knowing she's clueless.

“She's yours to protect as a big brother, Riaan.” My blood goes cold, making me want to throw the phone away because those were the last words I wanted to hear. Why did she have to remind me of the bond that I wish never tied me to her? She doesn't notice the silence on my end as she keeps talking, “It was so sweet of Zain to plan that whole thing for

her. When I told him Nyra was on the terrace, he was more than eager to take Sara upstairs so she could surprise her.”

He did what? I knew I heard her right.

Suddenly, there’s a ringing in my ear as my vision goes red, Mom’s voice trailing off into thin air. Like a puzzle, everything falls into place. I knew the timing was too perfect. Too deliberate. I even remember how my aunt avoided answering me when I asked her which date Zain booked her flight.

“Mom, I gotta go.” I hang up as soon as she says goodbye.

Fucking Zain.

My own brother betrayed me.

I smash my phone against the wall, letting it crash to the floor with a loud bang. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. I should’ve known since he was so against the idea of Nyra and me being together.

I remember vividly the look of repulsion on his face when he confronted me. What’s worse is that Nyra knew it, too, because I haven’t forgotten the color draining from her face when I mentioned his name in passing the time I had her alone.

He must have confronted her the same night. He shouldn’t have done this. Did he really think I wouldn’t find out? That I will forgive him for this?

Does he scare her?

If I find out he’s hurt or threatened her in any way, shape, or form, his life as he knows it will be over. Brother or not, he’ll pay the consequences for his actions.

Until now, my anger was boiling under the surface but now that it’s found its focus, it’s breathing fire. But that doesn’t mean I’ll let it control me like a barbarian.

My brother will pay for this and I know just where his weakness lies.

Since my phone is ruined, I call my assistant from the landline on my desk, and ask her to reschedule the rest of my meetings for the day and call Zain to come meet me at my office in the evening. I should feel guilty for what I'm about to do but as I said before, there are no lines I wouldn't cross to protect Nyra.

Even if it means going against my own blood.

Chapter Eleven

RIAN

The floor-to-ceiling glass window in my office provides a beautiful view of the high-rises and the dark starry sky. The height alone has adrenaline pumping through my veins every time I get a chance to get lost in the sight before me.

It not only makes me feel alive but also provides me with a calm to sort out my wayward thoughts when they become too much.

Yet tonight, it evades me.

I'm too hard-wired, pulsing from the betrayal by Zain to enjoy any peace or quiet while I wait for him since I know he'll be here any minute now. My mind plays our childhood back to where we were thick as thieves.

Our parents called us hellions, always causing destruction but through all of it, we always had each other's back. It was an unsaid pact, an invisible oath between two brothers. Some may even find it unbelievable but we never fought, something our parents appreciated the most.

He and I have never stood on opposite sides our whole lives, never had to. I never thought anything or *anyone* could create a divide between us, but I'm proven wrong.

If I were a lesser and irrational man, I would blame it all on Nyra—my heart says she's already doing it herself—for

coming between us and breaking our bond, but I'd be wrong and selfish.

She isn't the one who went behind my back.

She isn't the one who orchestrated the whole ordeal.

He's the one who put us miles apart, not her.

I blink back to focus when I hear the sound of the door jerking open to my office. I don't turn around because if I see Zain before I have my fury in check, I'd be tempted to beat his face into a pulp. And the last thing I need is to lose control.

"If I didn't know any better, I'd say you've been avoiding me, bro," he says with a chuckle.

His jovial and laid-back tone, like he didn't deceive me, has me clenching my teeth so hard to avoid shouting at his smug face that I know everything.

From my peripheral vision, I see him sit on the couch, one arm thrown on the back and his legs spread as he gets comfortable. Either he didn't notice my silence or is acting clueless as he keeps on talking.

"What was so urgent that you couldn't even bother to text me yourself?"

"Broke my phone," I reply curtly. Smoothing my tie, I casually prowl toward my desk and sit behind it while picking up the envelope in front of me. Twisting it between my fingers, I finally lift my gaze and speak in an impassive voice, "I also wanted to show you this."

His brows knit together in curiosity as he stands up and walks over to me, his hand reaching forward as I pass him the envelope.

Sitting back, I steeple my fingers under my chin and watch while he opens it, a huge grin splitting across his lips as soon as he realizes what it is.

Meeting my eyes, he replies excitedly, "Is this true? You've been keeping this from me this whole time."

“Very much is.” Before he can celebrate, I pull out another paper and slide it across to him with my fingertip as I declare, “But then I changed my mind and sold it to Manav today.”

He stills and cuts his gaze back to mine. I watch the emotions from shock to confusion to anger dancing across his face, before finally settling on hurt and betrayal, mirroring mine.

“You did what?” he yells in fury.

Most people don’t know that Zain is just as ambitious and creative as me, maybe even more. They only ever notice the surface with his carefree attitude, the bad-boy charm, and playboy reputation he lets everybody see, even my parents.

While I wear my intensity like a badge of honor, he hides his under many layers. He and I are a lot similar but the only difference is, I never hide who I am.

It’s also why I know that he’s calculating and putting the pieces together behind my double-crossing. Few months ago, he came up to me with an investment proposal in a venture that could be beneficial to us both. He had come up with a business modal to open an exclusive gentlemen’s club in Pune, which would have all the amenities catering to their every whim and desire, virtuous by day and full of debauchery by night.

His plan was solid and he never lost his composure while answering all of my questions, and he already had the prime location in mind. With my database of affluent and influential clients, who are always demanding something more unique than the norm, plus Zain’s expertise when it came to the nightlife while working with various club owners, it was the perfect collaboration for us. The only hurdle was Manav Singh, who was his direct competition and had his eye on the same location.

After a month of these meetings with Zain, I did my own research and sat down with my financial advisor who approved of the investment. I had connections with the right people in this business and soon enough, I was able to buy the

building by giving an offer the owner couldn't refuse. I kept my brother out of the loop so I could surprise him on his twenty-fifth birthday.

Then, he went and ruined everything.

One cardinal rule I have is to never go into business with people I can't trust. Unfortunately, I just never imagined it would be him.

"You heard me," I answer with a cruel sneer. "The building is off the table and so is our deal, brother."

"I understand you not wanting to invest but to sell it to Manav without letting me know, that's deceiving."

"Oh yeah." I curl my lip at him. "Well, I understand you being against me loving Nyra, but to send her mom to catch us, now that's *betrayal*."

Surprise flickers on his face only for a second before he gives a mirthful laugh and shakes his head. It's like he knew I would soon learn about his actions and he doesn't even look ashamed or guilty as he remains standing tall.

Roughly running his hands through his hair, he taunts, "Of course, it's about her. So this was retaliation, hmm?"

"Did you think I wouldn't find out?" I taunt accusingly. "I thought you had my back and I thought I could trust you."

"I did it to protect you."

"No!" I roar, my fist connecting with the table with a loud bang, making the paper ruffle and causing the stationery to fall to the floor. Rising up, I put both my fists on the desk and lean forward. "You stabbed me in the back instead."

"It's because you can't see it and live in this fucking fantasy land you created in your head where you and her walk into the sunset," he snarls. "You and Nyra will never end up together."

Why does everybody think they have the right to decide that? First, Nyra and now him.

“It wasn’t for you to decide.”

“Maybe,” he says. “But now you know how Mom and Dad are going to react when they learn the truth.”

“Why don’t you go ahead and do that as well?” I reply sardonically.

“Oh, trust me, I’m tempted,” he growls as he crushes the documents in his hand. “Especially after you ruined my dreams for your own selfish reasons. It’s your loss too, Riaan.”

“Actually, it’s not. In fact, I’ll get a sweet return since I’m a partner in his venture now,” I answer smugly. “So, if by a miracle you do find a willing new investor and a location, I’ll be your competition.”

His muscles bulge and he grinds his jaw in rage while glaring at me as we stand opposite each other. I know he’s fighting an inner battle to not lunge at me and I’d be lying if I said I’m not hungry for a fight, but neither of us like losing control. Since I have got nothing more to say, I turn around and give him my back.

“Get the hell out of my office, Zain,” I order.

I expect him to leave immediately but then he speaks, “At least my intentions were good. Too bad you can’t say the same.”

“I only have one intention,” I say. “Nobody hurts Nyra and gets away with it.”

“I hope she’s worth going against your own family.”

I listen as he walks away and the door closes behind him, leaving me alone with his words echoing in my head. If he ever paid close attention, he would know...

Nyra will always be worth it.

Chapter Twelve

NYRA

There's a saying... how can someone so wrong, feel so right.

I never understood what it meant until I fell for you.

Until you became that someone.

We are so fucking wrong for each other,

Even the world believes it,

We're never meant to become one.

Even more wrong is ... me not bothering to fight it,

And never stopped me from imagining us.

What's the harm in wishing, dreaming... I always said,

It's not like it was ever going to happen.

Until years later... I saw your eyes mirror the same possession and lust.

The second it became real,

Fighting you was a lost cause.

Your lips against mine, your taste running in my veins,

I finally understood...

How someone so forbidden, so depraved, could feel so right.

I read the words that I wrote over and over again, the pages now dry from my tears. If I had to put it into words, that's how he made me feel when we were together and drowning in each other.

It's like pouring my heart out.

The only difference is, writing it down gives the added bonus of having it for my eyes to see. Not only does writing things down feel therapeutic, it helps me deal with the

emptiness I've been feeling lately. Writing this brought me equal parts contentment and sadness.

Being with Riaan is no less than being on a roller coaster of highs and lows.

Closing the diary, I put it back into place before I get emotional all over again.

It feels as though an eternity has passed, when in reality, it's only been two weeks. I only have my sister, my dad when he's home from work, and my diary to keep me from sinking into a deep, dark hole leading to insanity.

My mom hardly ever looks at me or bothers to say more than two words to me when it's just the two of us.

Honestly, it's heartbreaking and depressing to think I'm no closer to earning her trust or respect back.

So really, it's been torture.

I literally have no contact to the outside world with both my phone and laptop being in my mom's clutches and because of it, I have several things to seriously worry about.

The only upside is that my mom doesn't have the password to go around snooping, which gives me a little peace of mind.

Just last night at dinner, we came so close to Dad figuring out something was going on behind his back when he asked me to show him pictures of my campus and my friends. However, before I could panic and blurt out something stupid, Mom distracted him.

It's like playing a game of cat and mouse before we're eventually caught.

I'm currently in my room figuring out a way to get my phone back before another scare like that, when the door to my bedroom opens and before me stands my mom.

My gaze runs over her stern face and then lands on her right hand, hope bubbling in my chest. I don't dare show the satisfaction on my face when I see her holding my phone.

I don't want to spook her into changing her mind about returning it to me.

Maybe she realized it, too, and wants to avoid Dad or Pri noticing its absence since hardly anyone in this day and age goes without their phone. Besides, she can't make an excuse every time on my behalf, or she would be giving way to suspicion.

"I think it's time I returned this to you," she says, holding out the phone toward me. "Seems it can't be avoided any longer."

It's not so easy to change Mom's decision once she's set her mind on something and if the reason behind it wasn't a secret, she probably would have stuck with it.

Dare I hope that maybe she's beginning to trust me a little?

Because until now, I haven't uttered Riaan's name like she demanded. Even when his family is mentioned whenever the conversation leads to Pune, I either keep my mouth shut or give short and curt replies. And I never let my emotions show when his name is spoken, especially feeling Mom's heavy stare on me every single time.

I have no doubt that the real test will begin now.

I'll have to be extremely careful.

Taking it from her hand, I express my gratitude, "Thank you."

"Before you get any ideas," she warns. "I still don't trust you, Nyra, and as a precaution, I have cut off your service, as well as changed the Wi-Fi password. Now, I want you to block his number and then delete it."

Of course, she did. My phone might as well be a box.

Why did I think my punishment would get any easier?

Sensing my hesitation, she narrows her eyes and snaps, "Do it."

“Okay.” I unlock it with my face ID and then go to my contacts, doing as she asked while she watches from above. I tilt my screen toward her so she can double-check.

“Good.” She nods and reminds me over her shoulder as she walks out the door, “Your dad will be home any minute now so come downstairs.”

Guilt settles inside me for tricking her, but I actually didn’t delete or block Riaan’s number. Parents always think they know their kids better but they don’t realize, we are just as good at keeping secrets.

She wouldn’t have found out about Riaan and I so soon, had Zain not plotted against us.

I mean, I kept it hidden from her for all these years.

I was always cautious in never letting my feelings show or leaving any obvious clues behind, which is why I never saved his number under his name.

His nickname “Arrogant Thief” was both because I couldn’t resist and to keep his identity hidden. Today, it turned out to be helpful. As for the discontinued service, Pri can help me with that.

I’m pretty sure if Mom could get access to a jammer, she would have gladly used it to cut off any chance of getting in touch with Riaan.

I would laugh if it wasn’t so sad.

Locking my door, I settle back down on the bed and pull up my texts, eager to see if Riaan left me any during these past two weeks. If there are none, then I’d be devastated.

It’ll mean I’ve truly angered and hurt him.

The second I read his name at the top, my heart swoons for the first time in a while. Like I can finally breathe.

I silence the voice in my head that whispers I shouldn’t get my hopes up.

I can never be with him.

But when you've been starved for too long, none of what the little voices say matters.

ARROGANT THIEF: I know about Zain's betrayal.

It was only a matter of time, and as if he already guessed where my mind went, his next text reads:

ARROGANT THIEF: No, we didn't kill each other.

ARROGANT THIEF: And it's not your fault.

Riaan is not the kind of man to let someone go unpunished when they've wronged him. And when it comes to someone hurting me, he's even more unforgiving and vicious, as I've come to realize.

He would never retaliate violently because it will come at the cost of losing his control.

He must have done something far worse instead.

Something that might make Zain strike back harder.

And even though he said I shouldn't, I still can't help but blame myself.

These texts are from a week ago, and there's only one more after that saying he misses me. I wish I could tell him I miss him like hell too.

I don't have to see his face to feel his vulnerability behind his message. He only ever reserved that sweet and thoughtful side for me.

Next, I pull up the texts that hang like a dark cloud over my head, waiting to burst open and rain down hell any second. I bask in relief when there aren't any new taunting or threatening messages.

Does this mean it's over now that I finally ended it with Riaan?

It has to, right? *Then why aren't I celebrating.*

I'm unable to get rid of the ominous feeling inside my chest. I don't believe I can rest easy until I have uncovered the identity of my blackmailer, knowing he can come back anytime or hell, go ahead with releasing the picture just for his own sick, twisted pleasure.

Putting aside my fear and panic for a moment, I take a deep breath and think about it from an investigative perspective.

Sitting at my desk, I grab a rough notebook and a pen to write notes that could point me in the direction of my blackmailer.

My gut says it's a man because if it were a woman, they wouldn't toy or play these games like the person sending me texts has done. Besides, I know Riaan doesn't have any crazy exes who would want to do this.

He has to be someone who is connected to me.

Someone who knows Riaan and I are related.

Only two names come to mind.

Monica and Zain.

But the only one who has the motivation is the latter. It's the only explanation why my blackmailer didn't text back to confirm I held up my end of the bargain, unless they witnessed it before their very eyes.

Does this mean he's the one blackmailing me all this time? Was he the one making my life a living hell?

He could've easily seen us at the restaurant. Furthermore, he did say he was willing to cross any lines necessary.

But why let my mom catch us?

It doesn't make any sense.

Maybe he thought I wouldn't go through with it. Or maybe he was threatened I would spill the truth to Riaan and

his plan to separate us will fail terribly. So, him bringing my mom must have been his backup plan.

When I ran into him that night, he had never looked so smug or unafraid. The only reason stopping him until now was his protectiveness of his brother, but I don't think he still feels the same way.

What will he do now? I'm too afraid to find out.

I jump with wide eyes when there's a heavy knock on my door but relax when my sister calls out from the other side. She must be back from her evening tuition classes. Making my way over, I unlock the door and stumbling inside is Pri, groaning from lifting a heavy box in her arms.

"What the hell did you order?" I ask, raising my eyebrow.

"You tell me," she replies pointedly. "This actually came for you."

"Huh, I didn't order anything."

"Feels like books or something." She walks past me and puts down the box on my bed with a huff. Her gaze lands on my phone and she laughs while shaking her head before turning to me. "You know, I honestly thought that you were doing something shady because whenever I ask about your phone, you would always clam up as if you were hiding something."

The second she brings it up, all my suspicions about Zain come circling back before she interrupted me. Casually sliding past her, I shove the notebook on which I made notes between others on my desk, away from Pri's prying eyes.

Nothing slides past her since she's always been too curious, which also explains why she wants to study science and be a forensic expert one day. I admire her ambitions and if anyone can achieve her dreams, I know it's her.

Instead of replying, I roll my eyes at her little comment and then utter, "Do you want to see what's inside it or not, Pri?"

“Duh, obviously,” she sasses, “I didn’t carry it upstairs for no reason.”

“Did Mom see you?” I ask, in case it’s something she shouldn’t know about.

“Nope. She was busy in the kitchen.”

Grabbing a pair of scissors, I cut through the endless amount of tape wrapped around it. It only has my address on the top and I’m curious to see what’s inside. Did someone send me a present or something? My birthday isn’t until next year.

“Hurry, Di,” Pri says, excitedly rubbing her hands together. “Do you have a secret admirer I don’t know about, hmm?”

“And what? They decided to send me books like you guessed?”

“Maybe he knows you’re addicted to romance paperbacks.”

“Or you’re just reading them a lot lately and your imagination has run wild,” I say with a snort.

My fingers are aching by the time I’m done cutting through the excessive amount of tape, and as I open the top, my mouth opening on a gasp because it turns out my sister was fucking right.

Beautiful paperbacks from my favorite authors greet me and I swear there is no containing the grin on my face, making me completely forget about the sender for a minute.

“Whoaa!!” admires Pri with wide eyes. “You’re one lucky girl, sis.”

I can only think of one person who would do this and I immediately want to cry while my heart feels full. I grab the one at the top and notice a note slipping from the pages but I don’t pull it out, afraid Pri might see it too. Then, there would be no stopping her from reading it.

“Did your admirer forget to leave a note?” she mumbles.

“I guess.”

“Or are you hiding the fact that you have a boyfriend from me?”

“You’d be the first person I’ll tell, Pri,” I reply with a smile and she grins back softly. “Maybe Monica sent them.”

She throws her head back and says in between laughter, “No way. Only a lovesick fool will gift something like this.”

She couldn’t be more right. Although I don’t say it out loud. Still grinning, she leans down from behind me and pulls out another book. There are at least thirty different books inside and at the bottom, something else catches my eye.

I’m about to pick it up, when my mom shouts from downstairs, calling us both for dinner. I tell Pri to go ahead and that I’ll come after putting these on my bookshelf so Mom doesn’t notice them, and she agrees with me. I let my sister believe it’s from some admirer and not from our cousin, Riaan.

As soon as she’s out the door, I lock it once again and unpack all the novels until I realize what’s at the bottom. Notebooks, but they are used and with handwritten pages.

When I read what’s inside, I realize those are study notes from all the classes I have missed till now and it only takes me a second to recognize it’s Monica’s handwriting.

I can’t believe he went to all these lengths just so I didn’t fall behind in my subjects.

I pull out the note he left for me, then unfold and read it, unable to hold back the tears any longer.

My little liar,

Since you weren’t returning my texts, I decided to write to you the old-fashioned way but with a twist, of course. I sneaked a peek into your Amazon wish list while you laid asleep in my bed the last night we spent together and couldn’t resist gifting them to you. Felt you might enjoy them now, since I’m not there to distract you or demand your attention.

I also sent you copies of your friend Monica's notes and she was upset you left without saying a word. Don't worry, I told her you were in a rush and will be back soon (don't bother denying you won't). Since you haven't replied back to her either, I'm guessing your mom took away your phone. I know I took a risk sending you all this but when it comes to you, I'm powerless.

Auntie Sara better not be hurting you because I will find out and you won't be able to stop me this time. I also found out about Zain, another secret you kept from me.

As for your other secrets, I'll eventually learn them too.

More than anything, I miss you, Nyra.

You're always on my mind.

P.S. Never forget... you are mine.

My vision blurs by the time I finish reading it and crush the paper against my chest, desperately wishing it was him I was hugging instead.

He's everything and far more perfect than my wildest dreams.

Riaan may present himself as dark and broody to the world. But for me, he lightens up.

My phone pings from beside me and I rush to grab it, butterflies flying in my belly hoping it's from Riaan. Next second, I'm tumbling into a dark abyss.

With no one to catch me.

UNKNOWN: Miss me? ;)

The monster—or should I say... *Zain*—has come out to play.

Chapter Thirteen

NYRA

I'm sitting at the dining table, with an easy conversation flowing around me, but my mind is stuck, being haunted by the text I received almost an hour ago. It's hard to focus while all I can think about are his intentions.

At least, I know it's Zain this time.

The only reason he's back is because of the ugly confrontation between him and Riaan. It makes sense for his anger to be aimed at me and to blame me for the mess I caused ever since I stepped into their lives again.

However, I'm still confused as to why he would still be targeting me because he accomplished exactly what he desired when he put his plan into action.

The fact that there's an even larger gap between the two brothers, makes his return much scarier than before.

Each scenario that my mind can conjure is worse than the last. What mind games does he wish to play now? What sick demand could he threaten me with?

"Nyra!"

"Huh," I mumble, pulling myself out of my troubling thoughts.

"Is everything all right, *beta*?" asks my dad. "You just zoned out."

I swallow past the sudden dryness in my throat while everyone at the table stares at me. Dad and Pri are looking at me with worry while Mom is looking at me with trepidation. It's times like this that I wish I could disappear.

“Oh it's nothing,” I reply with a short smile. “I was just wondering about classes.”

“Do you want to go back to Pune?” dad asks softly. “If you're feeling better, I can book us a flight and drop you off, sweetie.”

“No!” Mom says in a high-pitched voice before I can even open my mouth. She clears her throat, offering him a forced smile as she focuses her gaze at my dad. “I'm sure she can stay a bit longer. The college will still be there when she gets back.”

They both turn to me and I hate being put on the spot while they stare expectantly. The stern look in Mom's eyes demands I agree with her. So, even though my heart screams to side with my dad, I listen to the other voice.

“Actually, I don't wanna go yet, Papa,” I answer sheepishly. “Monica said classes are slow because of the upcoming festival so I'm not really missing much.”

Lines dot my father's forehead as he mulls over what I said and then nods, albeit a little reluctantly, giving Mom an unreadable look before going back to his food.

My mom is not being herself lately and the others are starting to notice, which is why I couldn't go against her. I get a sense she'll snap if I make any wrong move.

I don't know if it's only because of me or something else.

I get up from the chair as soon as I have finished my dinner and put the plates in the sink in our open kitchen. Without another word, I run upstairs to my room and shut the door behind me as soon as I'm inside. I still don't know what I would reply to my blackmailer. And even if I did, I can't do anything but wait for Pri to return so I can ask her for help.

Sitting at my desk in the corner, I nervously tap my fingers on the surface while reading the same text over again. It doesn't take long until there's another text from the anonymous sender.

UNKNOWN: Did you do as I asked?

Is he testing me? I can't help but think.

If this is his way of not revealing himself, he already fucked up.

Still, it would confirm my suspicions if I can get him to divulge something that could help me prove it's Zain. Just one tiny slipup from him, and that would help me to use it against him. I'll make him pay for it.

He went too far, mentally torturing me while being right under my nose.

The sleepless nights I spent feeling claustrophobic...

I blame it all on him.

It's the only reason I decide to keep his identity to myself for now, because I'm curious to see how long he keeps up the act. If I confront him right now, he might deny it altogether and he would most likely delete all our exchanges to make the proof disappear. I'll have to do it face to face when the time comes.

UNKNOWN: I'll take your silence as a yes.

"Of course you will," I say with a sneer.

I wait for another text but it doesn't come. He leaves me hanging because I don't for one second think he's back only to inform me that it's over since I kept my end of the deal. It leaves a bad taste in my mouth and a bad, ominous feeling in my chest.

He seems patient and less antsy unlike the last time. I bet he plans to enjoy the power he has over me.

The stupid and naive part of me thought the worst was already over. A part of me hoped that maybe, just maybe there's a slim chance of the tiff between him and Riaan simmering down and he would choose to end the blackmailing on friendly terms. But now, everything has gone up in flames.

Frustration has me gripping my phone tighter and I'm so close to hurling it at the wall, when my bedroom door shoves open and Pri enters.

"What's up?"

"I need your help. Can you recharge my phone service online?" I ask.

I was going to wait until tomorrow to seek her help but I don't think I'll be able to sleep tonight if I don't text back. I stare at her hopefully when she nods and unlocks her phone.

"Sure. Why didn't you do it yourself?" she asks, confused.

"I uh... didn't have enough balance."

"Oh okay." She types on her phone and after a minute, there's a notification on mine indicating the activation is done.

"Thanks, Pri."

As if she can sense there's something weighing on my mind, she makes no suggestion to watch a movie tonight, like we've been doing the past few nights.

Pri knows me all too well. When my mood is like this, she knows I would rather be left alone. Before leaving, she walks over to my bookshelf and chooses from one of the new books to read.

When she sees the one she likes, she mumbles on her way out. "I'm borrowing this, Di."

I lock the door behind her so no one can disturb me for the rest of the night. I switch off the lights and lie down on my bed, pulling up the last text. Then, I type and hit Send.

ME: I did as you asked and now it's your turn.

His reply comes almost immediately, as if he was waiting for me.

UNKNOWN: But the fun's not over yet.

UNKNOWN: I have another present for you.

Below his text, there's an attachment that without even looking at it, I know will bring nothing but more *nightmares*.

The fear I was trying to keep buried, floods back to the surface unlike before when I tap on it.

No. No. No. I chant inside my head while my lungs feel suffocated as I stare at the image in horror. An itchy feeling spreading all over my skin.

It's another picture of me and Riaan but so much worse. It's of us on the terrace where he has me pinned against the wall, his hand between my thighs, and our lips locked in a kiss. There's no disguising what we're doing, under my uncle's roof.

Oh God! I run toward my bathroom and open the toilet seat in time to throw up. I hurl until there's nothing left in my stomach and slide down to the floor after flushing.

I don't know how long I sit pathetically with tears streaming down my face and pull myself up. After washing my face and avoiding staring at my reflection in the mirror, I walk back over to the bed.

Somehow, I find the courage to open my blackmailer's—or should I say Zain's—last message.

One should always be careful with what they wish for.

I wanted proof that I was right and he handed it right to me. Zain was at the house before heading to the terrace with

Riaan and by then, he already knew about us. I remember our argument earlier that morning. He could have easily caught us and took the compromising picture as revenge.

Fuck. I should've been more careful. This is the price I pay for being a reckless, wanton woman. Riaan had finally made me his, and Zain just had to go out and taint that unforgettable night for me.

ME: Why are you doing this? What do you want?

UNKNOWN: Like I said... the fun has only just begun. ;)

It's just like I predicted. He's toying with me.

If he has this photo of us, he also must have more and if I thought the first one was risky, this one is a thousand times worse. If it got out, it wouldn't matter if people knew we were cousins or not, my reputation will still be ruined. The horrible names that I will be called would devastate my parents.

It is so easy to say never give in to a lunatic's demands and believe that one can easily take their power back by just refusing to do a blackmailer's bidding.

However, I realize I couldn't be far from the truth.

When your loved ones are at stake, you're powerless and just can't afford to risk it all. Had it only affected me and not Riaan or my family, I could've refused in a heartbeat, but I don't have that luxury.

Until I find a way that brings all of us out unscathed, I need to let him believe he's in control for the time being. *No matter the price.*

And as long as I'm stuck here at home, I won't be able to stop Zain. So when it's not you in. So until then, I have to do his bidding or he may let his anger get the best of him.

Before I accuse him, I also have to get my hands on his phone and delete all the pictures he has of Riaan and me. Only

then, will I dare to tell Riaan the whole truth, hoping he forgives me for not telling him sooner.

ME: I'm not scared of you.

UNKNOWN: Oh... but you should be. I'm going to break you in ways that Riaan will never be able to piece you back together. That is if he'll even want you after I'm done with you.

ME: I'll tell him the whole truth.

UNKNOWN: Save the lies for him. I know you're smarter than that.

ME: How can you be so sure?

UNKNOWN: Because if you tell him, he'll never catch me. And your dirty sins will be out for the world to witness, Nyra.

Of course, he called my bluff.

He also had the nerve to threaten me with my own words which I uttered to him that night; he can pick up the pieces of Riaan's broken heart.

I can feel his arrogance through the phone. Hatred like never before burns in my veins. I never imagined someone could evoke such emotions in me, let alone my brother whom I respected.

It's a crushing blow.

ME: Why do you hate me? Or Riaan?

I can't help but ask because this sudden angst—though I saw coming—is giving me whiplash. Just how far did Riaan

go to punish him? I understand he's angry but this threatening side of him feels more vicious.

The Zain I knew was never this evil.

I want to break you...

The prickly feeling returns as I read those words over again. What if I can't do as he demands? What if he truly wrecks me? How will I ever come back from that?

UNKNOWN: Keep me satisfied and your secret stays safe.

Until next time.

Zain is an unpredictable madman.

One I'm afraid I don't stand a chance against.

Chapter Fourteen

NYRA

Staring at the ceiling as I lay down on my bed, I will for sleep to come, just so I can escape my reality for a few hours. But it's like my body is detached from my mind and doesn't want to listen.

My tormentor is punishing me by keeping me awake so I can't forget our earlier conversation.

Because it's all I can think about, playing in an endless loop while making me feel like I'm trapped in hell.

A sardonic laugh spills from my lips at the irony. Nighttime always used to be my favorite while growing up.

Ever since I could remember, I have always been a night owl. Something about the dark, the soft moonlight and the tiny stars, calmed me down. I could let down my walls while the rest of the world slept. My burning desires that I kept buried the whole day could finally come out to play when the darkness arrives.

I could whisper his name without the fear of someone hearing me.

No one can hold back the smile that graced my lips as I whispered all the dirty deeds I wished he did to me in the dark.

It felt so freeing.

Delicious.

Intoxicating.

My nights were my safe haven but not anymore. The exciting feeling that would build in my chest as I lay awake, stealing my senses, has now vanished, replacing it with entrapment. Instead of a solace for my desire, it has become a refuge for my demons.

Demons created by someone I trusted.

Someone who should have been my protector.

My haven has now become my inescapable prison. I feel as if invisible chains are holding me down. It hurts to admit that sometimes, I wish I never woke up. I won't have to worry about my turbulent future, the misery I have caused the people I love if I ceased to exist. All of it would end if I'm not here anymore.

The more I think about it, the more appealing it sounds, but then I would remind myself that it'd be at the cost of letting him—my blackmailer—win.

That single thought alone lights a fight inside me.

Besides, I would only be running from my problems, not solving them, and a coward I'm not. I would be leaving Riaan all alone while knowing he will blame himself and I could never be that selfish, cruel, and heartless.

He always told me to fight for the ones I love and I may have broken the promise I made with him once, but never again.

I won't go down without a fight, even if it leaves me wounded and shattered.

If I go down, it won't be without the ones who pushed me or crossed me.

I just need to be strong until my time comes.

With a huff, I throw my legs off the bed and sit up, shaking off the dark thoughts. Tying my long hair into a ponytail, I decide to get some warm milk from the kitchen downstairs.

It was one of the old tricks that my mom taught me whenever I couldn't sleep, especially during the times when I stayed up late studying. Surprisingly enough, it always worked. And right now, I need it more than anything.

Melancholy hits me hard as memories of the past resurfaces. My mom never complained at least once when I used to wake her up as a kid, asking for her help in the kitchen to pour me some warm milk.

How I desperately wish I could turn back time.

Leaving my door ajar, I amble down the dark hallway toward the stairs and avoid pressing too hard on the steps that creak a lot in the dead silence.

I don't want to mistakenly wake up anyone and risk giving an explanation of why I'm up at two in the morning. Reaching the ground floor, I turn toward the kitchen but pause mid-step when I hear low murmurs.

Nothing but silence greets me so I assume my mind is playing tricks on me.

Clearly, the stress of everything is turning me into a lunatic who gets spooked easily.

Shaking off the absurd feeling, I walk forward again, realizing I really need that glass of milk. Opening the fridge, I take out the milk container and pour some into a saucepan to heat while putting the rest back in the fridge. Once it's warm, I transfer it into a glass I grabbed from the cabinet, add one tablespoon of sugar, stir it, and then go sit at the dining table.

I pull to a stop with the glass halfway to my mouth when I hear voices again, and this time, it's a little louder, confirming I didn't imagine it before. I frown when I realize it's coming from the direction of my parents' bedroom which is also downstairs.

Confusion and surprise lines my face as I ponder what they're doing up so late. It's not like them to be up so late as they are both early risers.

The right choice would be to give them privacy but when you're stuck in a series of bad decisions, it's hard to

stop. So, unable to resist satisfying my morbid curiosity, I stand up and follow their voices.

An odd feeling settles underneath my skin and I'm worried they're having a fight.

Fear paralyzes my body because the only reason they could be arguing is if it's about me, especially after the tension I saw between them at the dinner table earlier. It was very palpable as soon as I sided with Mom.

My stomach bottoms out that maybe she told Dad about Riaan and me. Walking on tiptoes while my heart beats faster with each step, I try to make out what they're saying, which isn't that hard since it's dead of the night and not a soul is awake.

"I told you not to stop taking your meds, Sara," my dad says roughly.

I expected something about my forbidden crush on Riaan but this is the last thing I expected to hear. Why would Mom need meds all of a sudden? My curiosity is even more piqued now. Whatever it is, it sounds serious.

"And I told you I don't need them," she replies in a cold voice, one I have never heard her use with Dad before, making my hackles rise.

Is she sick or are those pills stress related? Because I sense from their tone that it's not the first time she's needed them.

I rack my brain for any memories from my childhood that could help me understand and absorb all this, but nothing comes to mind. She's always been headstrong and cheerful.

The image Dad is painting doesn't harmonize with the one I've known all my life.

I blink back to focus when I hear my dad speak in an angry and worried voice.

"You're having panic attacks again and your nightmares have become more frequent, yet you have the

nerve to be so stubborn,” he states and then softens his voice, “I can’t watch you go through it all again, my love.”

What happened to you, Ma? What are you both hiding?

This is such big news, one they shouldn’t have kept hidden from Priyanka or me. Our mom is hurting and battling something, and we had no fucking clue.

It devastates me for not being there for her all this time. Has she been pretending to be happy all this time?

I stay hidden behind the wall after I take a peek and see that the door to their room is ajar, the light streaming into the hallway. When my mom speaks again, her voice is softer and calmer.

“I’ll be fine, I promise,” she reassures him. “I haven’t needed them in so long and I don’t want to go back to them again.”

“That’s what you said last time and I nearly lost you.” His voice breaks and tears spring in my eyes as I hear the pain and dread behind his words.

With each shocking revelation, I’m beginning to understand Mom’s behavior ever since we came back from Pune. For some twisted reason, she’s projecting her fears on me but I won’t know the full extent until I know the whole truth.

I also can’t imagine her sharing it with me willingly or if at all. Because there’s no denying her past is somehow connected to my present.

A second later, I hear someone pacing inside the bedroom and I’m guessing it’s Dad. He can be very intuitive when he wants to be, which is why I’m a little tense. I just know he won’t let this go until he gets to the bottom of it. It’s obvious Mom was fine until our return back home.

In the next breath, my worst fear comes true.

“Something must have happened to trigger you. What aren’t you telling me, Sara?”

I have read enough to know that triggers are usually linked to a traumatic experience. If what my dad is saying is true, then maybe I have unknowingly triggered her.

Maybe the shock of seeing me with Riaan brought out her own horrific memories that she kept buried inside. If that's true, does it mean she's been through something similar like me?

Oh God! I hope not. Please let me be wrong.

"Nothing happened, honey. I've just been stressed lately."

He ignores her lies and suspiciously asks, "Does it have anything to do with Nyra. Don't think I haven't noticed how you are cold to her when you assume I'm not looking. Is that why you ran to Pune and now you won't let her go back?"

My breathing turns shallow and my hands tremble as sweat dots my forehead. Mom is going to tell him everything, I can feel it, and then my dad will never speak to me again.

After all, it's my fault she's sick again and needs her medicine. If I hadn't cried over the phone, then she wouldn't have come to Pune and none of this would have happened.

"Did something happen to her?" he shouts, losing his composure. "Did someone hurt Nyra? Tell me, Sara, or I swear I will fly back there and find out myself."

"Calm down, Jay. You'll wake the kids." She tries to soothe him while I remain hidden in the shadows, the walls closing in on me. "Nyra is fine. Like I said, she felt homesick and nothing more."

"Then why the cold shoulder, Sara? I haven't even seen you hug her at least once, let alone smile at her. I see the pain in both of your eyes. You're angry at her for some reason and I can't for the life of me figure out why."

Every time I believe I have survived the worst, something else always tries to rip me into pieces. Just as I find the strength to fix one mess, another is waiting for me, shattering all my defenses.

Home was supposed to help me heal and become stronger. But instead, it's doing the exact opposite. I'm drowning. Dying. At least Mom has Dad, but I have nobody.

Even if I confess everything to Riaan, he can't help me when it comes to my parents.

The sad truth is I'm all alone.

I'm my own savior.

"Y-You're imagining all this, Jay. I could never be upset with her."

"You're a bad liar, Sara. You're punishing her for some reason," accuses Dad. "Something did happen and I know it's hurting you both. It's serious enough that it brought your own nightmares back. Instead of letting me help, you're making the same mistake you made all those years ago. Just know this time, it affects your daughter, too, and not just you."

"Jay—"

"Enough with the lies," he cuts her off harshly. "If you won't tell me, then I'll talk to Nyra. You must have warned her not to say anything to me, which is why she clams up every time I bring up Pune. The second I saw you both step into the house, I knew something was wrong. I thought you both needed some time and space alone but now it's been two miserable weeks."

"I-I'm sorry, Jay." She says his name pleadingly and then murmurs, "She just made a mistake but it wasn't her fault. All I'm asking you is to please trust me to take care of our daughter."

"Trust goes both ways," he retorts and sighs. "I have a right to know what's going on with my kid. Just answer me this, Sara. Does it have anything to do with your past?"

"Of course not," says Mom with a loud gasp, like it's too horrific to even imagine. I hold my breath, scared she may tell the truth but when few seconds pass, she doesn't. "It's just the stress that's bringing back all the old memories that I wish I could erase forever. I just don't want her to end up like me,

Jay. I won't survive it if she becomes a former shell of herself, just going through life without actually living."

"You keeping her at a distance is doing exactly that, honey," he says.

"What?" She gasps, taken aback. "I'm trying to protect her in the only way I know how."

"You're hurting her instead. She needs her mom now more than ever," he says. "If you keep this up, it's only going to push her away from you and it won't be long before she begins to resent you."

Tears flow freely as I listen to them and I appreciate my dad taking my side even though he's so far from the truth.

On the upside, it's the first time in a while that I have seen the glimpse of my old mom. It tells me I haven't lost her completely. Yet it both saddens me and gives me a sense of relief to finally hear her admit that she's hurting just as I am.

I wish she would realize that Riaan could never hurt me and that her fears are invalid. All she has to do is give me a chance to explain instead of keeping me at arm's length.

If she could just see past the conventional rules our society has deemed acceptable, she'll see just how much he loves me, cares for me, and would walk through the gates of hell just to protect me.

I understand things escalated between them the last time they were together, but it was only because he was hurting.

If only Mom could see past that.

Silence hangs in the air while she processes his words and then whispers, "You're right. I need to explain my perspective to her."

"I'm still upset with you, Sara. I thought we promised each other to never keep secrets, let alone the ones that have to do with our kids."

"I didn't want you to worry," she admits "And please don't say anything to Nyra. I know what you're thinking, but

she can never know about my past.”

It's too late for that, Mom, my mind screams.

“I wouldn't betray you like that, no matter how angry I am at you,” Dad finally answers her, his voice cold. “Someday, you're going to have to tell her yourself.”

“That day will never come.” Conviction laces her voice.

Mom doesn't realize that Dad won't rest until he knows the whole truth. She made a huge mistake even confessing this tiny bit. It's almost like waving a red flag in front of an angry bull.

All the secrets and the lies are drawing a wedge between them. She won't be able to hide the truth just like she couldn't hide hers, even if it's only the tip of the iceberg.

In the next second, I hear another door slam and I just know it was Dad walking out on her.

Even as they go to sleep, so many unanswered questions run through my head.

Like a chapter has opened that I never even knew existed.

The most shocking is that my mom apparently has a dark and tormented past that she never told us about. I assume it's because she probably didn't want to worry us but I still can't help but be hurt.

Karma is a bitch, after all, because it made me understand the way she must have felt when she saw me with Riaan.

I don't believe for a second that the resurfacing of her old wounds has nothing to do with my mistake. The only one who can connect the dots at this moment is my dad, but he would have to know the whole truth first. That's not a fucking possibility.

I have to find another way before it could escalate into something we can't come back from.

After the mind-blowing day I've had, I can only pray to whoever is listening.

No more unexpected revelations, please.

Chapter Fifteen

NYRA

Fog surrounds me like a warm cocoon, as the hot water beating down on my back kisses some of my pain away.

My slow breathing is the only sound in the enclosed space while my mind is a blank canvas. Light-headed and calm.

And I have never felt more peaceful.

I stay under the shower, chasing the feeling until the water turns cold and forces me to step out. And then, the multitude of chaos returns, one vicious attack after another.

There's no longer a dark cloud hanging over me but now there's a thundering storm waiting to drown me.

It's been two—long and agonizing—days since I eavesdropped on my parents' private conversation and it's still very fresh on my mind.

I'm trying and failing to process it all, like the fact that my mom's past is a mystery and no longer shrouded in darkness.

My tormentor—Zain—no longer anonymous, was hiding right under my nose.

And worse, he's nowhere near finished punishing me for my sins.

My only saving grace this past two days has been that there has been no words from Zain, which has allowed me time to recover from the shock of all the news.

I don't know who I should be disappointed in the most, my mother for protecting me by lying or Zain for stabbing me with deceit. Either way, both completely broke my trust.

And yeah, I know I'm a hypocrite but I can't find it in me to care anymore, not when my life is falling apart at the seams and my sacrifices are being wasted on nothing.

Sadly, neither Mom nor Zain can see how they have done the exact misdeeds they are accusing and castigating Riaan of. Unlike them, he has never once lied to me or betrayed me.

But I have done both to him.

Standing in front of my closet, I hold the knot of the towel against my breasts while randomly picking a dress to wear today even though I'm stuck inside these four walls all day.

Despite knowing it's unhealthy and depressing, I have simply resigned myself to my fate because there's nothing that makes me look forward to the day anymore.

To this day, thoughts of Riaan keeps distracting me.

It's nine a.m. in the morning which means he must be on his way to the office. His sweet or filthy text—depending on his mood—would always reach me around this time before he left his apartment.

My eyes slide toward my phone resting innocently on the bed, making my fingers itch to grab it, hoping he may have left one for me.

But it's futile.

Because his suspicion was correct about me not having my phone. And there's no way for him to know that I have it back. Unless, of course, I tell him. Hence, the dilemma of whether or not I should.

Even though I promised myself I would keep my distance and be the remorseful daughter my mom wants me to be, I'm so enticed to break it. The pull I have toward him has always been compelling, no matter the distance.

Until yesterday, it was easy to keep the promise, but now, it's become twice as harder to resist the tempting urge.

The devil in my ear whispering *maybe one text won't hurt* while the angel murmurs *be strong*.

Everyone knows how it ends, the devil always wins and I have no power to stop myself when my defenses are weak and gaping wide open.

On the other hand, the truth is that I want to contact him because I've never needed—missed—him more than in this moment.

Yet I keep denying it.

Instead, I tell myself that he at least deserves to know that I received his thoughtful and beautiful gift, especially the letter that I've read too many times by now. It's the only thing keeping me afloat and the only light of happiness I have these days.

So, before I can change my mind and come back to my senses, I grab the phone and type the words that come as easy as breathing.

There's so much I want to tell him that my heart could burst open anytime, but I settle for a more casual message. I lie to myself again that it's only this one time thing when the truth is, it's far from it.

Once I hit Send, it'd become tough to hold down the walls I've carved around my heart.

Because he'll see it as a crack.

A beacon of hope.

It will never end with just one innocent text because he won't let me. My gaze stays glued to the screen while my thumb is hovering over the Send button and just when the sensible side is about to win and I'm about to erase the

message, the devil whispers again... *It's okay to need him. Just this once.*

I lose the battle and press Send, and then I nervously bite my lip while regretting my decision immediately.

**ME: I received the paperbacks.
They are beautiful.**

Thank you, Riaan.

Of all the things I could've said, I keep it light, innocent, with no mention of the letter because he'll know it meant more to me than anything else.

I'm about to slam the phone down, when it suddenly rings, his number flashing on the screen.

Fuck.

My heart slams against my ribs, beating harder and faster with each second that passes as I stare at the screen, letting it go to voicemail.

I can't talk to him knowing I'll break down into tears if I hear his dark voice. I never realized how much I missed and loved it until this very second.

Just his voice whispering my name in that low and throaty tone has the power to make me tremble, shiver, and wet with desire.

Besides, I need to draw the line somewhere.

Otherwise, we'll fall into the same old pattern and into each other once again, and I'm not sure if we'll survive this time.

I finally breathe easy when the ringing stops, but then my phone pings. Holding my breath, I swipe it open to read the messages.

ARROGANT THIEF: Let me hear your voice, Nyra.

ARROGANT THIEF: You've made me wait long enough.

ARROGANT THIEF: Just talk to me, baby girl. I miss you.

A lone tear slips down my cheek as I read his last text.

It shocks me to see him reveal his vulnerability.

For someone who's only ever intense, hard, and strong, it still amazes me how I bring out this emotion in him. And with each text, he comes close to breaking down my resolve.

It's like I predicted, he wouldn't stop with just one text. He'll always be asking—no, *demanding*—more. I swear, persistence should be his middle name.

Some unknown fear is holding me back, though, and I can't explain why. Maybe it's because I'm scared it would be too personal, intimate, or maybe my guilt is still too heavy to face him.

Texting at least provides the semblance of a wall between us that I desperately want to maintain. Instead of replying to tell him any of this, I make a plausible excuse.

ME: I recently got my phone back, Riaan. Can't risk Mom taking it away again.

Of course, he doesn't make it easy and I glance down at my phone as another message appears.

ARROGANT THIEF: You're a stubborn little thing, aren't you? It's a safe excuse so I'll let you get away.

I can almost hear his taunting voice growling in my ear.

ARROGANT THIEF: Only this time, though.

ARROGANT THIEF: Tell me... She hasn't hurt you again, has she?

Even though she hasn't slapped me again, I don't think she will ever again, not because Riaan threatened her but because I sense she regrets it herself. I don't even blame her anymore because I know she wasn't herself that night and her emotions were running high.

Still, I can't deny that emotionally and mentally her indifference stabs and pains me deeply. At least when she lashes out, I know she's feeling something. Like she did two nights ago.

Shaking off those thoughts, I focus back on Riaan.

ME: Of course not. My mother is not a bad person.

I tell him this because I don't want him to paint the wrong picture in his head. He doesn't have to agree with her actions but he needs to respect her nonetheless.

He has no clue that her decisions have come from a good heart and she's protecting me just like any parent would.

ARROGANT THIEF: I never said she was. But I hate the thought of anyone hurting you. No matter who they are, and you need to accept that.

ME: I know.

ARROGANT THIEF: Good girl. Now tell me you're mine.

I can feel my cheeks heating as I read those words again and again. I have ached—no, *longed*—to hear them and

even though I expected them, I'm still not prepared to absorb their impact; still not used to the way they make my heart go faster, or the fact that a shiver runs down my spine and goosebumps erupt all over my skin.

However, it's only because I fear I might never hear them again.

I'm terrified of the thought I succeeded in pushing him away and he's finally letting me go.

That maybe he decided I'm not worthy of him and he'll leave me all alone.

But he proves me wrong and I want to kick myself for ever doubting him for a second. The way he still believes in us gives me a tiny glimmer of hope.

A smile tugs at the corner of my lips when his domineering side appears as I stare at my screen. Oh, how I missed it as well.

ARROGANT THIEF: Say. It.

But slowly, the smile slips because saying it will be nothing less than admitting—promising—that we can be together. That there's still a fighting chance for us. And I know I can't give him or myself that false hope when there are so many complicated obstacles standing in our way. I can't make a promise that I may have to break again.

So, I don't.

ME: I can't. I'm sorry.

Exhaling roughly, I realize it's my fault and that I should've resisted harder and not texted him. One moment of weakness and I've hurt him again by denying him the words he desires more than anything. I expect him to hurl angry words at me or accuse me of how I've hurt him again.

But his reaction, it's something I'm utterly unprepared for.

Or maybe I'm lying and it's everything I desired all along.

ARROGANT THIEF: Your offenses are piling up, baby girl. You're going to be so sorry when I get my hands on you.

ARROGANT THIEF: Besides, I made you say it once and I will make you say it again, my little liar. And when I do, I won't be satisfied until I've tattooed it on your skin so you can't deny it ever again. I'm going to make you scream it until your throat is raw and aching. I won't stop until I have imprinted it into your very soul, So deep that you can't ever bear the thought of not belonging to me.

My lips open to release a silent gasp and I swallow when a wave of brutal lust hits my core out of nowhere and my clit pulses with the rhythm of my heartbeat.

His filthy mouth.

His raw masculine intensity.

His *dark intentions*.

All of it should alarm me, terrify me, but fuck no, it does something else entirely. It douses me in forbidden lust and cravings so thick and heavy, which my body and mind have been left starved of for days. I have no control but to let his threat—or *promise*—wash all over me.

Every time he promises such delicious, rough, and wicked deeds, I'm left speechless, aching, and wanting more.

Like I'm his puppet and he's my master.

I helplessly try to back down and he pounces like a hungry beast, demanding my submission. Even from miles away, his presence is dark, striking, and commanding; leaving

me scared to imagine just how domineering and threatening he will be when I'm with him, denying that I'm still his.

And I know, deep in my bones, he's waiting for just that.

For there to be no distance keeping us apart.

No walls to hide behind.

No more running.

Just him and me...

All alone.

Chapter Sixteen

NYRA

There are all kinds of vicious and dangerous monsters that exist in our world. They all love to cruelly toy with their victims, taunt them with deliberate threats, all under the guise of being righteous and judge others based on their warped sense of justice.

Then there are those who hide in the dark, in the shadows or in plain sights. They are the scariest of them all.

Chillingly unpredictable yet patient.

Guided by morality yet depraved.

Silent but lethal.

Like *Zain*.

Yesterday, I found some pretense of respite after texting with Riaan, who sent me a sweet good morning text today now that he knows I have my phone back. Yet it managed to keep me distracted and calm only for a little while.

Now, I'm back to being anxious, jittery, and struggling while waiting to hear back from Zain, who I haven't heard a peep from.

So much so that I can't even focus on the television screen in front of me while I sit on the couch in my living room downstairs. I can't even remember the name of the movie playing which made me laugh at the start and now it

just feels depressing. I have no clue why I even picked it in the first place.

Exhaling a frustrated breath, I grab the remote and switch it off before I get a headache. I would spend time with Pri but she has gone to her evening classes and my mom, well, she still isn't talking to me and chose to spend time in her room instead.

I stare in the direction of the hall, wondering if I should approach her, because this punishment of hers has gone long enough.

I had hoped maybe my dad got through to her and that she would come to me willingly, so I waited, but now one day has turned into four with no end in sight of her silent treatment.

Enough is enough, though, and I believe it's time she heard my side. Steeling my resolve, I stand up and stride toward her room, and once right outside her door, I take a deep breath and knock twice.

She doesn't reply and I frown, thinking maybe she's taking an afternoon nap, but that's not like her. I grip the doorknob to push it open but decide against it so I don't disturb her and let her rest.

Or maybe you're just stalling, my mind taunts but I push that voice down.

I turn around to leave, when my ears pick up the sound of heavy breathing and a second later, something dropping to the floor. Panicked, I twist back around and pull the door open roughly and feel my body go still at the sight of Mom.

Her eyes are closed, sweat dots her brow, and her hands twist the sheet on her sides while she thrashes sideways on the bed, stuck deeply in her nightmare.

I approach the bed nervously, my nails biting into my skin while having no clue whether or not to wake her up, afraid I'll make it worse or hurt her. I just know I have to do something instead of remaining on the side like a useless statue.

She mumbles something, but her words come out unintelligible and jumbled. The way she's twisting her legs and her arms are glued to the mattress, it's like some invisible weight is holding her down and she's helplessly trying to get away.

"Mom," I call out softly, wishing Dad was here. He's the only one who knows how to help her when she's haunted and trapped in her nightmares.

"Mom," I say a little louder this time, but it has no effect on her whatsoever.

I lower myself to my knees near the bed and lean forward while cautiously lifting my hand to hold her arm. As soon as my fingers connect with her skin, she goes still, her breathing calming down, and I relax but in a split second, she begins thrashing again, even harder than last time. It startles me and I jump back.

"Ma!!!" I scream, my own breathing matching hers.

I watch as wrinkles form at the corners of her eyes as if she heard me, my voice somehow penetrating through the fog of her nightmare. Her fingers let go of the sheet underneath her, her body relaxing even though she's still deep in sleep. I don't move, my attention is laser-focused on her as I wait for two to three minutes before pulling myself off the floor and pushing my loose hair away from my face.

I step closer to her prone form and stare, observing how broken and sad she looks from whatever or whomever is torturing her psyche. I'm upset that they still have their hold on her, and I blame myself for unintentionally bringing those memories back to her.

Things are seemingly worse than I could have imagined and I'm still fucking clueless.

Her hair sticks to her sweat-dampened forehead, so I tuck them behind her ear carefully without disturbing her. After covering her body with the comforter that's tangled around her legs, I slowly back away.

"Stop," I hear Mom cry out from behind me. "Please."

I turn around, expecting her to be wide awake and talking to me, but her eyes are still shut. I walk closer in time to see a lone tear slip down her cheek and her body now twisted into a fetal position.

Something shatters inside me because it's not me she's whispering to but someone else. I realize she's still dreaming, still stuck in the past. This feels even worse than finding her thrashing and fighting.

So much more painful.

So haunting.

When she says nothing more, I walk out of the room while closing the door behind me and only then, I let my own tears fall down my cheeks.

Just how long has she been hurting like this and hiding it from me? Was I so self-centered that I never noticed the pain she's enduring? I've only seen the surface. What if the whole truth is so much worse?

I now understand how Dad must feel every time he has to take care of her.

Maybe this is the real reason why she's been avoiding me ever since we came home. While I've been drowning in my own guilt, I forgot that I should've been the one to talk to her even if she chose to be angry with me.

I told myself I would earn her trust back but I never made any effort. And it ends today.

If she wants to keep her past hidden, then I'll respect her wishes. I'll do anything and sacrifice everything for her if it helps her get better.

The ringing of my phone cuts through my thoughts and I make my way over to the sofa where I left it to check who's calling me. If it's Riaan, then no way I'm picking it up, especially with Mom so close. Bending at the waist, I grab it, and instantly a genuine smile tilts my lips when I read Monica's name.

Talking to her is just the therapy I need.

“Monica!” I shriek before she even utters hello.

“Oh my gosh!” she exclaims in her sweet, familiar voice. “Am I hallucinating or did you actually answer your phone?”

I laugh at her dramatics, despite feeling a little bit of guilt for not calling her sooner, before replying warmly, “I promise it’s not a dream, and I’m really sorry I haven’t been in touch lately. I feel bad already.”

“All I want to know is if you’re okay, Nyra. I became so worried when you didn’t show up after the weekend and your phone went straight to voicemail, only to find out later from the warden that you had gone home.”

“I know, babe. My mom came to Pune to surprise me and then we left in such a hurry that I never got the chance to tell you.”

“Don’t worry about it,” she replies. “If it brings your sexy-as-sin cousin Riaan to my door, then I don’t mind it at all.”

Red-hot jealousy and possessiveness rushed through me at her teasing words while she swoons over him.

Irrational anger stabs me as the fact that she saw him while I haven’t sinks in, and I hate my situation even more because I can’t tell her that he’s mine. But somehow, I calm myself down and try to switch the subject.

“Yeah. Thanks for sending me your notes, by the way.”

“That’s what friends are for,” she says. “When are you coming back, though?”

“Umm... I can’t say, Monica.”

“Could you at least try to come back before the fest? Pretty please?” she pleads.

“I’ll try,” I reply. “I promise.”

We chat for a bit longer after that, and I listen patiently as she tells me all about the upcoming fest excitedly. Hearing

about the Reet brothers' concert, the treasure hunt game, and the latest gossip made me realize how much I miss Pune.

I loved the life I was building there at the college and the friends I made, and I yearn for everything to go back to the way it was. It's more fun and has less complications. I liked the independent me who was learning to lean on herself every day, but now that progress has halted.

It's almost evening by the time I finish talking to her and I glance down when my phone pings with a text.

ARROGANT THIEF: Wish you were here, sweetheart.

A picture with an episode of *Friends* playing on his television screen is attached below the text message. There's no holding back the grin that graces my mouth. I was the one who got him hooked on that show, which happens to be my favorite, and now it's his too.

I make sure I'm alone since Mom came to check up on me to see who I was talking to earlier after my voice woke her up a while ago. It took all my practice to keep my emotions hidden. I can't let her know that I caught her while she was having a nightmare. Looking at her face, there was no signs showing she had one in the first place. After all, she's had years of practice so I shouldn't be surprised.

When I don't see or hear her, I reply back to Riaan.

ME: Not in the office today?

ARROGANT THIEF: My meeting got canceled, so I came home early.

ARROGANT THIEF: Every day that you're not here, I'm tempted to come and kidnap you, baby girl.

My heart screams in agreement but I ignore it.

He always follows through on his promises so I believe him, but I know it can only remain a fantasy. In my head, it's him whisking me away somewhere far where no one knows us and we could live happily ever after. For him, it's capturing me and then declaring to the whole world that I belong to him, cousins or not.

Still, I can't help but play into the forbidden fantasy he painted for me.

ME: What if I resist?

ARROGANT THIEF: What makes you think you'll have a choice?

ME: I'll run.

ARROGANT THIEF: You won't get far.

ARROGANT THIEF: And when I get my hands on you, I'll make you pay.

ME: That'll be too many lessons to teach me, Riaan. Won't you get tired?

ARROGANT THIEF: Never, my dirty girl. I'll have you so sore, edged, and begging to let you cum that the last thought on your mind would be to run away from me.

ARROGANT THIEF: The only one tired will be you, Nyra. You should know by now that punishing you, teaching you a lesson, is my favorite hobby. I'll hold your orgasm hostage while every inch of

you is covered in my cum. It's you who should be scared.

I could never forget the first time he taught me one of his lessons because no matter how much I had begged and cried, he hadn't let me come. My ass, my breasts, and my pussy... everything had been so sore by the time he finished with me. He had played my body against me while staring down at me like a wild beast.

Even now, I have to cross my legs to lessen the ache he's manage to ignite between my thighs by just talking to him.

God! I'm going to need a cold shower after this. I'm strung so tight that all it would take is one pinch to my clit and I will come right here on the couch, where anyone could walk in and I wouldn't even care. That's how much command Riaan has over me.

Ignoring the demand my body is making, I text him back with trembling fingers.

ME: If you won't give me my orgasm, I'll do it myself.

ARROGANT THIEF: Baby, we both know you won't disobey me. Your body knows who owns it.

ME: I hate you.

ARROGANT THIEF: And I love you, my little liar.

Out of nowhere, my phone is ripped away from my hands and when I look up, my scared gaze collides with my mom's angry one.

Oh fuck!

“Why the hell are you still talking to him, Nyra?” yells my mom. “I knew I shouldn’t have trusted you.”

I stare at her in horror, fear paralyzing my entire body as she reads the last text he sent me. I try to snatch it before she can scroll up and read the whole conversation.

She will kill me if she finds out I slept with Riaan. Before I can take it back, she shoves me back and her eyes go wide.

No. No. No.

All too soon, she brings her attention back to me but not before I see the discomfort and disgust on her face. I just know she read some of his earlier texts and I wish the ground could swallow me whole. Shame washes all over me while I’m unable to meet her eyes.

“Ma—”

“Why don’t you understand he doesn’t love you, Nyra?” she screams, and I flinch. “How am I supposed to get through to you? That boy is sick and he is using you.”

Tears stream down my face, making my vision blurry while words stay lodged in my throat. Her hands shake my shoulders and I don’t fight her. I want to scream that we are not sick.

We’re just two broken souls who fell in love with each other.

“Where did I go wrong in raising you?” she whispers in a sad voice, and the brunt of it makes me stagger back on my feet.

“I’m sorry.” It’s the only words I manage to say.

“That’s it,” says she while backing away. “I’m telling your father.”

“No!” I shout, finally meeting her eyes. I can’t let her do that so I plead, “Please don’t tell him, Mom. I beg you.”

“He needs to know. Maybe he will make you understand the wrongness of your situation. I tried and I

failed,” she replies solemnly.

You never tried... is what I want to say.

Not that it would’ve worked.

“Please don’t.” Stepping closer to her, I grab her arm and speak, my voice stuttering. “I-I’ll d-do anything. I promise. I’ll fo-forget Riaan. Please.”

There was a time when I wouldn’t have uttered those words but slowly, with each passing day, my strength and my hope is wavering. I’m losing against everything and everyone trying to tear me down. Some days, I feel like a fighter but on days like this, I couldn’t be weaker.

Seconds pass while Mom observes my face quietly, her face giving nothing away, and I’m scared she won’t listen to me.

“I’ll block his number and won’t ever talk to him again. I swear,” I try to convince her.

“Why should I trust you again, Nyra?” she asks in a cold voice.

“I can’t hurt Dad.”

She must hear the sincerity in my voice because she eventually nods. Whether it’s the fear in my eyes at the thought of Dad learning the truth or the thought of losing his trust like I lost hers, she knows she’s won.

She found the one weakness to cut Riaan from my life and that’s the love I have for my father.

If I want the latter in my life, then I have to lose the other and vice versa.

Either way, my worst fear has come true.

I’m all alone.

Chapter Seventeen

RIAN

Bad feelings are like cancer.

There is no cure for them. And once they make a home inside you, they're hard to get rid of. There's no pulling it out.

It grows and simmers and slowly eats you up from the inside. Even if one ends and provides momentary relief, another takes its place.

Unfortunately, I've been having a lot of bad feelings lately and it's making me lose focus, unsettled, and my mood sour.

Usually, I would shake the feeling off and distract myself with work, gym, or a friendly basketball match with my old college friends. And for the last two days, I tried them all yet nothing worked and I know exactly why.

Nyra has ghosted me again, vanishing off the face of the earth.

I haven't received a single word from her in the last two days.

When I first received her text after almost two weeks of silence, I felt like I could breathe again. It's like a dying man's thirst had finally been quenched.

It took all my control to be patient with her and not demand each and every detail of how her days were going by.

I wanted to know if she was safe and not feeling lonely, like I was despite being around people all the time.

I, at least, had work to distract myself with while she was stuck inside her home, which is why I couldn't help but send her those romance paperbacks she loves to read.

Even though I still haven't healed from her breaking up with me, I can't bear the thought of her being alone, sad, and depressed. No matter how angry, disappointed or hurt I may be because of her, she will always be my priority.

Besides, it can't be easy for her at home under her mom's watchful and distrustful eyes, with no one to talk to or someone on her side. Her little sister, Priyanka, is close to her, but she will never be able to help Nyra.

Our love is a weight only we can carry, and something only we can feel and live with.

No one but us can understand the struggle of loving someone while the world condemns and tries to rip us apart.

It's one of the many reasons why I always want her by my side, so she never has to bear the burden alone. I *need* her close so she never has to worry.

She deserves nothing less than the world beneath her feet, worshiping and showering her with happiness. I want to give that to her even if it takes a lifetime.

To make it happen, all I have to do is wait until she's back in my city.

And when she's back, no one will ever take her away from me.

However, every time I decide to take things at her pace and be more patient with her, she goes and does something that demolishes all my resolve. I didn't push her when she said she couldn't talk to me over the phone.

It was enough for me as long as she didn't ignore me and gave a small piece of herself. My days became easier to survive and I wasn't that angry anymore when we started texting again.

But the way our last conversation ended abruptly, I knew something went terribly wrong. There's no way she would willingly cut me off again. Hence, the bad feeling sitting in my gut.

I'm afraid my aunt caught her or something.

I never brushed on any topic regarding her parents, keeping it light and teasing just the way I did in the past. I could tell she's letting down the walls around her heart.

The anxiety brought on by her silence is bringing all my failures brimming to the surface. I was losing myself in her as much as she was in me, so we didn't have to face each of our demons. Never in my life have I felt so helpless, like I'm stuck at a fucking dead end.

Punishing Zain for his betrayal only managed to calm down my rage for a little while. It was because he was only to be blamed for putting miles between Nyra and me.

But the mystery of why she ended our relationship in the middle of the night has yet to be solved.

All I can say with clarity is that another person is behind it too.

Until I've put them six feet under the ground, the fury inside me will never go away.

With each day that goes by wasted and no closer to finding the truth, I realize I may not be able to until Nyra returns. I have racked my mind in a hundred different directions and the only conclusion I've come to is that she is the one with all the answers.

The only one that can lead me to the truth.

Since I can't bring her back myself lest I force her, I need to come up with something else and fast.

I also would be doing just that if I wasn't missing her as badly as I am today.

I'm man enough to admit that some days, my emotions run havoc on me and I want to run away or hide until the feeling passes.

Only one place comes to mind that always made me feel at peace and ironically, it also happens to be filled with memories—the happiest and the saddest—of Nyra.

We never realized it back then, but fate always brought us together at that place every time we were in close proximity.

Maybe it's the reason I feel so at serene there despite the few painful encounters, because it's linked to her. I'm hoping to get some clarity once I get there.

Without wasting another second, I grab my jacket from the back of the chair in my office, take my phone with my other hand, and saunter out.

It's late afternoon so everyone is at their desks when I close the door to my office behind me, making Snehil look up from her cubicle and I watch a frown cover her face when our gazes clash.

“I'm leaving early today, Snehil,” I tell her. “Text me if there's anything urgent.”

Not waiting for her answer, I walk in the direction of the elevator and press the button for the basement once I'm inside. Unlocking my car when I'm in the parking lot, I slide behind the wheel and start the engine and feel it purr beneath me. Pulling out of the building and on to the road, I drive toward my home, which is an hour away from my office.

My friends once asked me why I started my company in Pune instead of Mumbai where I already had all the connections. I told them that this city was my home and I couldn't imagine growing my business anywhere else. Besides, the potential was much broader and higher, especially with the increase in the event management business here. So, the decision was quite simple. Plus, it kept me closer to my family.

Maybe destiny wanted Nyra and my paths to cross again.

Even if it didn't, I know in my heart that we would have found our way to each other.

A smile tugs at my lips as I remember the first words she whispered to me... *It's written in the stars.*

The seriousness with which she said them still has me in a chokehold. Her eyes had glowed with love, passion, and so much trust that it was hard not to believe her, and utter it back to her.

Those five little words have made a special place in my heart, and rushed in my bloodstream ever since.

She may have lost her faith in them but I haven't.

I believe it even more than ever now.

After all, no great love story exists without a little heartbreak.

The clouds darken the blue sky by the time I reach my home and park my sports car in the garage. It's the first time since I've been back so I know nobody is expecting me.

Usually, I inform my mom beforehand but the last thing I'm in the mood for is her prying and discussing my feelings, which I know she will insist.

Unlocking the door with my spare key, I enter the house and relax when I don't hear Mom come downstairs, most likely taking a nap in her room.

I notice she added another tall plant in the hallway, giving the living area more of a welcoming vibe, and I swear she'll replace it with something else the next time I visit. She's always redecorating and sprucing things up whenever anything new catches her eye.

Being at home reminds of the last time I was here. It also happens to be the last time I saw Nyra's sad yet beautiful face as she walked away from me. She had thought that I had left when the truth is I had stayed behind and watched her leave from the terrace.

As if she could sense my eyes running over her or hear my heart screaming for her to stay, she turned around and at the last second, my aunt pulled at her arm and shoved her toward the cab.

As I take the stairs leading to the terrace—our favorite spot—I'm almost expecting to find her standing there, waiting for me like she did so many times before.

Instead, emptiness welcomes me.

A warm breeze envelops me but not enough to warm my cold beating heart. Only Nyra's touch, laughing voice, and shy kisses can make it go back to the way it was.

My heart... It beats and bleeds only for her.

I go and sit on one of the two chairs in the corner and pull out a cigarette from my inner jacket pocket along with my lighter. Taking a long puff after lighting it up, I exhale above me while wondering how one place can hold so much meaning and so many flashbacks, all intertwined with a single person.

Even before I decided to claim her and accepted my desire—or *messy* feelings—for her, she was already mine. I just didn't know it. It took years being away from her for me to realize I was already in love with her.

She had claimed my stone-cold heart long before I did the night she found me on the terrace all those years ago.

She had sat right here beside me and took my hand in hers, squeezing tight while telling me it was okay to hurt and miss my grandma and to know she will always be with me. I remember her telling me that it is never too late to say goodbye. She knew what I needed the most in that moment and gave it to me.

But that wasn't the moment I fell for her or truly saw her. It was when she boldly kissed me, pressed her soft, trembling lips against mine. Those two lingering seconds—yes, I counted it—while our mouths connected, barely breathing and her palm still in mine, it was then I fell in love with her and knew I was fucked.

Insanely and brutally fucked.

I must admit, I had some consumed alcohol, but it was her lips that I was drunk on.

Because all I wanted to do was take her in my arms, ravish and plunder her pliable mouth, and never let go.

In hindsight, I should've let her down gently, but with the taste of her still lingering on my lips and knowing she wasn't ready for all of me, I had to push her away.

Looking back at it now, it's one of the many decisions that I don't regret in my life.

The Nyra I knew back then was unafraid, a beautiful enigma of bold and shy, strong, but somewhere in the past months, I've seen less and less of that girl.

She's become a scared shadow of her former self. Sixteen-year-old Nyra wouldn't have run away from me, or turn her back on us, but instead, she would've fought long and hard.

I know that woman is hiding somewhere inside her.

And I need to reawaken that part of her again.

I must rekindle the spark she's lost.

I'm so lost in my turbulent and dark thoughts that I don't even hear the footsteps coming from behind me. I don't even have to turn around to know who it is.

"I told you no smoking in my house, Riaan," scolds my mom. "Just quit it already."

"Maybe someday." I shrug, my voice dry. She doesn't miss it.

"Why didn't you tell me you were coming?" she asks, sitting down beside me, her eyes a little puffy as if she just woke up and came straight here.

"Thought I'd surprise you."

"Hmm..." She hums under her breath, clearly not believing me.

I toss the butt of the cigarette to my right, crush it under my boot, and reply, "I sometimes think you cannot make up your mind on whether or not you want me home, Mom."

“I always feel it’s not me you’re here for.”

Perceptive as ever, her words hit too close to home. Maybe she knows more than I thought. Still, I neither deny it nor confirm it, letting her decide. Minutes pass as we sit in silence, her observing me while I’m deep in my own thoughts.

“Something on your mind, Riaan?” she finally pries, her motherly instincts kicking in. “You know you can talk to me, right?”

I decide to test her to see if she knows more or I’m just making it all up in my head, which is possible since my walls are down today. If nothing else, maybe she’ll help me with my dilemma.

“The older I get, the more I realize the world is too fucking complicated,” I confess. “Too many rules and so judgmental.”

“You’ve always known it.” Leaning forward, she looks me in the eye, and asks, “Why is it suddenly bothering you now? Perhaps it’s because of a woman?”

I raise one eyebrow while keeping my face impassive and ask, “What makes you think it’s about a woman?”

“You forget that I’m your mother. We have a sense for these things, no matter how much the kids think they are fooling us.”

The understanding I see shining in her soft gaze, says it all. My mind screams at the fact that she knows about Nyra, but neither of us say it out loud.

Maybe Nyra and I didn’t fool her, after all, but I still can’t take the risk of confessing everything.

“Is that so?” I challenge, and she grins softly.

“Men only care about the world when it’s standing in the way of something they want,” she explains, then points out, “and it certainly hasn’t stopped you before.”

“What do you mean?”

“You’ve always been a rebel, Riaan,” she replies, a faraway look crossing her eyes. “Even as a kid, you were always breaking rules, wreaking havoc, and no matter how much I scolded or punished you, it didn’t slow you down. Until one day, I sat back and saw that it made you headstrong, smarter, and not afraid to go after whatever your heart desired. So don’t stop now, *beta*.”

“Even at the cost of breaking your heart?” She stills under the weight of my stare. “Or going against my family? Would you still want me to rebel?”

“If it’s for *someone* you truly love, then yes. Because in the end, it’s your happiness that matters the most to me, and that’s one thing a mother would never punish her son for nor stand in the way of.”

Maybe she should tell that to my aunt.

As much as I appreciate her saying it as if she knows I need to hear it more than anything, I still can’t find it in me to believe her. I know deep in her heart, she just wants to help but I can’t let her. It’s not as uncomplicated as she’s making it out to be.

Still, her eyes plead with mine to pour my heart out to her, confess I desire Nyra in a way no cousin ever should, yet something makes me hold back. Hurt flashes on her face when I utter what she doesn’t want to hear.

“Don’t be so sure, Ma.” I give a sad smile and warn, “I would hate for you to take those words back.”

Her eyes turns sad and her head tilts as she stares at me like I’m being stubborn. Standing up, she comes closer to me and runs her fingers through my hair while smiling down at me.

“Have a little faith in me, Riaan.”

I wish I could, but only I know that my love is too dark.

It’s too depraved for anybody to accept, least of all her.

Chapter Eighteen

NYRA

Violated. Exposed. *Dirty*.

The last three words that any woman should ever feel.

That can break even the strongest of us. Especially when it feels like the whole world is standing against them, and left all alone... like me.

The more I let those words—feelings—sink inside my head, the more they make me want to crawl out of my own skin.

They keep repeating in my head, making me want to pull at my hair or scream until I shut them down. But like a poisonous parasite, they are stuck in my head and eating me inside out.

And it's all because of the unwanted and degrading string of texts I received from none other than my tormentor. After being silent for days, fooling me into safety, he finally spoke.

UNKNOWN: I've been thinking... what is so special about you that made your own cousin lust after you? He could have any other woman he wanted. Yet... he chose you.

UNKNOWN: Maybe I should have a taste too.

UNKNOWN: But before that, I want a glimpse of what you're hiding underneath those clothes, Nyra.

UNKNOWN: You have until midnight. Tick. Tock. Tick. Tock.

This is what I woke up to.

I stare and stare at the text messages wishing for them to disappear.

My heart was racing a mile a minute as I eagerly grabbed my phone, expecting another message from Riaan, only to remember that I blocked him for real this time.

That's when I got really scared, like my bad premonition was finally coming true. And it took less than two seconds for my world to splinter into pieces.

I don't remember how long I sat numb, shell-shocked, and wishing it was a terrible nightmare I was stuck in. PI prayed that it was a bad joke... prayed that Zain was playing with me. Maybe he made a mistake.

I couldn't believe what my eyes were seeing—or rather, *reading*. Just like any cornered person, I made up excuses, anything to deny the truth in front of me.

Zain wouldn't do this to me.

He wouldn't disrespect me this way.

I'm his little sister, goddammit!!

However, when nothing changed and those same words stared back at me, the tears helplessly fell down my cheeks.

The powerlessness swirling inside me, turned into madness, and I cursed him for having the audacity to threaten

me to obey him, as well as to even ask for it. I have done nothing wrong to deserve this.

My only fault is loving Riaan the way that I do.

Still, it doesn't give anybody the right to punish me for it and somehow justify their vile actions. The decision was pretty easy. There's no way was I listening to his sick demands. This is going too far.

ME: No. I will never do that.

It's been hours since I replied back to him and now he's toying with me again. I sent him the message in the heat of the moment and as minutes goes by with dead silence, dread and doubt creep in.

Have I pushed him too far?

He won't release the pictures, will he?

And the thoughts only keep getting more frightening than the last. I'm biting my nails when there's suddenly a knock on my door and I sharply look up.

"Why haven't you eaten your lunch yet, Nyra?" asks my mom.

After catching me red-handed a few days ago, I've noticed a change in her behavior and it has been for the better. She's being more like her old self with me as if our argument—or rather, the *result* of our argument—has given her some peace and satisfaction that felt missing until now. It seems like a breakthrough she was eagerly waiting for.

Perhaps, it came in the form of holding my love for Dad as a bargaining chip.

But if she believes it'll make things go back to the way they were...

She's in need of a very rude awakening.

"I'm not hungry," I curtly reply, refusing to meet her eyes.

I wish she would go away. But instead, she walks farther into my room. I watch from my peripheral vision as she goes to the beanbag chair in the corner, leans down and one by one, starts folding my clothes that I threw haphazardly off the side of my bed. Sadness tugs at my heart because it's so much like the old her.

It's these little things she's been doing the past few days like making my bed, spending more and more time in the same room as me, cooking my favorite food just the way it was before everything happened.

At first, I was shocked, until I realized she was trying to make an effort and not keep me at arm's length anymore.

I thought I'd be happy with the change in Mom. But now, it's me who is pulling away from her, giving her the silent treatment. She's trying to pretend like nothing ever happened and somehow, it stings even more.

Funny how the roles have reversed.

I haven't even told her about her nightmare that I walked in on. I almost forgot all about it in the chaos of the morning, which reminds me to check my phone again.

But nope, I haven't heard anything from him. It unnerves me that I almost miss Mom's next words.

"It's not good for you to stay stuck inside your room all day."

Is she really trying to care for me now? How sweet.

My emotions are already too frayed and raw that I feel like I'm going to burst any second. I'm trying so hard to keep up with these secrets, faking happiness every day in front of Dad and Pri, that my frustration is fighting to come to the surface while my mom's behavior is giving me a serious case of whiplash.

Besides, does she really think it's that easy to pretend that the last month never happened? Suddenly, I feel deeply angry with her for even trying.

"Where was this concern the past month?" I snap.

Shock then hurt crosses her features.

Good. She needs to feel the burn.

“Nyra,” she sighs. “I’m only trying to do what’s best for you.”

I chuckle dryly and accuse, “Do you really expect me to believe that after you ignored me for days? Where were you when I needed my mom? I promised to forget about him, so now you love me again?”

When my voice breaks at the end, she steps closer and tries to hold my arm but I pull away. As I stare at her, I realize I’ve been just as angry and hurt by her as she’s been by me.

All this time, I was burying these feelings, blaming myself day and night for our broken relationship that I stopped caring about how it affected me.

I understood her pain, her horror and anger as a result of my actions, but she never made the same effort for me.

She abandoned me when I needed her the most.

She never gave me a chance to explain.

Even now, she’s only here, caring for me because she believes she finally won.

“I know I should’ve come to you sooner and I’m sorry, *beta*,” she says. “I made a mistake and handled it all wrong. Instead of being delicate and helping you with your confused feelings, I left you to deal with it all alone. So please, let me be there for you now.”

“I wish you had said this that night,” I whisper, pushing a wayward tear away. “Besides, you shouldn’t worry anymore. Riaan is out of my life for good. Isn’t that what you wanted all along?”

“Not like this.”

Giving her my back, I tell her. “Please leave.”

I sense her hesitation but I make no move until I hear the door close behind me, and then I let myself fall apart. As if

it wasn't enough, my phone finally pings in perfect or should I say—*bad* timing.

UNKNOWN: Hmm... I expected that.

UNKNOWN: Maybe this will convince you. ;)

Below it, is a blurry video that pulls the rug out from beneath me, dragging me straight to hell. I already know what I'll hear before even playing it, yet I can't stop myself.

"Ahh... Riaan," I hear myself moan.

"Cum all over my fingers." He curses.

"Yes."

I don't watch the rest of it. He's already ruined enough memories for me and I can't take it anymore. The walls are closing in on me as I sit on the bed with my head hanging low. I think about the choices laid ahead of me and each of their dire consequences.

My pride or my family.

Protect myself or protect *Riaan*.

Ultimately, there is no choice.

If I risk outing my taboo relationship to the world, I will lose my parents' respect, ruin *Riaan's* life, and my own reputation.

If I give *Zain* what he desires, I'll also lose my dignity. The only question is whether I lose it to everyone else or just him. The choice is easy... protecting my loved ones means sacrificing myself.

Because the sad truth is, love never comes without repercussions.

There's always a price to pay.

The night has fallen and so have I, to the lowest point in my life as I stare at myself in the mirror. I run my gaze over

my clothed body and try to silence the voice screaming inside my head, begging me to not go through with it; that it's not too late to tell everyone.

But it's all a big fucking lie.

A delusion.

So far, the very same people who've known the truth have done nothing but call me sick and fucked up.

My own mother was so ashamed that she couldn't even bear to look at me or touch me. At least, not until I gave her what she wanted. They've taught me that I only have myself to lean on. I'm the only one who can right all the wrongs.

Some might call me stupid or weak for giving in to my blackmailer, but they are not the ones standing in my position.

It's easy to throw out advice and judgment when it's not happening to you but unless they've lived the same dilemma, they should keep their mouth shut.

The harsh truth is that nobody can tell what is right or wrong until they're standing at the crossroads, wrestling with their unwanted feelings.

In my heart, I know I'm only trying to protect my family and it's all that matters. So, taking a deep breath, I pretend it's like any other night as I take each item of my clothes off until I'm standing naked.

I pretend my body is trembling and shivering from the cold instead of the anxiety that it's a miracle I haven't fallen down to the floor or curled into a fetal position.

I pretend I'm not breaking down yet another promise that all of me belongs to Riaan, the only man I vowed to give my body to, stabs my heart.

I pretend that there are no tears running down my cheeks.

I just *pretend*. Until my body doesn't feel like my own. Until I detach myself from reality.

Stepping forward, I grab my phone from the edge of the counter and aim it toward me. My heart is racing a mile a minute, and the disgust I feel as I snap a picture while keeping my face hidden is unlike anything I've ever felt, but I push through it.

Just wanting to get it over with, I open the message thread and send the picture, and then I throw my phone away, not caring if it crashes and breaks.

Pulling the shower curtain away with a rough jerk, I rotate the tap and fall down on my knees under the spray. My arms wrap around my legs and my nails dig into my skin as if they can pry out the revulsion crawling in my veins while loud sobs rack my body uncontrollably.

My sounds mix with the running water as I let everything out, purging myself of the pain until numbness sinks in. I wash and scrub every inch of me as if it'll make me clean, not stopping until my skin is raw and pink.

An hour later, I finally step out of the bathroom and into my darkened room. Walking to my open closet, I dig around until I find Riaan's shirt that I stole the last night we spent together.

I bring it up to my nose, desperate to inhale his scent, but my heart sinks when I realize it has faded. Still, I wear it like a safety blanket and go lie down on my bed.

Tonight, I realized that a woman's soul breaks when her choice is taken away.

And mine wasn't only taken, it was *abused*.

Mercilessly twisted and captured.

The flashlight blinking in the dark pulls my attention to my phone, still lying on the bathroom floor that I see through the doorway.

Only one person will text me at this hour of the night and as much as I want to avoid it, my feet have a mind of their own as they carry me toward it.

I swallow the bile that rises up in my throat and bend
to pick my phone.

UNKNOWN: Good girl.

Just like that... *he broke me.*

Like he promised.

Chapter Nineteen

NYRA

Rough hands roam all over my body.

They ghost over the pulse on my neck and then slide lower from my naked, heaving breasts to the center of my stomach and circle my belly.

The soft, teasing sensation draws out a low moan past my lips, my hips lifting to meet the hand that slips between my thighs. When one finger pushes inside my walls, I cry out and fist the sheets. Slowly, one finger turns into two and they thrust harder while I chase the orgasm that I feel building in my core.

“Riaan...” I finally whisper his name.

“Shhh...”

I can't keep the sounds inside me... and why would he even want me to? He always likes it when I scream in pleasure and moan his name. I want to ask him something, but when his tongue licks a path down my slit, I lose all thoughts.

My hands wind into his hair and I pull when he bites my clit. I always love it when he's rough. But today, it feels strange. Wrong.

“Riaan,” I call out, no longer lost in pleasure.

He ignores me and laps at my pussy harder, biting into my thighs before roughly turning me over onto my stomach, and I frown.

“Riaan.”

His fingers dig into my hips painfully. I struggle against his hold, no longer enjoying this and becoming worried when he remains quiet.

Is he angry at me?

When he shoves my upper body into the mattress, I turn my head to the side and try to meet his gaze, but he’s pressing me down too hard. This isn’t like him. He’s never so silent and dispassionate.

My breathing grows heavy from exertion and I panic when his heavy body lands on top of mine, effectively trapping me beneath him.

“Stop.”

This is not Riaan.

The stranger leans down and cruelly chuckles in my ear and grunts, “He can’t save you.”

I go utterly still, the evil voice both familiar and unexpected.

I twist my neck and this time, he lets me so I can see his face.

When I do, I scream, “No!!!”

Then like an animal, he shoves his cock inside me.

I jerk awake from my haunting nightmare that almost felt real while my lungs feel suffocated as if I cannot get enough air. I touch myself and relax when I find my clothes are still on and I’m not trapped.

My whole body is drenched in sweat and covered in goosebumps as if I was fighting to pull myself out of the nightmare but failed. I can still feel those hands running over my skin, feeling me up, and I reassure myself that it was only a bad dream. I’m safe and in my own bed.

These nightmares started a week ago, right after the night I was forced to share a piece of my soul and dignity.

Each night, he comes back and asks for more.

Every time I resist, he holds the video over my head, the equivalent of an invisible gun. I sense his sick pleasure when he takes away my power, my fight, and breaks me viciously.

I wish for it all to end but it never comes.

He's unstoppable. Vile. *Monstrous*.

Nights are harder to face and survive through as I'm trapped inside the hell of my own making. With only fragmented illusions and dreams to keep me company, each frightening than the last.

They all start the same with invisible hands grabbing me, touching me invasively, and holding me down until I wake up. But until tonight, I never saw the man's face. Only heard that evil voice... which was always whispering.

I'll break you.

Take and taint what's Riaan's.

You're all alone.

Somehow, I hold my strength throughout the day, only to fall apart at night. No amount of showering helps me get rid of the self-loathing and the filthiness I feel every time I look in the mirror. My own reflection disgusts me because of the fact that I've been reduced to becoming this person.

Weak. Cowardly. A broken doll.

All because of him.

I can't even utter his name anymore without the fear and his words echoing in my psyche.

I've never hated myself so much, despite telling myself it's only for a little while. The more I fall into his web, the less powerful I feel.

My soul is dying little by little and I'm unable to save it.

The only reason I haven't completely lost myself is knowing I'm doing it for a reason—to protect those I love. I remind myself that as long as I keep my tormentor at bay, he will hold up his end of the bargain.

Just because he's in control, doesn't mean I've lost.

I mean, there has to be a light at the end of this tunnel, right?

I check the time on the bedside clock. It's only three p.m., and I know I won't be able to go back to sleep. I fear I'll dream of him again and it's the last thing I need.

He steals my attention when I'm awake as it is and there's no way I'm letting him make a home in my subconscious.

However, the reason I'm struggling the most with his demands and feel guilt wrap itself around me every time I give in, is because my heart says I'm betraying Riaan. I'm basically cheating on him despite having no choice. Every night, I let another man see parts of me only meant for him.

I get so scared at the thought of him finding it out and that he'll never forgive me.

Never stare at me with love shining in his dark eyes.

Once that happens, the line between love and hate would finally be broken.

To him, I'll be nothing but damaged goods.

No longer his.

The worst part is feeling like I deserve it and the only way I can seek redemption is through him.

My heart and body knows he's the only cure to purge me of the shame. The only soul whose touch and voice can replace the one currently taunting inside my head... Only he can cleanse me from my unforgivable sins.

I don't know if it's tonight's nightmare or my alarming fears that has me reaching for my phone on the nightstand. I have already made so many mistakes so, what's one more?

All I know is that I want to hear his voice so I don't feel so lonely and scared.

To not drown in sorrow and torment.

To stop feeling so dirty and tainted.

I just want him to tell me that I'm still his. And even if we stay apart for the rest of our lives, it will never change.

Despite knowing it's unfair to him, I still search his name and unblock it. I know I'm being selfish and greedy, but he's the only one I want to run to. The only one who accepts and loves me for who I am. So while it lasts, I want to soak it all in until he decides I hurt him irreparably once my torrid crimes are out.

Because no good deed goes unpunished.

Neither do sins.

It's quite late and I don't expect him to pick up. But still, with my heart slamming against my ribs, I dial his number. I'm holding my phone so tight against my ear that I'm afraid it might crack.

I hold my breath as soon as I hear the first ring and as if he was just waiting for me, he picks up.

"Nyra."

My eyes close at the sound of his groggy voice which is rough around the edges, and I draw in an uneven breath that echoes in the silence of the room. Hearing my name on his lips is like coming home after staying too long in the dark.

"Baby," he whispers raggedly, and a shiver races down my spine. "Please tell me you're okay."

I'm not... I want to say but the words get stuck in my throat. I hear his rough exhale and ruffling in background like he's trying to sit up.

"Talk to me, sweetheart. You're worrying me."

"I-I need you," I say, my voice faltering. "Everything hurts s-so badly."

The tears I held at bay silently fall down my cheeks, soaking the pillow underneath. I desperately wish he were here, holding me in his arms until no taunting voice or hands could dare to touch me.

The monster wouldn't get to me because Riaan would slay him before he could harm me, his protection and strength no match for my tormentor and their dark deeds.

“Oh, baby.” He murmurs softly, “I'm right here, Nyra.”

“I made a mistake,” I cry out and tell the truth. “I'm tainted, Riaan.”

“It doesn't matter, baby girl.” He claims roughly. “Because if you're tainted, then so am I. Don't you know you're so much more than that? You're sweet, shy, caring and so beautifully fucked up. You're everything to me, Nyra. Perfectly made just for me.”

If only he knew the truth.

He wouldn't want me if he knew the sins I've committed. The lines I have crossed. I'm no longer his sweet and shy Nyra. I'm no longer the girl he fell in love with. That girl who's everything to him, died in the aftermath of the catastrophe. I'm no longer deserving of him. Because he's everything I'm not.

Powerful.

Protective.

Loyal.

Chapter Twenty

NYRA

“Who hurt you, Nyra?” he demands sharply, as if he can hear my thoughts.

“It’s too late.”

A part of me wants to tell him that it’s his own blood, his own brother—Zain—remorselessly ruining me, breaking me so he no longer wants me.

The words are almost on the tip of my tongue but the fear he might not believe me holds me back. Besides, I have no proof except my intuition and the obvious signs indicating it’s Zain.

And even if he does believe me, he’ll go ballistic and do something he’ll regret. I cannot have that on my conscience. Moreover, if anyone deserves to punish him for his crimes, it’s going to be me. No one else.

“Why won’t you fucking let me in?” he grunts in frustration when I don’t answer his question. “What are you so afraid of, Nyra?”

“I’m only trying to protect you.”

“And who’s going to protect you?” I hear him curse. “Who’s going to take care of you? I hate that I can’t make sure you’re safe, hold you, or be there for you when you need me. It’s killing me to hear you sound so broken and alone. My

heart knows you're not okay, my sweet girl. I feel it every second of the day."

My own heart cracks wide open at hearing his raw confession. Every word is laced with pain, aggression, and longing.

There's nothing I can say that would make our situation any better. I also can't deny it because he's so fucking right. The fact that I called him in the middle of the night is proof of that.

"Riaan," I murmur when the silence becomes too heavy.

"Just tell me what you need, Nyra." He sighs.

To shut down the voices inside my head.

Until all I feel is him.

"Make me forget," I softly demand, running my fingers over his shirt that I'm wearing. The only thing that makes me feel closer to him. "Teach me one of your lessons. For betraying you, for walking away from you. For walking away from us."

"Nyra," he warns, his control unwavering.

"Please. I want to feel your pain," I push, unrelenting. It's the only way to lessen the guilt and the shame I feel in my core. And I know, deep down, he wants to. I just have to call out to the darkness in him that's craving to make me feel the burn. "Make me hurt, Riaan."

His breathing turns heavy but he still resists and questions, "Tell me why."

"I told you."

"You're lying again, my little liar," he growls. "You want me to punish you but the reason is something else. It's about you and not me. You're seeking atonement for something, aren't you?"

I should've known he'd see right through me. Because until tonight, I have never begged for his lessons, or his

punishments.

“Yes.” I tell him the truth. Otherwise, he wouldn’t give me what I want. What I deserve. So, I plead with him brokenly. “Please punish me. I-I need it, Riaan. Please.”

After a beat, I hear him shift and hear his breathing even out.

“Take off my shirt but keep your panties on,” he orders, and electricity runs down my spine. “You’re wearing my shirt, aren’t you, Nyra?”

“How did you know?” I can’t help but ask as I slowly unbutton his dress shirt and pull it off my shoulders while arching my back.

“I know you better than you know yourself,” he softly replies before hardening his voice. “And unless I give you permission, you don’t ask any questions. You only do as I say. Understood?”

“Yes, Riaan.” His authoritative tone leaves my pussy wet and throbbing.

“Put me on speaker. I want both your hands free and only touching where I tell you to.”

I follow his command and keep the phone beside my head so I can hear him and then ask, “Can I touch myself?”

“Tsk. Tsk. I told you no questions, Nyra. I’ll stop if you disobey me again.”

“Please don’t,” I reply in a hurry. “I’m sorry.”

“Put your fingers inside your mouth and make them wet,” he orders seductively. “I want to hear the sounds. Use your tongue and spit until they are glistening.”

I blush even though he’s not here and do as he asks, and I make sure he hears as I suck and moan. I ache to touch my skin and despite knowing he won’t be able to see, I still resist the urge and don’t dare disobey him.

“Now use them to circle around your nipples until they harden into tight little peaks but don’t touch them until I tell

you.”

“Yes.”

“Good girl,” he praises and my cheeks flush. “Your cunt is soaking your panties, isn’t it? So wet and slippery with your juices while your clit throbs, aching to be flicked, bitten, and pinched. Tell me, does your nipples hurt? Do you wish my mouth was there to suck them hard and bite with my teeth until my marks cover every inch of your tits?”

“Oh God! Yes.” I moan like a wanton slut, his words igniting a fire inside me. My legs twist and cross to ease the ache his filthy talk alone is building deep in my pussy. “I want your marks on me.”

“They’ll be aching and sore, but I still won’t stop playing with them, and slapping them. And just when you’re begging me to stop, I’ll pull out my cock and slide it between your big tits. Grind and fuck them until they’re painted in my cum. You would like that, wouldn’t you, baby?”

“Y-Yes,” I say, my lower lip trapped between my teeth as I try to keep my voice down, fearing I’ll wake up the others.

“Then say it,” he orders. “Tell me you want your cousin’s cum covering every inch of your skin. Say those words and I’ll let you touch and pinch your nipples until pleasure thrums through your veins.”

I gasp and feel my face heat at his rough command, at what he wants me to say. I hate how much his words make me feel both wrong and turned on at the same time.

My throat constricts as I form the words, knowing he loves it when I talk dirty. It makes him hard when he ruins my innocence and corrupts me. Besides, I badly need to touch my breasts while both my hands circle my areolas.

“I want my... cousin’s cum covering my skin and then I want to taste you on my tongue.” The last part slips without my control, rising from within the deepest, darkest parts of me.

“Not until I’m satisfied with your punishment,” he reminds me savagely. “Pinch your nipples now and do it hard.”

As soon as I do it, pleasurable pain courses through my body and my back arches off the bed on a silent scream.

“It’s still not enough, is it?” he taunts.

“No.” *It never is.*

“Take off your panties.” My fingers tremble as I hook them into the waistband and pull them down my legs. I’m so sticky and so wet that I have to pull slightly harder to get them off. My clit pulses when my knuckles rub over it, a low moan slipping past my lips that lets Riaan know I followed his order. “Now bring it to your mouth and taste yourself for me, sweetheart. Lick it with your tongue and taste how much it turns you on when you submit to me.”

Has his mouth become filthier or have I been deprived of it for too long?

I have tasted myself before at his wish but tasting and licking my own panties feels so dirty, wrong, and illicit. Yet I can’t stop myself from bringing it to my lips and doing just that and it brings another rush of wetness. I don’t even have to look. I can feel it dripping down my thighs.

His demand has me so mindless with need and desire that all it will take is one thrust and I would orgasm while calling out his name.

“I can hear you sucking and moaning like the dirty little girl you are, Nyra.” I hear him groan. “Never thought I’d be jealous of you. This is what you’ve taken away from me. Left me starving for your taste, your mouth, and your wet pussy. My dick has never been so hard and angry, just waiting to pound into you until you don’t know where you begin and I end.”

“Do you touch yourself?” I ask shyly, with my taste on my tongue and wishing it was his instead. I forgot I disobeyed him until he reprimands me.

“You’re such a fucking brat, Nyra. But I’ll let it slide only this time.” At least he shows mercy. “You wanna know if I masturbate at the thought of you?”

“Yes. Please.”

“I do, every night while imagining all the ways I’m going to fuck you. Own your cunt and fill it with my cum in so many positions that will leave you breathless and begging for more,” he growls in a dark voice that has me squeezing my breasts, my wet panties long forgotten. “But I don’t let myself finish, Nyra. Because the only hole I’m going to come inside is yours and the longer you make me wait, the more brutal I’m going to fuck you. You’re going to hurt and cry for me yet still ask for more.”

My pussy clenches and feels empty as I imagine Riaan pushing his cock inside me, filling me like he promised. I both hate and love the fact that he doesn’t cum and has chosen to wait for me. Our bodies are the only ones that can bring the satisfaction for each other, taming our desires and insatiable hunger.

“I’ll let you do everything you want, Riaan. Let you hurt me, choke me and tease me. I’ll take everything you have to give.”

“Yes. You’ll take it like my good little girl. Only then, I will let you come as many times as I want,” he wickedly promises. “Just not tonight.”

“Even after I’ve learned your lesson?”

“You’ve been a bad girl for too long, Nyra,” he scolds. “And bad girls get punished. Since I’m not there to spank you myself, you’re going to do it for me and not with your hands. Tell me... do you still have your teacher’s stationery that you loved to play with, hmm?”

I sharply inhale at the slight thrill and arousal I hear in his low, seductive voice. I didn’t think he would remember something from so long ago. But why is he asking for it now?

“Yeah, I do,” I reply hesitantly.

“Good. I want you to use the wooden scale ruler to spank your pussy at my command.”

Fuck! It’s going to burn so bad.

His naughty imagination always leaves me speechless and craving for more despite the slight fear that courses

through me. My thighs clench as my pussy throbs in anticipation.

I have always enjoyed the times he spanked me hard. Sometimes, he would spank my ass when I'm on all fours. Other times, he would spank my breasts when I'm tied spread-eagle. Not only does he inflict pain on me, but he also soothes it away.

"Let me know when you have it," he says.

Since my table isn't far away from my bed, I turn onto my stomach and lean forward until I find the scale and stare curiously at it. It's long and heavy and I shiver, knowing I'll never look at it the same way again.

"I'm holding it," I reply, fear and arousal evident in my voice.

"Spread your legs and rub the edge against your slit."

The second it connects with my pussy's lips, it feels cold and slightly weird. I've never even used any toys to make myself come, let alone spank myself. I rub it up and down, becoming familiar with the sensation, until the friction brings me pleasure.

"Stop." Riaan's voice cuts through the air. "I didn't ask you to enjoy it, filthy girl. I want you to spread yourself with your fingers and lightly tap your clit with the ruler first. Keep doing it until I say otherwise."

I do and cry out at the sensation, feeling the pleasure build in my core. "Ahh... yes, Riaan."

"That's it. You're ready," he praises. "Put your panties in your mouth, Nyra. Wouldn't want you to wake up anyone. Each time I count, you're going to spank your cunt. Harder, so it burns."

He pauses while I gag my mouth, my eyes rolling back in my head when the lingering taste of my arousal hits my tongue. God! I'm just as indecent as him for loving being treated like this. My legs quiver while I wait for him to count.

"One." I slap hard and it stings but feels oh-so good.

“Two.” *Slap.*

He doesn't pause to let me breathe and I imagine it's his hand delivering the spanks and dousing me with a drug-like heat.

“Three.” *Slap. Harder than the last.*

I moan around my panties, making it wet as my saliva runs down the corner of my mouth. It's a struggle to keep my legs spread while I can hear Riaan's breathing turn heavy and his voice thicker with lust as he counts thrice more.

I spank myself again and again until my pussy really starts to hurt and burn like he promised. I'm so lost that I lose count and almost miss his command.

“Stop, baby.” The wooden ruler falls from my grip and as I shift my legs, the pain shoots up my body, especially to my clit where I spanked the last two times. I remove the gag from my mouth and lick my lips. Still, something feels missing, hollow like I'm wound tight. As if he can sense it, he commands again. “Take your pillow and straddle it.”

I feel my cheeks heat but still, I obey him despite the slight pain between my thighs.

“Riaan... I'm too sensitive.”

He ignores me and says, “Ride it and make yourself cum. Grind your clit and don't stop even when it hurts. Tonight, pain is your only friend, my little liar. Ride that pillow like the bad little girl you are and whisper my name while knowing it wasn't my fingers, my mouth, or my cock that brought you pleasure. Know it wasn't my hands that spanked you raw and swollen. And when you're lying spent while still feeling emptiness inside you, that will be your punishment.”

Tears run freely down my face while I listen to him and like the masochist I am, I grind and rub myself on the pillow between my thighs. The harder I thrust, building the friction on my clit, the faster my orgasm builds.

As I chase the feeling, the more I moan and whimper which pleases Riaan, and I hear him praise me, urge me on.

It's not until he asks me to come for him that I let go
and see stars behind my eyes.

I chant his name again and again.

Until only he and I exist.

No more voices whispering and taunting me.

Just Riaan.

Chapter Twenty-One

RIAN

“I need your help with bringing Nyra back.”

All it took was one late-night call from Nyra for my patience to finally snap. One call for my anger to dissolve while I listen to her breakdown, her voice low and scared.

At first, I couldn't believe it was her calling me in the middle of the night. And then, as soon as I had picked up and heard her quiet breathing, the silence stretching between us, my heart had cracked open as visions of someone hurting her flashed before my eyes. Before she had even uttered any words, my decision was made.

I was getting her back.

I'll let her be mad at me, lie and fall apart, as long as she's by my side.

Until her pain mingles with mine.

No more waiting for her mom to get her head out of her ass and allow Nyra her freedom. I'm so pissed that she doesn't even realize or simply doesn't care that her daughter is falling apart, and all she is concerned about is her own anger.

I'm still haunted by Nyra's vulnerable words saying she needed me. Her pain so visceral that it cut me open.

Even more shocking was the way she was trying to punish herself, calling herself tainted. None of it made sense. What could possibly make her think that?

Most of all, I'm afraid I'll lose her and I'll be too late.

She is isolated, fragile, and alone.

She may deny it, but last night was the last straw, a cry for help. I more than felt the anguish that came pouring out of her. For a split second, I was taken aback when she begged me to make her hurt and the more she pleaded, the more powerless I felt.

I hated the distance separating us, the web of lies she's woven and her stubbornness to let me inside her.

While she was lost in the pleasure, all I felt was torture.

Torture I couldn't touch her.

Feel her.

Protect her.

Even though my body enjoyed the little noises and moaning sounds she made... It wasn't enough. The only thing keeping my temper at bay was knowing that she came to me while she was hurting and I'm the only one who could ease her pain and the guilt she felt.

It gave me hope that I could still fix whatever was broken. Hope that I could still save us and that it wasn't too late.

I waited while she came down from her high and only when her breathing had evened out, did I end the call. I, on the other hand, couldn't sleep and stayed up late until the morning sunlight poured into my room.

By then, I had plotted on how I was going to bring her back to Pune and there was only one person who could help me. The only one I trust not to betray me.

And she's staring right at me with understanding and satisfaction in her eyes. And I'm grateful when she doesn't circle around the question.

“I’m surprised you waited this long, *beta*,” my mom comments. “Of course, I’ll help you.”

She sits on the couch in the drawing room with a fresh cup of tea between her hands. Since I knew she won’t be busy in the morning, I came straight here to talk to her instead of going to the office.

Now that I’ve decided I won’t sit back and wait idly, I’m not wasting any more time. Before I tell her my plan, I have some burning questions of my own to ask her.

“How long have you known about us?” I ask while taking a seat opposite her.

She takes a sip of her tea before answering with a small smile. “Ever since I saw the way you two looked at each other the first night she stayed over after coming to Pune. You wouldn’t take your eyes off of her and stayed glued to her side. And when I saw the devastation on your face as she left, I knew it was more than just infatuation.”

She says the last part solemnly with sympathy shining in her bright gaze. All this time I thought I was masking my feelings for her but apparently not. I should’ve known nothing goes unnoticed by my mom under her roof.

“How come it never bothered you?” I question, finding it hard to believe she’s so supportive and not going ballistic and screaming like my aunt did. “How come you don’t think it’s wrong and forbidden? You don’t think I’m sick and disturbed?”

“Tell me this. Did you ever feel brotherly instincts toward her?”

“No.”

“Did you ever regret loving her? Felt like you’re doing something wrong?”

“Never.”

“Then you’re not sick, Riaan. You’re just a man in love.”

“A psychiatrist might say otherwise,” I say with a cruel laugh. “How are you even so sure, Ma? So easily accepting?”

“I won’t lie and say that the thought of distancing you and Nyra didn’t cross my mind. I won’t deny I didn’t get angry that you could make a mistake like this. But more importantly, I wasn’t going to make the same mistake I made in the past of punishing and scolding you every time you caused ruckus as a kid. I was only going to push you away so I sat back and tried to see past my own beliefs instead of judging you both for your actions.”

“Then what caused you to change your mind?” I ask curiously.

“Every bond or relation that exists takes time to nurture and grow. Just because one is born into it, doesn’t mean it’ll stay that way. You can’t expect someone to feel and love a certain way and the same goes for you and Nyra. Both of you never spent any significant time together as kids to be as close as cousins or siblings are supposed to be. You both were practically strangers growing up so you never had that bond that everyone is expecting of you. Instead it turned into an attraction and love that none of us saw coming.”

“Neither did I.”

Everyone searches for an explanation or a reason why we feel the way we do, fall for the last person on earth that we should. I was one of them, too, until Nyra crashed into me and made me realize that not everything has to have an answer. Sometimes the beauty lies in the forbidden and the unknown.

“Even if we had grown up together, it wouldn’t have mattered because my heart and soul will never have her in any other way besides being mine. All this distance has confirmed what I always knew: I can’t live without her. She’s not my other half, she’s my whole. My entire being. Nyra is my everything.”

Tears gather in my mother’s eyes when I look up, almost forgetting she was here while getting lost in the memories of Nyra. I don’t think it dawned on my mom until now about how deep my feelings ran for Nyra.

“Love works in mysterious ways, Riaan. Once the heart chooses to fall for someone, nothing else matters. No one can control who they fall in love with. Just like no one can control who stands in the way,” she softly replies and some of the weight lifts off my shoulder knowing I have someone on my side. “And the last thing you need is to be blamed or punished for it.”

“If only Auntie Sara was as understanding as you.”

“Just give her time and she’ll come around. She loves Nyra too much to stand in the way of her happiness, even if it may take a while,” she says comfortingly, her voice hopeful and sure. Next second, a spark glints in her gaze as she asks. “Now tell me how I can help.”

An hour later, I make my way out of the drawing room after I’m satisfied my plan is halfway into motion and all I have to do is count down the days.

I’m finally feeling like myself again after the wretchedness of the last month. Although it’s only been a whole fucking month since I’ve been apart from Nyra, it might as well been a lifetime. Time seems to stop when she’s not around.

A fresh wave of excitement thrums in my veins knowing it won’t be long until she is back.

I vow that this will be the first and the last time I spend days without Nyra.

Never again am I letting us go through this hellish torture.

I’m checking emails on my phone as I step out of the house, when I hear a vehicle pull up in the driveway and it’s none other than Zain’s car.

I haven’t seen him since the debacle in my office and if I thought my anger would lessen by now, but I was dead fucking wrong. I don’t think it ever will until I’ve punched his smug face.

He should count his lucky stars that I showed him mercy and didn't come after his pitiful existence.

On the other hand, I had expected retaliation. But so far, he's stayed silent and distant. I know it's all a ruse. A trap until he attacks. I know this because while he and I may have never fought with one another, that doesn't mean we haven't had our fair share of fights with others over the years.

Zain's not one to back down when someone's wronged him. The scary thing about him is that he's unpredictable yet calculative. Everything to him is a dare, a challenge, and as he's gotten older, they've only become worse.

You never know if he'll use his fists or his mind games.

Now that we're against each other, I can't let down my guard around him. I'm prepared for whatever he plans to throw my way.

My only weakness is Nyra, which he knows, so I'll have to be extra careful once she's back because he will use her to get back at me.

Naturally, I won't allow that.

Ignoring him, I walk toward my own car to avoid ruining my good mood. However, it's too late now because I've seen him.

I also don't want to cause a scene with our mom so close and make her worry for no reason. Our animosity should only remain between us.

"I'm surprised to see you here," he jabs but I don't react. Still, he doesn't relent, clearly looking for a fight. "Since you only loved to follow Nyra like a lost puppy. I wonder how Mom will feel about that."

Now I want to smirk because he couldn't be further away from the truth. I can't wait when he finds out, though.

"It's still my house, little brother," I remind him without turning around and unlock the car to sit behind the wheel, when his voice stops me in my tracks.

“How is Nyra, by the way?” he continues like we’re having a casual conversation. “Oh wait, she isn’t talking to you anymore. Well, it was only a matter of time before Auntie got through to her and made her realize what a mistake you were.”

Every bone in my body tightens and my shoulders pull tight at the smugness behind his voice. I’m tense at the fact that he can even imply it and not because he’s trying to drive a wedge between Nyra and me by playing at my fears.

Too bad he doesn’t know Nyra will never do that, no matter how many lies she spills.

He’s still holding on to his delusions that he did the right thing. And I’m afraid he might never let go of this sad illusion.

Something else that’s rubbing me the wrong way about his statement is the certainty with which he said it, like he knows more than I do. It unnerves me in an eerie way. If it were anybody else, I would probably let it slide but since it’s him, I cannot ignore it.

So, I decide to stay back and indulge him a little.

Maybe he’ll give something away.

Twisting around to face him, I find him leaning against his car with his hands in his pockets and his legs crossed.

Keeping my face impassive and my eyes pinned on him, I pull a cigarette from the pack in my suit jacket and light it up. While doing so, I watch him lose his patience and enjoy making him simmer in anger. I take my time while answering him.

“I see you didn’t learn your lesson, Zain.”

“Which is?” he sneers.

“That Nyra and my relationship is none of your fucking business,” I remind him calmly. “In fact, I don’t want to hear her name come out of your mouth ever again.”

I let my words sink in while he glares at me. Then, after throwing the butt of the cigarette to the side, I turn

around to leave.

“Or what?” he taunts. “I have got nothing left to lose, Riaan. But you do, especially our precious little cousin. If I choose to really hurt you, there’s nothing you can do about it. She doesn’t have to be in the same city for me to tear you both apart again, so better me careful, brother.”

My vision blackens in rage as he threatens me. Turning around, I cover the distance between us and grab his collar, not caring if anybody sees us. “What the fuck did you say?”

He grins like a maniac and threatens again, “Actually, I’d rather wait until she’s eventually back because guess who Auntie is going to trust the most to protect her from you? Me. She’ll be under my watch and I might just take a taste of her too. Maybe then, I’ll understand your obsession with her. I bet she’s a great fuck to have if she kept your attention for so long. I’m willing to share her if you—”

Before he can finish the thought, I pull back and smash my fist hard in his face. How fucking dare he threaten to touch what’s mine. Enraged and the only thought echoing in my mind to kill him for even thinking that he can lay a finger on my Nyra or go anywhere near her, I hit him harder.

I lose count of how many times I punch him until blood spills from his mouth and I hear the crack in his nose. The black rage I was holding back, that burned underneath my skin, comes out roaring like a lion. My only thought is to end him right here and now.

Somehow, through the fog of my blind fury, I realize he isn’t even fighting me back and only glares cockily while cuts and bruises decorate his face.

Shoving him backward until he smashes against the side of his car, I step back while my chest heaves in aggression, and the vein in my temple throbs incessantly.

I can’t believe there was a time when I thought I could trust him and expected him to be on my side. I couldn’t have been more fucking wrong.

The lines he's crossed are something I'll never forgive him for. He's no longer my little brother with whom I grew up side by side.

Despite the emotions running high between us as I glare at him, an ache forms in my chest that this is the end of our brotherhood. I bury that feeling while we are locked in a staring match.

"You so much as look in her direction, I will skin you alive and put you into the bloody ground," I warn him, my voice low with aggression while I somehow find the strength to not hit him again. "Brother or not."

Spitting blood on the ground, he cleans his mouth with the back of his arm and staggers back on his feet. I watch the cocky grin vanish from his face and darkness descends on his sharp features while he makes no attempt to come after me.

The look in his eyes tells me he knows our bond that was teetering on the edge has finally fallen.

"You can keep fighting the world as much as you desire, brother, but there will always be someone tearing you two apart," he warns, and then adds cryptically, "even if she comes back one day, she won't be the same girl you fell in love with."

Chapter Twenty-Two

NYRA

*Love makes us all do fucked-up things.
The kind of deeds we can never come back from.
Sins that we commit over again and again,
Until they irrevocably break our soul.
Or in my case... Sell my soul.
My first sin was falling for Riaan.
The second was betraying him.
And now I can't turn back from both.
I'm forever burdened with invisible scars that will
never heal,
Or wounds that will never seal.
The small hope I kept giving myself,
Has slowly vanished before my eyes.
Making darkness my new home.*

My fingers pause writing as I hear footsteps outside my bedroom door. I quickly close my diary and put it back in the bookshelf just as there's a knock on my door and it swings open with a soft click.

“Hey, *bacha*,” says my dad sweetly. My surprised gaze collide with his warm ones, not expecting him back from the office so early. It's only afternoon.

“Hi, Dad,” I reply. “You’re home early.”

“Thought I’ll take half a day off to spend time with my favorite daughter.”

“Don’t say that in front of Priyanka.”

He laughs and then winks. “It can be our little secret.”

The smile vanishes from my face in a flash.

Secrets are what has landed me here in the first place.

Somehow, they have become my worst enemy and nightmare wrapped in a deadly bow. Any more of them and they might just kill me.

I’ve come to realize it’s not the people that are dangerous but the web of lies and innocent secrets we wove ourselves, that push us into a dark void of our own making.

Dad senses the change in my mood and the energy in the room shifts from lighthearted to tensed and then suffocating. He steps farther inside my room and sits down on my bed across from me. He’s still staring lovingly at me. But now, worry has made its way on his face as well.

“I’m concerned about you, Nyra.” He finally addresses the elephant in the room. Ever since that night I eavesdropped on his conversation with my mother, I’ve been waiting for a moment to be alone with him. “You barely talk and are always hiding inside your room, especially this past week. It’s making me seriously worried. Talk to me about what’s bothering you, sweetie.”

I open my mouth to deny his well-meaning accusations, but words get stuck in my throat, heavy with emotions that I don’t want to name.

I look away from him, unable to handle his stare.

Tears don’t come anymore. It’s like I have lost the capacity to feel pain and shut all my feelings down.

Because if I won’t feel, none of it can touch me. Hurt me. *Kill me.*

“You said you were homesick, yet I haven’t once seen you happy ever since you’ve been back. At least you were pretending in the beginning and now you’ve just stopped caring altogether. Say something, Nyra,” he demands softly, as if dealing with a trapped bird in a cage.

What do I even say to him? That no matter what I do, I’m still losing everyone I love. That I’m imprisoned inside my own house. Unless he knows the complete truth, it’s all just a farce, worthless and unhelpful.

Maybe it would’ve been easier if Mom had just told him the truth. Then he could ignore me, too, and we won’t need to have this awkward conversation.

“I’m fine, Dad.”

“Don’t lie to me,” he scolds. “What happened in Pune?”

I clench my fists in my lap and inhale a deep breath. “Nothing.”

“Then why does your mom say otherwise?” I finally meet his shrewd gaze. “I gave you your space thinking you’re going through some teenage issues but the way you’ve been acting lately, I know it’s something far more serious. I just can’t sit by and watch you destroy yourself.”

If only he knew how far I’ve fallen down the rabbit hole.

“I made a mistake.” My voice comes out flat, small, and I see him go still, his mind on high alert. “And there’s no fixing it, Dad. If you knew, you’d never forgive me, and I can’t bear the thought of disappointing you.”

It’s like I’ve opened the tightly leashed door and words just spill out of my mouth, unstoppable and guilt-ridden.

“Is that the real reason she brought you home?”

“Mostly, yeah.”

“Look at me, *beta*.”

When I do, he beckons to come sit beside him. Gingerly standing up from my chair, I walk toward him and he wraps his arm around my shoulder, nestling me to his side. His closeness and warmth seeps into me and for the first time in over a month, I feel protected and cherished.

“Maybe I haven’t said it enough, but I love you more than life itself, Nyra. You can make a thousand mistakes and my feelings still wouldn’t waver. Each day, I’m proud of the woman you’re growing into and if somehow your fear of disappointing me is dulling your spark, I won’t have it.”

“Aren’t you curious to know what I did?”

“I trust you to tell me yourself when you’re ready,” he promises. “Nobody is perfect, *beta*. It’s the imperfections that makes us who we are.”

“What if it’s a mistake I don’t regret and I’m willing to make it again? That it’s only a fault in others’ eyes. Will you still love me?”

I hold my breath while I wait for his answer.

It has the power to either make or break everything.

“My love for you is unconditional and it will always be that way.” He takes my hand in his lap and squeezes. “I’ll always be by your side.”

Despite his promise, there’s still a small fear inside my heart and only time will tell if it’ll ever go away or not. Besides, as long as I stay away from Riaan, I may not even need to find out.

“Though that’s not all I came to talk to you about.”

“What else did you want to talk about?” I ask curiously.

“You need to forgive your mom, sweetheart. She’s hurting too much and you know I hate it when she’s upset.”

I pull away from him and angrily reply, “Why should I? She chose to ignore me, Dad. I did everything she asked of me and it still wasn’t enough.”

“Parents make mistakes too,” he reminds me. “If you deserve forgiveness, then so does she. Your mother has her own struggles that you have no idea of and it’s because she’s always hidden them well. You are her whole world, Nyra.”

“Is that why she’s taking pills again?” I finally demand, unable to keep it inside any longer. Dad’s shoulders tense and he stares at me in shock, so I confess, “I heard you talking about it with Mom.”

He sighs before answering, “Yes. She had to take them again when her nightmares and insomnia came back.”

“What do you mean came back?” I don’t tell him I caught her having one too.

I watch him struggle with whether or not to tell me and I’m about to let it go, when he speaks. “Your mother went through a traumatic experience when she was young and for some reason, those memories of hers have resurfaced.” When my eyes go wide, he reassures me, “Don’t worry, she is slowly getting better. Your mother is the strongest woman I know.”

“What happened to her?” I can’t help but ask. It’s exactly like I predicted. Though I don’t understand how it’s related to me.

“It’s not my story to share, sweetie. You can be angry at her all you want, but know that she was only trying to protect you and it took her a while to realize it wasn’t the right way. So give her a chance. Okay?” he coaxes softly.

“I will.”

He rises up to leave and when he’s almost at the door, he turns around and surprises me yet again.

“Also, you might wanna do it sooner because she and I have decided to send you back to Pune at the start of the new semester.”

Chapter Twenty-Three

NYRA

We're sending you back to Pune.

My father's words still haven't sunk in despite playing in my head on a loop since yesterday.

They were completely unexpected, unbelievable and a little bit dreadful to think about. I'm more concerned and flabbergasted that it was a mutual decision made by my parents.

How the hell did my mom even agree to it? Is this another one of her tricks? Or maybe a test?

It has to be the latter because there's no way she would be willing to send me back anywhere near Riaan unless she has a motive. Or have I become too cynical to believe she may have simply given me another chance? Perhaps it's an olive branch she's dangling over my head so we can mend our tumultuous relationship.

I honestly can't fucking decide.

Paranoia and trust issues will do that to you.

While she may want us to be closer again, she still doesn't trust me to stay away from Riaan. She will forever stand in my way, even if I fix the other mess created by Zain.

In fact, he's the last person she should trust, especially anywhere near me.

I have a tiny fear that she may have asked him to keep an eye on me while I'm there. A possibility I didn't think of until now. That's why her decision to send me back is unsettling me so damn much.

Yet all of it is overshadowed by the fact that there's only one more week left. Seven more days until I'm back where my heart, body, and soul belongs. My light. *My Riaan*.

Riaan is the only one I let inside my thoughts when I'm writing to him in my diary, which he will never read.

Uttering his name when I'm missing him too damn much. His broody eyes, possessive mouth, and intense protectiveness.

Dreaming of his memories when I'm aching for peace, the only balm to quiet my chaotic mind.

But does he even know I'm coming back?

I still haven't talked to him since that night. Because as soon as I woke up the next morning, I felt guiltier and selfish for using his weakness for me.

Suddenly, his own promise springs to the surface when he told me that he'll be by my side the moment I return. And if there is one fact I'm certain of, it's that he never ever breaks his promise.

The emotions I had buried and lost in the ominous darkness of the last month are now slowly finding their way back one by one. Some soothing. Some *haunting*.

More importantly, am I even ready to face my demons? Face Zain?

My mind screams a resounding no but my heart says yes. So much has happened in the past months that has broken me in unimaginable and irrevocable ways.

Some mornings it's a fight to get out of bed and face another tragic and hard day, never knowing what sick demand he has for me.

Somewhere in the back of my head, I knew I'll have to face him one day but now that it's a possibility, I'm nervous, scared, and doubting myself. Despite also knowing this, it's the only way to get out of his clutches and end this nightmare once and for all.

The more I circle that thought, the more I feel the fight inside me flare up.

It's small, but it's there.

Although my tormentor has been quiet lately. I should be glad he hasn't asked for more revealing and dirty pictures of me as a way to degrade and ruin me for Riaan, but I know it's only the silence before the storm. The calm before the hunt.

"Nyra."

My mom's apprehensive voice cuts through my subconscious and I sharply look up. I watch her take a step inside and notice the extreme nervousness on her face, even her color is slightly pale.

"Ma, are you okay?" Dad's words echoes from our last conversation.

She pushes her hair back that spills from her bun and gives a shaky smile as she nods. Taking a deep breath, she meets my gaze and speaks, "I want to share something with you that I haven't told anyone except your father. It will also explain a lot about my behavior in the last month." A sad chuckle spills from her lips before she speaks, "I was hoping to avoid it, but I can't live with you hating me forever, honey."

My heart cracks open at the remorse and fear in her eyes, and I begin to loathe myself even more than I already do. "I could never hate you, Ma."

"But there's no denying I've hurt you by pushing you away and handling everything wrong," she says, regret heavy in her voice. "I should've listened to your dad and taken my medication sooner."

"Why do you need them in the first place?" I ask.

She shivers despite no coldness in the room and her eyes ghost for a split second before returning to me. I sit with my legs crisscrossed on the bed to make space for her when she comes closer.

While she picks invisible lint off her dress and I patiently wait, sensing it must be hard for her to share the trauma she went through. Something she kept close to her heart all these years.

The worst part is that it's my fault because if it weren't for me, she wouldn't be reliving it again. After all, it's my actions that brought her memories back to her present.

"I was only three years older than you are right now when I got my first job in a big new city. It was also the first time I was going to be far away from home on my own. I can never forget how proud your Nana and Nani were of me when I told them." She's smiling even though there are shadows in her gaze. "I still remember being so nervous and excited at the same time. My stomach was a bundle of nerves and some nights I couldn't even sleep until the day finally came. The first few months were like a dream even while adjusting to being independent and I felt so strong and happy. Everything was perfect... Until it wasn't."

She stares at the wall in front of her while my attention is glued to her. The smile drops from her face and along with it, my heart as I feel the tension in her body, the soft tremble in her hands sitting on her lap.

This is a side of her I've never seen before and it fills me with dread because I know the other shoe is about to drop. Yet all I can do is sit and listen to the train wreck that I know is about to follow.

"I was young and a little bit naïve just like you. Always believed in the good in others, completely unaware of the danger surrounding me, lying in wait to turn my life upside down for years to come. I never even saw it coming until it was too late. The signs were there but I ignored them. All because I trusted easily. Trusted *him*."

Even before she says it, I already know the words about to spill from her mouth.

“I was sexually assaulted by a man who was supposed to be my protector.”

Time stands still as I absorb the truth, my ears ringing, and I blink, hoping I misheard her. There’s a clicking sound in my head as every little piece, every tiny detail, falls into place.

Her fear that Riaan may have done the same to me because he is my protector, too, but not in the way she wants.

If I were in her place, I probably would’ve assumed the same.

As it sinks in, I realize just how wrong and unfair I was to her the past two weeks. We both handled it terribly wrong.

“He attempted to rape me. But somehow, I found the strength to fight him and run away just in time. Yet those few minutes were enough to damage and scare me for life. He... uh, he was older, powerful, charming, and very close to our family that I never suspected he could do something like this. My parents trusted him to protect me from harm and instead, he tarnished that trust into shreds.”

“I-I’m s-sorry, Mom,” I whisper, and I shift closer to take her hand. But the second I touch her, she trembles and pulls away, as if she’s stuck in that moment again. I feel wetness on my wrist and I realize I’m crying. It only makes my tears fall harder as I feel a squeezing pain in my chest. “It’s just me.”

Her eyes meet mine and slowly, they recognize me and she gives a sad smile. It breaks my heart even more as I watch her be strong for me.

“Did you tell Grandpa?” I ask. “I hope he got him punished.”

A dry chuckle escapes her lips as she confesses, pulling the rug out from beneath me. “He... he didn’t believe me and neither did my mother.”

Horror etches on my face as I stare at her, dumbfounded. I swallow the bile rising in my throat from the shock. “How could they not believe you? Are you saying he never paid for his crimes?”

“Like I said, he was family and he had everyone fooled with his charm and well-respected reputation in the society. Nobody ever paid attention to the monster lurking beneath. I think my parents believed me,” she replies in a flat tone. “They didn’t just want to face the truth and fight against him. They told me to never speak of it again and to stay away from him, like I was ever going to willingly go anywhere near him again. Their reaction broke me in ways that my attacker never could and our relationship was never the same.”

“I can’t believe this,” I mutter to myself.

“It’s not that uncommon in families to push these kinds of incidents under the rug and continue living like nothing ever happened. It’s a sad reality, one I never dreamed I’ll ever face. After that, I couldn’t stay in the city so I came back home, tried to be strong for some time, compartmentalizing the memory, but it was the wrong coping mechanism. Eventually, it all became too much and I began having nightmares more frequently, getting spooked at the smallest touches, panic attacks, and my mental health took a hit.”

“What did you do?”

“Therapy was already a taboo subject in our family, so I knew there was no point in telling or discussing that with your grandparents. Besides, according to them, nothing bad occurred to their daughter. So, I found a doctor on my own and he recommended me some exercises to cope with my symptoms better and it took a while until it began to help me. I started to feel like my old self again and I was better until I crossed paths with him again.”

I become numb from dread as I listen to her and watch her face pale.

He hurt her this time, my mind whispers. But I hold hope to be proven wrong.

“We were at a family function so I knew he’d be there, but I thought I’ll be safe since I won’t be alone, but I was proved wrong. He was smug from getting away with it the last time and managed to corner and catch me unguarded.” The tremor in her voice matches my own as she continues, “He tried to touch me again but he was stronger and smarter so he predicted my moves easily. But what he didn’t know was that I also took self-defense classes and just when he thought he won, I stabbed him with a small knife I kept with me just in case. Instead of running away, I stood over him because in that moment, I realized no one was going to save me from him and only I could do it. So while he wailed on the floor clutching his wound, I cut him again and threatened to ruin his life if ever came after me again. When I saw the fear in his eyes, I knew I’d had won against my monster.”

“Why didn’t you go to the police?”

“I know I should’ve so he couldn’t hurt anybody else, but I just wanted to forget and move on. I was young with nobody to rely on and I didn’t want to get sucked into fighting a losing battle and damaging my mental health more than it already was. I had no evidence against him and he could’ve easily twisted the truth by calling me a liar and saying I stabbed him.” She pushes a tear away as it falls down her cheek and whispers, “I was weak and I wanted to just forget.”

“Did you forget?”

“No,” she softly replies. “But unlike those years ago, I have your father who’s my rock and chases away my demons. His love is all the remedy I need.”

“Who was he, Ma?” I dare to ask. “Does Dad know?”

A frightened look crosses her eyes which she tries to hide but it’s too late. I hope she cut ties with him and never had to run into him again. Men like him hardly ever change.

“No and you don’t need to know either. All that matters is that he will never harm me again,” she says firmly. “Besides, he has his own family now. Wife and kids.”

That's even more fucked up. Predators like him, who escape unscathed and are never held accountable, shouldn't be allowed to live normal lives. It's unfair and cruel. Does his family even know the truth about him? I bet they don't. I wish someday he receives the punishment he deserves.

Shifting closer, I take my mom's shaking hands and reassure her by keeping my voice soft yet firm.

"You're not weak, Ma. The fact that you defended yourself, became stronger, and made a life for yourself, it all proves just how much of a fighter you truly are. You did what you had to survive and nobody can say otherwise," I repeat confidently, and then I apologize, "I'm so sorry I unintentionally brought up all the bad memories for you and put you through hell."

"Aww, baby." She pulls me into her arms as I sob. "It's not your fault. Don't you dare blame yourself."

"If you hadn't seen me with Riaan, none of this would have happened."

"Look at me." She tilts my face toward her and speaks, "My past is something I struggle with when the memories become too much but none of it was triggered by you, okay? When I caught you with Riaan and saw the tears on your face, him holding you tight, I immediately thought he was forcing himself on you and hurting you. I was scared that I might have been too late to save you. Even though my fears were false, he's still the wrong man for you, Nyra. He can only ever be your cousin."

"I understand but I can't turn off my feelings for him like a switch, Ma. I know you don't want to hear this but Riaan's my first love. My only love. My soul mate." I blink back the unshed tears as they burn the corners of my eyes when I whisper, "And if I can't be with him, I'll never be with another man."

"Honey—"

"No." I shake my head. "I'll respect your wishes but you also have to respect mine."

We stare at each other and I don't waver under the pleading and depressing look in her eyes. She must see the determination set in mine because she sighs and cups my face in her palm while nodding.

“Okay, baby.” Rubbing my tears away, she wraps both her arms around me after denying it to me for two long months, and it feels like coming home. “For what it's worth, I'm sorry to be the cause of your broken heart, Nyra. I can only hope one day you forgive me and believe I was only trying to protect and do what's best for you.”

We hold each other quietly for a few more minutes while I think about all that she's been through and even though she doesn't realize it, her experience has given me the strength I felt missing all this time. Despite the tragic circumstances she dealt with, she never once gave up.

She fought against her monster, healed the scars he left, and came out powerful. She crumbled but she got right back up. I decide I must do the same.

That flare of fight I felt earlier is now a full-blown fire burning in my veins. And it will only be doused by Zain's blood.

I am my mother's daughter, after all.

I won't rest until I've slayed my monster too.

Part III

Chapter Twenty-Four

NYRA

(A week later)

Some see the world as full of colors.

Some only see it as black and white.

Well... I only ever saw it as different shades of fucked up. Morally twisted and a cacophony of condemnation.

You hate someone, you're condemned.

You *love* someone, you're still damned.

For fuck's sake, I'm the living, breathing proof of this poetic yet sick tragedy. I've been crushed, shamed, and broken, yet I'm still standing despite the cracks in my armor.

Because while the world is full of cruelty and duplicity, the people in my life make it all worth it. They are the only ones that matter.

The universe will never be on my side but my family will always be, no matter the ups and downs. They showed it to me as we spent time my last week here at home together before I left for Pune.

It has been a whirlwind, to say the least. It flew by in the blink of an eye. Mostly because I wasn't stalked by a dark cloud hanging over my head, casting a permanent shadow over any kind of semblance of peace I could steal.

Don't get me wrong, it's still there. But the opaque blackness has now settled into shades of gray. Tamer for now but still deadly as ever.

For now, I'm ignoring it like a pro.

My mother and I are closer than ever after our talk the other day. It was quite therapeutic, healing me emotionally. Her past made me see her in a whole new light and as tragic as it was, it also gifted me with hope. She was blindsided and betrayed by someone she was supposed to trust just like I am.

But unlike her, I know exactly who the monster is and it will end up being his weakness. His downfall.

"Did you get all your bags, Nyra?" asks my dad once we stand outside Pune Airport.

Did I mention the best part about last week? It was the brightest and the biggest smile on my dad's face as soon as he saw my mom and I together, holding hands.

I swear he had tears brimming in his eyes and so much satisfaction. I knew he could no longer see the shadows in our eyes or the weight drowning us. I didn't absorb until that moment just how much the fight between Mom and I was hurting him.

"Yeah, Dad," I reply again, even though he's asked me twice already. I suspect he's looking for any reason to stay longer with me.

"What about you, honey? Priyanka?" he then asks my mom and sister, who are standing beside me.

Surprise! My mom and my sister both came to drop me off, and turned it into a farewell. They said they regretted not doing it last time while Pri only came to get a tour around my campus, especially that freaking library she's obsessed with. Little does she know, it might not be possible as we only have until evening.

"Honey, stop. Nothing is missing." She rolls her eyes at him and then points behind him. "Now, go get us a cab so we can help Nyra settle into her new apartment."

While he goes, I gaze around me and my mind takes me back to the last time I was here with only my mom. That night, I was so heartbreakingly sure that I wouldn't be returning back to Pune. It had felt like a goodbye to the life I was building here. Like it was all coming to an end.

I may be back but nothing is the same.

I *am* not the same.

Since this morning, the adrenaline is pumping heavy in my veins at the long day ahead of me and until now, it kept me distracted from the turbulent thoughts of Riaan. However, the second my feet touched the ground, I could feel it slowly vanishing.

His last words haven't stopped echoing inside my head. Every hour that passes, the louder they become.

I know I'm supposed to stay far away from him, but still my eyes searched for him and when I didn't see him, a pang of disappointment hit me in the chest. If his absence alone is making me so weak, how the hell am I supposed to resist him when I run into him.

How the fuck am I supposed to push him away when he touches me?

Combat my feelings when he calls me his?

Fight a *losing battle*?

These thoughts plagued my mind, but I wasn't prepared for the power behind them until now and it's not even been a day. Just then, I twist and my gaze locks on my parents, my mom helping Dad with the suitcases, and the tension in my mind and body settles into calm. I can't put them through all of the trouble yet again. Hence, I must stay strong.

I have one goal and it's to stop Zain from hurting us again.

"Di, come on." Pri waves toward the cab as she calls out to me.

Since it's not compulsory to stay at the dorms after the first semester, my parents decided I should stay at a rented

apartment. We tried to find one near my campus but since I was late, all of them were already filled because students search for months in advance as most prefer to live off-campus.

At last, we found one that happened to be a little bit far but came with top-notch security and the building happens to be stunning.

I was a little surprised at the cheap rent because the area it was in is one of the most expensive ones and they were willing to let a single girl live on her own when they usually prefer families.

It struck me as odd so I asked my dad about how he found it in the first place but he shushed me, saying it didn't matter.

Two hours of slow-moving traffic and unpredictable rain for half of the ride, we finally arrive at my new home for the foreseeable future.

The high-rise building is every bit as stunning as the pictures I saw online. As obsessed as I am with the show *Friends*, it doesn't come as a surprise that I've always wanted to live in an apartment. Even if it's without a roommate.

I had asked Monica if she wanted to come live with me, but since she wasn't sure when I'll be coming back, she decided to rent with the other girls from her class. Both of us were extremely disappointed, and of course, her being dramatic as hell, she gave me hell for not asking her sooner.

Even if we are not officially staying together, I have a feeling she'll be at my place most of the time. When I expressed that, she said damn right she will. It put a huge grin on my face.

"I can't believe you'll be living here," says Pri in awe while gawking at the building. I can't help but join in her excitement.

"Jealous?" I tease.

She hits me with her small fist before retorting, "Whatever. My day will come soon."

The four of us walk toward the lobby and one of the doormen runs behind us to grab our bags, informing us it will be brought up to my floor. The other opens the door for us and my eyes bug out at the décor inside.

There's a sitting area in the corner with two wide sofas, beautiful plants on each side, and the glass wall through which we can see outside. Right in front of me is a short hallway with two elevators where one is marked private.

The whole atmosphere screams extravagance but subtle and now I'm even more eager to see my apartment. When my gaze meets Pri's, I know she's having the same thought.

"Sweetie, your room is on the twelfth floor. How about you, Pri, and Mom go upstairs while I go get the keys from the broker and meet you there?"

"Sure, honey," my mom replies while I nod.

Inside the elevator, I gaze at myself in the mirror behind me. My eyes are dull and I notice dark circles peeking out from underneath despite the concealer. My jet-black hair is now longer, almost reaching my waist. I've also lost some weight due to the stress, which Mom pointed out the other day.

I promised her I'd take better care of myself when she blamed herself.

Mending my relationship with her has helped but I still struggle with sleeping at night, afraid of the nightmares that await me.

Sometimes, it's the faceless man touching me, taunting me, and other times, it's my pictures getting leaked to the world. I wake up every morning and wish for them to stop but they never do.

"Nyra!"

I blink back into focus and notice we have reached our floor while Mom stares at me in concern and Pri stares suspiciously. Immediately, I smile at them sheepishly.

"Sorry. I got lost in my thoughts."

“Distracted by your own beauty? That’s a first,” teases Pri with a chuckle.

“Shut up.”

She’ll never know, but she was the only bright spot during my darkest days. Her light humor, and spending time with me whether to watch movies or just have a silly conversation, kept me from going into a dark hole.

A minute later, Dad joins us and opens the lock. Pri rushes past me into the hallway and I follow her as she spins around in a circle in the living room.

My eyes seems to take it all in at once, amazed by the fact that my apartment is even more dreamy than I expected. Spacious, fully furnished, and bright from the floor-length glass leading into a balcony with a breathtaking view of the cloudy sky.

A little farther on my right is an open kitchen slash dining area. To my left, down the hall, there are two doors facing each other. Before I can even ask if there are two bedrooms, Pri answers for me.

“Why the hell would Di need two bedrooms, Papa?” she comments.

“I assumed her friend Monica will move in with her so they could have separate rooms,” he replies, then shrugs. “Never mind. She can use it when they have sleepovers.”

Time goes by quickly as the four of us spend next few hours exploring the rooms, making sure everything is in perfect condition, and then Mom helps me with unpacking.

Dad and Pri go downstairs to get the food we ordered online since none of us wants to waste time going to a restaurant, especially with the traffic in the city.

“Come sit with me for a minute, sweetie.” Mom pats the seat next to her.

“Yeah?”

“I just want to make sure you’re okay with living on your own. I know you’ve had a rough two months and it will

take time for you to heal. If you want, I could stay with you for a few days.”

I ponder over her words before answering her and feel this is the right step for me to move forward. I felt imprisoned at home, like my choice was taken away and I had no control over my life.

Being on my own is exactly what I need—no, *crave*—to get that power back.

“I’m happy to be here, Ma. I can’t stay locked away anymore, putting my life on pause, and I just want to be around my friends, focus on my studies instead of constantly worrying. Do you feel me?” I softly explain to her.

She smiles and caresses my head. “Of course. You’ll be just fine.” Pulling me into her arms, she hugs me tight. “Just promise me if you ever need me, you won’t hesitate to call me. No more secrets, Nyra.”

“I promise.”

Both of us pull away when we hear footsteps outside. Her eyes are shining with emotions and she rubs a wayward tear away before Dad enters the room. The delicious smell of the food makes my stomach growl, making us all laugh. Quickly, we settle on the dining table and dig into our dinner.

Evening comes fast enough until it’s time for them to leave for the airport. I’m unable to keep my emotions at bay as I walk them over to the front door.

There is a reluctance in their stance but they know they have to go. They take turns hugging me and telling me they’ll miss me. Tears soak my face and I smile through them as I wave my family goodbye until the elevator door closes, leaving me alone in the lobby.

Locking my door, my head thuds against it as I swallow the tears back. The apartment feels too empty all of a sudden so I walk to the balcony. The chilly breeze teases my face as I stare at the view, the lights twinkling under the moonlight. A single thought rushes through me.

I’m finally home.

My body jerks back when I hear my doorbell ring, and my brows pull together at who it could be. It's only been a hot minute since my family left. Since I'm not expecting anyone, I assume they forgot something, most likely Pri. So, I rush inside and walk past the hallway.

I twist the lock and swing it open. "Pri, did you for—"

The words die on my tongue as a full-body shiver runs down my spine.

"I've missed you, *my little liar.*"

Chapter Twenty-Five

NYRA

Every sense I possess, which lay dormant until this moment, heightens all at once at his dominating and powerful presence.

Each fighting to attack me at once, rendering me speechless, breathless, and so still. My heart thumps against my ribs, slow but harder with each exhale.

His woody scent fills my nostrils like a hit of cocaine, bringing me back to life.

His voice—dripping with possession, heat, and longing—reaches my ears and settles deep in my bones and my bloodstream.

And my eyes they blink rapidly, afraid I'm hallucinating. Scared he'll disappear if I close them for even a nanosecond.

“Riaan.” My voice cracks, drowning in him.

He remains standing tall and imposing at my doorstep. My gaze runs over every delicious inch of him, knowing I'm not dreaming. *He's here, like he promised.*

“Aren't you going to invite me in, Nyra?” he says with a smirk, but his black eyes are stormy, dark, and vivid.

“You shouldn't be here,” I whisper. Biggest lie if there ever was one. Still, I don't make any move to shut the door.

His lips press into a thin line, making his rugged face appear sharper and scarier, but he's still handsome as ever. Our eyes stay locked as my words hang in the air, the silence becomes thick, and my heart begins to race.

Breathlessly, I take him in from head to toe, noticing his hair looks rumpled in a sexy way, falling over his forehead. One would assume he was going for a boyish look. However, he can't pull it off.

Riaan is all man.

And a really *sexy* one at that.

Broad shouldered, tapered waist, muscles stretching his black suit jacket... who could resist such a fine specimen of a man? Not me, that's for sure.

His hands remain in his pockets, bearing the tension in his relaxed posture. He looks like he came straight from the office, his tie gone and top buttons undone, teasing me with a glimpse of his skin where I want to run my fingers.

If it's even possible, he's become even more intense and unflinching. Like nothing could penetrate those walls.

And yet, they hide nothing from me.

Underneath that hard exterior, there's also deep yearning and softness in his stare as he watches me under hooded eyes. When his body shifts slightly, I realize he's barely holding himself back from taking me into his arms.

His chest beats a steady rhythm as electricity crackles and sizzles in the thin air between us. My body swaying toward him, as if it has a mind of its own, and puts us out of the trance we got sucked in.

My grip slips from the doorknob as he steps forward and locks us inside.

I swallow and back away slowly. Each step he takes, I take one back until we are dancing and circling each other down the dimly lit hallway. I'm a mess, a bundle of nerves, while he's all calm and lethal. I suck in a gasp when I realize he's enjoying the chase, the push and pull we're doing.

His eyes gleaming with intent.

He knows he'll catch me. I can never outrun him when he's so close.

Doesn't he realize if he touches me, I'll crumble? Why am I so weak when it comes to him?

The answer always eludes me.

“Riaan.” That one word sounds like a plea to my ears.

He shakes his head, never stopping the chase. He backs me into a corner, away from the bedrooms, so I can't run and lock myself in there. Not that it would have stopped him.

The darkness has fallen and since I haven't turned on the lights, the soft moonlight flickers over his chiseled face. I find it rather fitting for the hunter stalking his prey.

My eyes narrow when he pulls to a stop, a ghost of a smile appears on his lips but before I can take a relieved breath, my back collides against the couch.

Fuck! I'm trapped.

He beckons me closer with his finger and my stomach hollows while my core betrays me by clenching. Even silent, he's every bit as commanding. Every bit as demanding. He doesn't need words to make his presence known or to make people kneel at his feet.

My wide eyes look anywhere but at him, seeking a way to get away before his control snaps and he grabs me.

“Don't deny me, Nyra. I told you I was going to be by your side the second you returned.” His voice comes out as a low growl. “No more hiding. No more *distance*.”

I don't think, I just run past him.

I don't even make it two feet before I'm lifted off the ground by his arm around my waist. A soft cry slips past my lips as he pushes us against the glass wall of the balcony and lowers me until I'm standing on my own.

I don't dare touch him, afraid I'll never want to let go.

His musky and addictive scent invades all my senses. The familiarity making me feel nostalgic.

I shut my eyes when his hand circles my throat and tilts my head backward, pressing on my pounding pulse. His touch sears my skin and I want to moan at the pleasure he evokes. I want to cry from the satisfaction when I don't flinch at his contact.

I was afraid Zain had broken me. Because until now, I felt repulsed by my own skin.

Only a single touch from Riaan and it all goes away.

I know it'll return once I'm alone and that brings me sadness. I'm forgetting Riaan isn't mine anymore. He can never be.

"Look at me." He grip slides to my jaw and his fingers stroke my bottom lip, where I'm biting too hard. He rubs his fingers back and forth and soothes the sting away. I feel his forehead touch mine as he says so reverently and hungrily, "Please, baby."

Each word is spoken with a soft kiss on my eyelids and I can feel his stare burning into mine. Hating the ache in his voice, I slowly open my eyes and meet his dark ones. Our breaths mingle as we become lost in each other.

It's as if we're seeing each other after years and not just two months.

"Do you know how much I've missed holding you like this? To have you in my arms again? To see your beautiful face that haunts me every night in my dreams?" His voice lowers, and I can hear the rough edge in it as he growls, "Did you really think I would waste another second in coming after you the moment I knew you were back? Tell. Me."

"No. I knew you'd come," I say as a tear slips down my cheek, but he roughly pushes it away. "But you shouldn't have because nothing's changed. I... I still can't be with you, Riaan."

"I used to love the sight of your tears as you shattered in my arms. But now," He confesses, his lips curling

downward as his thumb rubs another away, “I hate them more than anything. The only tears you deserve are the happy ones. You deserve to smile, laugh, and feel all the pleasure in the world, Nyra. Let me give them to you.”

His palm cups my face and my hands instinctively fist his shirt as my feet almost give out from under me at the impact of his vow. But he’s there to catch me so I can lean on him. Always close, and never leaving me alone. My body molds against his, fitting perfectly like I belong there.

Only, I can’t make my home in them.

Not with so many secrets and lies between us. It hasn’t even been minutes and I’m already losing my fight. I’m slowly crumbling.

All he has to do is make a tiny crack on the walls I’ve erected, and I feel my resolve shattering. Brick by brick.

Can’t let that happen.

I try to pull away, unable to handle his quiet intensity, but he tightens his hold.

“You need to leave,” I try to appear strong, but my voice doesn’t come out firm.

When I push against him again, harder this time, he slides his hand around the back of my neck in a tight grip. I feel his mouth inch lower to my ear, and I shudder when he nips my earlobe between his teeth.

All trace of softness vanishes from his body as he holds me hostage for another second before pulling back, staring down at me.

“Did you forget my promise, my little liar?”

Chapter Twenty-Six

RIAN

Starved.

All these months, I was fucking starving for this woman. My hunger for her can never be quenched. Her shy eyes always stared at me like I'm her whole world. Yet tonight, they are guarded, dim and shining with tears. I still can't get enough of them.

They hold mine captive, ensnaring and tying me to her.

Her soft pants reach my ears, drawing my attention to her wildly beating pulse on her neck, and her supple lips that I ache to kiss and taste. *Very soon...* I promise myself. But first, she and I need to talk, so there's no mistaking my intentions for our future.

I pull back slightly while her warmth seeps into mine as I take in every tempting, delicious inch of her lithe body. Satisfaction hums through my veins that I finally have her in my arms, physically touching and holding her and not just imagining her.

The collar of her loose crop top has fallen off one shoulder, making me want to mark her skin with my teeth. She trembles when I trace her toned stomach visible between her top and denim jeans. But it's the sight of her long silky hair, which touch the top of her hips that brings new fantasies to

life, is what makes my cock twitch. I hope she never cuts her hair short.

She must witness the heat in my eyes at my blatant perusal of her body because her hand lowers to pull her top down. She's forgetting every inch of her naked body is seared into my brain. And when she squirms again, I pinch her waist to make her body go still.

"Riaan!" She sucks in a breath.

I wasn't surprised when she backed away, scared shitless as soon as she saw me standing at her doorstep, just a minute after her family had left. In fact, I was looking forward to her fight.

Her lies don't stand a chance against my determination.

It won't be long until I've uncovered the real reason why she pushed me away that night. I won't rest until I know just how much she's been through these last two months.

Because while she says nothing's changed, the truth is *everything* has. I'm not the same person I was two months ago and neither is she.

Our hearts bear invisible scars.

There's a darkness and brokenness inside her that wasn't there before. There are ghosts shadowing her eyes that I want to slay for her.

Suddenly I hate how much Zain's words ring true. But I will prove him wrong about one thing and that's making her mine. For forever this time.

She will push and challenge me every step of the way but I'm prepared for her every defense. She has no idea just how much of her world I'm going to turn upside down.

I intend to complete all my vows that I made to her because letting her go just isn't an option. Before my thoughts can escalate into dangerous territory, I focus my attention back on her.

"Do you need a reminder, Nyra?" I taunt, not easing my grip on her neck.

My question hangs in the air while she stares at me nervously and I know she remembers. There's no way my dark promises didn't haunt her. No way she didn't want it to be true. Still, she remains quiet and I harden my gaze.

“So that's how you want to play it, huh?” She looks away, as if it'll protect her. “Eyes. On. Me.”

They connect back with mine and I shift closer until she has to tilt her head back. I can see her building her walls back up to block me out, but it's a futile attempt.

She could never hide from me.

Her mind and body knows who's her protector, because whenever she'd been at her lowest, she reached out to me. I still haven't forgotten that late night-call and the stark fear in her voice.

“Riaan, please... just go. Every time I have to push you away, it hurts my heart twice as much. I can't handle doing it over and over again.” She finally speaks but it isn't what I want to hear. I try to bury the pain and the anger that returns with a vengeance but fail. “If I chose you, I lose my parents. My dad still doesn't know.”

“I told my mom about us.”

“What!?” she says loudly and jerks against my hold. I reluctantly let her go and give her some space.

Shoving my hands inside my pockets, I lean back against the couch and I don't miss how she stares at my body hungrily and longingly.

She craves my touch just as much as I love her skin against mine. My hands clench into fists for putting even this small amount of distance between us.

“In fact, she's the reason you're here.”

Her mouth opens and closes as she tries to form coherent words at the shocking news. Like I said, she's not prepared for me this time.

I thought I'd ease her into her new reality but rarely anything goes as planned, at least it never has with us. I see

her struggle, knowing she must have questions running through her pretty little head.

“And she approves of us?” she asks, flabbergasted.

“Yes,” I state, not surprised when her eyes go wide. My mom’s blessing wasn’t something I expected either but I’m grateful nonetheless.

“How can she?”

“Because unlike your mom, she doesn’t give a shit that we are cousins,” I answer through clenched teeth and then soften my voice. “To her, the only thing that matters is that we love each other and she’ll never stand in our way.”

“Y-You’re lying.”

“You’re the only liar in this room.” She flinches and I shrug. “Call my mom and she’ll tell you the same thing.”

I watch her pace while processing the truth even though she’s missing the most important detail, and I wait until she realizes it. A second later, her back goes rigid and she slowly faces me.

“Wait... What do you mean she’s the reason I’m here, Riaan?” Nyra cautiously asks.

I don’t hide the dark smirk on my face while I stand to my full height, towering over her small frame. Stepping in her space again, I cage her in my arms. “Did you think it was a coincidence I knew you were coming today and that I knew exactly which apartment you’ll be staying at? Or how I was at your door the second your family left?”

“What did you do?” Her teeth bite her lip nervously.

“You’re looking at your landlord, baby. I own this apartment.” The priceless doe-eyed look on her face makes all the trouble I went through to buy this place worth it. “You’ll be under my roof and under my watch.”

“No!” She gasps.

“You’re not in control anymore, my little liar.” I remind her of her new reality and my promise as I trace her

jaw with my knuckles. “I’ll be worse than your shadow. All your secrets, your dirty lies... There’s no use hiding them anymore. There’s no corner in this city you can hide, no one you can run to... Only *me*.”

“We are not living together,” she stubbornly says.

“It’s cute you think I’m giving you a choice.”

“I’ll fight you.”

“You better.” I smile at her threat. “It’ll make my victory all the more sweet.”

“I’ll ask Monica to move in with me.”

I chuckle at her last attempt and the contentment I feel sparring with her after so long. It thrills me to no end. The emotion I’ve been missing has my heart soaring. God! How the hell did I survive without her? That will never happen again.

“We do have two rooms,” I reply. “But since I plan to fuck you around every surface of this apartment, it might become a bit awkward for you two.” Dropping my voice low, I tease, “Or maybe you’ll like that. You always came harder whenever we had an oblivious audience.”

I have to clench my jaw when her nipples harden against the thin material of her top. Her chin lifts higher as she exhales a rough breath. “Ugh... You wouldn’t.”

“If you think your friend is going to keep me away from you, then I obviously haven’t made my intentions clear,” I say as I circle her throat.

“Riaan!”

Unable to resist the draw of her tempting mouth, I lean down and trap her bottom lip. Pulling it between my teeth for a second, I let go and soothe the sting with my tongue.

Lust clouds her eyes as her own tongue sneaks out to taste where I had nipped her.

My dick hardens painfully and the beast in me roars to claim her right here against the wall. Somehow, I find the

strength to inch away and lower my hands to my sides.

“I’m done hiding our relationship, Nyra.”

Before she can open her mouth again, I bend down and throw her over my shoulder, carrying her toward one of the bedrooms. Or should I say *our* bedroom. With her ass in my face, I squeeze it in my palm and spank it hard when she yells at me to put her down. *Stubborn little girl.*

“Don’t you dare go into my bedroom.” *Slap.*

It won’t be long until I have her calling it our bedroom. Once inside the room on the right, I softly throw her body on the bed and she bounces twice before settling down.

My devouring eyes are stuck on her top as it rides up her stomach, baring her black lacy bra. Fuck! Her heavy tits are going to be the death of me.

Keeping my eyes trained on her, I remove my suit jacket and her throat bobs as she swallows. Knowing how much she loves my body, I take my time unbuttoning my shirt until I’m standing naked from the waist up.

She tries hard to not lower her gaze but fails.

Her thighs squirm while she licks and bites the corner of her lip, her gaze stuck on my abs. I bet her pussy will be dripping if I checked.

I clear my throat and she looks up, blushing a cherry red. She tries to cover it up by lifting her chin. Next, I unclasp my belt and pull it through the loops. Throwing it on the chair in the corner, I unbutton my pants and before I can lower the zipper, she scrambles off the bed, then stands on the opposite side.

“I’m not going to fuck you.”

I hold back my grin. She can be so naïve and stupidly stubborn sometimes. It only makes me want to bend her to my will harder.

“Come here,” I order.

She stares defiantly and crosses her arms, which pushes her breasts up. They always make my mouth water, especially now that they are close enough to touch. They would look so pretty and filthy painted in my cum. The way they jiggle when I spank them, her dark brown nipples turning into hard little nubs when I tease them with my tongue, pinch and bite them with my teeth... lives in my head rent-free.

“Don’t make me repeat myself, Nyra.” I harden my voice. “Come. Here.”

Upon hearing the authoritative tone in my voice—one she knows not to disobey—she licks her lip and her pupils dilate. Yeah, right, she won’t fuck me. *Little liar.*

I hide my smirk when she sweetly obeys and covers the distance between us. Her steps are small and nervous, injecting more blood straight to my cock. God, I love making her squirm.

When she’s close enough to touch, I hook my finger in her waistband and pull her flush against my chest.

She fucking trembles and a shiver goes down her spine as her hands land on my chest. The skin-on-skin contact makes me want to do so many filthy things to her.

But instead, I lean down and put my mouth against her ear. Again, a tremor runs through her, electricity humming in the air, sizzling with need and tension. One she desperately tries to mask.

Too bad, her body knows who it belongs to.

“You’re not going to fuck me, huh?” I murmur and lightly bite her earlobe.

She sucks in a sharp breath, getting on her tiptoes, and nods, all her boldness and sassiness gone. The second I feel her body go lax as I run my knuckles up and down her arm, I take her hair in my fist and sharply pull until her neck is bared and her lust-filled eyes clash against my feral ones.

“Good. ’Cause it’ll be me doing all the fucking while you take me like my good little girl. When I say I want to fuck your cunt, you’re going to spread your legs and take every

inch of my cock. You're going to scream my name and beg for more." I growl and a needy whimper escapes her lips. "The only time you're going to fuck me is when I allow you to ride my dick. Besides, you haven't earned it back yet."

Controlling myself, I ease my grip on her hair and let it flow down her back.

My body is burning up from smelling her arousal and denying myself of her sweet taste. But now isn't the right time to let lust cloud my judgment.

I crave her body underneath mine, which she could never deny me, but it's her heart that I want more than anything.

"Wear my shirt and get in bed, baby," I tell her, knowing she must be tired after the long day she's had. Despite the makeup she's wearing on her face, I can see the dark circles under her eyes. Still, they can't disguise her radiant beauty.

"But—"

I put my finger on her lips to shush her. "Fight me all you want tomorrow, sweetheart. Okay?"

"Okay," she murmurs back.

Once she's gone inside the attached bathroom to change, I breathe a sigh of contentment and utter relief that she's back. The restlessness and urgency I felt finally settles into calmness and happiness. I take the rest of my clothes off and go lie down on the bed.

My mind takes me back to that night I got her phone call. I had never felt so scared, worrying I might have been too late. So, it was a huge relief to know she still has her fire and sass.

It means I can still save her from whatever—or, *whoever*—is tormenting her.

It's also one of the many reasons why I always want her close to me. She has no clue I have cameras placed all over the apartment but it's for her own protection.

I'm not taking any chances when it comes to her safety, especially with Zain still out there, pissed and hungry for blood. I'll die before I let him harm my Nyra or lay even a single finger on her.

I'm pulled out of my dark thoughts when the bed dips and I turn to see Nyra slide under the covers. A smile tugs at my lips when she stays close to the edge, even putting a pillow in the middle of the bed to put some distance between us. Her attempts at keeping me at arm's length are just too adorable and surprisingly entertaining.

Throwing the joke of a pillow aside, I stretch my arm and drag her to my side, her back against my naked chest.

Like a glove, she fits me perfectly.

Satisfaction swells inside my chest when she doesn't pull away and sighs heavily, but I know she's happy inside.

"Why did I even bother?" she grumbles and I only hold her tighter.

"No more space," I whisper in her ear and place a soft kiss underneath. "Sleep now, my little liar."

Chapter Twenty-Seven

NYRA

I feel the presence of a warm and hard body pressed against my back, the scent addictive and familiar. A heavy arm lays across my breasts, cupping one of them while calloused fingers tease my nipple, rubbing it back and forth. The pleasure shoots down my spine and elicits an ache in my core.

My body says to relax and bask in the heat that rocks me.

Yet my mind doesn't cooperate.

Because my nightmare always starts this way. It fools me into safety, only to use my body against me as a weapon, a trap that lands me into the arms of my monster.

One whose blurry face I can never see.

Always taunting me, taking what only belongs to Riaan.

So, before I become paralyzed by the fear, I push against those hands but like always, they tighten their hold. I can never seem to get away.

Tears that feel way too real soak my cheeks as I beg, "Please don't. Let me go."

Riaan's voice calls my name but it sounds close yet too far away. Is this some new trick my fear is playing on me?

I struggle harder, my brain hazy and those hands continue holding me down.

He's coming. I just know it.

Maybe if I keep my eyes shut, he won't hurt me. Because today, this nightmare feels too real. It's like I'm surrounded by the scent of Riaan, his worried voice calling for me, but I know it's bait. He's not here. He's never here.

I kick my legs and shake my head. "You won't taint me."

"Nyra! Wake up!"

Suddenly, a hand wraps around my throat and squeezes slightly. The threat of losing my air makes me wrench my eyes open and jerk awake with a gasp.

Instantly, the hand on my throat moves to cup my face carefully and I stare into the black-as-night eyes of Riaan, watching me from above with concern and fear.

I blink to make sure I'm not stuck in my nightmare, afraid my tormentor's face will replace his. My heart beats a frantic rhythm and I run my hands all over Riaan's face, his neck and chest, to make sure he's real. He saved me... *for now.*

"You're here," I whisper with a cry of relief, tears silently falling down my face.

He turns his head slightly to lay a kiss on my open palm without taking his eyes off me. "I'm right here, baby. You're safe." *No, I'm broken.*

My sweat-dampened hair sticks to my forehead and he pushes the strands away from my face. It takes me a while to realize I'm not in my old bedroom at home but in Pune.

I must have confused Riaan's touch with my monster. No wonder it felt real.

Last night, sleep came to me peacefully and it was because of being in the safe arms of Riaan. My subconscious must have trusted him to keep the nightmares away.

Morning light pours into the room and I take stock of my surroundings as the events of yesterday flash behind my eyes. I'm still shocked that Riaan is my landlord.

His calculative streak never ceases to amaze me. He must have been planning it all along. It makes me wonder what else he has up his sleeves.

I also should've known he wouldn't stay away from me. His determination to make me his again is much stronger than my determination to keep him at bay.

We're caught in a battle of strong wills, and neither of us is willing to admit defeat. It can only bring the worst kind of chaos. Sometimes, it feels like we thrive on it.

I haven't even wrapped my mind around the fact that he told his mom about us or the fact that she's on our side. It should give me hope, but it only fills me with more dread.

And no matter how my heart soars at being with him, I can't lower my defenses.

I can't let him back into my life, only to destroy us again.

I have a feeling it'd be the last straw and he won't ever forgive me. I'm not sure I'll survive that.

"I'm sorry. I was just having a bad dream," I explain, praying he doesn't press any further. I hope I didn't say anything to raise suspicions. He'll become a hound and won't rest until I spill everything. I don't want to give him more ammunition than he already has.

When he still hovers over me, I try not to get lost in him, at how sexy he looks with his bed-ridden hair falling over his intense eyes. The light morning scruff on his sharp jaw, is just as tempting as full his lips that I want pressed against mine. Lowering my hands to his muscled chest, I try to push him away so I can sit up, but he doesn't budge. He's too strong and hard as a rock.

How can he be so hard everywhere I touch?

His body was always to die for, sexy and muscled. But now... he's freaking ripped. There's no other word to describe him. His abs are like steel, making me want to lick between the valleys and the ridges. One would expect my body to not heat up right after a scary nightmare, but it obviously doesn't get the memo.

All I feel is hot and bothered, and I need to get away before I do something I regret. Like beg him to fuck me.

But he beats me to it, his question dousing water all over my arousal from a second ago.

"When did you start having nightmares, Nyra?" His voice sounds so serious and caring.

"I told you it was nothing," I answer casually.

"It looks far from nothing," he snaps, though I sense underlying worry in his tone. "One minute you were pushing your hips against mine and the next, you were attacking me and crying. You've never had them before. Who was trying to hurt you?"

"I don't want to talk about it."

"Does it have anything to do with why you called me that night?" he asks instead. "It is, isn't?"

When I go still and he sees the fear flash in my eyes, it gives me him his answer. Still, I refuse to admit it. Before he can demand any more questions, I mask my features and push him away.

This time, he allows me some space and I sit up, pushing the covers off me while trying not to become distracted by his body again.

"Just let it go, Riaan."

Our eyes remain locked in another heated battle before he narrows his and warns, "I'll figure out your secrets one way or another, my little liar. Run all you want, I'll be right behind you."

"You'll fail."

The last thing I should do is challenge him, but I can't stop myself. I don't understand where my sassiness is coming from because I was never this daring before.

Sure, I liked to push his limits but not like this.

Even more terrifying, he's enjoying it more than anything.

But when his control finally snaps, I'll bear the marks of it on my flesh. Quickly, I shut down the part of me that finds it a turn-on. All my emotions are getting twisted into a web.

After feeling nothing for weeks, I'm suddenly feeling *everything. Everywhere.*

I watch his eyes heat and his lips curl into a threatening smirk as he taunts, "Stubborn little girl."

Before I can retort, he throws the cover off and stands in all his naked glory.

Fuck. Me.

I forgot how thick and long his cock is. Right now, it looks angry. How the hell did I sleep with it pressed against me all night? I swallow as he wraps his hand around his girth. When he gives it a rough squeeze, it goes straight to my clit.

"I can smell your arousal, dirty girl," he growls.

I turn around and run into the bathroom. His arrogant laugh mocks me all the way inside.

Bloody hell! It's going to be torture living with him.

Holding the knot of my towel tightly against my chest, I peek into the bedroom to see if he's there. I take a relieved breath when it's empty because silly me, in my haste to run away from him, I forgot to grab some clothes to change into. I was under the shower by the time I realized it and thank God, I at least had the towel in the bathroom.

I also hated how disappointed I was when he didn't join me while showering and boss me around, which he loves

to do.

How am I supposed to guard my body and heart if it betrays me every second by wishing for him to be close? Ugh... so frustrating.

I see no option other than to force Monica to move in with me and use her as a human shield. Maybe I can tempt her with booze and movies every night, and then never let her leave.

Great! Now I'm even plotting like Riaan.

Walking to my separate closet, I stare at how large it is. The vanity I see in front of me is so pretty. The thought of getting ready every day in here is making me excited and look forward to waking up in the mornings. Yesterday went by so fast that I didn't get a chance to appreciate just how breathtaking my apartment is.

Sometimes, I forget that Riaan is a very successful businessman who can afford a lavish lifestyle. I also know how hard he works each day and night. Still, to buy such an expensive apartment just so he could have me close by is too much.

I don't know if I should be scared or happy that his love—or *protectiveness*—for me has no bounds. I feel like I don't deserve him.

I mean, what will he think when he finds out I bared my body to his own brother? He'll never forgive me for betraying him like that, coerced or not.

Now that I'm standing alone in front of the mirror, I drop the towel and my shame and disgust returns as I stare at my reflection. Yet, I also can't help but notice the glow to my cheeks, the flush on my skin after spending a single night with Riaan. If only I could focus on that and not on the invisible scars on my soul.

Noticing the time on the clock above me, I hurry to get ready because I don't want to be late on my first day back to college. I grab my favorite pair of high-waisted jeans and put them on, pairing them with a dark purple turtleneck crop top

with no sleeves. I blow-dry my hair and tie into a high ponytail, then finish getting ready by putting on light makeup.

Giving myself a once-over, I walk out of the closet with my tote bag that has my books for the day.

As soon as I round the hallway toward the kitchen, I stop and stare at Riaan's broad back encased in a crisp dark navy blue shirt and pants. The matching suit jacket is kept on the back of one of the chairs.

My mind takes me back to the last time I caught him cooking breakfast and warmth spreads through me at how happy I was that day. It was the first time he told me he loved me.

And a week later, I broke my vow.

Shoving the guilt down into a vault, I observe him move around the kitchen smoothly and the delicious aroma of the food has my mouth watering.

Still, my feet stay rooted to the spot so I can get my uninterrupted fill of him, to sate my craving for this man that never goes away like a deadly addiction.

I may call his tendencies insane but I'm just as guilty.

Our need for each other is like a compulsion, full of violent desires and dark urges.

A fatal obsession that only a forbidden love like ours can elicit.

"Stop staring and come eat your breakfast before it gets cold, baby." His playful voice cuts through my musings. Facing me, he nods at the plate set aside for me on the dining table. "I made you tea since I know you don't drink coffee."

Such a tiny detail but the fact that he remembered has my heart bursting with happiness.

Damn you, Riaan.

His burning gaze doesn't stray from mine and roams every inch of my body as I walk toward him. My core clenches when he licks his lips, the hungry beast finally

making his presence known. It's only a matter of time before he devours me.

I look away before I combust into flames from his eyes alone. Suddenly, I realize something I missed before and ask, confused, "Wait... Where did you get a new suit?"

"I brought one in my car and had the doorman bring it up," he explains as he pours my fresh tea into a cup, then informs casually, "I'll have someone move in my stuff tonight. On the weekends, we'll stay at my other apartment."

"I'm not going anywhere," I reply in the firmest tone I can manage.

"You say that like I gave you a choice." His gaze darkens and my teeth clench at his arrogance, especially when he orders, "Now sit."

"Still bossy as ever," I mumble to myself, but the little smirk and narrowing of his eyes says he heard me.

I sit, not to obey him, but because I'm getting late. Besides, I'm hungry and the food looks tempting. Still, I can't help but taunt him, "I might have blindly followed your orders in the past, but not anymore, Riaan."

Before the words are even out of my mouth, his face is inches from mine with his fingers wrapped around my ponytail, and he pulls sharply. His eyes are dark and feral as a wild forest.

Leaning forward, he takes a bite out of my bottom lip until I whimper, then he growls, "Do you want to get punished, little girl. Is that it?"

"No." *Yes.*

"Then why are you crossing your thighs? Is your pussy aching for the sting of my hand?" he taunts viciously. "You owe me a lot of lessons, Nyra. I promise to make each one of them painful and filthy. Only then, will I fuck you raw until you're screaming in pleasure and begging me to stop."

"I hate you." *For making my body betray me every time. For not kissing me yet.*

His lips pull into a chilling smile that has another shiver dancing down my spine. His thumb rubs the earlier sting away and soothes it with a teasing lick that I feel in my bones, my blood heating.

Pulling back, his eyes crinkle but they are no less intense as he whispers, “No, you don’t. You never could, my little liar.”

Chapter Twenty-Eight

RIAN

Loving someone like they're your reason to breathe was a foreign feeling to me.

One I never desired to chase. But once I fell for Nyra, it was a lost cause.

Because I not only chased it, I *ached* to hold it and never let go.

For the longest time, I thought of her as a complication I didn't need, a forbidden temptation I couldn't resist. Only, I couldn't have been more wrong.

It's the world that is complicated while she is the only clarity in all of the chaos. An innocent soul meant to be only mine.

However, after witnessing her writhing and crying in her sleep, pulling away from my touch like I burned her, I know that that's no longer true.

Someone has stolen her innocence.

Taken a piece of her soul and made it theirs.

It's the most unsettling truth I never saw it coming.

I became so lost in aiming my rage at Zain that I forgot someone else could be hurting her too. Someone dangerous

with their sights set on us. Hunting and destroying us long before that ill-fated night from right under my nose. Now, they've dug their claws into my sweet Nyra.

Deeply enough that she isn't even safe from her own subconscious. Their hold is so strong that she'd rather live without me. But what could they possibly have over her head to make her do this?

Most of all, why didn't she trust me enough to come to me for help? Why would she willingly choose to suffer and won't let me in?

That's what cuts me deep and maddens me more than anything. Both at her and myself.

Maybe if I hadn't let her mom take her away, I could have noticed the truth sooner and spent all this wasted time into searching the real enemy deserving of my wrath. Maybe then, she wouldn't be as broken as she is now.

Will I be able to handle it when I do find out? I don't even know what it is yet and I'm already planning ways to make their life a living hell until they beg me to end it.

Whoever it is, they don't realize they made the worst mistake of their existence by taking what belongs to me. Because no power in this world can stop me now from digging their grave.

Not even the *gods* that they serve.

They have just sealed their death. How cruel it will be, only time will tell.

A soft hand touching my wrist, followed by a soft voice, has me pulling out of my dark thoughts.

"Riaan."

I turn toward Nyra, sitting beside me in the passenger seat, and try to calm my rage and smooth my features. "Yeah, baby?"

I must have failed because the tension and the worry in her eyes doesn't melt away as she blinks at me before they lower. I follow her gaze and realize I'm clenching my hands

around the steering wheel too hard. I expect her to comment on it but she doesn't and goes back to staring ahead.

“You didn't have to drive me to college.”

I clear my throat to hide the chuckle when I remember her stubborn pout as she tried to tell me no and refused to get inside as we stood in the parking lot.

I, of course, being the gentleman I am, picked her up around the waist and threw her ass into the car, then shut the door in her stunned face. The warning in my eyes kept her from disobeying me until I got in myself.

“Why not?” I tease, hoping to get rid of the frown on her face. “You don't like the thought of your boyfriend taking care of you?”

Her head snaps toward mine, an annoyed look on her face, and then she rolls her eyes. “You're not my boyfriend.”

“You're right, I'm not.” My gaze darkens with lust as I remind her, “I'm just yours.”

A blush spreads across her cheeks as she turns to look out the window. I slow down the car when a red light comes and stare at how the sunlight hits her beautiful face just right. Her soft and silky hair glimmers and I love how she tied it into a ponytail, making my cock jerk in my pants.

My mind fills with the image of holding it in my fist while I make her choke on my length with her hands tied behind her. Bound and at my mercy.

When I inhale sharply, her scent—a perfect blend of flowers and sweetness—fills my chest and if I could, I would imprint my scent on her so every inch of her screams mine.

She doesn't realize she's awoken a beast and then made the mistake of leaving it hungry and angry. With her back and close enough to touch, it's aching for a pound of her flesh.

If anything, the distance has made my desire for her far more depraved and carnal.

I want to consume her in a way that borders on psychotic and insatiable.

I want to fuck her as much as I want to punish her.

I want to pound that stubbornness out of her until she submits to me.

Then, I want to mark and claim her in every way possible so everyone knows she belongs to me. I want my ring on her finger, my name tattooed on her skin and one day, my baby growing inside her. That's how deep my obsession—my love—runs for her.

God knows I've waited long enough but I also can't scare her away. It's the only reason I kept my control on a tight leash and didn't take her the way I wanted to last night. And when morning came, I knew it was the right decision.

One wrong move and I might just lose her, break her in a way I won't be able to put her back together.

Once I've righted every wrong done to us, I'll prove to her that nothing in this world is worth ending our relationship for. There will always be someone tearing us apart. But as long as we have each other, they'll never win.

Gazing at her, my heart squeezes at the sadness on her face and I desperately want to take that away. I promise to myself I won't stop until the Nyra I fell in love with returns. Shy yet bold.

The light to my darkness.

"You're not tainted, Nyra," I say once the light turns green and I start driving again. "You can never be tainted in my eyes."

I feel her tense and her spine go rigid before she masks it. But I know her mind is taking her back to the night she whispered those words to me. I expect her to deny it altogether but she surprises me by saying with a forced shrug, "Don't be so sure, Riaan."

Being in the shadow of her watchful mother, she has become quite good at hiding her real emotions, becoming even

more defensive. But if she believes she can fool me the same way, she's in for a rude awakening.

She can't hide from the one who has always seen every wicked and soulful part of her. She couldn't do it that night and she certainly can't do it now.

"If there's one thing I've ever been certain of in my entire existence, it's you."

Sharply, she turns to me, her eyes pained as she warns, "I'll be your downfall."

"As long as you're with me."

One lone angry tear falls down her cheek and she whispers roughly, "Why can't you see I'm trying to protect you? You accuse of me being stubborn but so are you. Just look at our past, Riaan. Every time we've ended up together, we've only left devastation in our wake. And I won't let it happen this time, not when it's not only our lives at stake."

"Whose lives are you trying to protect, Nyra?" She goes still when I catch her obvious slipup, and I harden my expression before she can lie or deny it. "Who is trying to hurt you?"

"No—No one is hurting me," she stammers.

"That's not what you said in your sleep."

Her face pales and her nails bite into her thighs yet she refuses to share. "I told you I don't want to talk about it."

I stay quiet and calm when she looks away, ignoring me completely. Letting her believe the conversation has ended, I drive until we end up on a deserted road, her college not much farther.

Inching to my left, I pull my car to a stop and she sits up straighter while her head twists toward me, confused and questioning.

Whipping my seat belt open, I twist and lean toward her. Resting my left arm on the back of her seat, I grip her chin with the other and warn her, "Don't you dare shut me out, Nyra. I won't allow it anymore."

“If I didn’t tell you my secrets then, what makes you think I’ll share them now?” She taunts.

“The fact that I got you to admit you have them is more than enough proof that I can. Until now, you were denying it.” I smirk devilishly, which must have struck a chord because she looks spooked. “Your walls are cracking, baby, and it’s only been a day.”

“I’ll never let that happen.”

I watch the hollow of her throat as she swallows and I inch my fingers lower until they are wrapped around her delicate neck. Her top is the only thing between her skin and the imprint of my fingers as I grip her hard.

“Who haunts you in your dreams, Nyra?” I prod again, my voice unflinching.

I didn’t push her to talk this morning because I saw the urgency and the cold fear in her eyes. She was too shaken up, sweating profusely, and looking so small that it would have done us no good. But I also won’t coddle her while she lets that torment fester inside her.

Sometimes, our own mind can be our worst enemy.

She doesn’t see it. But eventually, she’ll be too weak to hold herself together anymore. How her parents didn’t see it and do anything is beyond me.

Although her eyes remain jaded, she leans into my touch without even realizing it. She may be submitting her body to me, but her mind—her mind is shut tighter than a vault.

Her fight and her sass are just more layers to her thick armor. A distraction so nobody sees what lies beneath. That there’s a scared little girl hiding, who’s haunted and imprisoned by her own head.

So, if I have to push and shove until she flushes that poison out, I’ll do it.

“You can force your way into my life, Riaan, and say all the right things, but you’re forgetting one thing.” Her voice

sounds hollow and devoid of hope as she speaks. “You can’t control the demons residing inside me. You’re chasing the shadow of a girl you fell in love with but I’m not her anymore. I’m tainted and broken. And even if I wanted to undo the sins I’ve committed, I can’t. So, just let me be and walk away.”

Doesn't she realize we're both sinners? It's what makes us who we are and I won't have her any other way. No sin is powerful enough to make me stay away from her.

“Don’t.” I squeeze her neck lightly.

“What?” She frowns.

“I know what you’re trying to do, Nyra.”

“Oh yeah? And what is that?”

“You’re trying to hurt me, or anger me so I’ll push you away.”

“What if I am?” Her voice hoarse and low under my hold.

“It won’t work.”

“How can you know? I see the pain in your eyes too, Riaan. You haven’t forgiven me for walking away from us. If I told you the secrets you’re so desperate to uncover, pain won’t be the only emotion you’ll feel. The line between love and hate you said you were standing on... it may just become true.”

“Then I guess you’re not the only masochist, baby,” I whisper against her lips. Love like ours is built on pain and immoral desires. It’s what we thrive on.

Guilt flashes in her unblinking gaze and when her eyelids fall close, I let her go and sit back in my seat. I run my fingers through my hair roughly as I remember the nights I spent lying awake at night, especially the first few days after Nyra had left.

One of my worst fear was someone taking her away from me and when that turned into a reality, it was fucking hard. It’s plain torture to be physically away from her.

It's why I want her so fucking close to me at all times. It's just as much for her as it is for me. If she didn't have to go to college, I wouldn't have let her leave the apartment.

Maybe if I confess to having my own my demons, she'll eventually trust me with hers.

Our quiet breaths fill the space before I speak, my voice soft, "I always thought that loving someone was the hardest thing to do but I was wrong. It's the distance when all you want is to be close, to be together. It's the nights you have to spend alone, wishing they were in your arms. It's the constant fear of someone ripping them away from you. And I lived through it all when I almost lost you. It was the hope that you'll return soon that kept me alive. So, never again am I going to allow you to be taken from me, Nyra. When I say no more space, I fucking mean it."

I feel her attention on me but I don't meet her eyes yet, afraid of what I'll find. I simply bare every emotion that she makes me feel. "I don't want to spend a second of my life without you by my side. Even when we are bones and ashes, I'll be by your side. Wherever you go, I go. You want to fight me? Fine, fight me, hurt me, push me away, be mad at me as much as you want. But you will never ever leave me again."

"Riaan." When she calls my name brokenly, I can't help but face her. Cupping her cheek, I rub the tears away.

"I didn't spend my entire life making you mine, only to lose you in the end. You control my blood, Nyra. If you're not with me, I'll bleed out."

For a lingering second, I get a glimpse of the girl that promised to fight for us but just as soon as I see it, it disappears.

Nevertheless, it's enough for me. As long as she's still somewhere inside her, I'll bring her back.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

NYRA

My heart has never felt so heavy, so shattered, and yet it keeps beating.

Every time I fear it will crash from all the ache, the sadness and the darkness that never fades or lessens, it only beats harder.

How can it remain so strong yet crumble at the same time? It's a puzzle to me. It takes and consumes but always holds on. The brain is supposed to feel our emotions, the struggles, yet it's our heart that feels it all.

In this moment, I feel mine melt into a puddle as Riaan's confession runs repeatedly in my head. His words are dark and hauntingly beautiful. I felt them right down to my marrow, because they mirrored my own feelings.

Maybe it's the reason why our love is so strong, because it runs in our veins. Connects and binds us in a way there's no purging it out.

Despite everything I've been through, my love for him hasn't wavered.

Loving someone yet knowing you can never be together, it's a dangerous kind of love. *Heartbreaking and all-consuming.*

My eyes keep sneaking a peek at him while he stares ahead. His profile is just as perfect as the rest of him.

Riaan as he drives and swerves smoothly through traffic is still as sexy as hell to watch as I remember. The way his mouth is set in a firm line, one hand gripping the steering wheel and his eyes narrowed in concentration, it's making me all sorts of hot and bothered.

Who knew watching him drive is one of my kinks that drives me absolutely wild. Pun intended.

When it comes to this man, I guess I shouldn't be surprised. Everything he does has me wanting to get on my knees and worship him. He's always in control and intense and commanding.

It's why I was shocked when he bared his heart out and confessed worst fears. I always see little glimpses of his softer side but never so open and raw.

All I wanted was to apologize for putting him through that. To jump into his arms and promise I'll never leave him.

But it would've been another lie.

Before I could utter a word, he was back to being his broody and silent self as he put the car back into drive. I hated the burning disappointment in my chest, and the feeling of powerlessness as I sat mute. I hate that I'm being so heartless to the man I love.

There must be a line between justifying my actions for protecting the people I love and plain coldheartedness. I fear I may have just crossed that line without realizing it.

I thought it was his domineering nature that has him moving in with me and not letting me out of his sight, when the truth is that he simply needs me close after missing me for long. I'm his safe haven, his home, just as much as he's mine. The distance has broken our souls in different ways.

But the remedy is the same. *Each other.*

Maybe it's why I didn't fight him as hard as I should have when he ruthlessly forced his way into my life yesterday.

Maybe deep down, I wanted it so I didn't stop him. I don't want us to be over. Or just maybe... I want him to save me and keep me, consequences be damned.

I thought I let him go but I haven't.

He's so fucking right. It's only been a day and I'm already going against my own instincts. Craving to break my own promises.

Maybe there's a chance you can still be with him, both the angel and the devil whisper in my ear. I shove them down because I know it's a false hope. I can't go down that road again. Besides, the danger of my blackmailer is still hunting me. He's quiet but I know it will end soon.

There's no way Zain doesn't know I'm back. What if he sees me with Riaan and posts the pictures, thinking I went against his wishes? I need to get my hands on his phone and destroy all the evidence as soon as possible. The clock is ticking.

I jerk back when Riaan's hand caress my cheek, "Baby, we're here."

Noticing the familiar trees and the tall brick buildings, I realize we've reached my college. Instantly, a little bit of my mood brightens, excited to see Monica after so long. She can distract me from the disaster that has been my life lately.

Students mill about, some laughing and talking in groups, while others walk alone, and I feed off their energy.

Unclasping my seat belt, I lean over the console to grab my bag from the back seat and I ignore the shiver racing down my spine when my breasts press lightly against Riaan's arm. The physical contact only lasts a fraction of a second, but my pussy throbs in teasing pleasure.

"Thanks for the ride, Riaan," I tell him and hurry to get out before his scent engulfs me.

I have only taken two steps when I hear another door shut behind me and I make the mistake of turning around.

I watch Riaan round the front of his car and saunter toward me, his gait confident and the intent in his eyes dark and sinful.

A group of girls passing by check him out and I have an insane urge take their eyes out, but I forget all about it when his shadow falls over me.

My nervous gaze clashes with his and before I have a chance to utter a word, his mouth descends on mine. The shock and the soft feel of his lips pressed against mine renders me speechless and my knees too weak.

When he sucks my lower lip into his mouth and teases me with his tongue, I moan which he greedily swallows.

He kisses me so deeply that it is too indecent for the public eye and yet he doesn't stop.

God, I missed his taste. I missed the ruthless drag of his tongue leaving no corner of my mouth untouched. His sexy groan of satisfaction is for my ears only. Nothing, not even anything I've ever read, compares to being kissed like this.

How the hell am I supposed to spend my life without this? Without him?

When the fog in my brain diminishes for a second, I remember I'm on my campus and Monica might see us so I try to rip my mouth away but he grabs the back of my neck and bites me until I whimper and fall into him.

His kiss becomes rougher and harder as he tastes my mouth shamelessly.

I swear I intend to push him away, afraid someone will recognize us, but instead, my hands grip his shirt and I pull him closer. It's like I'm kissing him for the first time and I can't get enough.

Like I'm dying and he's bringing me back to life.

It feels like forever when he finally rips his mouth away from mine, both of us panting heavily, even though it's only been a few seconds.

As I become aware of my surroundings, I notice my bag on the ground and I have no clue when it fell from my arm. My cheeks heat with embarrassment when I feel random the people's eyes on us and I scold myself for losing control.

It's all his damn fault.

He caught me off guard and once his taste hit my tongue, I was done for.

As I bend down to pick my bag up, I glare at his smug face, which is still watching me ravenously. "You can't kiss me like that in public, Riaan."

I look around for signs of Monica since I told her last week I'll be back for the new semester and breathe in relief when I don't see her. My skin tingles when Riaan grabs my waist and turns us around. He backs me against his car and covers me with his body until all I see and feel is him. I have to tilt my head back to maintain his possessive gaze.

"I'll kiss you whenever and however I want, Nyra," he darkly says. "And I don't give a fuck who sees. In fact, every time you fight or push me away, I'll make sure to kiss your sweet mouth in public so you know who you belong to."

"So this is your way of staking your claim?" I taunt.

"I don't need to stake my claim when I already know your heart beats for me, baby. I kissed you because I wanted to. I kissed you because I missed the taste of you, and the soft surrender of your body. And the way your eyes beg me for more every time I bite your lip, knowing you crave it too. You are just too stubborn to ask for it."

There goes my heart and soul again, melting for him while my panties become soaked under his hooded gaze.

"You're enjoying our war too much, aren't you?" The words just fall from my lips.

His face darkens as the beast that lurks beneath, comes to the edge and stares at me like I'm his next meal. It's the same part of him that likes it when I goad him.

The one I shouldn't push too much and should be scared of, yet I couldn't help but be drawn to.

I don't know why Riaan's keeping it locked and hasn't let it come out to play. I've always craved that part of him too much and seeing it before me, I want to unleash it.

"What if you lose, hmm?" I taunt innocently, ignoring all the rational voices inside me.

Slowly, Riaan leans his elbows on the roof of his car on either side of me. Bringing his lips inches from mine, he warns, "Don't push me, my little liar. Not unless you're ready to handle the beast that you're so desperate to play with. Two months is a long fucking time to deny me the feel of your delicate little body. So when I do take you, and I will very soon, you will be under my mercy. My cock won't be satisfied with just your cunt. I'm going to fuck your virgin ass too. I won't stop until I've claimed and filled all your holes with my cum. It's going to hurt but you'll take me like my good little fuck toy, won't you?"

"Yes," I whisper, hypnotized by his sensually dark voice.

"And you'll only cum when I let you?" he coaxes.

"Yes."

"Good girl." His praise washes over me.

Satisfied, he backs away slowly and when I look behind, I panic at seeing Monica, who is yet to see us. With a curse, I hiss at Riaan, "You need to leave."

Calm and broody as ever, he follows my gaze and turns to face me with a smirk. Crossing his arms, he demands, "Tell me you're mine."

"What?" I snap at him. "No, I'm not going to say it."

"Okay. Then I guess I'll stay here and say hi to your friend and you can explain your flushed cheeks and your swollen lips to her," he says, still standing too close.

"Please, Riaan," I plead.

“Say you’re mine.”

I look in Monica’s direction and see her getting closer while someone else has her attention. Fucking hell! Meeting Riaan’s gaze, I say the words that makes my heart beat faster, “I’m yours. Happy now?”

“Next time, don’t make me wait or I’ll kiss you in front of her,” he threatens and steps back. I see the smile in his eyes after I admitted what he wants to hear the most.

Rolling my eyes, I walk away from him and a minute later, I hear his car speed away. Just then, my phone vibrates inside my pocket and out of curiosity, I pull it out.

ARROGANT THIEF: Have an amazing day, baby. See you at home.

I hate the smile that pulls at my lips after reading his text. He’s incorrigible. That man is always so broody and savage with that filthy mouth of his that his sweetness surprises me sometimes. I’ll never tell him, but I secretly love it when he softens his edges only for me. Like I’m the only one who deserves every side of him.

“Who’s got you smiling like that, bestie?” Monica’s teasing voice pierces through my daydreaming. I look up while shoving my phone inside my bag.

“Oh my God! Monica!” I shout excitedly. “I missed you so much.”

With a scream, she covers the distance between us and pulls me into a hug. I squeeze her tight and we sway for a minute before we pull apart. Her warmth and light rubs off on me and I can’t contain the genuine smile on my face. Although she has cut her hair slightly shorter, she still looks the same, bright and bubbly. Clothed in a floral dress, she looks stunning. Her new haircut also accentuates her cheekbones.

“I missed you too, babe,” she says and then narrows her eyes playfully. “Although I’m still mad at you for ghosting me.”

I know she's joking but guilt stabs me nonetheless. "Sorry. I had a rough couple of months."

Her lips pull into a concerned frown and she winds her arm with mine before replying, "I was just kidding. I wish I could've been there for you, you know. We may have known each other for a short time but I love you and you can always trust me with anything."

"Even if it's dark and messy?" I quietly say.

"Especially then." She winks while bumping our shoulders.

Chuckling at the cute expression on her face, I reply. "Okay!"

"So... Who had you blushing earlier?" She wiggles her eyebrows and mischievously asks, "Have you met someone?"

"What! No. It was nobody." I roll my eyes.

"Liar," she teases. "Don't worry, I'll get you to spill the deets."

"How is the fest going?" I change the topic as we stroll toward our building. "I heard the Reet brothers are coming. Is it true?"

"Oh yeah!" She nods excitedly and fans her face. "They are so hot. I was thinking to sneak in backstage and seduce one of them. Or both."

A boy passing by and trips over his feet as he hears Monica mention a threesome. Poor guy. My bestie, however, remains oblivious, clearly lost in her fantasy. Turning to her, I probe, "And just how do you plan on getting backstage?"

"I have an idea." She smirks and then declares, "And you, my bestie, are going to be my wingwoman."

"Well, someone has to be there to bail you out when their security catches you," I joke. "Besides, I need a story to tell your children about how their mom was so much trouble."

"Someone obviously needs to teach you the responsibility of being a wingwoman. It's no joke, you know."

“Ha. Very funny.” I scoff. “You better have a solid plan.”

“We are going to be volunteers,” she announces. “I’m already in the security team, for obvious reasons.”

“Of course.”

“Lucky for you, there was a spot available in the management team and I already gave your name. You just need to meet the head of the team once to confirm and to go over your tasks.”

“Does this mean we get to skip classes?” I ask, grinning from ear to ear.

“Hell yeah!”

This actually works well in my favor since volunteering work can have late hours. The fests at my university have always been a big event with lots of different colleges coming to participate in all the games we conduct and finally ending it with a bang on the last day. It will be a perfect excuse to keep Riaan at arm’s length.

Looks like I’m going to win, after all.

Chapter Thirty

RIAN

“Did we sign a big client or something?”

Sitting behind my desk, I look up at my assistant and frown at her question. “No. Why?”

She taps her pen on the notebook while sitting in the chair across from me and replies with a small smile, “You’re in a good mood and earlier, you smiled at me when you came into the office. You never do that.”

Ignoring the document I was busy reading while I had her make notes, I lean back and mull over her words. “Huh. I didn’t notice. Why are you making it sound like a big deal, though?”

“Because you’ve been an angry grump this past months,” she replies and wince like I might reprimand her. Not a surprise considering we never discuss anything personal. Since I’m curious, I don’t shut it down immediately. Besides, there’s a lightness inside my chest with Nyra being back and I’m not letting anyone affect it.

“Is that right?” I ask.

I thought I had better control over my emotions. Clearly, I was wrong. I usually maintain a professional distance from my employees and keep my personal life private. I should’ve known Nyra would be capable of disrupting that balance.

“Yeah. Everyone noticed it,” says Snehil. “It was like one wrong move and you’ll erupt. It had us all worried. Since we know you’re a private person, we never said anything. But I’m glad it’s all okay now.”

“I appreciate you telling me this. Still, make sure there’s no more unnecessary gossip about it,” I inform her in a firm voice.

“Of course.”

“What are the updates on the fest?” I ask next. “Did our team meet with the volunteers?”

Since the fest is being held at the university and will go on for three whole days, the student volunteers will be working alongside my team. So, we make sure to have an official meeting with them to go over their responsibilities and what is expected of them. Not only does it give us an additional set of hands, it gives them a chance to closely see what happens behind the scenes.

For the most part, it’s a chance for them to skip classes without being faulted for not being in class.

“Yes. We’ve divided them into different groups according to their skills and interests. Few girls were pretty adamant to join either the security or the backstage team. I think they believe they stand a chance of meeting the Reet brothers up close that way. I told them it won’t be possible but I don’t think they believed me,” she says with a chuckle.

“Keep an extra eye on them. I want volunteers who will take their responsibilities seriously instead of causing problems.”

“I’ll make sure of it.”

“What about the management team? You said there was one spot left,” I inquire. “Did we find anyone?”

“Just today actually. A girl named Nyra Ahuja.” I hold back my surprise when her name comes up. I did not expect that since I was hoping to surprise her. I sit up straight, an idea forming in my head as I listen to Snehil. “Since she missed the

group meeting, I was going to go meet with her today. You know, just to go over what we expect from her.”

“I’ll do it,” I inform her, which stops her mid-speech and her brow furrows.

“You don’t have to.”

“No, it’s fine,” I say firmly. “I need to run some things by the dean anyways.”

“Okay.”

As soon as the door shuts behind her, I run my fingers over my jaw and smile. Looks like fate is in my favor. It wants us closer too.

Where are you going to run now, my little liar?

A little around three in the afternoon, I leave my office to reach the campus on time for my meeting with the dean. Then, I’ll meet with Nyra, who has no clue I plan to make her follow me throughout this whole festival.

I can already imagine her bratty little mouth trying to back out, not that I’ll allow it.

In fact, I can think of a few ways she can please me. Because of her, my cock is now in a perpetual state of semi-hard. Just imagining her naked with her pussy on display, has my cock reaching its full hardness.

The way she taunted and teased me earlier today, I wanted to fuck her right then and there. But I’m too possessive to let anybody see what a dirty little girl she is for me. Nobody will ever know she likes it rough and hard and kinky. That she gets off on the thin line of pain and intoxicating pleasure.

The loud ringing tone inside my car cuts through my fantasies and when I see it’s my mom, it’s like a cold shower minus the water. Connecting to the Bluetooth of my car, I pick up her call.

“Mom,” I say.

“Hi, *beta*,” she greets, then asks, “Are you busy?”

“I have time. Is everything okay?”

“Of course. How did it go with Nyra?” I hear the excitement in her voice. “Was she happy to see you?”

Shocked, scared, breathless, but beneath all of it, I also saw relief, yearning, and love. While her pretty mouth pushed me away, the truth was in her eyes... She was more than happy to see me.

It was in the way her breath hitched every time I touched her and the way she fell asleep curled up in my arms and stayed pressed up against me till the morning.

I know this because all night long, I watched her like I was afraid she might disappear if I closed my eyes. It was early dawn when I finally fell asleep and woke up when my second alarm went off.

“It was perfect, Ma,” I finally reply with a grin on my face. “But Auntie Sara is still against us and her dad is clueless. Not to worry, though. Once I convince Nyra we can still be together, I’ll talk to her parents.”

If my mom can agree, I have to believe I can get her parents’ blessing too.

“Let me talk to them. You’ll have a better chance then.”

“I appreciate your offer, Ma, but it’ll be better if Nyra and I do it together.” I try to let her down easy and before she gets any ideas, I request of her, “And please do nothing behind my back, okay?”

“Okay, fine,” she says with a sigh.

“Thank you. I’ll talk to you later.”

“Wait... Come for dinner this weekend and bring Nyra. It’ll be nice for you both.”

“We’re both busy this weekend. How about the next one?”

“Sure. I’ll be waiting,” she says softly. “Bye, *beta*.”

I hang up and drive faster while knowing Nyra will not so easily agree to the dinner. It will be nice for her to be around someone who won't treat her the way her mom did.

Maybe it will be a chance for me to show her the future we can have if she trusts me.

Half an hour later, I'm at the college and walking down the hallway to the dean's office while students rush past me in a hurry.

I think of all the trouble I went through when I was their age and often came to this campus for basketball tournaments. They were the best days of my life and I made sure to live them to the fullest.

The dean's assistant informs me that the dean is waiting for me and I waste no time entering the office. He stands up and rounds the desk when I approach him. Older than my father's age, he's still in very good shape, his face sharp and strict.

"Mr. Ahuja. It's good to see you." He greets me and we shake hands. "I hope the preparations are going well."

"Everything is running smoothly," I reassure him, then sit across his desk. "Just some security-related details I want to go over."

The rest of the meeting goes by perfectly but I'm more eager for the next one which will be much more fun and entertaining. I just want to capture the look on Nyra's face when she sees me.

"I also wanted to discuss one more thing," I say to the dean. "I have chosen one volunteer from the management team to work with me closely. Think of her as a liaison between my team and the volunteers. I hope that is all right with you."

"Of course. As long as it doesn't interfere with her studies."

"I'll make sure it doesn't." I smile politely as I answer.

He walks me to the door and after shaking his hand one last time, I make my way out and check the time on my watch. I still have a few more minutes until she's here.

I ask the assistant to point me toward one of the empty classrooms to wait and to let Nyra know to find me there.

The corridor is empty when I walk to the class at the end of the hallway to my left and I assume it's because the last lecture for the day ended a while ago. Entering the room with the door ajar, I stroll to the window in front of me and wait, my anticipation skyrocketing with each second.

I only saw her this morning but I'm already missing her. A day isn't nearly enough for my need to have her beside me go away.

It's like I went through withdrawal and the small taste of her isn't enough of a cure. I need more. And I want her constantly. Until I'm drowning in her.

As much as I want to fuck her, I crave even more to simply spend time with her, listen to her talk about nothing and everything. I want to take her out on dates, on vacations wherever her heart desires, and then when night falls, I want to own her, and corrupt up like she loves.

The months we spent hiding and sneaking around, satisfying our darkest desires were all fun and games but I need more. Nyra was and will never be just my forbidden little secret meant to last in the shadows. Even the love born in the dark deserves to shine in the light.

I ache to hold her hand without her pulling away.

I want to kiss her without the fear of getting caught reflecting in her eyes.

I yearn to proudly show her on my arm as my woman, my love, my soul mate.

Until I make it a reality, I won't be satisfied. I won't stop.

"What the hell, Riaan?" Nyra's shrill voice echoes in the empty classroom. "How did you get in here?"

I smirk as I slowly face her and watch her step inside while glaring at me. That angry little pout of hers makes me want to kiss her even more.

“Hey, baby,” I drawl and notice the slight flush on her cheeks, her hair slipping out of her ponytail like she came running here. Looking at my wrist, I notice it’s half past four. “You’re late.”

Confusion dots her pretty gaze and I enjoy the clueless look on her face. She thinks I came to get her. Naïve little girl.

“You need to leave. I’m supposed to meet someone here,” she explains and then crosses her arms. “Why are you even here? Did you take stalking as a hobby while I was gone?”

“Seems like I’m not the only one who got a new hobby, because you’ve become a brat,” I scold. “I love your fire and sass, baby, but it’s going to get you into trouble.”

She bites her lip while lust darkens her eyes, the brown in them almost turning black. Dropping her arms to the sides, she cocks her hips and says, “You still haven’t answered my question.”

Sauntering to the teacher’s desk, I open my suit jacket and take a seat, facing her. “If you want to be a volunteer, then you need to be punctual, Nyra. I don’t like my time being wasted.”

I keep my face hard and impassive like she’s one of my employees and watch as understanding dawns on her. Her lips forming a little *O* as she stares at me with her eyes wide.

“Wait... Is your company organizing the event?” When I nod, she shakes her head. “Uh-uh, no way.”

“I was planning to surprise you but I think I like this better,” I answer with a smirk and then point in front of me. “Lock the door and come here.”

“No,” she says, frightened. “I was supposed to meet with a woman.”

“You were but since you’ll be working directly for me, it would’ve been irrelevant,” I tell her, enjoying her nervousness. “She doesn’t need to know all of the duties I’ve planned for you anyways.”

“Did you plan all of this?” she demands with a narrowed gaze.

“Actually, no. It was fate.” I smile, then quirk my eyebrow. “Now are you done asking pointless questions?”

“I want to work in a team, like I was told.”

Running my fingers over my jaw as I look her over, I taunt, “Are you scared of me, Nyra? Does this mean I won our war?”

The fire in her returns and her eyes flare. Her chin lifts as she retorts, “You wish.”

“Then why are you still standing there?” I harden my voice while our gazes stay locked. “I expect obedience from my employees too, Nyra, so unless you want to quit, I expect the same from you. If I have to repeat myself again, the coming days are going to be tough for you.”

My threat finally pushes her into action and she covers the short distance between us. Once she’s close enough to touch, I grab her around the waist and make her sit on my lap. Her thighs spread and I can feel the heat of her pussy through her jeans.

“Do you treat every volunteer this way or am I just special?” she says with a scowl.

“You already know the answer to that, baby.”

“This isn’t a fair war if you have all the power, Riaan,” she whines.

I wish she knew I’m the one who is powerless when it comes to her. She has me wrapped around her little finger and she doesn’t even know it. She owns me just as much as I own her.

“When it comes to you, I stopped playing fair a long time ago.” I growl. “And don’t lie to me that the thought of

working under me while I boss you around doesn't make your pussy wet. You'll listen to me like my good little pet, won't you, baby?" Running my fingers up her spine until I wind them around her hair, I pull hard. "Should I make you call me Sir, hmm? Say it. I want to hear it."

When she hesitates, I spank her left tit. She whimpers as a shiver spreads through her body. "Sir."

"Good girl," I praise while pressing on her hard nipple until she moans. Her hands squeeze my shoulders when I pinch the other nipple. "Are you dripping for me, Nyra? Did you soak your panties even though you haven't cum yet?"

"Oh God! Yes. I'm so wet. Only for you, Riaan," she croaks, her voice hoarse and horny while she grinds on my lap.

Spreading my legs wider, I halt her movement so she can't seek the friction her pussy is craving. I'm the one who decides when she gets pleasure, not her.

Taking her arms, I push them off my shoulders and twist them behind her back, holding them captive. It pushes her heavy tits against my waiting mouth and I bite down her little nub poking through her thin top and she fucking moans at the slight pain I deliver.

I pull back when she tries to push harder against my lips, like she's craving my marks on her skin. When her gaze meets mine, I taunt, "Always so willing and greedy to be my fuck toy, aren't you, Nyra? Tell me you love it when I treat you like a dirty little girl. Tell me that it gets you off when I use your body for my pleasure."

"I do. I love it so much," she says in a low voice, her cheeks turning pink as she blushes.

"I want to hear the words from your innocent little mouth, Nyra," I demand in a rough voice. "Say. It."

She licks her bottom lip and my dick jerks in my pants as she shyly whispers, "I love being your fucktoy, Riaan. Even when you treat me like your dirty girl, you always look at me like I'm the most beautiful girl."

“Every inch of you is beautiful, Nyra, and so is your heart and your soul.”

“I’m afraid one day you won’t,” she says as a shadow falls over her eyes. I just know it’s because of the secrets she’s hiding. But she’s wrong.

“Never, baby,” I promise her. “Because above all, you’re my woman. Made just for me and one day, I’m going to make you say it to the whole world. Without feeling guilt and fear.”

Circling my fingers on her throat, I bring her mouth to mine to chase away the sudden sadness on her face. I kiss her softly and reverently, even though my grip is vicious. I coax her tongue out to play with mine and suck it in so I can taste her.

I kiss her until she’s breathless and melting against me.

Until she’s kissing me back hungrily.

Until she’s back to grinding her cunt against my leg and I’ve chased her fears away.

We pull apart while panting heavily and her body is wound so tight, all it’ll take is one push and she’ll fall over the edge. But I’m not done punishing her enough. Letting her hands go, I grab her tiny waist to make her stay still and she stares up at me with accusation, making me smirk.

“You come when I tell you to, baby.” Picking her up, I walk us to a nearby student desk and make her sit while I hover over her. “You sure you don’t want to back out, Nyra? I can be quite demanding as a boss.”

“You don’t say,” comes her sassy reply before she seriously asks, “What are my duties?”

Still touching her, I go over the tasks. “You’ll be ensuring each of the volunteer teams are working smoothly and finishing their tasks on time. You’ll have to meet with the head of my team or my assistant for each week’s schedule and convey it to all the teams. Every day, you’ll inform me about the progress. If the volunteers need any help or have any questions, you’ll come to me directly and I’ll handle it. In

other words, you're the SPOC for the volunteers. Do you have any questions?"

"No. I understood it all. It's pretty straightforward," she replies confidently.

"Good. I'll get you in touch with my assistant, Snehil, tomorrow."

"Okay."

Assuming we'll leave now, she tries to slide off the desk but when I grab her upper thighs, she sharply looks up.

"Riaan," she whispers nervously.

"Why are you in such a hurry to leave, baby?" Inching my fingers closer to her heat, I order, "Lie back with your hands above your head."

Her pupils dilate with fear and lust at the shift in my body and the domineering edge in my tone. It tells her all she needs to know.

It's time for her lesson.

And what better place than to teach it in a classroom.

Chapter Thirty-One

NYRA

Today is turning out to be a mindfuck.

I was so goddamn smug thinking volunteering was my ticket out of Riaan's devious control, only for it to blow up in my face. Never in a million years did I expect to find him here.

Everywhere I turn, he is waiting. Stalking me like the shadow he promised he will be. I just never expected fate to be on his side too, putting him in my path without any warning.

I bet fate is a woman, because she easily fell for his charm.

Now, here I am, staring at him and waiting to be punished.

Every inch of me is all too eager to feel his savage touch and wicked mouth. My breasts are still aching from his rough treatment while I sat on his lap. I hadn't even recovered from his filthy talk—the dark fantasies he painted inside my head—before he switched topics.

I'm pretty sure I only half listened to him while trying not to squirm under his gaze.

He went over my responsibilities so calmly like he hadn't just had his lips around my nipple, biting and sucking while calling me his pet.

It should not have made me wet and yet it did. In fact, I was indecently soaked and I still am as he leans over me.

The look in his eyes is nothing less than a savage hunter who has finally found his prey.

The beast no longer lurking in the shadows.

My hands slap on the desk as I lean back while trying so hard not to tremble, afraid he'll pounce. And there's no denying I'm more than willing to be eaten alive.

The mix of fear and twisted desire—is a heady potion.

“Riaan,” I murmur while I eye the locked door behind him. There's a tiny glass window built in it which can allow anyone to see inside the room easily. “Please... not here.”

My words aren't even out before he grabs the back of my knees and pulls me toward him. My grip slips from the edge and I lean back, close to lying down.

“Beg all you want but there will be no mercy from me, Nyra. I told you I kept count of your lies, your disobedience, and once I got my hands on you, you'll regret ever walking away from me,” he darkly threatens and I shiver. “Even coming back, you've done nothing but run away from me and challenge me. And despite my warning, you still didn't learn. Just take your lesson like the bad girl you've been and don't push me.”

His expression screams wicked intentions and lights up every nerve ending in my body. I should run and hide, but when he corners and dominates me like this, I'm powerless and incapable of anything besides submitting to him.

He may be holding all the power but I'm just as corrupt.

Our urges, carnal and illicit.

Even when it gives us nothing but pain, it's the delicious kind that warms your body like a hug. His lessons hurt but they also bring erotic pleasure. The kind I feel for days.

Everyone has their love language, this is ours.

Never taking my eyes off him, I lie back and stretch my arms above my head. Satisfaction and possessiveness shines in his gaze. With his tall frame and wide shoulders, I'm unable to see the door in this position but the small fear is still there. As if he can sense it, he steals my attention.

"Never take your eyes off me." His voice is a low growl and I nod.

Suddenly, I feel shy staring into his hooded gaze. A blush darkens my cheeks and I lick my lip while his eyes takes stock of the small movement.

When I bite it, his control snaps and in the next second, he's stretching my top over my tits. My bra is pulled down next until cold air tightens and teases my nipples.

I'm naked from the waist up in a classroom in the middle of the day and I don't seem to care. My nails bite into the wooden desk yet I make no move to hide myself, loving the desire on Riaan's clenched face.

The longer he makes me wait, the more I want to scream at him to do something.

Bite. Lick. Suck. *Spank.*

Just anything other than this sweet torture. *Or is this my punishment?*

If it is, then wasn't two months enough?

"Riaan... Please. I'm aching."

"And I haven't even touched you yet," he teases cruelly and my back arches when he finally runs his fucking knuckles around my belly button. The bastard knows where I want his hands and still, he denies it, enjoying my torment. Still softly grazing my shivering skin, he growls, "Your tits are so soft and pretty, baby. They taunt me every time you walk, always making my mouth water. Bet they'll look even more stunning covered in my cum."

Tightly grabbing my breasts in his rough hands until they spill, he pulls and pinches my nipples hard until the burn of his touch twists into pleasure. Spanking them at the same

time, his jaw clenches as they bounce and I moan while tears gather in my eyes.

The sound of metal clinking pierces through the haze and I look down to see Riaan pull his belt off.

Rounding his leather belt until the ends meets, he commands ruthlessly, “I’m going to spank and then fuck your tits until they are sore and swollen, baby girl.”

I turn beet red while my clit throbs as I imagine his cock sliding and rubbing between my breasts. Even more twisted is me wishing he spansks me with his belt.

God, why am I so turned on and not scared?

There’s no way I’ll be able to keep quiet. Riaan always takes his time, especially when he’s teaching me a lesson. Fuck... we’ll get caught.

Besides, haven’t I learned my lesson? I’m making the same mistake and I haven’t even paid the price for my last one. There are cameras in the class. Even if nobody catches us, the recording will be enough to haunt us forever.

“Somebody will see us, Riaan. We can’t,” I try to persuade him but he shakes his head and I can feel my fears blurring. I try to plead again, “What if someone hears us?”

“Then you better be quiet.”

The Riaan I always knew was domineering, possessive, and arrogant but this one is just *unhinged*.

He is everywhere, taking up all my air and wreaking havoc on my senses. Day and night.

I mean, he bought a fucking brand-new apartment just to have me living under his roof. As if that wasn’t enough, he moved right in, giving me no choice or say in the decision.

The worst part... I hate that I don’t mind it at all.

I actually love his psychotic, over-the-top bulldozing into my life. I love how he’s fighting for me. For us.

But being this reckless, can be too risky.

So how do I tell him without revealing the whole truth?

His fingers circling my throat brings my attention back from the emotional turmoil and when his teeth sink into my bottom lip, I lose all rational thought. They all become a jumbled mess, unintelligible and irrelevant.

The devil on my shoulder is winning again.

My bottom lip stings when he lets go and inches back to whisper against my gasping mouth. "I own you, Nyra, and no one stares or touches what's mine. I'll kill whoever tries. Do you understand?"

Chills race down my spine at the aggression and madness in his low voice.

A little late for that... is what I want to say but words don't come out.

Like the liar he calls me, I nod and I hate myself when his eyes soften a bit before they sharpen with lust.

As if I'm not drenched enough, he takes his time stripping his suit jacket while the shirt underneath stretches over his sharply cut biceps. I shift restlessly as he rolls the shirt sleeves, revealing his veiny forearms.

I wish we were at home so I could seduce him to let me see his bare chest, and stare at his steel abs that I want to lick, especially that trail of hair leading to his thick cock, which is pushing against his pants right now.

I can't wait to taste and swallow his cum. I've missed it.

"Did you touch your cunt again after I made you cum that night?" he asks while grabbing his belt which he put aside before stripping to his shirt.

"No."

"Did your little pussy hurt? Did you enjoy spanking yourself?" he rasps and my thighs shake, remembering the sweet burn. Because of him, I can't look at that ruler the same way again.

“It did but it wasn’t the same. I wanted your hands,” I whisper truthfully.

Like a predator, he prowls to my side and folding his belt, he skims the hard leather over my naked skin, leaving goosebumps in its wake. The closer he brings it to my breasts, the more I twist in anticipation. When he presses the flat side on my right nipple, it delivers pleasure straight to my clit.

He does the same to my other nipple and even though it feels good, something feels missing. He’s teasing me again and I want to scream.

“Riaan... stop torturing me,” I whine.

Whoosh.

Slap.

My back arches at the sharp sting on my right breast and I scream but the sound never echoes because he covers my mouth with his hand. I stare up at him in shock and notice that he’s biting his lip in hunger. My heart races behind my ribs and slowly, the pain ebbs into a soft and warm sensation.

Another hard spank kisses the same nipple. The sting is sharper in intensity due to sensitivity.

Spank.

Spank.

He does the same to my neglected nipple and tears leak from the corner of my eye while his hand is still silencing my cries of pleasure. He only eases back for a second so I can breathe before spanking me again.

“My dirty little girl is so pretty.” He grunts, his expression wild and predatory. “Your tits were made to be slapped.”

I watch as he unfolds and then wraps the leather halfway around his fist, then without any warning, he slaps both of my tits together and my eyelids close.

“Eyes. On. Me,” he growls while pulling my hair. “Close them again and I’ll make sure everyone hears your

scream.”

Afraid of his threat, I do as he says while he alternates between punishing my nipples until all my senses are heightened and attuned to his. I lose track of time. And with each spank, the pain twists into mindless pleasure until I feel my orgasm building in my core.

This twisted need—the freedom to submit until I have nothing in mind—is what I craved while I was gone. In this moment, I’m nothing but his.

No lies. No monsters. No fears.

Just him and I.

“Riaan.” I moan his name when he pulls his hand away and I gasp, sucking in oxygen. I don’t even realize my fingers are clutching his wrist while he caresses my skin. When I look down, I see the imprint of his belt on my breasts.

“You were going to cum, weren’t you?” he taunts, his lips tilting to the side and yet his face doesn’t soften. I blush because he’s right. I was so close when he stopped. But I’ll be damned before I give him the satisfaction by feeding his ego. “If you beg nicely, maybe I’ll let you.”

“Now who’s the one lying?” I taunt and he chuckles low.

Pinching my sore nipple until I whimper, he says, “You certainly won’t now, little girl. Not until I’ve punished the brattiness out of you. Now be a good little fuck toy while I fuck your swollen tits.”

Using his grip on my ponytail, he moves me to a lower bench where he can easily fuck me. The height of the seat perfectly aligns me to his waist while he only needs to bend a little. The erotic things he makes me do has me spellbound, excited, and horny.

How fitting. He’s teaching me a lesson in a classroom.

A fantasy I didn’t even know I had until now.

I expect him to unbutton his pants and pull out his cock, but I’m startled when his hands go to my jeans instead. I

grab his wrists to stop him and say, “I’m not getting naked at my college, Riaan.”

“Fuck toys don’t talk back, Nyra. So stop talking or I’ll fuck your mouth while you’re naked instead,” he warns harshly and goes back to unbuttoning my jeans while I stare at him with wide eyes. I’m so turned on by his domination.

Why the fuck am I so weak when it comes to this man?

My body is never my own once he gets his hands on it.

I moan when his fingers slide inside my jeans, shove aside my panties, runs a finger over my wet slit. I press closer, hoping he’ll do it again but he doesn’t.

“Always so fucking drenched for me,” he softly murmurs to himself as he pulls his hands out. I watch him bring his fingers to his mouth to taste them before he rubs the wetness over my left breast. Again, he repeats the same gesture to my other breast until his intention dawns on me.

He’s using my own wetness as a lubricant so he can fuck me. The filthiness of the act making me tremble. Unable to wait, I slide my hand over his length over the cloth and stare at him under hooded eyes as I whisper, “Can I take out your cock?”

Both of us go still for a lingering second as my words hang between us. He’s watching the blush blossoming on my cheeks as I say *cock* out loud. Pride blooms in my chest when I see the slight surprise in his eyes.

“Say it again,” he coaxes with a tilt of his mouth.

“I want to touch your cock, Riaan,” I say boldly. “Please.”

“Do it,” he growls. “Then make it wet because I can’t wait any longer. I’ve been hard and aching since you’ve been back and I need to mark you with my cum.”

“Yes please.”

My hands shake as I lean closer and slide down his zipper after unbuttoning his slacks. I can hear my heartbeat in my throat as I jerk his boxers down. His thick cock springs

free, almost smacking me in my face. The head shines with pre-cum and before he can stop me, I lean down and lick it off with my tongue and swallow.

“Fucking hell.” He groans and I take advantage by sucking the top again. Before I can pull away, his fingers grip the back of my neck and he pushes my head down until I choke on him, fresh tears falling from my eyes. “Suck.”

I do as I’m told, but he still doesn’t let me up. Instead, he barks while his cock pushes against the back of my throat and my nose is pressed against his groin. “Again.”

His hold loosens and I pull away, gasping for breath. Tilting my face upward, he rubs the drool away from my lips. “Disobey me again and I’ll stop touching you.”

“No. I’m sorry.”

“Lie back. Arms on your sides.”

I hurry to follow his command and it takes all my willpower to not touch him when he bends and circles his tongue around my hard nipple. Softly, he flicks my hard nub and pulls back. “Push your tits together, baby, and keep your mouth open.”

Hovering above me, he spits on his hand before wrapping his fist around his girth, stroking it up and down as I get in position. He looks hot and angry, like a wild beast as he bends and inch by inch, slides his thick cock between the tight space between my tits.

“Yes... that’s it. Such a good girl.” I flick my tongue over the slit when the head of his dick hits my waiting mouth. “Are you hungry for my cock, baby?”

“Yes.”

“Do you want my cum to fill each of your holes?” he asks while thrusting his length further, his rhythm becoming hard and rough as each filthy question leave his lips.

“I want it. So much, Riaan.”

“Then why the fuck did you walk away from me, huh?” he barks angrily. Twisting my nipples until I cry, he

grabs my throat and harshly continues, “Do you think you can live without me?”

“No I-I can’t.” My voice comes out hoarse. “I love you so much.”

“And yet you left me.”

“I’m sorry.”

“You’ll never get rid of me, Nyra.” He punctuates each word with a punishing thrust. His cock feels silky yet so hard and the friction makes my pussy sticky, my clit hurting too much with arousal. “You deny me again, and I’ll hunt you down and keep you locked up forever. You understand me? You’re fucking *mine*.”

I feel his pain that I caused him that night and I know he’s taking it out on my body. I’ll let him every time he wants to, however he wants to. I’m all his even when we’re apart.

My palms are sweaty from trying to stay still for him. When I look down, I realize his grip on my neck is the only anchor holding me in place every time he moves. His balls slap against the underside of my breasts and the sound is so filthy and erotic to my ears.

“Riaan. Please let me cum,” I beg, even though I promised I wouldn’t when I feel my core tighten again. His seductive cruelty alone is enough to bring me closer to my orgasm. His filthy words, rough touch, and maddening cock is all too much to handle. I can’t take it without letting it consume me alive.

“Bad girls don’t cum.” He clicks his tongue. When I open my mouth to plead again, his hand on my throat slides up to my jaw and he shoves his thumb inside, “Suck while I cum all over you.” he orders, desire heavy in his voice. “I’m going to teach you a lesson every day until I’m satisfied. And only then will you earn the luxury to cum. Your orgasms belong to me. Do you understand?”

“I’ll be good,” I mumble when his digit slips out.

Ripping one of my hands away from my chest, he squeezes and slaps my right breast hard on the side before

holding it in his vicious grasp. My back arches but I can't move and can only take the pain as it spreads into warmth. His cock looks even more angry and hard while I take in the look on his face. I can tell he's close to an orgasm.

Jaw clenched, eyes narrowed, and shoulders bunched, he fucks me like I'm just a toy made for his pleasure, his to use and his to own. His angry grunts teases my ears like a melody. I slide my free hand over his tightened abs underneath his shirt and run my nails over his skin. Animalistic need darkens his features and it makes me want to push him further.

"Cum for me, Riaan. Paint me in with it," I whisper shyly, and my dirty request sends him over the edge. His hips jerk unevenly and with one last thrust, he spurts his orgasm over my nipples, my neck, and even my face.

"Fuck," he groans in pleasure.

My pussy throbs, feeling empty, and my lower stomach tightening as my own orgasm stays out of reach. He's got me hooked to his domineering control that I can't come without his permission. I both love and hate it.

Our breaths remain harsh as my arms fall to my sides and my head feels heavy while he stares at his milky white cum covering my skin.

His eyes shine and burn with intensity and possessiveness. I'm shocked when I find his dick is still semi-hard even after he came all over me like a savage.

"Don't be surprised, baby. I have two months of pent-up need to fuck you. Your pussy is going to feel it all very soon, every day and night. You won't be able to walk without feeling me between your thighs," he promises and I know today was nothing compared to what's waiting for me. "Even when it becomes too much, I won't stop until you're dripping all over me."

Taking my hand, he pulls me up and once I'm standing before him, he rubs his cum all over my skin. I sway while warmth spreads through my body and he catches me before I could fall forward.

As always, he handles me with care, by pulling my top down until I'm no longer naked. I hiss when it slides over my too sensitive nipples and I know they're going to be sore for days.

"Once we get home, I'll put gel on them to take away the pain. Okay?"

I nod. His sweet gesture makes me feel treasured.

"I smell like you," I whisper with a smile, and he grins.

"I should claim you like this every day so you never forget you belong to me, baby," he murmurs while tilting my face toward his and I blush. "So beautiful and all mine."

"I missed you, Riaan."

The words just fall like rain on a cloudy day, unstoppable and stormy.

It could be because my walls are down or the lines have become blurry. It could be because my body and mind are floating. It could simple be because I'm tethered to him in the moment where the past and the future doesn't exist.

Whatever the case may be, the truth just pours out of my heart.

"I might've walked away from you but I barely lived."

Kissing my forehead, he whispers against it, "I know baby. I missed you too."

Chapter Thirty-Two

RIAN

Touching and claiming Nyra never takes the edge off.

I'm a fucking fiend when it comes to her body. As soon as I'm finished, I want her again.

I have to hide my smile when Nyra sucks in a sharp breath as she tightens the seat belt around herself and it slides over her sensitive breasts. I'm pretty sure I bruised her pretty nipples with my need to mark her and went too rough on her.

"Stop gloating. I can practically hear your smile," she grumbles as if she can hear my thoughts.

"Don't tell me you didn't love every second of it." When she blushes, I reply smugly, "Thought so."

"I would've loved it more if you'd let me come."

"Tell me we're back together and I'll worship you on my knees, baby," I demand.

"We can't, Riaan," she whispers back and I shrug.

"Then I'll punish you a little longer until you do."

The ride back home is far more peaceful than the one this morning but I know it won't last. Once we get back to the apartment and the high wears off, she'll go back to pushing me away. Her walls are only down when I make her lose control and have her at my mercy, but we can't go on like that.

Eventually, we'll need to talk because I can't have secrets between us any longer.

Secrets in a relationship like a poison to the body. If you don't purge them out, they'll kill you.

"How was your day?" I casually ask when we stop at a red light. The traffic at this time is always hectic with everyone on their way back from work.

"Boring and exciting at the same time. I missed Monica and her loud mouth," she replies with a laugh. "Though I should warn you that she plans to seduce one of the Reet brothers at the concert. I'm supposed to be her wingwoman."

Jealousy flares inside me at the thought of any man near her. "No you're not."

"Excuse me?" she says while glaring at me.

"You won't be leaving my side."

"Oh my God! You're jealous," she replies with a smug grin and quirks her eyebrow. "Are you afraid I'm going to leave you for one of the brothers?"

"If you wanted another man, you would've never fallen for me, sweetheart. No one makes your heart race faster than me." Unleashing the darkness I never let her see, I warn, "But if I see another man look at you with lust in their eyes, I'll put them two feet into the ground. Unless you want that on your consciousness, I'd suggest you don't go looking for trouble, even if it's for a friend."

Fear renders her mute for a second before she utters, "I was kidding, Riaan."

"I wasn't."

Ever since Zain threatened to touch her, I can't control the rage that consumes me at anyone touching, let alone looking twice at Nyra. I don't know what I'd do if somebody made the mistake of doing it. So, it's best to let her know my intentions now before she unknowingly puts herself in danger.

The ping of her phone pulls us apart, and I drive again as soon as the light turns green. When I twist to look at her, I'm shocked to see her face pale, white as a ghost.

Her eyes stay glued to the screen while her hand tremors. My body goes on alert because of the stark terror on her face. It's unlike anything I've ever seen before.

"Nyra," I call out to her, but it's like she doesn't hear me. Cautiously grazing her wrist, I whisper softly, "Baby."

She blinks as she regains her focus. Slowly, the color returns to her cheeks but my worry doesn't go away. Whoever texted her, has everything to do with the distance, the lies, and the secrets between us. The one I need to find before they wreck our lives any further.

"Who is it?"

She clears her throat and I know she's about to lie. "It was uh... Mom. She was just checking up on me."

Every instinct in me roars to confront her but I push down the urge because it's not something I can force or coerce out of her. The nightmare, lives she's trying to protect, and now this text... someone is obviously after her and I need to know more before I demand the truth.

"Okay," I finally reply and relief crosses her features.

"I'll call her once we get home."

The rest of the ride passes by in silence as we both become lost in our thoughts. By the time we reach the apartment building, the sun has set and night swarms in. Parking the car in the garage, we get out and take the elevator upstairs to our floor.

As soon as I unlock the door, Nyra runs inside, throws her bag on the couch, and calls out over her shoulder, "I'm going to take a shower."

Running my fingers through my hair, I eye her purse with the phone inside and even though I know I shouldn't, I stalk toward it. Morals are the last thing I'll let stand in my way.

Keeping my eye toward the hallway, I wait for a few minutes and when she doesn't come out, I bend and pull out her phone.

But of course, it has face ID.

I guess I'll have to wait until she falls asleep before I try again. If that doesn't work, I'm not above getting someone to hack into it. Putting it back into her purse, I make my way into the bedroom and take off my jacket, then my tie, and sit on the bed.

I want to join her in the shower but I allow her the space she needs. When I hear the shower turn off, I pull out something from the bedside table and wait for her.

She jumps a little when she sees me. My gaze drops to the small towel showing more skin than it's covering. Her hold on the knot tightens while few water droplets shine on her bare neck and cleavage.

"Come here," I softly tell her and my chest pulls tight when she doesn't fight me.

I hate the shadows on her face when only a while ago, she was laughing and glowing.

I spread my legs and pull her closer between them. Pushing her wet hairs away from her face, I uncurl her fingers until the towel drops and she stands naked before me. My marks cover her soft tits, some light while some darker, and possessiveness runs through me. She remains quiet as my hungry gaze roams over her curves. Unable to resist, I graze my fingers over her tight belly and small waist, until I reach her pink pussy.

So pretty and wet and *all mine*.

Her hands grab my shoulders when I dip my fingers inside her drenched slit and flick her clit.

"Riaan," she moans, her nails biting into the skin beneath my shirt.

Running my fingers through her pussy one last time, I place a soft kiss on her belly and pull away. When I fuck her

and make her come, it won't be while she's vulnerable and sad with shadows haunting her. Nor will it be out of pity.

Grabbing the aloe gel I pulled out earlier, I take some in my fingers and rub it over her sore nipples and her areolas. Her eyelids open and meet mine.

“It'll help with the pain,” I tell her and she blushes.

“Thank you.”

Standing up, I kiss her softly on the lips and whisper, “Let me take a shower and then, we'll order dinner.”

Under the shower, my mind runs through all the possibilities of who could be hurting her. My blood boils as I think of who could make her so afraid of her own shadow.

How long has it been going on, and why are they doing this? It couldn't simply be because they want to keep us apart. However, the truth feels far more sinister and dangerous.

The only thing I'm certain of is that it's somebody I know.

Someone who is hiding in plain sight. And unless I get my hands on those texts, I won't know where to search.

Whoever it is, they can't hide forever.

Until then, I'll keep Nyra safe.

Chapter Thirty-Three

NYRA

I know you're back.

Are the words I expected to hear from Zain. But still, I wasn't prepared for them, especially not with Riaan witnessing it from right beside me.

I was ready for the questions that I knew would be coming, but his silence was far scarier. Him blatantly ignoring my reaction to the text I got and calmly going back to driving made me nervous. I thought maybe he'll ask me about it once we got home, but he didn't.

However, I could see the calculative streak in his eyes and I know he's putting the pieces together and plotting to confront me at the perfect moment.

I can handle his aggressive demands and interrogation, because then I know what's going through his head, but if he keeps his intentions sealed, then I'm in big fucking trouble.

And no matter how hard I try to conceal my thoughts and emotions, I've already given him too many clues. I'll need to be careful because he'll be keeping a closer watch on me like a hawk.

As if that wasn't enough, I now have to worry about Zain too.

Both the brothers are raining hell on me in completely different ways. One of them is a lover, the other one is a blackmailer, and I'm caught in between.

"Honey," says my mom on the phone. "Are you listening?"

"Yeah. Of course."

"How are you feeling? Did you try asking Monica to come stay with you?"

"Ma, I told you she can't. She already paid the deposit and the rent for the next two months. Besides, I'm happy having my own space, you know," I reassure her.

"I just don't want you to be alone. You've been through a lot already."

I hate lying to her, falling down the same rabbit hole like last time. She's going to lose her shit if she finds out Riaan played her and my dad. She can't ever know that he's living with me. I promised her I would stay away from him and not only did I break it, but I also gave my body to him too.

The worst part is, I don't think I can stop.

Like an addict, I relapsed.

Maybe I should've just stayed at the dorms, but it's too late now.

"Don't worry, Ma. I spend most of my days at college. And by the time I come home, I'm too tired to think about anything."

"Okay, sweetie," she reluctantly says.

Her voice fades into the background when my eyes stalk Riaan as he enters the living room. I hardly ever saw him out of his formal suits. But right now, as he walks around in a simple black T-shirt and low-rise gray sweatpants, he has never looked sexier. I drool all over him as I take in his handsome features. His hair slightly wet from the shower. His forearms are on display and his face is sharp and serious.

He's still broody but looks approachable.

Every time he moves, I can make out the heavy bulge pressing against the soft material of his pants. Even though I had his cock in my mouth a while ago, I'm craving it all over again.

Those damn sweatpants are going to be the death of me. He doesn't even realize how distracting they are.

"Huh."

"You seem distracted, Nyra," my mom replies with a chuckle. "I said I'll call you in the morning, *beta*. Eat dinner and take rest."

Riaan's penetrating gaze meets mine and I look away. "Yeah okay. Goodnight, Ma."

"Love you."

"Love you too. Bye."

"I take it everything's well between you and Auntie Sara," Riaan says as soon as I hang up. I feel him approach me near the couch until he's towering over me.

"Except I'm lying to her again." I shake my head with a sad laugh. "All because of you. You accuse me of being a liar and yet you're the one who turned me into one."

"No, Nyra. It's always been your choice," he replies, sounding terrifyingly calm. "I never wanted to hide my relationship with you and I still don't. You're the one hell-bent on lying to our family."

"I'm trying not to hurt our family."

"What about the hurt you're causing me, hmm?" he accuses, and I stagger back. "Why did you suddenly stop fighting for us, Nyra?"

"When I realized it was all a hopeless dream. That all of this is just a fantasy. And no one is lucky enough to have such twisted dreams come true. At some point, we have to wake up and face the real world."

"You're wrong, baby," he says as he cups my face and caresses my skin. "In this harsh world, you have to fight for

what you want, especially for the dreams that seem untouchable. And I'm doing exactly that."

The tension dissipates from my body at his determination, the confidence with which he utters it. But so is my mom, who will never accept us and after finding out about the suffering she's been through, I can't go against her. No matter how much I want to.

So gathering all my strength, I pull away from him while pain flashes through his face. "We should get dinner."

I go into the kitchen while he orders pizzas for us, which he knows is my favorite. I pull out two plates from the upper cabinet, ketchup and seasoning, before bring it all to the table in front of the couch in the living room. Another thing we have in common is that we both like to watch something while eating.

While we wait for the delivery man, Riaan switches on the flat-screen TV and I make myself comfortable on the sofa. I keep my phone as far as possible, afraid Zain might text again.

If he demands another picture, I don't know how I'll get out of it without making Riaan suspicious.

I don't think Zain's aware that his brother and I are living together. Otherwise, I wouldn't have received such a simple text. He's going to be pissed when he learns his plan to ruin me didn't work. That he didn't break me like he threatened.

"*Friends?*" Riaan grins. When I nod, he randomly picks an episode before sitting closely beside me.

"Riaan!" I protest half-heartedly as he grabs my thighs, pulls me between his spread legs, and manhandles me until I'm sitting with my back against his hard chest.

"Shh... watch the show," he scolds and rests his arms around my waist.

Too comfortable to resist and secretly loving our cozy position, I focus on the television. Halfway into the episode,

his fingers begin playing with my hair and it feels so nice that I couldn't help but let out a blissful sigh.

If we lived in a perfect world, this could be our lives. Waking up every morning with him and then coming home together in the evening.

It's all I ever wished for and yet I know it can't last forever. We're still on borrowed time.

"I think I like your hair longer," he murmurs while twisting the strands around his fingers.

"You sure like pulling it all the time," I tease.

"You mean like this?" Tightening his grip, he pulls at my hair and smiles when I moan. "You certainly don't mind it."

"Shut up!" I grumble and he chuckles in return.

The doorbell ringing saves me from his dirty reply and I move aside so he can go get our dinner. My stomach growls when he returns with two pizza boxes in his hands. As soon as he's close, I grab one and he shakes his head at my eagerness.

"What? I'm really hungry."

Ignoring his amused face, I pour ketchup, oregano, and extra chili flakes on the crust before taking a bite. I don't care what anyone says but pizza with corn and cheese is the best. Riaan sits beside me and digs into his own.

"So, I saw you moved your stuff in," I say casually.

Another surprise I found when I went into the closet and saw his suits lined up and arranged in a color scheme on one side. I was so tempted to mess it up a bit as payback for edging me before he sneaked into the shower but I didn't.

"I did," he replies with a smirk.

"Are you even sure you wanna live with me? I can be quite messy," I warn.

"It's not news to me."

"I'm a night owl."

“I’ll fuck you hard each night until you pass out.”

Okay, I should’ve seen that one coming. “I hate doing laundry.”

“The building has dry cleaning and a laundry service.” His smug grin infuriates me. The man has an answer for everything. “If you wanna get rid of me, you’ll have to try harder, baby. It won’t work but it’ll be entertaining to see you try.”

He gets up to take our empty plates into the kitchen and I follow after him.

“I never agreed to moving in with you, Riaan,” I say to his back.

Slowly, he turns around and leans his hip against the counter. “Isn’t that what you always wanted?”

I tap my foot on the ground and put my hands on my waist as I accuse him, “Not by buying the damn place.”

“And yet not once I’ve heard you say you want me gone,” he throws back.

“Sure I have,” I answer with a flip of my hair.

“No. All you’ve done is give half-assed excuses and tell me how we shouldn’t be together.” Stalking over to me, he questions seriously, “Do you want me to leave, Nyra? I’ll still be here every morning and every night, though.”

When I hesitate and take too long to answer, his lips tilt to the side and he looks downright sinful. “Whether you like it or not, I’ll be living here. So stop complaining, baby.”

“I hate you.”

“I love you too,” he says, chuckling. Even his laugh is sexy. Giving me a kiss, he orders, “Now go sit while I bring us dessert.”

Back in the living room, my eyes catches on my phone and dread settles in knowing I can’t ignore it forever. It also reminds me of the fact that I can’t constantly live in fear and need to come up with a plan to go to my aunt’s house and

search Zain's room for all the dirt he has against me. I'll have to make sure he's not there.

The sound of footsteps approaching has me putting on an easy smile as Riaan serves me a dark caramel chocolate pastry. When I only see one plate, I ask, "Where's yours?"

"I don't eat sweets."

"But why?" I ask like it's a crime.

"I only have an appetite for one dessert and that's you," he teases.

"Well, that's not on the menu for tonight."

He laughs and it's music to my ears as it distracts me from my chaotic thoughts. Sitting sideways, he pulls me closer and my breath stutters when his thumb brushes the corner of my mouth. Pushing it between my lips, he softly murmurs, "Suck."

The taste of chocolate hits my tongue as I obey and lust darkens his features. I let his thumb go with a pop and lick my lips, making him groan and narrow his gaze.

"Keep that up and you won't be able to finish it."

"No way."

I take my time eating and torturing him by licking the chocolate from my fingers. I don't know why I like to push him so much. Perhaps, because it's addictive. Besides, why should I be the only one left aching with need and horny?

"How were things at home, Nyra?" he asks carefully. "Just talk to me."

It takes everything inside me not to crumble as flashbacks of all the sleepless nights I survived alone play behind my eyes. Not a soul knows the torment I've suffered or how close I came to falling into a dark void.

As I look into Riaan's concerned gaze, I'm reminded of my betrayal. Will he even believe me if I told him about Zain? And if he does, will he forgive me for hiding it from him?

He still thinks I gave up on us and that my parents are the only obstacle standing in our way, but that's so far from the truth.

Ultimately, the decisions I made were to protect him. I foolishly thought I was being smart. But now, I can't help but doubt myself.

My heart says it's not too late to tell him.

But my mind, which is ruled by fear, says otherwise.

I have two choices... *tell the truth* or *lie*.

Sadly, whichever I choose, I know it ends with us tearing apart.

Chapter Thirty-Four

RIAN

When it comes to Nyra, patience is not my strongest virtue.

But if I want to win her back, it's what I'll have to practice.

As I watch her sitting across from me, I see the struggle on her face and the memories she's trying to forget. I rub her soft thighs as she gathers her thoughts and consider whether to answer or push me away. I try to convey with my eyes that she can trust me.

I don't expect her to tell me everything but I hope anyway.

She puts her plate down on the table before pushing her hair behind her ear and meeting my gaze. Her voice comes out low as she speaks. "It was awful and the worst days of my life, Riaan. I hated pretending like everything was fine in front of Priyanka and Dad when, in fact, it was the exact opposite. My mom wasn't talking to me and hardly ever looked at me when it was just us. I could feel her disappointment, see the anger and the disgust on her face like I committed the worst crime in the world by falling in love with you."

Tears gather in her eyes and as much as she tries to hold them back, they fall. Before I can wipe them away, she roughly swipes them away before continuing, "I was alone, trapped and so afraid that everything was falling apart, that I'd never see you again. Every morning I woke up, I dreaded the

thought of Dad finding out the truth and staring at me with the same look I see in my mom's eyes. It only got worse, hopeless. So many times, I got the urge to reach out to you but I didn't even have my phone and when I finally got it back, Mom caught me texting you. She threatened to tell Dad, so I blocked your number and promised to stay away."

My fingers tighten into a fist as anger and pain racks my body but I calm down for Nyra's sake. I knew something had happened when her texts abruptly stopped. But I also sense it wasn't why she called me that night a few days later.

Something even worse had to have occurred for her to break her promise and unblock me. She's hiding something big.

Why the fuck can't I see it?

"Then what happened?" I probe.

"Afterward, it was the repeat of the same and Dad began to notice it too. If it wasn't for him, my mother and I would go on without talking. She told me some truths about her life that made me understand her behavior. It brought us closer and we've been working on mending our relationship ever since."

I listen patiently and I remember my aunt's reaction when she confronted me. I was right, it was connected to her life somehow. But I'm more concerned with Nyra.

While I'm glad she and her mom are close again, it still doesn't explain her nightmare and the constant pain in her eyes. I know there's more she isn't telling me.

"I felt like no matter what choice I make, I end up hurting everyone who loves me. The last week at home was the only time I didn't feel it. While I don't like how you fooled my parents, I'm still glad I'm back," she says with a small smile.

"What happened that night, Nyra?" I ask. "Why did you call me?"

Terror shadows her soft features as she swallows nervously and I don't miss the shudder that racks her body.

“Did your mom hurt you?” My voice angry.

“No.”

“Then who did?” I search her eyes as I ask her because I can’t get her voice out of my head as she begged to let her go in her sleep. No one reacts that way unless someone has a toxic hold on them in a way. I hate where my mind goes but I need to know. “Did anyone touch you, Nyra?”

“No!” She gasps while pulling away.

“Don’t lie to me.” I warn coldly and ask again, “Why did you really break up with me, Nyra? Did someone force you?”

She goes utterly still like my words triggered a memory and my stomach drops.

“I can’t. Please.” She whimpers as her face pales and uncontrollable sobs causes her spine to tremble. “I had no choice. I had to do it.”

Before I can probe further, she falls apart as thick tears fall like rivulets down her face. She looks so frightened and frail. Afraid she’ll have a panic attack, I lean forward to push her hair away, but she shakes her head sideways.

Just like during her nightmare, she attempts to pull away from me. My heart breaks into pieces seeing her like this and I pull her onto my lap and hold her head against my chest. She struggles harder but I don’t let go, hating every second of seeing her like this.

Hating the fact that I didn’t protect her like I had promised.

“It’s okay, baby. You’re safe,” I murmur as I rub her back. “I’m here now.”

“I’m sorry,” she mumbles against me. “Please don’t hate me.”

“Never,” I vow, kissing her head. “I’ll fix it. No one is going to hurt you ever again.”

As she cries in my arms, I take in everything she told me. It wasn't much but at least I now know my fears were valid. Somebody is trying to take her away from me and I won't let them.

There's a small part of me that believes Zain might be behind all of this but I can't be certain until I have proof. He's the only one who's been against us from the beginning, who set a trap for us to get caught, and the person who found out about our relationship first.

All signs are pointing toward him. Even though I wish to be proven wrong that he wouldn't stoop so low or harm Nyra, I'm not so sure anymore.

Looks like he and I need to have another chat.

"Come on, baby. I'll take you to bed," I whisper to Nyra as I rub her back soothingly. I fear I pushed her too hard tonight.

Carrying her bridal style, I walk us to the bedroom and gently lay her down on the bed. Since she's already wearing her tiny sleep shorts and matching camisole, I pull the cover over her body. Taking off my T-shirt, I slide in beside her and tuck her against my chest.

She presses tighter against me like she wants to burrow herself underneath my skin. It pulls at my heart that only beats for her. I run my fingers through her hair until her tears dry out and she stops shivering.

She's halfway asleep when she murmurs, "I called you because you keep the nightmares away."

Her confession rocks me to my core.

I shouldn't have let her leave. It's as much my fault as the monster that she's drowning in.

Around midnight, I carefully shift Nyra to the side while ensuring she doesn't stir as I get off the bed. I place a pillow beside her in case she wants to hug and tuck the covers up to her chin before quietly walking into the living room.

Her phone is still on the table where she left it and I check to see if there are any new notifications but find none. Grabbing it, I make my way back to the bedroom and tilt the screen of the phone toward her face and sigh in relief when it immediately unlocks.

I expect guilt to surface for invading her privacy but none comes.

Once again back in the living room, I sit and open her recent texts but don't find anything suspicious. I scroll up and down, searching for anything that looks sketchy. There's a few from her dad, Monica, and some advertisements, but nothing useful.

"Fuck!" I curse. She must have deleted it.

I check in the junk folder. But of course, it's empty.

I'm about to close all the windows and put it back when my eye catches on her gallery. Like a voyeur, I glimpse at her pictures and a smile plays at my mouth when I stare at the ones from today. She took quite a few with Monica and some other girls from her class.

Despite the sadness I often see, there's also happiness on her face like she's glad to be back.

Like she belongs here.

I chuckle low when I find out that she sneaked a photo of me from this morning while I looked sideways in the kitchen. Sudden realization dawns on me that we don't have any recent photos of us together. I guess I'll have to change that.

I search her albums if there are any more when I notice a hidden folder.

Curious, I tap on it and though I suspected pictures of Nyra, they are not what I imagined. My shoulders go rigid as I stare at her nudes with her face hidden but there's no mistaking it is her. In fact, there are quite a few and the dates show they weren't taken long ago.

Since it's the first time I'm seeing them, it's obvious they weren't intended for me.

Did she send them to someone? If she did, then it explains why her face is hidden and the reason she believes she's tainted. My mind goes to a dark place. Since I know Nyra will never cheat on me, it can only mean one thing.

She's being blackmailed.

With everything I know till now, it's the only harsh truth that makes sense. All this time, I thought she gave up on us and walked away because I wasn't worth fighting for, when the glaring truth is... She's trying to protect me.

As I ponder it over, I'm convinced that whatever dirt her blackmailer has against her, it would put the people she loves in grave danger. Nyra is smart.

She wouldn't be foolish enough to send these to her blackmailer, right? However, the sinking feeling in my chest tells me otherwise. My grip around her phone tightens as rage consumes me.

I wish she'd come to me before she risked her life.

She should have trusted me instead of falling prey to a *monster*.

Chapter Thirty-Five

NYRA

No hungry looks or filthy warnings.

No touching

Not even a kiss.

That pretty much sums up my life the past week and a half. Now, I've had it with Riaan. It's just not like him.

Ever since the night I fell apart in his arms, he's been broody and aloof, and it's making me go insane. It's like a switch has been flipped and now he's treating me like I'm made of glass. It's as if he's afraid that if he so much as push me, I'll shatter.

The next morning when I'd woken up, I found him dressed in the kitchen, looking like he's on his way to leave for work. My face had been a mask of surprise, confusion, and questions.

All he did was give one soft look and a guarded smile, then asked how I was feeling before he told me to eat the breakfast he cooked and that his driver would drop me off to college.

All day, I kept rehashing our conversation and regretting it. When he'd asked me if anyone had touched me, Zain's face flashed before my eyes and I panicked. Pair that with Riaan's furious gaze, and I couldn't hold it in any longer.

I don't even remember the words I uttered after. Then, morning came, and he's been acting like nothing happened

ever since.

I thought it would be a one-time thing where he was giving me space—I know, shocking—until I felt better. But then, one day turned into two, then three and now it's been a whole tortuous several days.

He went from being my shadow to following me like a cloud, close yet distant.

Hell, I should be happy. I was fighting him to leave me alone. At first, I felt we were better off this way and it'd save us from the hurt. I wouldn't be betraying my mom. I expected relief, yet it never came. Somehow, him giving me the space I needed felt more painful.

I hate his distant attitude when all I ache to feel is the high from having him surround me, tease me with his rough warnings and wandering hands that leave me breathless.

He made me feel alive and kept the monsters at bay.

The truth is, I've already spent most of my days feeling broken, depressed, and fragile that I didn't want to live through it again. However, I'm starting to doubt if staying away from him is even worth it since nothing has changed. If I choose to stay with him for good, then what?

Another part of me fears that I spilled too much. I fear that he thinks I'm damaged and that's probably the reason why he's walking on eggshells around me. Even though it's not what I want or need, I don't tell him anything.

My mind and heart are at war with each other and despite the warnings, I let the latter win.

I want him to go back to the way he was before.

Domineering, possessive, and mischievous.

Even if I have to push his limits.

Because the only time I feel the old him is when he comes to bed to sleep beside me. Some nights, he works late to the point where he orders me to not wait up for him, but I always do.

The first night I pretended to be asleep when I heard him turn the lights off outside and come into the bedroom. I kept my eyes shut and breathing even—well, I tried.

I thought I had gotten away with it when he slid into bed. I secretly smiled victoriously when he spooned me from behind and whispered, “Your acting skills are terrible, baby.”

I kept quiet and shrugged until he chuckled. It’s low, throaty, and warms not only my heart, but also the space between my thighs. Then in a few seconds, I fell asleep, deep and without any nightmares.

While he hasn’t been as close as I’d like him to be, doesn’t mean he hasn’t been spending time with me and taking care of me. His intense eyes are always watching me, following me around the apartment like he wants to touch me but he’s holding himself back.

The first day he started keeping his distance, I’d gotten a call from him informing me his assistant would be coming by to meet me at the campus regarding my volunteering duties. Turns out, it isn’t as easy as I had assumed.

It’s quite time-consuming and involves lots of communication between various teams to ensure harmony.

While major arrangements are being managed and supervised by Riaan’s professional team for the final day of the festival, we volunteers are helping in the organizing of the various competitions.

Every day, I coordinated and worked with different teams such as social media and PR, technical, finance, and the most tiresome was marketing where we went to different colleges to invite them to our event. Of course, the Reet brothers’ concert was the enticing factor.

Though the best part of my day was seeing Riaan waiting take me back to our apartment, which he did daily. The only thing I didn’t like was that he didn’t kiss me like he used to do. I saw the urge and the lust in his eyes but I could never get him to act on it.

During dinner, he would ask me about my day or the festival which is in two weeks and the conversation never strayed toward my epic meltdown. I know he has questions swirling in his head but his silence is making my hackles rise.

He's up to something and I'm clueless.

I'm mystified, furious, and beyond frustrated.

Every morning, I'm left aching and drooling when he wakes up in all his naked glory and dresses into one of his gentlemanly suits that my hands itch to rumple. And when we get home, he prowls around in his sweats, chiseled abs on display, that my imagination run wild and dirty.

I swear he's doing it on purpose because I see a hint of a smirk on his tempting mouth. I don't care if he's giving me time and space but I've decided I'm going to put an end to his madness.

And what better way than to break one of his rules, especially while he's super busy and forgot to mention he'll be at my campus today. For the whole day, no less.

"When exactly were you going to tell me that you're hot-as-fuck cousin, Riaan, owns the company organizing the freaking concert?" asks Monica, accusation in her eyes.

I roll my eyes when she taps her foot on the ground as we both stare across the seminar room where he's standing, talking to one of his team members.

Intense, focused, and standing with one hand in his pocket and the other scratching his jaw thoughtfully. The simple act makes my pussy wet in a room full of people.

"It slipped my mind," I answer with a shrug while fighting the urge to not take my best friend's hungry eyes off him.

Is it wrong that I want to mark my territory? He does it all the time. But then again, he isn't afraid like me. In fact, he would love it if I did that.

"Seriously! you had a whole week and you still forgot to share?" She pouts. "He's sure a sight for sore eyes and way

hotter than those Reet brothers. Maybe I should seduce him. You can put in a good word for me.”

“No!” I say too loud and her head swivels to mine, eyebrow raised. I laugh to cover the slip up. “I mean, do you think someone like him can be single? Besides, if it didn’t work out between you two, it’ll be awkward for us.”

“You’re right.” She hums before smiling at me. “I can’t lose you. Best friends before dicks.”

“Is that even a saying?” I tease.

“If it isn’t, it should be.”

I laugh and shake my head at her silliness. “I agree.”

“Still, do you think he could get me backstage and alone with the brothers?” Monica asks, her eyes dancing with excitement.

“You’re serious about seducing one of them, aren’t you?”

“Oh, I never kid,” she says, a dreamy look crossing her face. “Who knows, maybe one of them will sweep me off my feet.”

“Go big or go home, I guess.”

Someone behind us calls her name before she can reply to me. The second she leaves, my gaze circles back to Riaan just as he’s walking out the door. Without waiting, I follow after him.

The hallway is empty when I step out and my brow furrows at where he magically disappeared to. I walk a little farther and I’m about to give up and turn around, when a hand grabs my elbow and pulls me into an empty classroom.

My back collides with the wall while a calloused hand silences my scream. My heart beats faster and harder inside my chest as Riaan’s handsome face fills my vision.

“Looking for me, baby?” He smirks.

Slapping his hand away, I glare at him and whisper, “You scared me.”

Stepping back, he shoves his hands into his pockets and stares down at me, no longer smirking. His face turns calm and serious. The same one I've been gazing at this past week. It fills me with annoyance.

“Did you want something, Nyra?”

“Why didn't you tell me you'll be here the whole day?” I accuse.

His expression doesn't shift as he replies, “I never tell you about my business meetings. With the festival close, I had to check the progress myself.”

“I could've used a heads-up.”

“Why?” he asks in a flat tone that maddens me further.

“Because now that everyone knows you're my cousin, rumors would spread like wildfire. What if someone saw us kissing at the parking lot, huh?”

“Good. They'll finally know you're mine.”

“Riaan,” I groan.

“You're worried they'll find out, yet you followed me in here and instead of running away while your friends are in the other room, you're arguing with me,” he says.

“You yanked me in here,” I say dumbly.

“Semantics,” he retorts and after looking at his wristwatch, he meets my gaze and raises his eyebrow. “Unless you have questions pertaining to volunteering, you're wasting my precious time, Nyra.”

His businesslike tone grates on my nerves. He did warn me he's a strict boss and now I'm seeing it firsthand. Despite hating it, I'm actually aroused, which is my constant state around him.

God! How I wish to ruffle his feathers...

Suddenly, an enticing idea forms in my mind and I wear the most serious and professional expression I can manage. His eyes narrow but he remains quiet and observing.

“No. I don’t,” I answer smoothly. “I’ll let you get back to work. I also have a busy day ahead.”

Giving him one last look, I turn my back to him and leave him standing alone.

Come hell or high water, he won’t be so calm before the day is over.

Chapter Thirty-Six

RIAN

Today was supposed to be an uneventful day. I was going to oversee the preparations my team has been working on for the past month, update the dean, and finally go home with Nyra.

Yet it has been anything but.

Instead, I've been distracted by my walking, talking temptation, Nyra.

The bratty little girl has made it her mission to ignore me, pretend I don't even exist as she walks around in her summer dress that lifts with every sway of her hips.

Since we are working outside, the wind blows the skirt of her dress, giving an enticing view of her upper thighs to me and every red-blooded male in the vicinity.

Now, I'm regretting letting her step out of the apartment in that thing in the first place.

I both love and hate that dress.

I know what game she's playing, one where she ends up getting her way, but I won't make it so easy.

I've been distant with her lately but it's not for the reasons she believes. She thinks I'm giving her space because

of her meltdown or that she's a little broken when it's only because of the pictures I found on her phone.

They haven't stopped haunting me, imagining how she must have felt when she was pushed into taking them.

Her call that night was a cry for help and I did nothing.

I just couldn't see past my own pain to help her sooner. If I had an inkling, I would've warned her parents and went to see her, protected her.

The only reason I haven't lost it completely and gone on a rampage yet is because they couldn't break her. She has invisible scars but she survived. When most would have given up, she stayed strong.

My first instinct was to scream at her for giving in to the demands of her blackmailer but it would be like blaming the victim. It is not her fault that she was put into that situation and no one has the right to tell her whether or not she made the right choice. All I know is she did it to protect the ones she loves.

Every time she said she was tainted, I saw the tiny flicker of guilt in her gaze. It's as if she believes she betrayed me.

I wish I could throw it away by letting her know nothing can make me fall out of love with her, least of all for other's crimes. I hate the desolation on her face when I promised her she could never be ruined.

I need to know who's blackmailing her. Unfortunately, I can't do anything unless I hack into Nyra's phone. I've spent the past few days trying to search for a hacker. I found one, but he'll need access to her phone for a few hours. So far, I haven't had the chance, and it's frustrating me to no end.

Until I can identify him, I'm being cautious. He obviously want her out of my life, and if he's already seen me with her and know we are living together, then Nyra's in grave danger.

So, I've kept my eyes on Nyra, never leaving her alone to ensure her safety, and also in case she receives another text

and decides to give in to his demands.

The reason why I'm putting some distance between us is because every time I stare at her beautiful face, I feel like a failure. I can't seem to shake away the guilt and the anger burning in my veins, so I haven't even allowed myself to touch her, for fear I'll take it out on her sweet body.

I hate to think about the fact that someone out there has seen parts of her that were meant only for my eyes. If I get a taste of her lips, the control I'm barely hanging on to will snap.

It's always been this way when it comes to Nyra.

I keep her nightmares at bay and she consumes my darkness.

It's fucked up but the only time my demons can't consume me is when I'm inside her.

"Mr. Ahuja."

"Nyra," I drawl, staring down at her and trying not to kiss the hell out of her. While I'm amused by her attempt to keep things professional between us in front of her friends, I'm also turned on as fuck. "Can I help you with something?"

Her eyes, that stare at me when she thinks I'm not looking, flare when I don't give her the reaction she desires and my lips tilt to one side. The whole day she's been trying to poke at my control but failed each time. When ignoring her didn't work, she tried flirting. It's the little things like accidentally brushing against my arm, bending if I'm at a desk and teasing me with the swell of her tits and smiling at everyone but me.

Doesn't she realize I'm not one to play with? The last time she did, it ended with her tits getting spanked by my belt.

"Snehil told me to hand this to you," she says and passes the document to me, electricity sizzling between our fingers when our hands touch. "She also said that the college's head of security wants to run some protocols by you."

I listen and think how just last week, she was adamant in keeping me at arm's length. I thought she'd be relieved I finally listened. Instead, like some kind of reverse psychology, she's craving to have the old me back.

It became obvious after a few days as she cooked us dinner, using excuses to touch me, and finishing her assignments while I worked.

I'm not ashamed to admit I loved every second of her vying for my attention. Deep down, she wants us to be together but she's just scared.

The little shit misses me but just won't admit it. Unless she does, I'll torture us both.

Two can play at this game.

"Anything else?" I ask, raising an eyebrow.

"No," she says, blinking back at my bored voice, "Mr. Ahuja."

"Then get back to work."

Chest heaving, she holds my cold stare for a few seconds before turning around and walking away, her tight ponytail bouncing with each step. I reluctantly pull my eyes away from her hips and long legs. The last thing I need is a hard-on in front of my colleagues every time she calls me Mr. Ahuja with that little lilt to her soft voice.

The next two hours pass by as I meet the head of security and his team, the technical team, and I'm happy that we are on schedule and everything is running smoothly. The tickets have almost been sold out, so the crowd will be huge and we need to be able to accommodate them.

Just recently, there was a tragic incident at a concert due to a large number of people which led to a ruckus causing a few casualties. I've made sure to take precautions if such a situation arises. Another reason we need tight security, is so random people can't sneak in.

I make my way outside where all the volunteers are working and don't see Nyra anywhere. Last I checked, she was

busy preparing for the scavenger hunt with the committee organizing the games and since all of them are here, she should be too.

What is she up to now?

“Hey, Riaan.”

I face a grinning Monica who is nothing but trouble, and an amazing friend to Nyra. She doesn't know it but being around her is bringing back the old Nyra too. I wonder if she knows about me and her best friend.

“Monica. How are you?” I ask, smiling politely.

“I'm superb.” She replies. “Was surprised to see you here.”

“Didn't Nyra tell you?”

“Nope.” She shrugs before a soft look crosses her eyes. “It's so good to have her back. I missed her.”

“So did she.”

“I wish I could have been there for her, you know. She still hasn't shared why she left in such a hurry except for the fact that she had a rough time. Do you know why?”

“It's not my story to tell,” I reply, and it's the first time I've seen Monica somber. She must really care for Nyra. “You've helped her more than you know, Monica. She's lucky to have you.”

“I'm glad.” She smiles softly.

Still no sign of Nyra, I question her friend, “Do you know where she is now?”

“Oh! She went inside with Ronit to help him with something. I don't remember what.”

The smile vanishes from my face knowing she's alone with some guy and my hand tightens into a fist inside my pocket.

“How long have they been gone?” I casually ask.

“A while ago,” she answers, a mischievous grin on her face. “Don’t tell her but Ronit has a crush on her and probably asked for help so he could spend time alone with her. Anyways, see you later, Riaan.”

Leaving me fuming and jealous, Monica sashays away.

Maintaining my calm composure is taxing, knowing she’s alone with that boy somewhere. It’s not mere jealousy or possessiveness running through me, it’s a far deeper emotion.

I can’t entertain even the possibility of sharing Nyra with anyone, especially with someone out there already holding a piece of her.

I never let my emotions get the best of me but I can’t stop my vision from blurring and shoulders bunching tight with one single thought raging. The rational side of me knows I’m overreacting but the territorial side of me can’t focus on anything except the fact that another person is trying to steal her from me.

Well, Nyra certainly has grabbed my attention now and she didn’t even have to do anything.

Stalking inside the building, I hunt for her. With each class I find empty, I become even more impatient. The longer it takes to see her, the more my control vanishes until every inch of me is coiled tight and waiting to get my hands on her.

I’m at the end of the hallway when her sweet laugh teases my ears and I follow the sound until I’m standing outside the last classroom. I shove the door open and it slams against the wall, the loud bang startling both Nyra and the guy, who is standing a little too close to her for my liking.

I must look scary and pissed off because fear flashes in that prick’s gaze and he swallows nervously. Keeping my stare pinned on him, I bark, “Out.”

“But... h-hey—” he stutters.

“Get out or say goodbye to your legs.”

“Riaan!” Nyra snaps while the guy runs past me like the hounds of hell are after him.

Once we are alone, I train my cold gaze on her defiant ones. Fingers twisting in her skirt, she watches me with fear, lust, and *victory*. The last emotion pouring like gasoline over my madness and possessiveness.

The little brat played me. She came here on purpose, knowing all too well I'll come after her.

"You really love disobeying me, don't you?" I muse while tapping my knuckles on the desk beside me as I stalk in her direction.

"Maybe." She smiles innocently.

"I don't like these games, Nyra," I say in displeasure, until only a small distance remains between us. "If you want something, fucking say it."

"You're the one who started it," she accuses me, hurt flashing in her eyes. "What happened to being my shadow?"

"I'm always close."

"The hell you are."

I raise my eyebrow as her chest heaves and speak while towering over her small frame. "We live, eat, and sleep together, baby. How much closer do you expect us to be, hmm?"

"Don't toy with me, Riaan," she whispers through clenched teeth, and I enjoy the neediness on her face, begging me.

I know exactly what she wants but I need to hear her say it.

"I'm not, though," I tell her, and I'm surprised how composed I sound while inside, I'm a mess. "You chose this, sweetheart."

Her tiny fists hit my chest as she shouts, gaze desperate, "No. I fucking didn't."

"What do you want, Nyra?" I say, my voice low.

"You," she confesses with another hit to my chest and her fingers twist into my shirt as she gets on her toes, inching

closer to me. “I need you.”

“Then next time, get on your knees and beg.”

Chapter Thirty-Seven

RIAN

Before she has a chance to respond, I grab her wrists, twist them behind her back, and bend her over the desk.

Flipping up the hem of her dress, I pull the tiny lace panties down her thighs, baring her ass, and spank it hard twice on the same spot.

Her cry of pleasure and the harsh sound of my palm connecting with her soft skin fill the entire space.

“I don’t care how desperate you are for my attention but you will never go near another boy ever again.” I discipline her with another harsh spank on the same ass cheek until she begins to squirm away. Squeezing it until she feels the burn, I command, “Stay still.”

The image of that little fucker breathing the same air as her fills my vision and I let the beast inside me loose.

Spank.

Spank.

Spank.

I rain them down on her other ass cheek until the skin flushes pink and still, I’m not satisfied. All the weeks’ worth of pent-up need and hunger consumes me.

Her soft whimpers and my harsh breathing echoing like a symphony around us. She rises on her toes when I land

an even harder slap and my cock hardens with an intense need to fuck.

“Is this what you wanted, dirty girl? Me losing control?”

I should've just fucked her the day she returned because she didn't deserve any mercy. Before we leave here, she won't be walking straight without feeling me between her legs and my cum dripping out of her cunt.

Slapping her ass, and watching it jiggle, I rub circles over the imprints of my fingers teasingly while she whispers unashamedly, “Yes.”

“Is that why you've been flaunting your tits in my face all day?”

“Maybe.”

“I wasn't the only one staring, Nyra. Do you know that?” I scold harshly and enviously. “Because of you, I had to fire two of my staff.” Grabbing her ponytail, I wind it around my fist and pull until her tear-streaked face meets my possessive gaze. “I warned you. I don't like anyone looking at what's mine. Your body is only mine to look, touch, and fuck.”

“I'm sorry, Riaan.”

“Not Mr. Ahuja anymore, huh?” I taunt and she blushes. “Spread your legs.”

Like a greedy little pet, she obeys and I stare at her wet slit, the juices dripping down the inside of her thighs. My filthy little girl loves the sweet taste of enticing pain as much as I love giving it to her. Her panties is stretched tight, restricting me from seeing every inch of her wet cunt. So, with one pull, I tear them down her thighs.

“Fuck,” Nyra curses when it stings a little and I smile when her pussy clenches. My little fuck toy is so fucking needy.

“Who owns you, baby?” I demand as I run one finger up the inside of her thigh and slowly slide it closer to her heat, her wetness soaking my palm. When she doesn't answer

instantly, I pull my hand and lay a hard slap on her pussy. “I said... Who. Fucking. Owns. You. Nyra?”

“You do,” she screams and I don’t even care if anyone hears her.

“Who makes your cunt drenched?” *Slap.*

“You.”

“Whose little fuck toy are you?” *Slap.*

“Yours, Riaan.”

Spreading her ass cheeks with my hands, I get down on my knees and like a starving savage she’s reduced me to, I take a long lick from her pulsing clit to her tiny asshole.

Her moans fill my ears as I suck on her wet slit until her juices soak my trimmed beard and nip her throbbing clit. I groan when the taste of her hits my tongue and makes me lose my mind.

For two fucking months, I was robbed of her pussy. Its scent and its sweet taste.

Keeping her open, I blow on her bundle of nerves until she shivers, and bite down on her ass, leaving teeth marks. I don’t care if I bruise her or if I’m rough, I’m too obsessed with sating my need for her flesh. It’s been too fucking long since I tasted and ate her out like this.

Furthermore, if her loud moans and her chanting of my name is any indication, she’s enjoying it too.

Every time I suck, lick, and bite, she gushes onto my waiting tongue and shoves her pussy harder against my face. I haven’t even given her my fingers yet, and she’s already soaking wet. Such a needy little thing...

When I look up, I’m pleased to find her arms behind her, nails digging into her skin. As if she can sense my gaze, her head tilts down and she meets my manic face while biting her bottom lip. Keeping my eyes pinned on her, I spread her ass cheeks indecently wide until her little dark pink rosebud is bare and I lick it.

An embarrassed and cherry-red hue covers her entire face and she whispers, "Riaan... it... you can't."

"Can't what, baby?" I push with a dirty smirk.

"Don't lick me there." If it's possible, she blushes even harder.

Pushing my tongue against her asshole, I tease her, and despite the plea on her mouth, she's turned on. The evidence is in her juices that gushes out the more I suck and taste the most forbidden part of her.

"I plan to do more than just lick your virgin ass, Nyra," I remind her. "My cock will make its home there and you'll take every inch of it. Then, you'll be mine in every way."

Spitting on her untouched hole, I press my index finger and slowly push against her tightness, her body fighting to keep me out.

"Riaan... it feels weird," Nyra murmurs. "Ah..."

"Relax, baby. Let my finger in," I command softly and push harder until I'm past my knuckle. My saliva and her wetness allows me to thrust my finger in and out of her easily. Once Nyra becomes used to it, I add another finger and she squirms harder, resisting. "Take it."

"I can't. It hurts..." she cries.

"And yet your pussy is dripping wet," I taunt and shove both my fingers inside her clenching hole. "That's it. That's my good little girl."

I use my other hand to rub her clit fast and hard while thrusting inside of her asshole until her cries turn into moans of pleasure. I flick her nub fast while keeping my pace slow and when she begins to push her hips back, I fuck her harder. I could come just from watching her like this.

"Look at you, taking your cousin's fingers in your tight ass," I growl, and a shudder runs down her spine. "What will your friends think if they find you bent over, ass naked and fucking my hand like a filthy little girl?"

“Riaan!!” She whimpers and ignoring her clit, I spank her ass and hold my fingers inside her walls. “Let me cum, please.”

“Not yet,” I warn, and scissor my fingers insides her and push a third one in. The sight brings the animal in me out. Her ass is going to choke my dick when I pound into her.

“Please... no more fingers. I’m too full. I can’t,” she begs.

“It will hurt a lot worse when it’s my dick, baby. I won’t go slowly then, so accept what I give you,” I tell her while watching her tiny hole taking my fingers so beautifully. “And don’t tell me it hurts while your pussy is dripping on my hand, my little liar.”

“Fuck!” she curses when my rhythm becomes hard and rough. Slapping her thighs wider, I suck her pulsing clit into my mouth and thrust my tongue inside her cunt while not easing on her asshole. I want her to feel the sweet pleasure and the tingling pain.

“Beg me to allow you to come,” I grunt against her skin.

“Please, Riaan,” she begs with her hooded and lust-filled eyes on me. Her cheeks flushed, lips swollen from biting, and hair a mess from my tight grip on her hair earlier. “Let me come on your tongue. You’ve tortured me enough. Please... *please*.”

The love, the desperation, and the longing on her face does me in and shoving my fingers to the hilt in her ass and two in her cunt at once, I command, “Come for me, baby. Now.”

On a silent scream, she falls apart and orgasms all over my hands, drenching me in her cum. Her entire back jerks and bucks while I keep thrusting hard so she keeps coming. To me, she has never looked more stunning.

The second she’s spent and goes still, breathing heavily, I slowly pull my fingers out of her slightly gaping hole. It’s so pretty.

Straightening up, I rub circles on her ass, help her up, and grab her elbow to turn her toward me. She watches me shyly while a satisfied smile tilts her lips up.

The seductive draw of her mouth pulls me in and leaning down, I crush my mouth against hers so she can taste herself. I shove my tongue inside her to battle with hers and wrap my hand around her throat to hold her still.

Her nails dig into my waist as she goes up on her tiptoes and lets me ravage her mouth. Her body sways and she sucks sharply when I bite and pull her lip and let it go with a pop.

“I don’t think I can stand on my own. You made my knees weak, Riaan,” she teases before pouting, “And you tore my panties.”

“You’re lucky I didn’t tear your dress off, baby.”

“Do you expect me to walk out of here naked?” She raises her eyebrows.

“No.” Squeezing her throat, I darkly tell her, “You’re going to walk out of here with my cum dripping out of your cunt.”

“What?” She gasps loudly. Desire and heat pools in her eyes while she blushes under my heavy gaze.

“After everything we’ve done, you still blush like a virgin, baby,” I say while caressing her face and squeeze her cheeks. “It only makes me more obsessed. I will never stop pushing your limits and dirtying you up.”

She swallows thickly and I watch as she tries to back away. I let her because bending her to my will always gets me harder than a rock.

“Did you think I was done with you, silly girl?” I taunt. “It’s your turn to please me, my little fuck toy. My cock has waited long enough to fuck you.”

“Not here, Riaan,” she rushes to say. “Someone might be looking for us.”

Without bothering with a reply, I pull her flush against me. I grab the end of her skirt in my fist, slowly pulling it up over her naked hips.

“Then we’ll just have to be quick.” I smirk, eyes hard. “Hold your skirt for me.”

Despite denying me a second ago, she follows my command and I roam my gaze from her hard nipples poking against her dress, down to her bare pussy. I just had her cum on my tongue, and yet I want to taste her again.

“I can’t wait to be inside you, Nyra.” I groan past clenched teeth. Pressing closer, I run my middle finger between her wet slit and shove it hard inside her waiting hole. “So fucking tight. I’ll have to teach you to take my cock all over again.”

“Fuck me, Riaan,” she whispers, legs trembling. “Let me feel you inside me. Punish me for keeping you waiting. I want it to hurt...”

With a snarl, I grab her tiny waist, making her hands drop, and pick her up. She circles her legs around my hips and taking two steps, I push us against the nearest wall. Squeezing her neck until she gasps, I growl, “I’m going to fuck you bare, fill you up with my cum every day until you’re bound to me irrevocably. That’s how insane I’ve become to keep you with me forever. You should be terrified, Nyra, because one way or another, you’re never leaving me again.”

“You keep forgetting, Riaan.” Instead of fear, her eyes mirror my madness and baring the darkest parts of her soul, she confesses, “I’m just as twisted as you. All my life, I’ve craved you with an intensity that borders on an unhealthy obsession. I’ve spent nights alone in my bed staring at your photos, touching myself with thoughts of only you. Despite knowing you’re forbidden, I still dreamed of you staring at me the way you are right now. Lovingly, obsessively, and possessively like I’m the only woman that exists to you. So know, your darkness can never scare me when it’s the only thing I’ve chased my entire life.”

Time ceases to exist as our eyes stay locked, our heartbeats syncing and our desire wild and hot.

“Pull out my cock.” My voice is raw and guttural.

Her gaze lowers while her hands slide down my chest, my abs, and once they reach my pants, she fumbles with the button and the zipper in her haste. When her fingers wrap around my girth and she pulls it out, I groan and curse in satisfaction.

I can smell her arousal and feel her heat against my body.

“I love how big and hard you are, Riaan,” she says, stroking me up and down while staring at my size in awe. “I missed the way you stretched me, made me hurt and forced me to take it all. I feared I would never feel you again.”

“I’ve noticed your mouth isn’t so innocent anymore, filthy girl.” The last time she dirty-talked, I blew my load all over her tits.

“I love the effect it has on you.”

“Oh yeah? Then say cock and see what it does to me, baby,” I say roughly. “You wanna talk filthy? Then you better do it right. Look at me and say you want my dick in your cunt.”

Slowly meeting my dark gaze, she licks her lip before saying softly, “I want your dick in my *cunt*.”

As soon as she whispers it, my cock twitches in her hold and she looks down in surprise at the pre-cum leaking from the head. Her tongue flicking out as if she wants to taste it.

“Rub the head against your pussy. Make it nice and wet,” I bark impatiently.

“Yes.”

Pleasure shoots up my back as she strokes me up and down her wet slit. Every time she circles the crown against her opening, I ache to plunge inside. But seeing the way she watches me slide between her pussy’s lips, entranced, I hold

back the urge. I bet she'll come just from the friction if I let her.

“Stop,” I command when she lowers the tip to her entrance. Without warning, I thrust to the hilt and she screams when my cock pierces through her tight walls. “Fuck! I missed this pussy. It’s fucking *mine*.”

“Yes. Yours.” She moans.

“Can you feel what you do to me, Nyra?” I grunt while grinding my hips against her clit. “Every time you walked past me with that defiant look in your eyes, I wanted to choke you with my dick.”

Holding her weight with one hand, I pull out completely before thrusting hard and rough again. Home and heaven... It’s what her juicy pussy fills like and like an animal that found its mate, I plunge inside her again and again.

Her eyes fall close when I hit a spot inside her that makes her wetter than ever. I want her to see what I do to her.

“Don’t take your eyes off me,” I violently growl while holding my cock inside her. Her eyelids fall open and meet mine. “I went without them for two fucking tortuous months. You won’t ever hide them now, especially when I’m pounding into you.”

“I won’t. I promise,” she vows, holding my face in her soft palms. “Don’t stop. I need more.”

Letting her delicate neck go, I shove her arms above her head and hold them in my hand. Grinding against her clit, I pull my cock halfway out before thrusting in savagely, her tits bouncing in my face. Like a savage, I tear the top of her dress down until her breasts pop free and bite down on her nipple.

“Riaan!” She whimpers in dark lust and I flick it with my tongue before biting it again, making her walls clench around my length. Pulling back slightly, I deliver a harsh slap to her tit and squeeze it hard.

“You’re choking my dick, baby,” I taunt cruelly. “You’re going to milk every drop of my cum, won’t you?”

“Yes,” she croaks, high on lust and pleasure. “Make me come.”

“What did I tell you?” I harshly demand while rutting into her furiously. “You’re my what, Nyra?”

“Your fuck toy.”

“And?”

“They don’t talk back,” she whispers, face pinched in tension while trying not to orgasm.

“Good girl,” I praise her. “You’re going to come when I’ve had my fill.”

Licking between the valley of her tits, I suck and mark them with my teeth all over again. She moans and bucks her hips when I bottom out every time I bite.

The sound of my balls slapping against her skin fills my ears. I’m pounding into her so hard and fiercely that it takes me a second to hear the voices coming from outside. When I slow down, Nyra notices it and stares in confusion. But a second later, the look in her eyes twists into fright.

“Oh my God! Someone is having sex here,” says a girl with a laugh.

“Yeah. I heard it too,” replies her friend.

Nyra fights against my hold but like the bastard I am, I thrust inside her and she shakes her head.

“Riaan. They’ll catch us,” she whispers and begs. “Please stop. Ah...”

The fear in those pupils of hers wakes up the depraved beast inside me and once again, I pound into her without remorse. I let her feel every inch of me and just like I knew, her cunt clenches around me painfully. My balls draw tight and I know I’m close.

Inching my hand lower, I find her sensitive clit and rub it furiously, her head shaking side to side as the pleasure, the desire, send shivers down her spine.

Biting her earlobe, I growl, “Come for me, my little pet. Let them hear what a twisted little girl you are who enjoys her cousin’s cock. Let them all hear that you like being at my mercy and let me use your tight little pussy like my personal fuck toy. Give your orgasm to me, Nyra.”

Pressing her mouth against my neck, her scream of pleasure vibrates all over me as she falls apart. When I fuck her through her orgasm, pinching her clit, she bites down on my skin to keep from moaning while her cunt holds me in a chokehold.

I let her wrists fall down and take hold of her thighs. Spreading them wide, I keep my thrusts short and deep as my balls pull taut. I drive into her like I hate her, use her like the toy she is to bring me pleasure. After three or four thrusts, my own orgasm is triggered and I ejaculate inside her tight hole like an animal. Once she’s milked every drop, I reluctantly pull out my softening cock.

Lowering my gaze, I watch some of my cum dribble out of her and I love the sight.

I lower her legs and right her clothes, or at least, whatever I can salvage. Her upper half is torn from the harsh way I pulled at it, her full tits bare for my eyes. I cup her face and notice her lipstick is smudged from my kisses. She looks freshly fucked, marked, and owned.

“I don’t think I can walk,” she mumbles and I laugh.

“I’ll carry you, baby,” I say, pushing her fallen hair behind her ear. “I ruined your dress. Wear my jacket.”

“How come my clothes are always ruined?”

“I do it because it makes you horny as fuck.” I smile. “Deny it and I’ll ruin what’s left of your dress.”

“You wouldn’t,” she retorts, her eyes narrowed.

I give her a heated look, daring her to try me while removing my jacket and once she wears it, her small frame is dwarfed in it, making her look adorable. “Take my keys and go sit in my car. It’s parked in the staff parking lot.”

“But I don’t have my bag,” she replies, looking at me.
“I left it with Monica.”

“I’ll get it.”

“But—” I shush her with my finger on her lip.

“You look like a beautiful mess, baby,” I say, roaming my gaze from her head to her toes. “You scream freshly fucked and no one but me gets to see it. Now run before I decide to fuck your ass too.”

The second she leaves, all the chaos returns.

Nyra may have chosen me today, but I’m no close to tearing down her walls.

As long as she’s held captive by her monster, she’ll never let me in completely.

We’ll always be on borrowed time.

Chapter Thirty-Eight

NYRA

Is it even a walk of shame if I want to do it all over again?

I'm glad when I don't run into anyone as I head to the parking lot through the back entrance. Each step reminds of the ache between my thighs and the slickness in my core.

My cheeks heat when I feel some of his cum slide down despite how hard I'm clenching to keep it in.

I can't believe I let him fuck me bare.

Can't believe I let him finger-fuck my ass.

The look in his eyes paired with the aggression in his body, I would've let him do anything to me just as long as he kept staring at me the same way.

I've had his cock inside me but it had never felt like this. So warm, thick, and hard. It was like I was losing my virginity all over again except the pleasure was more present than the pain. Never once did he take his eyes off me. After treating me delicately all week, he fucked me unbelievably deep and brutally passionate like he wanted to shatter me.

When he came, I felt every spurt of his cum. I thought it would never stop.

What if I get pregnant? my mind screams, now that I'm thinking rationally.

I'm not even on any pill. I'll have to buy it first thing in the morning. I also cannot be making mistakes like this, no matter how enticing they feel. Besides, Riaan can't be serious about intertwining our lives this way. As soon as he's back, I'll talk to him.

Pressing on the key fob, I hear his sports car beep from my left and I see it parked in the very last spot.

Hurrying toward it before anyone catches me, I reach it and unlock the passenger door to slide inside. Since I have nothing to pass the time, I have no choice but to wait for him.

Since I have no way to check the time, it feels like forever and I wonder what's taking him so long. I'm startled when I feel something vibrate and I realize it's coming from the pocket of Riaan's jacket. I'm guessing it's his phone so I pull it out and read the name "Karan" written on the screen. Assuming it could be urgent, I pick up the call.

"Riaan," the guy says on the other end of the line.

"Hi, I'm sorry but Riaan is away right now," I explain. "I can take a message if it's important?"

"Who are you?" The way he questions me raises my suspicions.

"I'm his assistant, Snehil," I lie smoothly. "If you want, I can ask him to call you back."

"No. It's fine," he replies, though the tension doesn't leave my body. "Just let him know I found another way to hack into the phone instead of him bringing it to me. He can call me and I'll explain."

Why is Riaan working with a hacker? If it's related to his work, shouldn't he be hacking into a system or something? Various questions run through my head at once.

"Snehil," says Karan, and I blink.

"Sorry. I'll pass the message on to him," I reply.

"Thanks."

I hang up without another word while my foot taps nervously on the floor. I can't let go of the uneasy feeling bubbling inside my chest. Riaan's distant behavior the past several days, especially skirting the last conversation we had, and now this call. It all screams one thing.

Riaan is spying on me.

Anger, fear, and hurt take over my senses. That's why he never asked me about the text.

I mean, why would he when he could just hack into my phone? I should've known he wouldn't let it go. He won't find anything, though, because after making a copy, I deleted all the messages.

But the pictures, I never got to them. Damn it.

I don't care what his intentions are but betraying my trust like this, he's no better than the blackmailer. Just like him, he's taking away my choice.

I was letting him in and building the courage to tell him the truth because of the way he's been taking care of me. But all this time, he's been plotting behind my back. He needs to understand that this isn't something he can control.

Even if I disrupt his plan, he'll find another way.

So how do I stop him?

Looking at his phone, I easily unlock it since he didn't bother to have a password and delete the last call. At least, this will save me some time.

"Shit!" I curse in horror and almost drop the phone when I hear the click of the door. My gaze collides with Riaan's cool ones as he climbs inside the car.

"You okay, baby?"

"Yeah. You just scared me," I answer nonchalantly while trying to calm my racing heart. "What took you so long?"

"I had to check in on a few things."

“What did you tell Monica?” I ask when he throws my bag in the back seat and shrugs.

“Told her you felt sick so I’m taking you home,” he replies with a shrug. “You might wanna call her once we get there.”

“I will.”

I face forward, expecting him to start driving, but his attention never strays from me. My stomach drops when he says his next words.

“You look tense, Nyra.” He observes me. Softly gripping my chin, he turns me to him and asks in a concerned voice, “Was I too rough?”

I inhale sharply at the stark worry on his handsome face. I feel like such a hypocrite for being angry at him when I’m guilty of the same crime. After all, I’m the one who caused all this mess. If I hadn’t hidden the truth from the start, everything would’ve turned out differently.

I just can’t let him find out about the blackmailing from somebody else.

He deserves to learn it from me.

Smiling to ease the distress in his eyes, I shake my head. “I’m okay, Riaan. I wouldn’t have you any other way.”

“You’re perfect,” he compliments, gazing at me with so much love and protectiveness that it takes my breath away.

My heart aches badly for comparing him to my blackmailer. He could never be like him. Still, I can’t shake off the hurt for his blatant disregard for my privacy.

“Take me home,” I whisper, wanting to forget about the call.

Caressing my cheek one more time, he faces forward and shifts the car into gear and drives us out of the campus.

Butterflies dance in my belly when he holds my hand in his lap, only letting go when he has to change gears. The small gesture is far addictive than words could ever be.

An hour later, we arrive at our building and five minutes later, enter the apartment. With both of us exhausted from a long day, we go straight to the bedroom. I throw my bag on the high-back chair in the corner while untying my ponytail. I feel his eyes on my back so I twist around.

“What?”

Amusement lights his face as he shakes his head. “Nothing, baby.”

While I couldn’t care less where I leave my stuff, he’s equally methodical and has a place for everything. I follow him as he goes to the nightstand, sits down on the bed and puts his watch, lighter, and pen away one by one.

Since I’ve become quite familiar with his routine while living with him, I know he’ll take his clothes off next.

Feeling mischievous, I slowly pull his jacket off my shoulders and I’m about to throw it on the chair, when his voice stops me without lifting his eyes.

“Don’t you dare, baby.”

I hide my smile and answer innocently, “I wasn’t going to.”

“If you say so, my little liar.”

“Order is boring, Riaan.”

Straightening up, he stalks toward me and twists my nipples punishingly. Arching his brow, he asks, “Are you calling me boring?”

Dominating. Broody. Ruthless. Mischievous. Sexy. *Wicked*. He’s everything but that.

“Umm... May—” My words get cut off as he smashes his lips against mine and kisses me deeply, stealing all my thoughts. I feel dazed when he pulls back way too soon.

“Shower with me,” he whispers sinfully.

“Okay.” Before I can take off my dress, he does it for me and rips it off completely. I roll my eyes at his smug face. “You couldn’t resist, could you?”

“Not when it has this effect on you.” He teases while smacking my wet pussy.

When he goes to unbutton his shirt, I stop him and replace his hands with mine. “Let me.”

His head tilts with his consent and I loosen the knot of his tie and pull it off, placing it carefully to my side. I focus on my task while trying not to burn under his intense gaze. Once I’ve opened all the buttons, I inch my fingers underneath and let it fall open.

We’re always so desperate and hungry to touch each other, that moments like these feel so rare. I didn’t realize how much I craved this slow dance of seduction and simply basking in our closeness. And I can sense him feeling the same.

His abs tighten when I run my nails down the valley between each muscle before I remove his shirt completely. I unbuckle his belt, unbutton the pants, and lower his zipper. Inching my fingers in the waist, I pull them down his strong legs while also sliding to my knees.

When I tilt my head to meet his gaze, his fingers slide into my hair and he holds it there. Running my hands up his thighs, I push my fingers in his boxers and pull until his cock springs free, hitting his lower abs.

Once he’s naked, ripped muscles everywhere, I stand up and press against every hard inch of him. He pulls my hair and demands roughly, “Had your fill?”

“Mmhmm.”

“Good,” he says. Bending down, he grabs the backs of my knees to take me into his arms. My legs circle his waist while I wrap my arms around his shoulders. Like two hungry souls, our lips crash and tongues engaged in some type of duel while he carries me into the bathroom.

Shoving open the curtain, he slides me down and switches on the shower, setting the temperature to hot. Water beats down on us and I watch him grab my body wash and pour some onto his hands.

“Turn around.”

My neck tilts when he pushes my wet hair to the side and rubs his hands over my shoulders, down to my back, and brings it to the front.

Slowly inching upward, he pays attention to my heaving breasts, teasing my nipples with his thumbs. I become dazed, lost in his soft caresses. I sigh blissfully as he leaves no part of me untouched. All the tension evaporates from my body when he washes me.

When I feel him press against me, I lean my head on his broad shoulders and his fingers grip my neck from the front. His lips and hot breath tease my ear as he says, “You know, Nyra, this could be us for the rest of our lives if you just let me in.”

I go still and my eyes close, imagining us together. Breathing in his scent, standing under his protective shade, I confess to the constant feeling I carry in my chest but never said out loud, “I want it too, Riaan, but I’m scared.”

“I know, baby,” he murmurs in understanding while caressing my pounding pulse. “But you’re more than your fears. I’ve seen you stare in the mirror when you think I’m not looking and the sadness in your eyes breaks my heart. I wish you could see what I do. You’re a strong, beautiful, and fearsome woman who not only protects the ones she loves, but also fights and sacrifices herself for them. You’re the only woman who dared to fall in love with me, who chose me despite being able to have any man in this world. The one who never hid her feelings for me even when I was too scared to admit them. So don’t you dare give up on us now.”

The fierceness in his words pulls at my heartstrings, renders me speechless, and raises goosebumps on my arms. Twisting against his hold, I turn to face him and his palms cup my cheeks.

“You say fate keeps pushing us apart but it’s always bringing us back together too. It’s because you’re meant to be mine.”

“How can you still love me after I hurt you so terribly?” I ask brokenly.

“Because it’s you.” His gaze turns fierce and his hold tighter. “Because love is not a single feeling. It’s complex and messy and emotional. Its happiness, sadness, longing, obsession, forgiveness, acceptance, pain, and, baby, you make me feel all of them.” Taking my palm, he presses it against his chest. “Right here.”

With tears stinging my eyes, I stretch up on my toes to kiss him, and his lips meeting mine halfway. He lets me plunder his mouth, and I pour my love and need for him into the kiss. It’s messy and desperate. I suck and taste him like I never want to stop, like he’s my reason to exist, and he is.

“I love you so much, Riaan, and I need you to trust me to give you all of me. The way you deserve,” I whisper. His forehead rest on mine. “Wait for me like you promised you would.”

Sometimes, the distance doesn’t lie in the miles but in the situations we are stuck in and that’s where he and I are. I see the same recognition and understanding in his dark pupils. Until yesterday, hopelessness sometimes flickered in them. But tonight, they burn with hope and it sparks mine too.

“Then you need to trust me too,” he demands. “We all have demons, Nyra, but that doesn’t mean you have to face them alone. Let me fight them with you. Let me watch you conquer them from by your side. Let me be your strength and not your weakness.”

“Through my darkest days, it was your voice that brought me to the light. You are my rock, Riaan.”

“And you’re mine,” he growls against my lips, and I nod because he’s still here despite everything.

Still loving me like I’m his.

Always keeping his promises.

I vow to do the same.

Chapter Forty

NYRA

Sex brain is a real thing.

Because sex all I can think about like a nymphomaniac after sleeping with Riaan. One would expect my body to be satisfied after receiving three delicious orgasms, yet the ache in my pussy hasn't lessened.

It's like I'm starved for his touch and his proximity, the hunger not dissipating.

It's as if the floodgates of desire has opened, and there's no containing it.

It's just the way it has always been.

All my life, I longed for him and once it happened, I began to yearn for normalcy. I wanted to pretend that we weren't related the way we are. But as more time passes and the longer I ponder, I'm slowly realizing I'm wishing for something that destroys who we are.

We are not normal.

We are complicated, messy, and a little twisted.

Our love is illicit and one of a kind.

I don't want to be anyone but us. And once I accepted that fact, it brings me peace and joy. Strength and serenity.

The dinner was delicious and romantic. Our night out was exactly what I needed to forget about the hard path laid ahead of me.

If I want to give Riaan and me a real fighting chance, then I need to fix everything and start with a clean slate. We can't do that if we have to keep watching our backs.

I will tell him about Zain and his betrayal, no matter the consequences. Their already precarious relationship will be destroyed but I don't see any other outcome.

I'm sitting outside an ice cream shop on a barstool while Riaan went inside to bring my order of a vanilla ice cream cone with chocolate syrup.

The street buzzes with chatter as well as the soft hum of music and laughter, while I'm thinking of a believable excuse to visit my aunt alone. I look up, my gaze clashing with Riaan's as he prowls toward me and all the noise dies down as my whole being becomes ensnared by him.

He stops in front of me and doesn't move to sit. My extra height saves me from tilting my neck to keep our gazes locked.

He casually leans his free arm on the table and the move has me trapped. I move to grab the cone from his hand, when he shakes his head.

"I'll feed you," he commands, his tone sultry as he brings the tip closer to my lips. "Lick."

My heart thuds as I take a long lick, the ice cream melting on my tongue, and I swipe my bottom lip when some of the chocolate drips down. With his gaze lustful and his jaw clenching, he follows the movement.

Wild eyes meet mine and before he even says it, I move. "Again."

I don't dare look away as I circle the tip before taking another lick and suck the top. It's obvious we're both imagining it's his cock.

I suck and bite a few more times while he attentively watches and except the expression on his face, there's no sign he's affected at all. Only I know that it's the stillness before the beast in him comes out.

Like the filthy girl he says I am, I take my time and enjoy the little power I have over him.

I'm almost finished when I pull back to swipe the little chocolate from the corner of my lip and suck my finger clean with a pop. "You don't want a taste?"

I ask even though he doesn't eat desserts but he surprises me by saying, "I do."

Covering my lips with the ice cream, his hand grabs the back of my neck to hold me still as he tastes the flavor from my mouth.

Instead of pulling away, he pushes his tongue inside and kisses me so savagely that my toes curl in my heels. I savor the combined taste of him and the chocolate and vanilla. I suck his tongue, craving more, and his fingers tighten around my throat.

I forget that we are not alone and suddenly, I don't care if people are watching us.

When my hands twist in his shirt and I whimper, he harshly rips his mouth away.

Frighteningly calm, he only says, "Home. Now."

I stand on jelly legs as he intertwines our hands and walks us in the direction of his car without another word. I try to keep up with his fast pace but I'm short and wearing heels and the fact that I'm aroused as fuck isn't helping.

"Riaan," I say, tugging at his hand. "I can't run in these."

He stops, takes one look at my feet, and picks me up in his arms. Thank God we're the only ones on this street. Otherwise, I would've flashed them my panties. However, it's not like Riaan would've allowed it.

His jaw is shut tight with dark desire evident in his expression and it sends electricity running through my body. As soon as we reach his car, he unlocks it and roughly dumps me on the seat. Shutting the door, he rounds the hood and gets in the driver's seat.

“Seat belt.” He only seems to be capable of one-syllable words.

With trembling hands, I put on the safety belt while he pulls into traffic. The muscles in his arm bulge and flex as he shifts gears while driving fast. The tension in the air is so thick and potent that I could cut it with a knife. Our hands remain on our sides and I don't even look at him.

His dark energy wafts over me.

The whole night was just foreplay. And now, I'm bursting with need and desire.

Once again, I'm leaving a wet spot on his shiny leather seats and my cheeks heat in embarrassment. I'm a mess while he's lethal and silent with his attention on the road but it doesn't mean he's unaware of me.

The only visible proof he isn't completely unaffected is his hard cock forming an obscene bulge in his pants.

I feel so hot that I lower the windows slightly and the wind blows my skirt, baring my wet panties.

Riaan's hand tightens around the steering wheel, eyes scanning my naked thighs. I don't cover myself up on purpose and feel his intensity heighten. When I spread my thighs, he increases the speed.

“Nyra,” he warns.

I know I'm playing with fire but I'm too far gone.

Finally, we reach home and as soon as the car stops, we both get out of the car. Still not touching me, he walks a step behind me like I'm a lamb he's taking to the slaughter.

The kind where he will break me by pulling orgasms out of my willing body. Inside the elevator, his gaze burns my back from head to toe yet he doesn't say a word.

I watch the number of floors as we rise up and will for it to hurry. I shudder violently when his finger traces a slow path down my spine and stops right above hips.

It's such a small and innocent touch, yet it pulls the strongest reaction out of me. Thankfully, the elevator door finally opens on our floor.

“Walk,” Riaan commands darkly.

Why is his cold and hard voice turning me on? I ask myself.

His large palm slides down to rest over my ass while he stands behind me, his arm coming around to unlock the door with confident fingers. I step into the dark hallway, with only a sliver of light pouring in from the kitchen when I hear the lock click.

In a split second, the energy shifts and every trace of tortuous calmness is gone.

He doesn't even let us reach the living room before he pounces on me, and he whips me around with his hands fisting my long hair.

The dark shadows makes his face look beastly as he pulls at the neckline of my dress, the strings coming undone under his force. My naked breasts bounce and he slaps them hard, eliciting a pained cry from my lips.

“On your knees.” His voice sounds so guttural and unrecognizable.

I follow his command, dropping down before him while his other hand roughly pulls at the button on his jeans and jerks the zipper down. I lower his briefs and jeans down, too eager to take his cock in my mouth.

The sweetness I'm tasting on my tongue, I want to replace it with the salty taste of his cum.

He wraps his hand around the base and like the depraved man he is, he slaps his dick against my cheek. It doesn't hurt but the act itself is dirty, wrong and humiliating. My pussy throbs nonetheless.

His eyes flare when he catches me enjoying it. He does it again and then paints my lips with his pre-cum. I lick it eagerly.

“Good girl,” he growls. “Do you remember how to suck my cock or do I need to teach you again, hmm?”

“I do,” I whisper, feeling shy all of a sudden.

“Are you going to choke for me?”

“Yes.”

“Are you going to swallow my cum?”

“Yes, Riaan.” I stutter as he taps the purple head of his dick on my lips. “Please, I want to taste...”

“Taste what?”

I blush, knowing what he wants to hear and hate the fact that he’s making me wait. “Your cock.”

“Open your mouth wide,” he orders, and when I move my hands to rest on his thighs, he growls. “Hands behind your back, *fuck toy*.”

His shoulders are wide and his arm is flexed as he barely hangs on to his control while I obey him. I’m at his mercy, his to do whatever he pleases, and his to fuck however he wants.

When he’s satisfied with my position, he stops holding back and shoves his length to the back of my throat in one hard, merciless thrust. I keep my mouth relaxed but I still choke on him, tears springing to my eyes while he groans in pleasure. His thick girth pulses wildly as he holds me immobile.

“Fuck yes. That’s it.” He keeps still for a few seconds before pulling out completely.

Eyes locked with mine, he pushes in slowly, watching how my cheeks hollow around his size. “Take it. Every fucking inch.”

“Breathe through your nose, baby.” I do as he says, his musky scent filling my nostrils. When his balls hit my chin, he

commands, “Suck.”

He fucks me slow and deep a few times until his cock becomes wet with my saliva and my tears. He never once looks away and when I squirm in pleasure as I blow him.

“Look at you writhing on the floor.” he smiles darkly. “Is your cunt aching, dirty little girl?” he taunts, his fingers tightening painfully in my hair. “Is your clit throbbing? Does your hole feeling empty, hmm?”

I nod, face red as I absorb every single word that spills out of his filthy mouth. In return, he thrusts his cock deeper. His expression darkens as he stares down at me. “I need to fuck your mouth raw, baby. Are you going to take it like a good girl?”

When he lets me breathe, I nod and whisper, “Yes. Use me, Riaan.”

With all softness gone, he tilts my head, spans his dick against my open mouth, and thrusts all the way in. He doesn't stop until my nose is pressed against his groin, cutting off my air. Without mercy, he fucks my mouth and seeks his own pleasure.

Each time he goes down, I swallow and suck. The sound of his balls smacking against my chin fills the hallway, and mixes with his low grunts and groans. My nails bite into my skin while the rest of me is tethered to him.

My jaw aches from how rough, fast, and hard he thrusts repeatedly but I don't care.

I feel powerful in my trapped state, knowing I'm the only woman to make him blind with desire. The only one who sees beneath his broody exterior. The only one to feel his domination and debauchery.

“I thrive on control, yet your innocence always makes me lose it each time,” he growls and I moan, the sound vibrating around his dick. “Every time I fucked my hand, I had to imagine it was you on your knees. But it wasn't the same.”

“Nothing.” *Thrust.*

“Compares.” *Thrust.*

“To.” *Thrust.*

“This.” He grunts with a plunge so deep and rough, my knees scrape on the floor and he tightens his hold. “You’re so wet and warm. And with your face a filthy mess, you never look more like mine.”

With both of his hands sliding into my hair, he grips it roughly and I deep-throat him even harder while spit spills from the corner of my mouth. Head thrown back, corded neck muscles on display, he uses me like I’m a beautiful toy made only for him and his pace becomes uncontrollable.

His cock swells and I know he’s close. Shifting closer, he backs me into the wall and meets my teary eyes while his are as dark as the night sky. His thrusts become short and jerky while my nipples harden painfully, knowing I’m about to taste his cum.

Wanting to push him over the edge, I stop holding my hands back and run them over his strong thighs. His eyes flare when I sneak my fingers underneath his shirt and grab his waist. I feel his muscles clench and the sting in my hair as he shoves his dick one last time and spurts a thick jet of cum down my throat.

“Drink every drop,” he commands, watching the column of my neck as I swallow. “Greedy little girl. All fucking mine.”

He comes long and hard, and warmth spreads to my core. He looks deranged with his hair falling on his forehead and eyes possessive. Like a beast. *My beast.*

When he frees his semi-hard cock, I gulp in air and before I can fall to the floor, Riaan is there to catch me. Bending down, his hands grasp my waist and he picks me up like I’m a doll as I circle my legs around his hips.

Tilting my face by pulling at my hair, his lips smash on mine in a soft, sensual kiss. A complete contradiction to the savage way he took it just a moment ago. He kisses me like a

lover while bruising the rest of me harshly and unapologetically.

Never have I been so wet as I grind my pussy against his hardening cock. One hand is gripping my neck while the other holds my ass as he walks us inside the living room.

His mouth moves slow but deeply, devouring me and uncaring that he can taste himself as well. My nipples hurt from the friction against his shirt while he steals all the air from my lungs.

“Riaan,” I moan against his lips until he harshly pulls away. I run my hands through his thick hair and softly demand, “I need to feel your skin against mine.”

With both of us half naked, he drops me on the couch in the living room and steps back.

“Take that dress off or I’ll ruin it too,” he orders while grabbing the back of his shirt and pulling it off in one sexy move. His ripped stomach clenches and tightens until he’s standing nude before me, built like an Adonis. When he sees I haven’t moved, he barks, “Now. Panties too.”

The second I do, his eyes zoom in on my pussy. One minute, I’m admiring him and the next minute, I find myself being twisted around and bent over the arm of the couch.

Spreading my ass cheeks until I’m completely open, he sucks my clit into his mouth and shoves three of his fingers inside my cunt.

I shout his name as the orgasm that has been building throughout the entire night barrels down on me. Stars dance behind my vision and I moan at the way he stretches me, scissoring his fingers inside my walls.

Before I’ve even come down from the high, he withdraws his digits from my pussy and without any warning, he thrusts them in my ass.

My back arches in pleasurable pain but he pushes me down, holding me still while he finger-fucks my ass. I feel something warm hit my core and I realize he spit on me to glide inside easily.

He's relentless as he stretches me to the max, intent on making me cum again while his tongue sucks, bites, and flicks my clit.

"Ahh... fuck. It's too much," I cry out, my voice stuttering. "I can't."

"You will," he grunts, spanking my left cheek. "I want every ounce of pleasure from your tight little body, Nyra. I want your screams. I want your cries. I want you a filthy fucking mess."

Damn him and his dirty talk...

As if I wasn't already feeling so full and sensitive, he fills my pussy with two fingers. He's fucking both of my holes so hard and so viciously, that I fear he's going to tear me apart. Despite my protest, I fall apart around his expert hands and mouth

I whimper.

I moan.

I cry and gasp while my body jerks.

He laps at my core hungrily. The sound is obscene and erotic to my ears.

It's a miracle I haven't passed out from the onslaught of pleasure and the sensory overload. His fingers pull out and I feel his wicked scrutiny. Cheeks reddening from being on display, I try to close my legs but his teeth sink into my thigh in blatant warning.

"Never hide yourself from me," he whispers, reverence in his voice.

Suddenly, my body is turned around until I'm facing Riaan and my eyes go wide when I see he's fully erect again. His hard dick is bobbing against his lower abs. As he strokes himself roughly, his head tilts and he taunts, "I need to be inside your cunt, baby. Will you spread your legs for me?"

I should say no. Every inch of me is overly sensitive and trembling. Yet, I nod my head while licking my lips. His

face darken savagely And I realize that the desire in his eyes is my own undoing.

“It’s going to hurt and I won’t stop even if you beg,” he threatens with his jaw locked tight. “But it’s what you want, isn’t it?”

“Yeah.” My admission shocks me. Not a surprise, though, considering I crave the bite of pain he delivers. “I want it.”

Shifting me roughly on the couch until I’m lying on my back, he grabs the back of my knees and pushes them up to my shoulders. Lowering to his knees between my open thighs, he positions his wide head at my entrance.

Unlike earlier in the classroom, he slowly pushes inside inch by inch and the fullness I feel inside me is nothing compared to the feel of his fingers. I clench around him, adjusting to his size while his cock throbs inside me. I stare into his eyes and pull at his hair when he grinds against my clit.

“You’re so goddamn tight like this,” he says through clenched teeth. “Fucking greedy little cunt. Always choking my dick in a vise.”

“You’re too big,” I whisper breathlessly.

“You love it.”

Taking my bottom lip between his teeth, he sucks while pulling out and then thrusting hard to the hilt. I whimper but he doesn’t let my lip go and continues slapping his hips against mine ruthlessly. Penetrating me so deep and rough, I can only take it.

He presents himself as broody and silent gentleman to the entire world, but between the sheets, he’s an animal.

Wild.

Brutal.

Punishing.

And I wouldn’t have him any other way.

Sliding his hand upward, he wraps his fingers around my neck and squeezes. Letting my swollen lip go with a pop, he speaks against it, “Do you like it when I hurt you, dirty girl? Mark you with my teeth? When I spank you, fuck you savagely until tears fall down your cheeks?”

“Yes. Only when it’s you,” I admit, meeting him thrust for thrust.

“Instead of begging me to stop, you only crawl back for more,” he says. A dark emotion flickers in his gaze and it unnerves me. “You don’t even know why, do you?”

“No,” I whisper on a moan while his body covers mine as he angles his hips so he hits my g-spot. My pussy spasms while I feel another orgasm building even though I didn’t think it was possible. I cry out in frustration when the bastard slows down.

“It’s because you’re a painlut,” he snarls and I go still.

Shivers dance down my spine as my entire body flushes red from his words, and I shake my head. I know I love the pain when he punishes me and pushes my limits, but that doesn’t make me what he says. “I... I’m not.”

It’s the wrong thing to say because he takes it as a challenge and drives into my pussy harder than before.

“So you don’t like it when I do this?” he taunts and pinches my hard nipples until I shout from the delicious pain. I shake my head.

“How about this, hmm?” Taking the same bruised nipple, he pulls harshly and tears sting my eyes. “Or this?” He spanks it with the flat of his palm and when I feel myself become even more wet, I hate that he’s right. He feels my juices between us and smirks victoriously. “Your cunt is dripping and clenching around my dick. Admit that you’re a painlut, Nyra. Or I’ll keep you on edge all night long.”

Words fail me as he grips me tightly and slaps my breasts. “I see it in your eyes, baby. You’ve always come undone when I make it hurt. You enjoyed it when I took your virginity, begged me to do it harder. You came with my fingers

fucking your ass. Even now, I feel you getting close. More than anything, I love that you like having filthy sex and trust me to make you feel good. Embrace your kink as you always have.” Kissing my mouth, he praises, “You’re my pain Slut, Nyra. Say. It.”

The excitement and possessiveness in his husky voice makes me lose the battle. I’d be lying to myself if I don’t admit it, because he’s right. I don’t understand this need inside me but it’s always been there. He only brought it out.

“I’m a... *Pain Slut*.”

At my soft admission, his pace becomes maddening. Leaning back, he intertwines our hands and pushes them above my head. I circle his waist, my feet digging into his ass as he plunges deeper, hitting the same spot repeatedly. “I’m going to take your virgin ass just like this. Only, you’re going to be on all fours, hair in my fist while I take you from behind like an animal. It’ll be painful but you’ll love it, won’t you, my pain Slut?”

“Yes. Any way you want.”

“I’m close, baby.” His voice is low and husky. “And you’re going to cum with me.”

“I don’t think I can, Riaan.”

My protest has no effect on him. Intent on making us orgasm together, his tongue circles my nipple and sucks it into his mouth softly. My heart races faster like it’ll explode out of my chest.

“Suck harder please,” I beg, pushing my breast into his mouth, and he obliges. “Ah... yes.”

Trapping my wrists under one of his, he pushes the other between our sweaty bodies until he reaches my bundle of nerves. I twist at the contact of his thumb, too sensitive and sore, but he isn’t deterred. He presses on it and rubs from side to side while his breath teases my ear.

“Cum for me.” He growls. “Milk my cock, Nyra. Now.”

I shatter.

I fall.

I scream.

“Riaan!”

He bites down on my pounding pulse as his own orgasm barrels down on him. Every jerk and spurt of his cum prolongs my own as he fills me up.

His groan of satisfaction drowns me and I twist my arms out of his hold, desperate to touch his skin. He stays inside me even after he softens, his weight resting on mine, and I hug him.

We hold each other in the aftermath. His fingers caressing my hip while I run mine up and down his back. He lifts his face, eyes shining with so much love and protectiveness. Resting his forehead on mine, he kisses me passionately.

“Forever mine,” he whispers.

I'm forever his.

Chapter Thirty-Nine

NYRA

The second we're out of the shower, he announces while carrying me to the closet, "Get dressed. We're going out."

The heaviness from a moment ago has vanished and now there's a lightness inside my chest. It's none other than genuine happiness. Yes, I still have so much to confess to him but I know he'll stay by my side through thick and thin.

He's absolutely right. Until now, I let my tormentor use Riaan as my weakness. I let him cloud my judgment, play with my fears, but not anymore.

I'll be the woman Riaan says I am. Strong and bold.

My feet touch the rug-covered floor and I grip the towel tighter as I question Riaan, "Where are we going?"

"It's a surprise." He winks and tugs at the knot on my towel until I'm standing naked.

I cock my hip and ask, "When did you even plan it, considering you were keeping me at arm's length until yesterday?"

"You look cute when you're mad, sweetheart." He chuckles and before I can rebut, he drops his own towel, effectively shutting me up. "It was a last minute decision and I had to pull some strings. I promise you're going to love it."

“Give me a hint so I know what to wear.”

“Wear another dress,” he replies, his gaze heated. “I like them on you.”

“You mean ripping them off?” I roll my eyes.

“That too.”

I move to my side of the closet and pick a black halter-neck dress that flares around my thighs with a low-cut back. I keep sneaking in glances at Riaan in the mirror as he slides into his black briefs, encasing his tight ass. I look away when he catches me staring and hear his low chuckle.

I can't help that I'm obsessed with his body.

Actually, I'm obsessed with everything about this man.

Before I melt into a puddle at his feet, I put on my own black thong. Since my dress has a built-in bra, I slide into it next and tie the strings behind my neck. I leave my hair open and flowing down my back. To finish my outfit, I put on black mascara, nude blush, and red lipstick.

When I turn around, Riaan is dressed in a tight black tee and denim jeans that displays his cut physique. With his hair messy in that sexy bad-boy way and his trimmed beard complementing his chiseled jawline, he looks like a broody heartthrob.

While I'm checking him out, he's doing the same to me and once our eyes clash, his lips tilt into a sensual smile. “You look stunning, Nyra.”

“We're twinning,” I observe.

“Hmm... I like that.” He smirks. “Come here.”

I close the distance between us and put my hands on his abs. He winds his arm around my waist as he pulls me flush against him, trapping my arms between our bodies. His calloused fingers send a shiver down my spine as they glide up and down my naked back. “It's a good thing you let your hair down. Otherwise, I would've been distracted the whole night. It's a struggle as it is, baby.”

“Like you aren’t distracting enough. I almost took Monica’s eyes out when she couldn’t keep them off you,” I say possessively, and his gaze darkens like he loves my jealousy.

“Is that why you bit me when I fucked you?” he demands. “You want to lay claim on your man, Nyra?”

The way he calls himself *my man* in that rough and low voice of his fills my veins with euphoria. I’m never one to be so bold but the urge to mark him had come out of nowhere. He wasn’t the only one tortured today because so was I. I wanted to scream, “*He’s mine!*” when I noticed the eyes of every girl in the vicinity drooling over him.

“Yeah,” I reply, my voice a low rasp. “I hated the lust in other people’s eyes, thinking they can steal you away from me. They need to know you’re mine, Riaan. That I’m the only one who makes you lose control.”

Deep down, our need to claim each other in every primal way is so strong because it’s the one we’re being denied. Whenever someone says we can’t be together, I want to prove them wrong. So, until I can, I’ll claim him in the shadows.

Sliding his hands down to my hips, he grasps me roughly until a moan slips past my lips. Running his nose down my cheek, he peppers my skin with soft kisses and puts his mouth against my ear, gruffly whispering, “You own me as much as I own you, baby. My heart beats for you, my body belongs to you, and my soul... it can’t last without yours. And when you’re ready, I’ll claim you in front of the entire world.”

Inching back, his lips touching mine as he says, “Until then, claim me however you want. I’m all yours.”

“Do we really have to go out?” My body is starving for something else entirely.

His dark gaze turns warm with amusement. “Yeah, baby. You haven’t gone out since you came back.”

“But—” His lips smash against mine, kissing me deeply.

“I’ll let you ride my dick once we get back.”

“Promise?” I’m not even ashamed of the need in my voice. Having him ravage my body is a high I never want to get rid of.

“I plan to fuck you all night long, baby.” His tone is predatory. “Slow and deep. Rough and hard. Until your throat is raw from screaming my name.”

“You’re insatiable.”

“Takes one to know one.”

Standing to his full height until I have to tilt my head to maintain eye contact, he moves to stand behind me while holding out his phone. When I look up, I see our reflection in the full-length mirror in front of us. I hardly even reach his shoulders because of how tall he is despite the short heels I’m wearing.

With one arm resting on my hips, he brings my hair forward on one side, baring my collarbone, and leans down to kiss my wildly beating pulse. Meeting my gaze in the mirror, he tells me playfully, “It’s a shame we don’t have pictures together. But I know that you were sneaking some of me.”

My body goes cold at the mention of pictures but before painful memories can drown me, Riaan’s soft voice brings me back to the surface. I remind myself this is different and focus on him, his hands, his scent, and the feel of him. “We’re going to fix it now. I want to capture the way you look at me.”

Placing my hand on his, I intertwine our fingers and lean my head in the crook of his arms. “How do I look at you?”

“Like I’m all you’ll ever need.”

I blush and my cheeks heat even more when he raises his phone and snaps the moment. I catch his gaze in the mirror and cocking my hip to the side, I pose for him, making him smile. I love how we fit so perfectly, his hard edges complementing my soft ones. He stares at me so intensely like I take his breath away and the feeling is indescribable.

Taking the phone from him, I click more selfies while he uses the free rein to his advantage and roams his hands all over me. When his fingers inch underneath my dress, one arm wrapped possessively around my shoulder, I almost drop the phone. I only get one more snap before my eyes close as he teases my pussy mercilessly with his fingers rubbing circles over my thong.

I'm about to fall apart when he stops and straightens my dress. "Come on. We don't wanna be late."

"I hate it when you do that," I snap in frustration.

"My filthy girl is always so greedy."

"You've turned me into one."

"I know," he replies smugly.

Taking my hand, he pulls me into step beside him as we make our way to the hallway. I forgo my purse since I'm only carrying my phone and wait as he locks the apartment door.

Ten minutes later, we get into his car and pull into the traffic. During the ride, I admire the tall buildings, the posh areas, and the greenery as he drives us to the surprise location.

I recognize the street as *Koregaon Park*, which turns into a whole other city at night. It never sleeps and is famous in Pune for its nightlife. It's also where I met Riaan after moving here and it feels like another lifetime.

I'm still clueless as to what he has planned for us and excited to find out.

My brows scrunch in confusion as he parks in a private spot outside a closed restaurant and cuts off the ignition.

I'm familiar with the place since it's a very famous and expensive pizzeria in the city and I've always wanted to come here. Before I can ask Riaan, he gets out of the car, rounds it and opens my door. Taking my hand, he pulls me out and I stare up at him.

"Are we late?" I ask, staring at the sign behind him.

“No.”

“You do realize the restaurant isn’t open.”

“Only for others,” he answers smoothly. “I reserved the whole place for just the two of us tonight.”

“You did what?” I ask, flabbergasted. “Why would you do that?”

“Because you’ve always wanted to come here and since you also mentioned wanting to cook a pizza, I thought we could make both happen at once.”

“I can’t believe you arranged this.” His thoughtfulness shocks me and melts my insides. It must have cost him a fortune, and it’s all because I said it in passing. Sure, I wanted to try it out, but not at a five-star restaurant. Do they even allow just anyone to cook in their kitchen?

“Come on. The chef’s waiting for us inside.”

Instead of taking the front, we round the building and walk into a private entrance that leads to a shiny lobby. We are immediately greeted by the manager who has a professional smile for us.

“Mr. Ahuja.” He and Riaan shake hands, then he nods at me. “Miss Ahuja. Please come this way.”

The architecture of this place is gorgeous and inspired by an Italian pizzeria with an open kitchen in the middle surrounded by large dining tables and a few booths in the corner. The whole vibe is wholesome and the entire place is decorated beautifully.

The delicious aroma of food teases my senses and my mouth waters. The manager leaves when I see the chef round the corner and I’m surprised that he’s young, around Riaan’s age.

When a friendly grin brightens his face, I realize that they know each other. He walks up to us and man-hugs Riaan. He’s handsome in a boy-next-door kind of way and is built just like Riaan but is slightly shorter.

It's also the first time I'm meeting a friend of Riaan so I'm nervous on how to introduce myself.

"Look who finally found time from his busy schedule."

"Says the guy who can't even bother to pick up my call," Riaan jabs before pulling me to his side with his arm around my waist. "Nyra, this is Vedant. The head chef of this restaurant and also one of my closest friends. We went to high school together."

Vedant turns to me with interest and curiosity burning in his gaze, then says with a flirty grin, "Nyra... beautiful name. I'm glad to be at your service tonight."

He leans closer to take my hand when Riaan growls threateningly, "Flirt with someone else. She's mine."

Vedant backs away with a low chuckle and says to me, "You must be real special to have caught his attention. I guess he finally found someone who could bring him down to his knees."

"Oh, I do," I reply with a grin, making Riaan's fingers tighten around my ass roughly, away from his friend's eyes. I bite my lip to stifle the moan.

"How did you two meet?" Vedant asks. Even though it's a normal question to ask, it's anything but that for us.

Riaan's fingers starts to play with the hem of my dress when I tense and he smoothly answers, staying close to the truth, "I've known her my whole life. We reconnected when she moved to the city."

"Are your families close?"

"Yeah," replies Riaan.

"I'm glad you found someone, bro."

My anxiety vanishes the more we talk to Vedant. He doesn't seem to recognize me as his friend's cousin, which makes me relax a little. The normalcy that comes with the fact that he sees us as just a happy couple, hanging out with a close friend, makes it easier to believe that this could be our lives.

Riaan always assumes I'm scared of the world's judgment once they find out about our secret, but he's wrong.

I don't really care what some strangers or our friends would think about us dating, knowing we are related, because they wouldn't be real friends if they judge us.

The only acceptance and blessing I crave is from our families. They are the ones I don't want to hurt and disappoint.

I blink to focus when Vedant asks us to follow him to the kitchen where he'll guide us with cooking our own pizzas. As we round the island, I find all the ingredients we'll need and three separate stations. When Vedant tries to pass me the apron, Riaan grabs it from him and helps me tie it behind my back.

I suppress my smile when he makes sure my naked back is hidden as he stands between his friend and me.

I must be as crazy as him for loving his possessiveness.

Most women see it as a red flag while it secretly thrills me.

The next hour flies by with funny banter, quiet laughs, and messing around in the kitchen as Vedant tries his best to teach amateurs like us. Riaan being competitive and focused as always does a way better job than me.

He will deny it but I can see he's enjoying himself since he likes to cook at home whenever he has the free time. He's intense in every aspect of his life so when his lighter side emerges, it brings me happiness.

Every time his friend comes around to help me, his gaze burns with possession. Or when Vedant shares funny or embarrassing stories of them from their childhood and I laugh, I see the warning in his face.

I only smirk in response as payback to the jealousy I endured the whole day.

Vedant eventually excuses himself once our pizzas are in the oven, leaving us alone. The second he rounds the corner, I feel Riaan's presence behind my back and feel his breath

tease my ear. My fingers dig into the counter as he harshly bites it.

“Smile at him one more time and I’ll fuck you where he can hear you.”

Before I can reply, footsteps come closer and I look up at the manager who informs us, “Your table is ready, Mr. Ahuja.”

Riaan grasps my hand firmly and I’m surprised yet again when we’re taken up to the rooftop. The sight that greets me pulls me to a stop at the beautiful candlelit dinner table set for us. No one has ever put in so much effort for me, making me feel like the luckiest girl alive.

“Wow... Riaan.” I gasp, peering up at him. “It’s stunning.”

His knuckles caresses my face and he smiles. “After being apart for so long, I wanted to make our first date special once you returned, Nyra.”

Tears gather in my eyes and I lean up on my toes to kiss him, whispering the only words I can muster, “With you, everything is. I love you.”

Why did I ever think I could resist him?

He breaks through my defenses every time. Never with force but with his love, protectiveness, and quiet intensity.

He’s given me his whole being and he deserves the same. So with the stars above us, I make a promise with myself.

I’ll fight for him.

I’ll fight for us.

Chapter Forty-One

RIAN

Yesterday was intense.

Even that is too tame a word. All I know is that I've never felt more alive, content, and hopeful in a very long time. Everything is slowly falling into place. Nyra is no longer fighting me tooth and nail to keep us apart. I saw it her eyes that she's letting me in and trusting me.

And I won't let anything or *anyone* jeopardize that.

The moment I heard her say she loves me, I felt my world right on its axis and brighten up again. It filled my body with so much happiness, like a dying man's last wish had come true.

Now, I just want her to say it again and again. No matter how many times she tells me, it'll never be enough.

Lying on my side with my head propped on my arm, I watch her under the morning light as she sleeps beside me. She's lying on her stomach, comforter tangled between her legs, which has left her beautiful body on display. She had tied her hair in a bun before getting into bed but during the night it had come undone.

My lips tilt because I'm the one to blame for that.

After I'd fucked her on the couch, I carried her into the bedroom because she was in no condition to walk. I had truly

taken all ounce of pleasure from her body. I felt like a bastard because I wanted to do it again.

I call her insatiable, when it's actually me.

After laying her on the bed, I cleaned the mess I made between her thighs with a warm cloth. I had the intention of pulling out but the need to claim her had taken over me.

I want nothing more than to have her pregnant with our baby but once the high of lust wears off, I realize it's not the right time nor is it my decision to make alone.

The second we laid down, she wrapped herself around me and passed out. I had followed soon after, holding her tight while she smelled just like me.

Somewhere in the middle of the night, I woke up when I felt her shift against me. I was afraid she was having another nightmare. But instead, her sleepy eyes met mine and she moaned my name. Just like that, I was hard again.

Turning her on her side, I pulled her against my chest, spread her knees, and slid inside her wet heat. Holding her tight with my grip on her breasts, arm underneath her thigh to hold her open, I fucked her deep and slow. It was nothing like the harsh, hasty and animalistic fucking we did earlier.

It was a need to feel closer.

Mend our broken pieces.

It was making love.

Something I never wanted to do until I met her. Soon, her fingers gripped my hair while her soft lips pressed kisses on my neck and my mouth, as I brought her to climax. I held her flush while chasing my own orgasm. I almost pulled out when her hand dug into my ass and she whispered to cum inside her. It pushed me over the edge and I spilled inside her tight pussy.

As soon as we finished, she was fast asleep again.

Staring at her now, I realize she's going to be sore as hell because her waist and hips have my imprints on her skin.

When she shifts to her back, the front of her isn't any better. Bite marks and hickeys cover her collarbone and tits.

Yet I can't help but admire and love them.

I like that she'll feel me for days.

Every time she'll stand in front of the mirror, she'll remember them.

When I'm not with her, she'll be wearing my marks.

I check the time on the clock at the nightstand and realize it's six in the morning. I usually wake up at five to work out before beginning the rest of my workday. But today, I snoozed the alarm to sneak in another hour with Nyra.

I decided that I can have a small session at the gym in the building. I pull the comforter over her because she won't wake up for another hour or so. Unlike me, she's definitely not a morning person. Rising from the bed, I freshen up before leaving the bedroom and head downstairs.

Not only is the gym in my other building better, it has an amazing view. Once the festival is over and I no longer have to be at her campus for business, I'll move us to my old apartment.

Unless her parents decide to visit, I'll convince her to stay with me because I know she won't accept my decision easily.

I check my emails while running on the treadmill and see what meetings I have for today. Suddenly, I remember that it's Saturday and I promised my mom we'll have dinner with her and Dad after postponing it multiple times already. Another thing Nyra wouldn't agree to so easily.

She's hesitant and scared to meet her, especially after the way her mom reacted when she found us. I'll stay by her side but if she's still not ready, I won't push her.

When I'm back in the apartment after running one more important errand, she still hasn't woken up. Even though it's the weekend, she has a few extra classes to make up for

what she missed when she left in the middle of the last semester. Pushing open the bedroom door, I walk inside.

Not wanting to spook her, I softly call her, “Baby.”

She stirs and stretches, and when her eyes blink open, she groans in disappointment, “Is it morning already?”

“I’m afraid so,” I chuckle.

“Shut the blinds,” she grumbles, hiding her face with the pillow. “I’m not getting out of bed today.”

“Then maybe learn to go to sleep early,” I joke, unable to resist.

I duck when she throws the same pillow and glares at me. “Not funny when it’s your fault.” Her brows draw together as her gaze roams over me. “Did you go somewhere?”

“Yeah. Here.” I place the packet on the nightstand. “It’s the morning-after pill. Don’t forget to take it.”

Her cheeks turn pink, and she looks even more adorable when she chews on her lip. “I completely forgot.”

“I think it’s a good idea to see a doctor about birth control, baby. I already fucked you bare thrice yesterday and the way we lose control, it’s bound to happen again,” I explain softly. “I’ll come with you if you’d like. Unless you want me to use a condom?”

“No,” she whispers shyly. “I like it when you cum inside me.”

“I’ll make an appointment then.”

“Okay.”

Nodding once, I straighten up and ask, “What time is your class today?”

Her mood deflates and I arch my eyebrow. “I’m so tempted to skip it but I also have to meet with Snehil.” I hide my smirk when she gets on her knees on the bed and shifts closer to me. “Maybe you can talk to her and cancel it.” she coaxes, looking at me with a playful look in her eyes as she toys with the hem of my tee.

Resting my fists on the sides of her hips, I smirk and play along with her, “What do I get?”

“Wasn’t last night enough?”

“What do you think?” My voice comes out low and husky.

Lust darkens her eyes before she narrows them at me. “You had your fun last night. My body is off-limits today.”

“Is that right?”

“Mmhmm.”

I tilt my head and ask, “So if I placed my hand between your thighs, I wouldn’t find you dripping wet?”

“Oh, I’m definitely wet,” she says seductively before smirking. “But if I don’t get what I want, you don’t either.”

“Wrong answer, baby.”

Before she has a chance to react, I lay her flat on her back. Pushing her arms above her head, I straddle her legs and rub my knuckles along her wet slit.

She bucks against my hold but since I’m stronger, I don’t stop teasing her pussy. I slide my fingers deeper, spreading her wetness all over her. Then, I insert two fingers to the knuckles in her cunt while pressing my thumb on her clit and fuck her slowly.

She moans loudly, eyes closed and tits shaking from her panting. I keep my thrusts deep and teasing until she starts to ride my hand. My dick hardens painfully inside my shorts as she becomes pliable and willing underneath me. The second she chokes on my fingers and her body turns rigid, I pull my fingers out before she can orgasm.

“Riaan... No.” Her fiery eyes open and I smirk arrogantly. “God! You’re an asshole.”

“You’re a terrible negotiator, baby.” She sits up and I grip her chin with my drenched fingers. “Rule number one: never let them know your weakness when you have everything to lose.”

“You never play fair.” she pouts.

After laughing at her, I kiss her and back away. “There is something you can do for me.”

“What?” she asks curiously.

“Come to dinner with my parents tonight.” When she’s about to protest, I add, “Please.”

A strange emotion flickers across her face. But it vanishes before I can decipher it. Pushing her hair behind her ear, she surprises me by nodding. “Okay. I’ll come.”

“Let me take a shower and then we’ll have breakfast.”

Turning around, I walk into the bathroom and quickly freshen up. When I come out, Nyra looks up from her perch on the bed, hair in a messy bun and wearing my shirt. Sometimes, I think she likes my clothes more than she likes hers. Then again, I’m a possessive guy so I love it whenever she wears my clothes.

Another innocent habit of hers that drives me crazy is the dreamy look that crosses her eyes when she stares at my body. Even now, I feel it on my back as I go into the closet. I drop the towel when she follows me inside and sits on the dresser, watching as I get dressed.

“The blue one would match your suit perfectly.” She chooses my tie for me and I pick it up. “Let me.”

I smile at the gesture, imagining doing this every day. Closing the distance between us, I stand and pass it to her. I rest my hands on her thighs while she slides it underneath my collar. She bites her lip while concentrating on her task and I can tell she’s done it many times.

“Who taught you?” I question, caressing her skin with my thumb.

“My dad,” she replies. A faraway smile pulling at her lips. “I used to do it every day before he went to the office. It was my favorite part of the day as a kid.”

“You’re closer to him than your mom, aren’t you?”

“Yeah.”

“I remember you could never sleep without him by your side,” I say with a chuckle, the memory playing in my head. “You were also very possessive. Threw a fit when you thought Zain and I were stealing him from you whenever we visited.”

Her cheeks tint with embarrassment. “I did not.”

“Liar.”

“Whatever.”

Once she’s finished tying the tie, she flattens her palm on my chest and I tilt her face toward mine. “Are you afraid he won’t accept us?”

Her shoulders tense and a dark shadow crosses her features. “You saw how Mom reacted, Riaan.”

“Doesn’t mean he will react the same way.”

“You don’t know that.” She shakes her head with a sad laugh. “I feel so overwhelmed sometimes. I feel angry that our love isn’t enough. It isn’t even seen as love, only as wrong or inappropriate. I thought my parents wanted me to fall for someone who loves me back just as hard, treats me with respect, and makes me happy. You are all of that and more. If you were any other man and not my cousin, they would give their blessings in a heartbeat. But no, it’s not enough. So, was it all a big fucking lie?”

Tears of sadness and frustration fall down her cheeks and I push them away. Her anguish is breaking my heart.

Taking a deep breath, she continues, “After the anger comes guilt. Like I’m being selfish and greedy for wanting and expecting more from them. I love them and can’t bear to hurt them but it’s only a matter of time. Because when they ask me to choose, I already know it’s going to be you. I thought I could survive without you but I was wrong. I only pray they forgive me.”

I wrap my arms around her small, trembling frame and kiss her forehead.

I want to say it'll be okay but it's the only thing I can't promise her.

When she eventually calms down, she inches back. "Sorry," she winces. "I ruined your shirt."

"It's only fair." She laughs and the sweet sound eases away my tension. Once she's quiet again, I let her know, "We don't have to go tonight if you aren't ready, baby."

"No. It's okay. I've missed Auntie Vandana."

"All right. I'll be home early and we'll leave around six."

"Perfect," she answers and leans forward to kiss me. However, before I can take over, the little brat dashes away from me and shouts behind her back, "I'll cook breakfast."

One hour later, I finally reach my office and nod at Snehil as I pass her desk. She knocks on my door before coming inside while I take a seat behind my desk.

She pushes two documents toward me and straightens up before speaking, "I need your signatures on those. Your afternoon meeting with Mr. Kapoor got rescheduled to tomorrow. Also, you have a call waiting from Karan."

"Put him through," I reply curtly.

She nods and leaves the room. A second later, my phone rings and I pick it up.

"I was expecting a call from you days ago, Karan," I answer, my voice hard.

The last time we talked, I had asked him to search another way to hack into Nyra's phone. He said there might be and he'll contact me once he knows more. But then, I never received a call from him and now I'm wondering if he even was the best choice.

"I did call you yesterday and left a message with your assistant." His reply makes me go still. "You never returned it so I decided to call your office today."

"Who did you talk to?" I ask to be sure.

“Snehil.”

There’s no way she could’ve gotten a hold of my personal phone since that’s where Karan always calls. It means he never actually talked to her, but I don’t mention that to him. I certainly didn’t see any missed calls. There was only one person I was with the whole time.

Nyra.

Suddenly, my mind flashes to a memory from yesterday where she jumped back like I caught her doing something wrong in the car.

Only now, I know the reason.

The panic, the faraway look in her eyes, and the slight anger in her voice, was because she found out I’m spying on her. She must’ve realized I know about the texts.

Is that why she asked me to trust her? To wait for her?

The meaning behind her words hit me like a freight train now. She’s planning to do something, I can feel it. Knowing her, she’ll put herself in danger. I need to stop her before she does.

Fuck! My grip tightens on the phone.

“What was the message?” I ask despite knowing it’s useless now. Nyra will never leave her phone alone. Even if I get my hands on it, I’ll hardly find any clue.

“There’s an app you need to install in her phone that will sync and track all her calls, texts, and everything to yours. Until you can bring it to me, this is your best option.”

“What if the person sees the app and deletes it?”

“You only need to download it from the browser, set it up and then delete it,” he explains.

“Okay. Send me the details and the steps to do it,” I answer. “And, Karan, unless it’s me, you don’t talk to anybody else. No matter how urgent. Understand?”

“Yes.”

I hang up and pull out my cigarettes, desperately needing one. I light it up before standing in front of the floor-to-ceiling glass wall. The hit of nicotine somewhat calming me. Here I thought she was finally trusting me yet once again, she fucking played me.

I'm a man of my word, though. She told to me wait and I will, but it doesn't mean I'll sit back and do nothing. It's like she says, I never play fair.

Her secrets are mine.

Even if I have to dig them out of her.

Chapter Forty-Two

NYRA

Nerves are like butterflies in your stomach.

Uninvited, distracting, and uncontrollable.

The faster the clock turned to six, the harder it became to push them down. I shouldn't be so anxious about meeting my uncle and aunt. It's not like we haven't spent time together before.

Yet I can't help it.

Riaan says his mom is happy with our relationship but what if actually seeing us together changes her mind? I can't handle another disappointed and disgusted face. My mom's reaction has made me lose all hope and courage.

Another reason my nerves are all frayed is because of my plans after dinner.

I'll be sneaking into Zain's room to search for those photos and videos he's been blackmailing me with.

Despite having his own place, he still spends most of his time at Uncle's house. Since he and Riaan are hardly on speaking terms, I don't expect him to be here.

Slipping away from Riaan will be hard enough, I certainly don't want to fend off both brothers together.

Things have been quiet since the last text and since I became so consumed by Riaan, I almost forgot them. I let my

guard down when I can't afford to make that mistake.

Especially after he made sure I knew he's aware I've returned. He always attacks when my life becomes smooth sailing. I know of his intentions but I haven't been able to figure out his game.

Some days he torments me constantly.

While other days, he'll go completely silent. Like a ghost.

It makes him scary because he's unpredictable.

All day, I tried to take my mind off tonight by spending it with Monica. I went to her place instead of inviting her here because one glance around the apartment, she'll know I'm not living alone. She'll bombard me with questions I won't have the answers to.

Luckily, it's easy distracting her so I suggested shopping and eating lunch at the mall and that's how we enjoyed our day. I always thought I was a shopaholic but she takes the cake because every store we went to, she didn't come out without purchasing something. Good thing she can afford it.

Somewhere around five-thirty, I return home while carrying my shopping bags. I honestly can't wait to try everything on again, especially the sexy Victoria's Secret lingerie I bought.

I'm fumbling while searching for the keys in my purse when the front door slides open and I meet Riaan's cool gaze.

"You're back early," I state as he steps aside to let me in.

Eyeing my bags, he mocks, "You planning on a vacation?"

"I didn't shop that much," I reply with a roll of my eyes.

"You're carrying eight bags, baby."

“Keep teasing and I won’t let you see what I bought,” I warn and drop my voice seductively. “I’ll give you a hint. It’s something you’ll definitely wanna rip off me.”

My ass stings when he smacks it and lifts me around the waist, the bags hitting the ground. Biting my earlobe, he playfully growls, “If we didn’t have to go to my parents’ place, you’d be dressing up for me right after I spanked the sass out of you.”

Thrill courses through my body and I smile at the vision he paints.

Lowering me to the ground, he twists me to face him and I lock my arms around his neck. Rising onto my toes, I kiss his stern lips and ask after pulling back, “How was your day?”

I frown when his fingers tighten on my waist before they relax as he casually answers, “Same old, same old. Though, I was more eager to get back. I like coming home to you, baby.”

“Me too.” A wide grin plays on my face at his confession.

“Get dressed or we’ll be late.”

The car slows to a stop outside my uncle’s house.

It’s still as pretty and huge as I remember but the last memory is painful. With it, returns my nerves. Though, I’m relieved when I don’t see Zain’s car in the open garage. One thing I don’t need to worry about tonight.

Riaan’s strong and reassuring hand slides onto my thigh and he squeezes. I turn to him watching me intensely and protectively. He looks sexy and ripped dressed in a simple black T-shirt and jeans that mold to his strong thighs.

I was drooling when I saw what he was wearing. I wish he would wear this often because it takes away some of his hard edges.

“Does Auntie know everything about that night?” I ask, wanting to know.

“She knows your mom caught us, but not that Zain was behind it,” he answers, his voice turning to stone at the mention of his brother. The anger and hate in his eyes is frightening enough for me to confess all my secrets, but I keep my emotions hidden regarding Zain.

My secret is going to ruin many lives and relationships. Once I accuse Zain of what I feel is true, Riaan will most likely kill his own brother. Uncle and Aunt might not even believe me, and history will repeat itself.

Then all hope will be destroyed for my taboo relationship because my aunt will never forgive me for wrecking both her sons’ lives.

“You never told me about what happened between you and Zain.”

His expression hardens, a shutter going down as he answers, his voice void of emotion, “He got what he deserved.”

“What did you do, Riaan?” I whisper, dreading to hear his answer.

“I took something of his like he took mine.”

I’m going to break you in ways that Riaan will never piece back together... I understand him now as a chill settles in my bones. The slither of doubt I might be wrong about Zain slips away as I ponder over their words.

Riaan’s fingers wrap around my throat in a possessive hold and he darkly vows, “Nobody hurts what’s mine and gets away with it. No. One.”

“That’s what scares me, Riaan.” I confess.

“You should be.” His thumb pressing on my racing pulse.

“I won’t let anyone rip us apart, Riaan,” I promise him. “I’ll fight for us.”

“You better fucking mean it, Nyra,” he growls. “Because I won’t let you break it. I won’t let you break my heart again.”

“Never,” I vow. “I love you.”

“You’re mine.”

“And I’m yours.”

Our words linger in the air and some of the darkness melts from his sharp gaze as he caresses my face softly.

“Let’s go inside,” he says the moment he pulls himself back. “Mom is eager to see you.”

“Uncle doesn’t know, does he?” I ask once we step out of the car and walk toward the front door.

“Not yet,” comes his smooth reply. “Don’t worry. He doesn’t need to know tonight.”

“I want you with me when I tell my dad.”

He stops and stares down at me, eyes sparking with emotions I’ve rarely seen cross his features. Surprise and amazement. He’s always so hard and in control that nothing could penetrate his walls. Yet I’ve already done it twice. The first time was when I kissed him on the terrace when I was sixteen.

“I wouldn’t be anywhere else, baby,” he says, tucking a wayward strand behind my ear. “Whatever his decision, we face it together.”

Although it feels like I blurted those words out of nowhere, it has been constantly on my mind today. I want him to know that I don’t want to hide our relationship anymore. My choices were ripped away from me, my control stolen, but I am going to take it all back.

When his lips tilt into a small smile reserved only for me, my heart soars. Tilting my chin with a finger underneath, he bends down and kisses me. Straightening up, he pulls me against his side and before he can knock on the door, it jerks open.

Startled, I try to inch back from his arms but he doesn't allow me and circles his arm around my waist possessively. I turn beet red while my aunt watches us with a jovial expression on her beautiful face.

"I thought I heard you two," she says, her gaze lingering on our close stance. I wait for the shame and disgust to come but it never does. "Nyra. I missed you."

"Hello, Auntie," I answer nervously. Taking my hand, she pulls me in for a tight hug and her familiar scent envelops me. I relax when she treats me like nothing's changed. Like I'm not dating her older son who is also my cousin.

"How are you, sweetie?" she asks before glancing at me from head to toe. "You look beautiful."

"Thank you. I'm good. It's nice to be back," I reply truthfully.

"Your son is here too, Ma. In case you forgot," Riaan teases.

She turns to him and smacks his arms playfully before pulling him into a hug. "You were supposed to be here last week."

"I told you we were busy."

"I don't care," she scolds. "I'm your mother. You must make time for me."

"I always do, Ma," he counters and my aunt just shakes her head. "Now are you going to invite us in?"

"Is Dad home?" asks Riaan as we walk past the foyer and into the living room.

"He's on his way," My aunt replies, motioning for us to sit on the couch while she does the same, sitting at the couch opposite from us. "I sent him out to get the dessert."

"You're not supposed to eat them, Ma," Riaan warns sternly, his eyes narrowed. "The doctor said you need to control your blood sugar level."

“Don’t worry, I’m not going to,” she assures him with a flip of her hand. “They’re for Nyra and your father anyways.”

I can tell Riaan doesn’t believe her but he doesn’t say anything else on the matter. He’ll probably hide or throw them away before we leave. I wouldn’t put it past him to do just that.

His leg touches mine with how close he’s sitting beside me while I’m a nervous wreck. He’s not overly affectionate but he’s not hiding our connection either.

My aunt is still smiling as we make small talk but can’t do the same because I’m still waiting for the other shoe to drop. All of us aware of the elephant in the room but none of us bringing it up.

Sensing I’m spiraling into dark thoughts, Riaan’s arm stretches behind me and he runs his fingers through my hair. He knows it relaxes me and I appreciate the small, private gesture.

The sound of the front door opening puts a halt to our conversation just as my Uncle Rohan walks in, carrying a paper bag. This time when I pull away, Riaan lets me, albeit reluctantly.

“Nyra. So glad to have you back, kiddo,” my uncle says brightly. “Did you come with Riaan?”

“Hey, Uncle. Yeah, we drove together.” I grin. I’ve always liked his cool and mischievous energy. “How have you been?”

“Life is good.” He shrugs. “How are your parents? Haven’t talked to them in a while.”

“They’re great. I’m sure they would love to hear from you.”

He nods before smiling at Riaan. “Son. I need your advice on something. Talk to me after dinner.”

“Sure, Dad.”

“Nyra,” calls my aunt. “Help me set the table.”

The moment I've been dreading finally comes and with a polite smile toward Uncle Rohan, I follow her into the kitchen. Pretty sure "set the table" was code word for "the talk". As soon as we're alone and out of earshot, she faces me.

"I can tell from the way you've been avoiding my eyes that Riaan told you, sweetie." She says when the silence becomes too thick for me to handle.

"He did."

"Then why do you look so scared?" Her voice sounds sad. "I haven't changed my mind, if that's what you're worried about. You two are obviously in love and I would never stand in the way of that."

Looking at her, I realize that the truth shines in her eyes and it eases away my tension. So, I give a shaky smile. "You don't feel like it's wrong and sinful?"

"Of course not, honey," she rushes to say and takes my hand until we take a seat at the dining table. "Your situation is complicated but that doesn't mean it's sinful. Loving someone is never a crime. Yes, most people will not be comfortable but it's your happiness, and your life. You should live it the way you want and with the man you love. You have to be strong."

"You've no idea how much your blessing means to me, Auntie." I say fiercely, happiness blooming inside me. "I've already disappointed my mom. I don't know how Dad or Uncle will feel when we tell them. I don't want to lose them but I won't leave Riaan. I've always loved him and I can't imagine my life without him."

"You will not lose your family, Nyra. Do you understand?"

"I'm not so sure anymore."

"Your parents love you and they'll want you to be happy more than anything. It may take some time but they will come around. All they need is to see the two of you together and they'll know like I do that both of you are perfect for each other. No matter what happens, you'll have me by your side. I

love you like my own daughter,” she promises, kissing my forehead.

“Thank you,” I whisper, my voice thick with gratitude.

We pull away just in time as the men walk in. Riaan comes straight to my side and I give him a secret smile, ensuring everything is well. His body relaxes as he slides into the chair beside me, his warm hand squeezing mine under the table.

Dinner goes by smoothly and I enjoy it thoroughly.

No touchy topics are brought up and we only share small and mundane talk. My aunt’s cooking reminds me of home and I miss my family terribly.

I receive calls on alternate days from either Mom or Dad in the evenings. Mom pointed out once that I look happy and healthy during one of our video calls and all I wanted was to tell her that it’s because of Riaan.

I’m lying to her all over again but I’ll stop that soon.

After helping my aunt clean up, I silently make my way upstairs. Riaan went to talk to his dad, so I wasted no time taking the opportunity afforded to me.

My heart is in my throat as I climb the stairs while making sure I’m alone. Since Riaan’s parents’ bedroom is on the other side of the house, I easily sneak into Zain’s room at the end of the hallway.

The door creaks slightly when I push it open, and I’m glad it wasn’t locked. A huge four poster-bed sits in the middle with a black headboard. The room is neat and spacious, done in colors of light gray and black with a separate closet.

As I look around, I can’t tell if he’s been here recently or not. Maybe he’s organized just like his older brother.

On my right, there’s a desk cluttered with some papers and when my eye catches on his laptop in the corner, hope flares inside me.

Maybe I’ll find the copies of my photos in there. Otherwise, I’d be left with no choice but to confront him. He

will fucking lie and deny it, which is why I need to have concrete evidence.

I hurry to switch on his laptop. My foot is tapping nervously on the floor as I watch the screen light up and I log in easily as it doesn't ask for a password. Zain has always been cocky, which might work in my favor.

Opening his files, I search through different folders while praying I catch something. I pull at my hair in frustration after coming up empty.

Everything is clean. There are no pictures except some old ones with his friends. I'm half tempted to smash it in anger but calm myself down.

Think, Nyra. Think.

He must have saved them somewhere else like in a hard drive or pen drive. Maybe he made copies. I just have to keep looking. Finding the laptop bag on the chair, I search inside, but find nothing. Bending down, I open drawers and other than some stationery and papers, there's not much in here.

Damn it! I got absolutely nothing. I underestimated him because he's smarter than I thought. My shoulders sag in defeat as I shut the laptop down and put everything in its place. The foreboding feeling returns with a vengeance. The last option that I've been dreading the most is the only one I have left.

Luring him out.

I need to lure him out so I can get him to confess. It's risky and dangerous but if I want this game of his to end, then I have to take it. Only then I can be completely Riaan's.

“Looking for something?”

Chapter Forty-Three

RIAN

Nyra jumps at my voice and sharply looks up, looking awfully like someone got caught red-handed. Her hand rests on her chest as she calms down her racing heartbeat.

Her nervous eyes clash with mine and I arch my brow while leaning against the door frame, my hands casually inside my jeans pockets.

“What are you doing in Zain’s room, Nyra?”

She doesn’t miss the hard edge in my voice and swallows while smoothing down her dress. The gesture betrays her frayed nerves. “I-I was using the bathroom.”

“There’s one downstairs.”

“Your mom said to use the one upstairs,” she answers without missing a beat. “Are you done interrogating me now?”

“Why do you look afraid then?” I counter. It’s pretty obvious she’s lying to me. For one, she’s standing on the far side from where the bathroom is, but I don’t mention it. She’s like a deer caught in the headlights. “Your reaction to my presence certainly tells a different story. Like you’ve done something wrong, and you’re not telling me the truth.”

“Because you startled me.” She huffs.

I run a cursory eye around the room, checking to see if anything’s out of the ordinary, but everything’s the same as it

has always been. Zain hasn't been home in weeks according to what Mom told me but I know he's in the city.

He's not one to run away and will eventually come find me. How do I know? Because he's just as vindictive as I am.

Focusing my attention back on Nyra, I notice her trying very hard to act aloof but fails miserably. I've been trying to forget about this morning's phone call but catching her in here plus the way she's skirting around the truth is making me highly suspicious.

I was hoping for a relaxing evening with her and my parents to take my mind off my dangerous thoughts.

It was working. Until now.

Zain's last threatening and disrespectful words toward my girl echo in my head. They fill me with rage and possessiveness. Especially seeing her surrounded by his things and looking so guilty and apprehensive.

And when her gaze darkens in fear, I feel like a bastard for loving it.

Pulling away from the wall, I step a little farther into the room and shut the door behind me. Nyra watches the movement and then focuses her attention at me.

Her lithe body encased in another summer dress—a little demure—trembles while she backs away. She doesn't get far and bumps into the desk behind her.

“Riaan.”

“Quiet, baby.” I hush her by placing my thumb on her full lips once I've trapped her between me and the wooden desk. “The walls are thin and I'd rather my parents don't hear the shameful sounds you make when I teach you a lesson.”

Her eyes widen, and she shakes her head vigorously. “But I didn't do anything.”

“First of all, I know you're lying.” Her body jolts at the coldness in my voice. “Second, I don't like you alone in my brother's room.”

She doesn't even deny it and reasons softly, "Auntie must be looking for us, Riaan. Please, not here."

"Hands on the desk," I order without flinching.

"No," she says defiantly.

I smirk and it's not a playful one. "You're in no position to disobey me, Nyra. All you ever give me are half-truths and I'm fucking sick of it. I've never been a patient man. Yet here I am, trying to be one for you. But even I have my limits and you crossed them tonight. Either you confess or submit your body."

I'm almost disappointed when her fingers grip the edge of the desk behind her, and then it turns into anger and lust. The intoxicating scent of her fear and arousal fills the space between us and it pours like gasoline over the fire burning inside me.

I hate that she still won't let me in completely. That she sneaked behind my back. I hate the fact that she was in here alone, because all it'll take is one wrong step for her to fall into my brother's wrathful clutches.

Until I know he isn't a risk, Nyra isn't leaving my sight even if I have to punish her every time she tries.

Grazing my fingers on her thighs, I play with the hem of her dress before inching it up. Goosebumps rake over her skin as she visibly shudders, chest rising and falling under my heavy stare. Her tits push against my chest, erect nipples poking through the material.

She never could resist her punishments.

People see her as someone who looks so innocent, yet she's hiding some sick and forbidden desires.

"We shouldn't, Riaan. This is wrong," she whispers pleadingly. Her cheeks are already blushing a bright pink, and I've done nothing but run my knuckles on her soft skin.

"We've already established I'm a depraved man, Nyra," I grunt in her ear. "And you are my willing prey. Decency never existed in this relationship. You really

should've thought about that before sneaking in here, little girl, because I'm going to own you right now in my brother's room."

"Please. Take me home and have me any way you want."

Flipping up the skirt of her dress up, I pull apart her thighs and bring my palm down on her pussy. The fight leaves her body as she submits to my harsh spank. She bites her lip but the pained moan manages to escape. I step between her spread legs when she attempts to close them.

"Don't make any sound, filthy girl, or I'll gag you." I tsk.

Spinning her around like a ragdoll, I bend her over the table roughly while the stuff on Zain's desk clatters to the floor. I pull at her white lace panties until it stretches between the crack of her ass and the material bites into her wet folds deliciously.

When I'm done with her, she'll realize the silly mistake she made. I may be rough and dominating in bed but it's nothing compared to the dark side of my brother. If Nyra knew, she never would've stepped in here. My lips tilt because she's about to find out.

She squirms as I hold her down but she doesn't make any noise. It pleases me that she's being my perfect, obedient girl. I lean on my right toward the nightstand and pull out two things from the top drawer.

The sound draws her attention but before she can take a peek behind her, I straighten to my full height.

"Riaan, what are you—" Her words get cut off when I rip her panties and drop one of the toys beside her. "Oh my God! Is that Zain's?"

Twisting my hand in her hair, I tug and warn, "I told you to be quiet, baby, unless you want that ball gag in your mouth."

Like I said, my brother is one twisted fuck. Which I found out when I walked in on his one-night stand years ago.

Using his toys on my woman is crossing a line I didn't even know I had but the wetness dripping down Nyra's thighs makes my cock rock hard.

The primal beast in me won't be sated until I've claimed and marked her as mine. It's the only way I can push his dirty threat out of my head. It's as much for me as it's to teach her a lesson.

"When I have my hands on you while you're under my mercy and waiting to get fucked, another man's name shouldn't even be on your lips. You belong to me. Do you understand?" I demand harshly and she nods eagerly. "Now be my good little pain Slut."

"Okay, Riaan," she whispers. "Don't gag me, please."

"Are you going to stop being a brat?"

"Yes."

"Spread your cheeks. I want to see every inch of your cunt and virgin asshole," I bark and watch as her trembling hands come behind her and bare herself for my hungry eyes. "Tilt your hips."

She does and my cock jerks at the sight of her pink slit and the tight forbidden rosebud. My girl has the prettiest and tastiest pussy. Knowing I'm the only man to have been inside her makes me feel like the luckiest bastard alive. My mouth waters to eat out her but then I wouldn't be able to stop. If we were at home, I would've kept her on edge all night until she couldn't take it anymore.

Pushing my fingers between her folds, I spread her juices and circle her clit roughly. I slide her hair to one side so I can see her flushed face. Her eyes are closed and her lips are swollen from trying to keep her moans and whimpers inside.

I flick her clit faster, shove three fingers to the hilt, and pinch her until she gushes all over my hand. She's so lost in pleasure, that her grip begins to slip and she almost releases her grip when I slide the handcuffs on her wrists. She jerks when the lock clicks and coldness hits her.

I smile when she pulls at her restraints in shock and a shiver races down her spine while her pussy clenches around my fingers still inside her. When her mouth opens, I pull them out and slide my fingers past her lips until she tastes her cum.

She sucks without waiting for my command and it's such a deliciously filthy sight to behold.

Before she has a chance to protest, I replace my fingers with the ball gag and tie it around her mouth. My head tilts as I admire my handiwork because in this moment, she truly looks like my dirty little girl, my fuck toy, my pet. *Mine*.

Wrapping her hair in my fist, I pull her flush against my chest and whisper in her ear, "Look at you, all bound and gagged. You're truly under my mercy now, baby." Her whimper comes out muffled and I bite her collarbone and suck hard. "Scream all you want now 'cause no one's going to hear. You're going to keep your pussy on display while I feed it my cock. And don't you dare cum without my permission."

Pushing her down again, I unbutton my jeans and pull out my dick that's already leaking with pre-cum. I spread her legs wider with my shoes and shove my length in to the hilt, making her body jerk forward from the force. Instantly, her cunt squeezes me so tightly that it's a miracle I haven't blown my load inside her.

Like a madman, I grab her shoulders to keep her immobile while pounding into her mercilessly.

I give her no choice but to accept each vicious thrust.

My balls slap against her clit every time I go deep and the small and muffled moans spilling out of her pretty mouth is music to my ears.

"Greedy fucking pain Slut." I growl when a tear falls down her cheek. "You were born to take my cock."

My abs tighten when her pussy convulses. I stare as it gapes open when I pull out to the tip and stretches around my girth when I plunge inside. Her fingers tremble as she holds herself open as if she can feel my eyes.

Curling my fingers around one shoulder, I fuck her hard, rough and deep, while using my other hand to tease her back entrance. She struggles when I push my thumb inside and fill both her holes at the same time.

“You filthy little girl. The way you’re shivering and dripping down my balls,” I muse, looking in her hooded eyes that watch me with so much love and lust. “I should’ve used sex toys on you a long time ago. Your nipples will hurt and look so pretty with clamps.” *Thrust.*

“Or maybe I’ll use a fake dick, and I’ll make you ride it while I jerk myself off.” *Thrust.*

“Or maybe I’ll just fill both your holes until you’re full.” *Thrust.*

I chuckle darkly when her walls tighten and I know she’s close. Holding my cock deep inside her, I spank her ass twice in a row while fucking her asshole. “Don’t you dare cum.”

Her eyes roll back in her head while her face becomes a mess with tears and drool running down her chin. Never has she looked so beautifully desperate to come but this is punishment and not pleasure.

Pulling out, I turn her around and place her ass on the desk and thrust inside her again. Grabbing the back of her knees, I wrap them around my waist so I can push in her core faster and harder. Nyra’s tits shake violently with each shove of my cock, and I drive it even deeper into her.

With our gazes locked, I lean down and lick the corner of her mouth before whispering, “Watch how your greedy little pussy sucks me in, baby. Look how I claim you until you milk my cum. How I shatter your innocence each time while you reduce me to nothing but a mindless beast that only wants to fuck you.”

“Riaan,” comes out her garbled whine.

Desperate to hear her cries, I remove her gag and growl, “Say my name.”

“Ahh... Riaan. More. Please,” she begs. “I need to touch you.”

“Then stay away from another man’s room next time.”

“I-I won’t. I promise.”

“Then I’ll let you cum next time if you’re a good girl.” Circling my arm around her small waist, I pick her up. Still inside her, I walk and sit on the bed with her in my lap. “Now ride my fucking my dick.”

My low and gravelly demand causes her to gasp while shyness dances in her soft eyes. With her hands still in cuffs, I hold her weight and watch as she grinds on my lap. My length twitches in her pussy and she blushes upon feeling it.

“Be a good fuck toy and make your man cum,” I rasp encouragingly. The way her pupils dilate with so much love and desire every time I say I’m her man has me in a chokehold. Possessiveness burns in those depths as she inches up until only the tip of my dick is inside her pussy and she slides down slowly. “Faster.”

Soon, she finds her rhythm and begins to fuck me earnestly. With one hand gripping her waist, I wrap the other around her throat and choke her. Her cunt responds by tightening around me and my balls pull taut.

“Yeah. Just like that.” I grunt in ecstasy. “Own me, baby.”

“You feel so good, Riaan,” she whispers, her head thrown back and her hair teasing my thighs. “I can feel your cock get bigger inside me.”

“It’s because I’m about to come, filthy girl.”

“Let me come, too. Please, Riaan.”

“No,” I grunt and thrust my hips up, making her body bounce with the force. “Bad girls don’t deserve orgasms and neither do sweet little liars.”

Thrusting twice more, I pull out and shove her to the floor on her knees. Tilting her head back, I slap my dick on her lips, “Open.”

Thick jets of cum spills onto her waiting tongue when I stroke my cock roughly. My harsh groans fills the room as I finish inside her mouth.

“Swallow every drop.”

The second she does, I tuck my softening dick away and help her up. Turning her around, I uncuff her wrists and rub them softly to ease the blood flow. She observes me as I take care of her and help her into her panties which I luckily didn't tear into shreds.

“Riaan,” she says when I remain silent.

“You and I are going to talk when we get home, Nyra,” I answer, meeting her gaze. “Clean yourself up and come downstairs.”

Then without so much as a backward glance, I walk away while leaving her standing there, hurt.

For the first time.

Chapter Forty-Four

NYRA

Cold. Brisk. Angry.

He turned his back to me and walked away.

I finally know how he must've felt that awful night.

It's similar to my heart being ripped open and left out to bleed. Dread fills me at the thought that everything is about to fall apart. Although it was worse when it was me who walked out.

It was foolish of me to think he bought my lie. Going to the bathroom... God! What was I thinking. The excuse was bland, my obvious lie written all over it.

Besides, Riaan is too shrewd and smooth to fall for that.

Lately, he's been watching every move I make like a hawk.

The sheer relief I felt that he didn't catch me while I was snooping on Zain's laptop has now evaporated. He wants to talk and I'm nowhere near ready. How can I be when I've become so used to keeping it locked away inside me for so long?

I saw the finality on his hard face.

Tonight was the last straw and my secrets can no longer be kept in the dark. I only hope he doesn't hate me

afterward.

With my body sore and aching from the orgasm denial and the ruthless way he fucked, I gingerly make my way into the bathroom. Although mascara is running down my cheeks, my hair a mess from all the pulling, and there are imprints of his fingertips around my throat, my dress is intact.

I should've fought harder and not let him have his way with me with my uncle and aunt so close, yet there was no stopping him.

He was visibly upset. I saw his body coiled with aggression, and I knew submitting was the only way to calm the darkness I could feel brewing to the surface.

He's always sweet in his aftercare. But this time, he was efficient and mechanical. He didn't even kiss me which hurt me more than his words ever could.

Gone for too long already, I clean up my face as best I can while covering the marks he left on my skin with my hair. My breath stutters when I see the sex toys discarded on the bed for anyone to find.

I liked them more than I should.

The initial shock had turned into curiosity and I can't deny it was the hottest experience of my life.

Putting them away, I walk downstairs and hear voices coming from the living room. When I round the corner, Riaan is standing with his arms crossed and talking to Aunt.

I find no glimpse of the man who whispered dirty deeds in my ear. And although he's aware of my presence, he doesn't look my way and it stings.

It feels extremely wrong that my mouth tastes like him while standing two feet from his mom. I will my racing heart to calm and not fidget as I smile at her.

Can she tell we had sex upstairs? Please, I hope not.

"We're going to leave, Ma," Riaan says. "Thanks for the dinner."

“You can both spend the night here, Riaan,” she suggests softly, then admonishes, “I probably won’t see you again for a few weeks.”

“Mom.” He sighs.

“Fine.” My aunt relents. “I had to try.” She narrows her eyes but I see the love shining there. Turning to me, she pulls me in a hug and demands, “You better not turn into him, honey. Come visit me often.”

“I will,” I answer with a laugh.

“Not without me,” Riaan claims and pulls me into his side. “I’ll bring her anytime she wants.”

I don’t tense this time and lean happily, satisfied he’s touching me again. I don’t like it when he’s upset. My aunt watches us with an indescribable emotion in her eyes before smiling at his protectiveness.

“You two make a beautiful couple,” she proudly compliments and it fills my heart with so much joy that I’m left speechless. All my life I’ve waited for others to accept my love for him and when someone finally does, it’s nothing less than a dream come true. “I’m going to make sure Sara and Jay sees it too, Nyra.”

When she mentions my parents, I only give a soft smile even though I think it may never happen. I don’t want to give myself hope that she can convince them, only for it to crash and burn. That promise has been broken one too many times now.

“It’s Nyra’s decision, Mom,” Riaan tells her sternly. “And not until we tell them ourselves.”

Her expression shifts and she simply nods in understanding. I don’t want her to feel upset so I tell her, “I really appreciate it, Auntie.”

“Of course, sweetie.”

After saying goodbye one last time at the front door, Riaan and I finally drive away in his car. During the whole ride back to our apartment, he’s quiet and focused on the road.

There's no telling what's going on in his head.

Afraid of his reaction and dreading the long awaited talk, I dare not say a word and stare out the window. Too soon, we reach home and take the elevator. Every step feels heavy and tense, but I don't say a word.

He enters first and I follow, his intensity and dark mood a living, breathing thing in the room. My stomach drops when he carelessly throws the keys on the table.

It alarms me because it's the exact opposite of his nature. I freeze when he slowly faces me.

"Sit and start talking, Nyra," he says, nodding at the couch. "From the beginning."

He remains standing and looming over me like my dark protector. His face is locked in an expression so calm and impassive that he might as well be a stone. Unable to handle his attention, I stare down at my hands before speaking.

"The week before the night I broke up with you, I received a text from a private unknown number. It had a photo—an intimate photo—of us from our first date. The person claims to know my secret. My mind went black from cold fear because the only thing I was scared of happened. Somehow, I stayed strong and chose to ignore it but then the texts became frequent, ugly, and threatening. I struggled with wanting to tell you about them but he said that he will release the picture to ruin your career and reputation unless..."

"You ended it with me," Riaan finishes in a flat tone.

I don't need to look up to feel his rage. Instead, I'm taken back to that week and I continue in a trembling voice, "I was already raw and vulnerable from the constant taunting and the awful names that I panicked. It was like someone found my deepest fears and toyed with them. I... I just couldn't let them hurt you, so I pushed you away. I was naive to believe that I could solve everything but it only went downhill from there."

"How?" he asks coldly. I close my eyes as if it'll wipe away the memories. I want to run and hide but Riaan

continues to press me for answers, “What did he do next?”

“A week later, he began blackmailing me again with more dubious pictures of us. I begged him to leave me alone. I already did what he asked, but he wouldn’t stop. I let him trap me with no way out, so I did what I had to do to protect you and my family.” My voice is almost a whisper. Shame and disgust settles underneath my skin. I’ve tried so hard to purge it, but it never fully goes away. Meeting his livid gaze, I confess my darkest mistake in a hollow voice, “He wanted to see me, all of me, in exchange for his silence. I sent him photos o-of my b-body. I’m sorry.”

I’m taken aback when he doesn’t visibly react.

No flinch. No anger. *No shock.*

“You already know.” I gasp, realization hitting me like a brick. Guilt finally flickers in his eyes but he says nothing. “Oh my God! How long, Riaan?”

“I saw them on your phone two weeks ago.”

“You went through my phone?” I shout angrily. “I know you were planning on hacking it but to think you actually went through with it... You had no right to invade my privacy, Riaan.”

“How many?” My accusation has no impact on him. They don’t even penetrate his thick skull as he demands in a low voice, “How many times did you let him violate your body that way, Nyra?”

He shouts when I stay silent, “Answer. Me.”

“Every night for two weeks.”

Before I can even comprehend what I had just confessed, his body twists and he punches the wall nearby. Seeing this terrifyingly violent side of him makes me jump. Turning to me, he growls, “All because of two stupid photos. How long were you planning on sending them, huh? Were you going to wait until whoever it is suddenly grew a conscience and let you go? Don’t you know that playing with monsters only makes them more powerful?”

I flinch while a vein throbs in his temple and his mouth sets in a thin line. I don't even correct him that it wasn't just two stupid pictures. His accusation makes me feel like it's my fault everything escalated this far. I knew he wouldn't understand. The fight leaves my body and I feel exhausted. Depleted.

"I thought I was protecting you," I say brokenly.

"You should've told me, Nyra," he yells, "You should've fucking come to me."

"You don't understand, do you? I know I shouldn't have given in to his demands and let him control me for months because there's never an end to the vicious cycle," I counter before covering the distance between us and stabbing my finger in his chest. "But when you're lonely, sad, and living in constant fear with no one to talk to, you break. When you're weak, you give in. When your mother treats you like a sick freak and you're lying to your father, you fall. When it's the only way to protect the man you love whom you may never see again, you sell your *soul*."

"It wasn't your soul to sell, baby." Pushing my back against the wall with a possessive grip on my throat, he whispers through clenched teeth, "It belonged to me. I don't give a fuck about my reputation or my life if you're not in it. I can build it again but there's only one of you. I would rather ruin my name a thousand times than lose you."

"Then you know exactly how I felt in that moment, Riaan," I whisper fiercely. "I wouldn't be able to live with myself if I'm the reason you lose everything. I wouldn't be able to sleep at night if I didn't at least try to save you."

"Then stop risking your life. Stop letting your fears win," he growls, shaking me slightly. "Because the only thing I'm afraid of losing is you. You're my everything."

I shatter upon hearing the rawness and ferocity in his claim.

Suddenly ripping himself away when I rest my palms on his chest, he goes back to being hard and impenetrable.

Fury radiates off of him and it wraps itself around me like a snake. I've never witnessed this side of him before. He always kept it on a leash, but not anymore.

His hunter-like gaze holds mine captive as he demands, "The last text. What did it say?"

"He knows I'm back."

"What else aren't you telling me, Nyra?" he probes before dropping his voice dangerously low. "Why were you in Zain's room?"

"I was searching for proof." I feel my heart in my throat and I know there's no hiding it anymore. He goes rigid as a statue and I can't decipher his emotion. "I think he's my blackmailer."

You can hear the pin drop with the silence that ensues and it's fucking deafening.

"How long have you suspected it's him?" he calmly questions.

I breathe easy that he didn't immediately discard the possibility. But it also frightens me that he believes Zain is capable of such a deplorable act. Seeing that I have no other choice, I decide to tell him everything.

"I didn't think of him until I went home. He was the only person to know about our relationship and was against us from the moment he found out. Long before the blackmailing, he confronted me and told to end it because you never will at Uncle's house. I, of course, said no but I guess he became pissed and chose to take matters into his own hands." My tears fall like an avalanche because of his betrayal. I always trusted Zain, but he took that trust for granted. Pushing my tears away, I continue, "He has videos of us too, Riaan. It's so much worse than the pictures. You have to understand I had no choice. Our lives will be ruined if they ever got out."

"He won't do it if it means setting you free," he declares, murderous intent flaring in his eyes. "Otherwise, he would've released them a long time ago. I'm more concerned

about the fact that he's threatening you and not me. It isn't like him."

He mumbles the last part almost to himself.

"You can't go after him, Riaan," I implore.

"It's not up to you anymore," he throws, hurt evident in his tone. "I'm disappointed you never once came to me. I would've understood if you didn't know their identity but after suspecting it was my own brother, you fell for his web of deceit and kept meeting his demands. Even worse, had I not caught you tonight, you'd still be keeping it from me."

"I was scared you wouldn't believe me," I say, my voice rising. "I wanted proof before I came to you. I begged you to wait, to trust me, yet you went behind my back."

"I was supposed to protect you, damn it," he growls, running his fingers through his hair in frustration and disappointment. "And I failed. It's my fault he's after you."

"No. He's the only one to blame." I shake my head and step closer but he backs away, making me jolt. It's like I'm reliving that night all over again.

Only this time, he's the one distancing himself.

"If you had come to me sooner, I could've stopped him," he snaps, and I want to curl into a ball. "Because you waited, he now possess pictures of you and that makes him even more dangerous. I hate that I can't go after him like I want to and risk your safety."

Bracketing me against the wall again, he tilts my chin up and every pore in my body seizes at his proximity and strength. "If Zain really is behind it, there's no saving him from my wrath. He'll regret daring to touch what's mine," he vows darkly. "I want to see every text, threat, video, and picture that he's sent to you. You won't stand in my way and you'll block his number. Do you understand?"

"As long as you promise not to risk your life." I shiver under his gaze but hold myself up. The smile that tilts his lips is nothing less than vicious and violent.

“It’s not my life you should be worried about.”

“Riaan.” I gasp.

“Go to your room, Nyra,” he orders after backing away and taking all my oxygen.

I stare mutely at his back because he has never looked more far away than right now. The second I’m inside the bedroom, I hear the front door slam shut. He left me all alone.

They say the truth will set you free, but not before stabbing and pissing you off.

I’ll be damned before I let it tear us apart.

Chapter Forty-Five

NYRA

Darkness swarms my vision when my eyelids fall open and I rub the slight wetness from my face.

It takes me a second to recognize they're from my tears when I cried myself to sleep. I turn onto my side and notice that Riaan's side of the bed is still empty and untouched.

Worried and choking down unwanted dark thoughts, I check the time on the nightstand clock and realize it's two in the morning.

Why isn't he home yet? More importantly, where is he?

God! I hope he didn't go after Zain in the middle of the night. He was positively raging and murderous when he left. After a few hours, I had texted him to come back but he only replied to go to sleep. I can't believe he'd say. He knows I can't sleep without him beside me.

I decided to take a shower instead in hopes of purging the shame those horrible memories brought. In the mirror, I saw the ghost of the lonely girl I had morphed into and never do I want to be her ever again.

That woman was someone who was afraid, weak and cornered. In the short time of being back and living with Riaan, he showed me I'm so much more than that.

Some might say I'm relying on him a little too much, but I don't care.

He's my rock. My strength. My man.

After changing into one of his shirts, I laid down in bed intent on waiting for him return, but the heaviness of the day lulled me to sleep.

I knew he was going to react badly once I told him everything and might want some space, but it still shook me. I wish he would just talk to me and not distance himself. Keeping it all in just never ends well.

I should know.

I pick up my phone to call him when I hear the door open and close. I sigh in relief that he's safely home. I pull the covers off and sit up while staring at the bedroom door but hear no sound in the hallway.

The apartment is eerily quiet as I discard the blanket and step out of the room. The living room and kitchen are empty and I wonder if I imagined the footsteps earlier.

I shiver from the unexpected cold breeze since I'm naked underneath his shirt. I press my palm to my thundering heart when I see a large shadow in the balcony. Only to calm down when it's Riaan leaning on the ledge with his back turned away.

He doesn't shift when I step on the balcony and find him smoking. One of his arms is resting on the banister while the other holds his cigarette as he brings it to his mouth.

I've only ever seen him smoke when he's deep in thought or struggling to sort his emotions. I hate that I'm the cause of it tonight.

Stars twinkle in the sky above while the city sparkles below.

The view is breathtaking yet my attention is captured by the man who owns my heart.

His head tilts slightly, as he could feel my body heat behind him. He shifts backward in a silent command for me

step between him and the handrail. I stand facing him while he brackets me with his hands on either side of me.

“Hi,” I whisper, his closeness a balm to my soul.

“Baby.” He sighs softly.

“Where were you?”

“Driving aimlessly.” His calloused fingers caress my face. “I needed to think.”

There’s still a rage storming in his eyes but it’s shadowed by hurt and guilt. Sometimes, it’s easy to blame ourselves for others’ actions, especially when someone important to you is involved. It’s the same chaos running through Riaan’s head.

He is extremely protective and caring beneath his hard and domineering edges, so learning he couldn’t save me is hitting him strongly. And I know it will take time before the feeling fades away.

I say nothing and push away the hair that falls on his forehead with my fingers. His eyes close as I slide my hand to the back of his neck and slowly massage the tense muscle there. Some of the tension melts from his shoulders as I continue to massage him softly.

“I’m sorry, baby,” he murmurs and I pause.

“You’re not the one who blackmailed me, Riaan.”

“You didn’t deserve it. It shouldn’t have happened. I knew loving each other would have consequences but never this,” he says as his torn gaze meets mine. “I can’t even imagine how you must’ve felt. When I first saw those photos, it was like someone stabbed and ripped my heart out. The way you pulled away from my touch that morning, it fucking gutted me. It’s the reason I held myself back.”

“I know that now and it made me realize that I was in denial too. I was so fixated on pushing you away that I never stopped to think about how much it was hurting me. I was letting my tormentor win. He wanted us apart and I was giving him exactly that. I even let my mom and everyone else into my

head by putting their happiness first that I completely forgot about mine. I deserve to be happy, to be yours, and I'll die before I let anybody else make me believe otherwise," I vow to him and the light that sparks in his eyes makes the pain worth it.

"I never once doubted that you would come back to me, baby. I never once believed that you wanted to let me go. The truth was always in your eyes and it's the only thing that kept me going without you."

"You didn't think I cheated on you after seeing the pictures?" I ask nervously. It's something I struggled with a lot during those nights. The doubt always slithers its way into my head whenever I'm alone.

He doesn't even miss a beat as he replies, "Of course not."

"But I did, didn't I?" Tears sting my eyes. "I vowed to be only yours yet I let another man see me."

Strong hands pull me closer and grip my jaw tightly. "You did what you had to, to survive an awful situation and I would never hold it against you, Nyra. You were left to believe you had no choice. You felt threatened. And even if this person didn't physically force you, it doesn't mean you weren't. And it doesn't make you tainted or weak. It makes you a survivor."

I nod and he rubs the fallen tears away before kissing my forehead. "You are still every bit mine as you were before. You always will be."

We remain locked in an embrace while his confident heartbeat keeps me tethered. I let his words wash over me and settle deep in my bones. The burden of carrying those tormented secrets has finally been lifted off my shoulders and I feel free. I have no doubt that there would be days where they might pull me down but I know Riaan will always be there to catch me.

I lean back a little and tilt my face toward him. "What if he asks for more? What if he releases our pictures and

videos if I don't comply with his demands?"

"I won't let it happen. You only let me know if he does."

"Do you think he knows we're living together?"

"I don't think he does because only my mom knows. She couldn't have told him since he hasn't been home in weeks." Fingers playing with the ends of hair, he asks, "But you need to promise me something."

"Anything."

"No more secrets," he demands.

"I promise."

"You also can't keep all this shit locked up inside. It'll eat you alive. You get nightmares and the panic attacks, because you haven't dealt with what happened. I still see the shadows and the sadness on your face. So, whenever those memories become too much, you talk to me. I'm going to fix everything, Nyra. You don't have to be scared anymore. No one will ever hurt you again."

"I know you will," I say confidently.

When I shiver from the cool breeze, his brow pinches and he tugs at my shirt. He shakes his head as he scolds, "You might as well be naked. Come on, let's go inside before you catch a cold."

Inside the bedroom, his hands pull at my shirt and strips it off my body. I lie down on the bed and watch him take off his own clothes before sliding in next to me. Spooning me from behind, he kisses my neck and whispers. "I love you, baby."

"I love you too."

The next morning, it's me who wakes up first while Riaan is sound asleep beside me. I'm lying on his chest with our legs tangled and his hard cock pressed against my thigh.

One arm is resting behind his head, his hard features smooth and boyish while his steel abs are on display for my wandering gaze. Even though I'm still sore, my pussy throbs with need.

I miss waking up to the feel of his mouth on me, which he hasn't done in a while. Glancing at his face once, I untangle my legs from his and slide down with a smile.

Wrapping my fingers around the wide head of his cock, I stroke up and down and feel him harden even more in my grip. Pre-cum leaks from the tip and I lick it with my tongue greedily.

His hips jerk but I don't check to see if he's awake. My sole focus is on his thick girth that I can't circle fully with my fingers. I take him between my parted lips and suck as much of him as I can without gagging. His rough fingers tangle in my hair and push me down until I'm choking.

"Fuck. Baby." Riaan growls in a low and raspy voice. "Suck harder."

I do and he thrusts his hips up as if wanting to get deeper. I breathe through my nose while his pubic curls tease my jaw. His masculine scent surrounds me and I love it.

"Such a good girl," he praises and lazily fucks my mouth. Pulling me off his cock, he grunts, "Lick my balls."

His mouth is always so dirty...

I lick his length from the tip to the base before sucking his balls into my mouth. I keep stroking him until his pleased groan fills the room.

One second I'm lying next to him, still sucking his balls, and the next, he grabs my waist to sit me on his hard chest, facing away from him. His soft pants tease my wet folds as he spreads my ass cheeks.

"If you're going to have breakfast, then I'm hungry for mine too," he says before lowering my pussy to his waiting mouth. My mouth's pace on his cock falters at the first swipe of his tongue on my slit. When I stop, he does the same. I was

about to turn around and look at him when he slaps my ass. “If you stop, I stop.”

“No.” I moan. “Please don’t.”

“Then take me in your mouth and suck like a good girl.”

It’s so damn hard to focus as he ravages my pussy like it’s his last meal. His tongue licks and sucks every crevice and I can hear the filthy, wet sounds he makes. It’s erotic and dirty.

As if I’m not spread enough, his arms slide behind the back of my knees and lock around my hips. I can’t move as he pulls me harder against his lips.

When my moan sends vibrations down his length, his teeth bite my clit and he sucks hard. My scream doesn’t get out as he thrusts his length to the back of my throat.

I might have been in control when I decided to blow him but I’m completely under his control now.

My stomach tightens as an ache in my pussy builds, telling me I’m close. The pleasure is so intense and sweet. Riaan knows exactly where to lick to bring me closer to the edge but not letting me fall. I bob my head around his length while teasing his balls. I want him to feel as good as I am.

Flicking my clit, he brings his tongue to my asshole and circles it, the sensation strange and forbidden but still amazing.

It hurts a little whenever Riaan shoves his fingers in there but it becomes overshadowed by the pleasure. Although I know it’s going to hurt a lot worse when it’s his cock, my pussy warms and drips at the thought.

Instead of fearing it, I’m excited for him to claim my ass.

I want him to fuck me where no one ever has.

My body trusts him to bring me an intoxicating type of pleasure, and I know I’d enjoy every second of it.

“Ahh... Riaan. Yes.” His cock slips out when I whimper. I have no choice but to accept his tongue as he pushes inside my asshole. The pressure of my orgasm intensifies but he fucking stops. I realize my mistake and eagerly suck his cock.

“Good girl.” His lips return and I exhale a satisfied sigh. “I’m going to fill your mouth with my cum and you’re going to drink every drop.”

His big cock ravages my mouth while his tongue plunders my ass until I’m mindless with desire. His thrusts become short and deep so I suck harder, eager for his taste.

I feel my own orgasm barreling toward me and as if he can sense it, he shoves two of his fingers inside my cunt as his teeth clamp down on my ass cheek.

The pleasurable sting sends me over the edge and I fall. Just then, his thrusts stop and he goes still inside my mouth. His hips jerk as his warm and salty seed floods my mouth. I swallow it greedily like he commanded.

“Just like that, baby,” he mumbles against my core and I shudder violently.

Our harsh breathing is the only sound in the room and I feel spent. He slides me off him, making me lie flat on my back, as he hovers over me. He pushes my hair away and smashes his lips against mine, kissing me roughly until our tastes mingle. His morning scruff teases my face but I can’t seem to care.

“Good morning,” I murmur breathlessly when he pulls back.

“It was way more than good, baby.” He winks. “Want me to make it even better?”

“Oh yeah... How?”

“Let me fuck you in the shower.”

“My body can’t handle another orgasm, Riaan,” I protest, and a challenging glint covers his face.

I gasp and laugh when he stands up from the bed and throws me over his shoulder. He spanks my ass and playfully growls, “You should know better than to dare me, baby.”

“I wasn’t.” I yelp as the sharp sting of his slap shoots to my core.

“Too late.”

Chapter Forty-Six

NYRA

Life has a way of surprising us.

I never thought I'd find anything that's boring and mundane exciting until now.

Because after waking up every day with a looming dark cloud, simple has become my new exciting. I hated the shadows, the state of living in constant fear, and fighting my feelings.

Eradicating them has brought me peace.

It's been almost a week since I confessed to Riaan and it has brought us closer than before. We've settled into a routine like a normal couple and I'm addicted to it more than I should.

I like waking up to him in the mornings and sleeping beside him each night. It's like we are cocooned in a blissful nest where no darkness can touch us. Don't get me wrong. We will have to eventually face Zain. But until then, we are content with just spending time together.

For the past few days, Riaan has been taking extra care of me, as if he wasn't already. He compliments me, touches me every chance he can get, and calls and texts me when he's at work while I'm at college. He worries I might have another

nightmare or panic attack but I try to show him I'm stronger than I look.

One night after dinner, we sat down and I shared the lows I would feel every time I had to send a picture. Including the feelings of disgust and shame that would wash over me, followed by loneliness and emptiness.

I also confessed that there were times I wanted to give up, sometimes wishing I didn't have to wake up.

His soothing and strong presence as he quietly listened kept me calm. And for the first time, I didn't cry as I talked about it.

When he asked me what happened between my mom and me, I told him about the rough couple of weeks. He was still angry with her for slapping me, taking me away, and treating me so badly, so I told him about her past.

He needed to understand where she was coming from and he replied that he understands her a little better now, but he still didn't like how she handled everything. It was more than I hoped from him.

After that, there wasn't another heavy talk and our days were spent as they normally did. Waking up, dropping me off to college and then bringing me home, eating dinner and sleeping shortly afterward.

Of course, he kept me up on most nights and fucked me in positions I didn't know were possible.

Muscles I didn't know I had were sore the next morning.

Basically, there isn't any inch in this apartment where he hasn't fucked me. I'm glad I started taking morning pills after he took me to doctor's because he never misses a chance to spill inside me.

The one time which still makes me blush was when I was talking to Monica on the phone while standing on the balcony and he had sneaked up behind me. The moment I saw the devious glint on his handsome face, I knew I should end the call immediately. I was about to cut the call when he shook

his head in a warning. Dropping to his knees, he unbuttoned his shirt that I was wearing and ate my pussy like a madman.

I could only handle the conversation for few measly seconds before I dropped the phone and gripped his hair as I climaxed hard on his mouth. Shortly after, he bent me over the closest available surface, and he pierced me with his cock and took his own pleasure while screaming filthy expletives in my ear.

My screams had echoed into the night and I'm pretty sure the whole building heard us fucking.

With each time he fucks me senseless, the anticipation of him taking my other virgin hole increases tenfold. Almost like he's waiting for me to beg him. And damn it, I want to.

We fuck like heathens...

Utterly insatiable.

And I pray our lives always stay this way.

He also took me to one of his weekly basketball games with his college friends and he played just like he fucks. Rough. Ruthless. Domineering.

He introduced me as his woman to everyone and their reaction was priceless. They teased him that he found someone to love other than his work. Riaan was the broody and quiet one of the bunch but gave back as good as he got.

The more he includes me into other aspects of his life, the more my fear of being together in public vanishes. My blackmailer's threat no longer holds power over me because I'm no longer hiding our relationship.

I'm not broken and Riaan is still mine.

College and work has been keeping us busy that we didn't realize that days has come and gone and it was now the weekend. Today is the first day of the three-day fest. The Reet brothers will be performing on Sunday night and I'm super excited. Monica's plan to seduce them is still on which she never can seem to shut up about.

Oh, and she's still insisting I talk to Riaan to help her despite me saying no several times.

I'm supposed to meet her right now at campus but I'm running late and haven't even left the apartment. There are more than ten missed calls from her and I lied that I'm on my way, which was an hour ago. Riaan had to leave early and since his driver was busy today, I'll have to take a cab.

Taking one last look in the mirror, I grab my bag and wallet from the bed and rush out of the bedroom. I forgo breakfast and pick up my phone that I left charging in the living room.

I'm in such a hurry to leave while simultaneously booking a cab that I don't notice who's standing on my door until it's too late.

I jerk to a halt when I look up and audibly swallow. "Zain."

He smiles but it doesn't reach his gray eyes. They resemble a cloudy sky right before a thunderstorm. How fitting. I should've known my happy bubble would burst, but not this soon. Not today. Not while I'm alone.

"Hey, Nyra." His voice shows his amusement. Yet my skin crawls as memories assault me. He's cornering me just like he had done the last time we were alone.

Dressed casually in a black tee and dark denim jeans with his hair pushed back, he strolls past me to walk inside uninvited. Zain is an inch shorter than Riaan but he's packed with more muscles and broad-shouldered.

While his brother is all hard edges and sharp angles, his looks are lethal and handsome in a sensual way. He sucks you in with an easy smile and his charming personality. It's what I used to like about him.

I never saw the darkness and intensity he kept locked tight.

Cold fear freezes my body as he faces me while I'm still rooted to the same spot. With his head tilted to the side, he

quirks an eyebrow and says, “Aren’t you going to show me your apartment, cousin?”

His words pull me out of my stupor. I neutralize my expression before hardening my voice, “Get out, Zain. I’m late for my classes.”

He doesn’t even take offense that I’m dismissing him, “I see... You’re still upset with my part that night. Seems like it wasn’t as effective as I thought since you’re back with Riaan.”

There’s no remorse in his statement and I can’t believe he’s the same brother who used to make me laugh. His expression is completely unreadable. Indifferent and icy. Fake and mocking.

I’m wearing jeans and a black cropped hoodie yet I still want to cover myself up under his gaze. I can’t shake the thought that he’s probably seen all of me.

Did he not feel guilty as he sent me those texts?

Did he think twice before crossing those boundaries?

Does he care at all how it affected my psyche?

Or maybe he enjoyed it like a sick monster.

I want to shout and demand for answers but I fear it might spook him. The thought of him destroying any proof of him blackmailing me holds me back. I walk back inside when he makes no move to leave. I don’t want him to know I’m scared of him because he’ll pounce on it. His calmness and friendly façade isn’t fooling me one bit.

“How did you get my address?” I question.

“Does your mom know you’re living with Riaan?” he viciously taunts. “She sent me here to check on you, you know. I should let her know her daughter is perfectly fine and still rebelling without a care.”

I steel my spine instead of cowering against his threat. He’s already damaged my relationship with my mom once. I won’t let him do it again.

“You think I’m rebelling?” I sneer before taunting him with, “Then again, a man like you would never know what love or loyalty is.”

“Careful, Nyra.” His voice drops an octave as he takes a threatening step forward. “You may be my brother’s girl and my little sister, but I don’t take kindly to insults. Especially when I’ve done nothing wrong.”

I can’t believe he has the fucking audacity to play dumb. Never in my life have I ever wanted to punch someone so badly. The fear and pain that twists in my gut turns into anger and tries to claw its way out. I hold it back. Barely.

“My mom won’t believe you,” I say instead.

“Are you sure?” He laughs like I told a silly joke. “She trusts me more than you, Nyra. I’ve never lied to her.”

His smugness slices through me because there’s truth in his words. So, I switch tactics.

“What do you want, Zain?” I sigh. “You wouldn’t be here without a reason.”

“I just wanted to see where my brother was hiding you. In his warped mind, he still believes you’ll both get a happily ever after.” He shakes his head and laughs angrily. “I mean, he loves you so much that he turned his back against his own brother. Did he tell you what he took from me?”

Finally, some emotion flickers in his eyes. Betrayal, pain, and fury.

I take a step back when he takes one step forward. With his body coiled tight with rage, he looks like an angry bull. His nostrils flare as he stares down his nose at me and there’s no mistaking he blames me for what Riaan did to him. After all, he never would have betrayed him if it wasn’t for me.

“No. I don’t.” I reply in the softest tone I can muster.

“He took away my future that I tirelessly worked on for years.” He growls. “One signed paper and it was all

destroyed. So tell me, why does he deserve to live happily with you while mine was stolen?”

“You stole from us too, Zain.” I know I shouldn’t push him but I can’t hold back anymore. After everything he’s done, he has no right to accuse me like I’ve done something wrong. He took a whole lot from me than he could imagine. My pride. My choice. My soul.

“All I did was try to protect you both from making a terrible mistake.”

“That’s not all you did and you know it. Stop pretending like you’re the fucking victim in all of this,” I yell rather harshly at him. All the pent-up rage I buried inside me was now boiling to the surface.

“What the fuck are you talking about?” he asks. The confusion contorting his face is almost believable. He’s a better actor than I thought.

“The blackmailing,” I accuse. “I know it was you.”

“Blackmail you?” he mocks, raising an eyebrow. His frame towers over my small one as he backs me into the wall behind me. I brace myself for an attack while trying not to shrink. “I can think of far more devious ways to hurt you if I wanted to, Nyra. You are the reason for causing a rift between Riaan and me, but he’s the one deserving of my wrath. Unlike him, I won’t stoop so low and use you to get my revenge no matter how tempting.” Closing his eyes, he inches backward, still suffocating me with his closeness. When they open, he’s back to being cold. “Make me the villain but my intentions were never about hurting either of you. I’ll never understand your relationship, nor do I care to. As far as I’m concerned, you both don’t exist to me.”

I’m trying to make sense of his words and a new possibility flicks in my head.

Is Zain even behind all this? Should I believe him when he’s already betrayed us before? He almost sounded sincere. Because if I’m wrong, then my blackmailer is still out there.

Their identity is still a mystery. And while I've been flaunting my relationship in public, they could still hurt us. I'll never see it coming. I'll never be able to stop it.

How am I supposed to protect us when I'm fighting against a shadow?

The front door bursting open with a wild thump startles Zain and me.

A furious-looking Riaan enters the room.

They are going to kill each other... is my last thought.

Chapter Forty-Seven

RIAN

All morning I've had a strong feeling in my gut that something is wrong.

It started when Nyra texted me that she's running late, and it slowly intensified when she said she's on her way in a cab.

It twisted into full-blown worry when she never showed up at the university where I was waiting for her.

Ever since our talk, I've been keeping a close eye on her, always being aware of her whereabouts. She knows I'm being protective the past couple of days after learning my brother might be behind all of the chaos.

What she doesn't know are the cameras that I've installed all around the apartment before she moved in.

So when she didn't respond to my last text, I opened the app and checked the live footage. I watched as she grabbed her bags and phone while hurrying out the door. The second her body went rigid, my gut tightened into a ball of fury and fear when I saw Zain on the other side.

He hadn't even taken a step inside before I ran toward my car. I drove like a madman, breaking several traffic rules as if the hounds of hell are after me.

I kept glancing at my phone and observed the trembling in her hands and the nervousness evident on her face. Although she was hiding it well from Zain, it's clear that his presence unnerved her.

The second the elevator stops at my floor, I rush toward my apartment. Flinging open the door, my vision turns hazy when I find him aggressively towering over my Nyra. Wrenching him away from her, I slam my fist against his jaw before he sees it coming and his face snaps to the right.

“I told you to stay the fuck away from her.” My rumbling voice cuts through the air.

My body is brimming with violence and the urge to hit him again for daring to breathe the same oxygen as her feels stronger than ever, but I hold myself back. I've already lost my anger twice in front of Nyra.

She never said anything but I saw the fear in her eyes and I never want her to feel unsafe around me. So I control my rage and watch as my brother stands to his full height.

I'm prepared for him to attack but he only stares with silent intensity. Rage storms in his eyes yet he doesn't act on it. That behavior rattles me more than it should.

“This is the second time you've punched me, brother.” He narrows his gaze. “It better be the last.”

“Then never show your face here again.”

His gaze flicks behind me at Nyra and grins. “Why? I can't come and visit my cousin? Don't worry, 'cause unlike you, I don't like to keep it in the family.”

A small hand circles my arm as I step forward threateningly. I stare down into Nyra's pleading face and her touch soothes me marginally. Zain observes us with an unreadable expression, his gaze laser focused on where our hands are touching. The look is gone as soon as it came.

“Get the hell out,” I bark.

“Don't be so rude,” he jabs before turning serious. Pushing his hand into his pocket, he sneers in derision, “Like I

already told her, I'm not the blackmailer for whatever reason she believes. So before you waste your time coming after me, I suggest you search for the real culprit. Clearly, I'm not the only person disgusted by your relationship.”

I feel Nyra flinch beside me and I want to throttle him until he begs for mercy. But without another word, he walks out.

Unfortunately, I already figured out he couldn't be the one tormenting Nyra when he already accomplished separating us. It simply doesn't make sense for him to continue blackmailing her and then send my aunt to come find us. Even the timeline doesn't match. The threats began long before I confronted him, so he couldn't possibly be doing it to get his revenge.

Nyra was already frightened enough that I didn't want to upset and send her into another panic attack by sharing this. I'm going to let her believe it's Zain blackmailing her the whole time until I figured out who really is hell-bent on ripping us apart. Hence, the extra vigilance.

Seems like being vigilant isn't enough because my brother just had to bulldoze his way into our lives like a riptide and jeopardize everything.

He really is the definition of chaos.

Turning to Nyra, I pull her into my arms before cupping her face. “Baby, you okay?”

“I'm fine, Riaan.” Her soft smile reassures me as she leans against me. “I don't think he was here to hurt me. He seemed really upset when I accused him of blackmailing me.”

“But?”

“He may have betrayed us, but a part of me feels bad for him. How sad is that?”

“It's because you have a pure heart.”

“You believe him too, don't you?”

My face betrays me. She tries to pull away but I hold her flush against me. “Nyra.”

“God! You must have thought I was stupid.” She laughs to herself. The sound is hollow and sad.

“Look at me.” I force her face towards me until those insecure eyes of hers collide with mine. “I could never think that. If I had been in your tough situation, I would’ve thought the same. Everything pointed toward him. He would threaten to harm you whenever we had a fight, so I almost believed it could be him. We were both wrong, Nyra.”

“Or maybe I just wanted to blame someone so badly that I made it all up in my head,” she says helplessly. “I can’t believe my instincts were this wrong.”

“You couldn’t have known.”

“I spent all these months hating him with every fiber of my being and now I don’t know how to feel. Some stranger has photos of me and I have no clue as to who.” Her chest rises and falls rapidly like she’s about to have another anxiety attack. “What if we never catch this person, Riaan? What if he rips us away again? At least with Zain, we stood a chance.”

Her eyes become unfocused and she staggers on her feet. I catch her before she loses her balance.

“Take deep breaths, Nyra,” I say softly while pushing her hair away from her face and rubbing her back. “Take another.”

When she steadies enough to meet my eyes, I pick her up and carry us to the couch. I sit with her in my lap and play with the soft strands flowing down her back. It always seems to calm and soothe her. Even now, she melts in my arms and rests her head on my shoulder.

“No matter what happens, nobody is taking you away from me,” I promise her. “Whoever it is, we will find them. Until then, you have to be strong. You’ve come so far and you can’t let them win now. Can you do that for me, baby?”

“Yeah. I will be strong,” she mumbles against my chest.

“Just focus on enjoying the weekend. Okay?” I tell her to distract her. “I know you were looking forward to the

festival. I'll take you to campus."

"Okay!"

I reluctantly let her go so she can stand up and grab her bag which she dropped earlier. I see her pull out her phone and curse. "Shit! Monica is going to be pissed."

"Hurry up then."

Together, we walk out the door and ride the elevator. Standing beside me, she interlinks our arms and rests her head on me. We've almost reached the ground floor when she sharply looks up and demands, "Wait... How did you know Zain was here?"

"I have cameras around the apartment," I reply with a shrug.

Just then the doors open but she doesn't move and gasps, "Cameras? When were you going to tell me?"

"Never."

"Riaan!" she snaps.

Before the elevator can shut its doors, I haul her out and walk us toward my car that I didn't even bother to park in the garage.

"I don't care if it was for my protection but you should've asked for my permission, Riaan."

"I own the apartment, baby." She should know by now I don't have any boundaries when it comes to her. "Besides, I had them installed before you moved in."

"That's even worse."

Backing her against the passenger door, I tilt her chin and speak firmly, "Need I remind you I'm the one in control when it comes to us? I won't take any chances when it comes to your safety, Nyra. Today is proof of that."

Some of her fight vanishes as I let her catch a glimpse of the turmoil I felt when I saw her alone with Zain. The fright that crossed her pretty face when he caught her off guard still pisses me off.

“Fine.” She sighs. “But please don’t keep things like this from me.”

“I won’t, baby.”

I stop inching away as I gaze at the shift in her expression. Her teeth bite into her bottom lip as she watches me shyly. “Do you check the cameras often?”

A smirk tugs at my lip and I want to sink my own teeth into her full lips painted in pink lipstick. They match the blush that flushes her cheeks after I’ve made her come on my cock.

“You mean when you stand naked in front of the mirror and touch the marks I leave on your flesh?” I rasp. “You bet I do. Next time, make yourself come and know I’m watching you.”

“Maybe I will,” says she breathlessly.

Unable to resist the draw of her mouth, I kiss her hard until all the earlier tension melts away from her body. Once we are seated inside the car, I pull away from the curb and into the traffic.

“I was glad you showed up when you did, Riaan,” she confesses. “I feel safe knowing you’ll always come find me.”

Taking her hand in mine, I kiss the back of her fingertips and vow, “You’re mine to protect, baby. I won’t let anybody come near you again. I’ll kill anyone who tries.”

Whoever is blackmailing her should be scared.

Hide all you want, I’m coming after you.

Chapter Forty-Eight

NYRA

My university campus is one of the topmost beautiful campuses in the country. Other than the stellar and competitive programs, the infrastructure and the campus is what draws hundreds of applicants every year.

It's what made me want to apply here, too, and the day I received the confirmation letter, I was beyond ecstatic and proud of myself.

The place is always abuzz with students. But today, the crowd is large. The atmosphere is buzzing with electricity and excitement as everyone feeds each other's energy.

Students from nearby colleges, who have come here to participate, mingle all around me. Some are riding on bicycles to roam the grounds while some are walking in groups and clicking pictures. This is nothing compared to how huge it will be the night of the concert.

In the distance, I make out the top of Monica's head as she stands in a group near the organizers' table. The first competition—the treasure hunt—is about to commence in less than an hour and I'm tasked with explaining the rules to the participating teams. The winners will receive a cash prize and VIP tickets to the concert.

“Will you be here all day?” I ask Riaan, who hasn't stopped glaring at the guys who look my way. With his wide

frame and quiet intensity, they scatter away like he lit their asses on fire.

“I’m tempted to stay just so nobody attempts to flirt with you,” he growls, his voice dangerously low with possessiveness. “But I have to confirm the arrangements for tomorrow at the office.”

“I’ll be too busy to talk to anyone,” I calmly say and rest my palm on his chest so his attention is on me.

His arm circles my waist to pull me closer. “Don’t go anywhere alone.” he orders. “Be good.”

“I won’t.”

“I’ll come to pick you up. Okay?”

“Mmhmm.”

Our gazes remain locked for a few lingering seconds. The urge to kiss him is strong, but he pulls away with only a heated look. I watch his back disappear into the crowd and with a sigh, I stalk toward Monica.

Sneaking up behind her, I cover her eyes with my hands and whisper, “Guess who.”

“Someone I was about to hire a search party for,” she grumbles in mock annoyance. Twisting in my arms, she snaps, “Dude. Stop ignoring my calls. I was worried you went home again.”

“Come on. I’m not going to ghost you again,” I say with a pout. “The cab took too long so I had to catch a ride with Riaan.”

“If I didn’t love you, I’d be dumping your late ass.”

“Hey! It’s not my fault the traffic here sucks.”

“Excuses, excuses.”

“Shut up,” I snap, rolling my eyes, and she laughs. “Are all the participating teams here?”

“Yep,” She replies. “Each captain has filled out their team members’ names. Everything is in place and I have the

first clues right here.”

“Perfect. I’ll go over the rules of each round. Meanwhile, you distribute these to them.”

“Let’s rock this day.” She cheers.

Grabbing the microphone near the makeshift stage we made, I stand at the center and shout excitedly, “Who’s ready to hunt for some treasure?”

The second I have all of their attention, I begin to explain the rules. They are all pumped by the time I finish. To make it interesting, one of the teams who impresses the volunteers through a challenge will be given an advantage in the final round. Monica finishes passing the first set of clues. The teams huddle when I say go and it’s fucking game time.

Our brains can sometimes be so easy to distract.

Throughout the day, not once did what happened this morning cross my mind. I got swept away in the whirlwind of games, laughter, and the hidden shots of vodka that Monica and I sneaked in with a few others. It was entertaining to watch as teams fought each other, running all over the campus to win the games.

The treasure hunt was a success and now we’re all having an after-party to end the first day of the festival with a bang.

The sun has long since set and the wind has turned chilly. I can’t feel it, though, because my body is hot from all the alcohol I consumed. It tastes like shit. But fuck, I’ve never felt so relaxed and happy.

It might have been a mistake because I’m beginning to feel the effects. I’m slurring and swaying slightly, but when my mind goes numb I don’t want to step down from the high I’m currently experiencing.

Monica isn’t doing any better. She drank even more than me.

“You’re telling me you never do anything in threes?” she slurs to one of the other girls in our circle. Even they are in different states of drunkenness.

“Yeah. ’Cause it’s inviting bad luck,” the girl, Rashmi, replies.

“So terribly wrong.” Monica winces. “And sad.”

“Why?” Rashmi grumbles.

“What if you want to have a threesome?” says Monica, cocking an eyebrow. “Are you telling me you’ll say no because of your belief? Now that’s bad luck.”

Hysteric laughter spills from my lips at the sad expression on Monica’s face as if not having a threesome is the worst tragedy. I could have never seen this turn in the conversation coming, but my light-headed mind is too hooked to stop listening.

“I don’t wanna have a threesome.” Rashmi yelps, embarrassed.

“Why not?” questions Monica with a tilt of her head. “Is it because of your rule?”

“I got a solution! One word.” I perk up, as if we’re tackling a huge problem. They both look at me. “Foursome.”

Rashmi, who is slightly sober than us, buries her head into her hands in defeat. Monica’s eyes, on the other hand, sparkle as she mulls over my answer.

“Hmm,” she mumbles.

“What? It’s the perfect solution.” I frown.

“Four’s a crowd.”

“So is three,” I say while throwing my hands up. “How would you even know?”

Monica and I always seem to have the weirdest and stupidest conversations when we’re drunk. Last time, it was about haunted houses and tonight, apparently it’s orgies.

Before she can give her smart-ass comeback, I hear someone clear his throat behind us and goosebumps rise on my skin. I'm afraid to turn around because I already know it's Riaan.

I need no other proof to validate my assumption, because it's evident in the way my friends' eyes have turned into saucers. His presence renders all of us speechless and blushing. Heat warms my back and I try not to melt under his gaze.

Damn! How much did he hear?

"Hey, Riaan." Monica speaks first. The mischievous glint in her eyes tells me nothing innocent is about to come out of her mouth. "What do you prefer? Threesomes or foursomes?" she boldly asks and I close my eyes in mild embarrassment. Apparently, drunk Monica has no filter.

I stare at Riaan's profile as he comes to stand beside me, hands in his pockets and a tiny smirk tilting his lips. "I don't share my woman."

I hide my smile at his smug answer and the undercurrent of possessiveness in his tone.

If it were possible to swoon and melt into a puddle, my friends would be doing exactly that. Vicious jealousy sparks in my gut as they ogle him. So before the alcohol could steal my sensibilities and I shout he's mine, I pick up my bag from the ground and clear my throat.

"I'm going to go home, Monica," I announce. "See ya tomorrow. 'Kay?"

"Stay, Nyra." She pouts before flirting at the man standing beside me. "Riaan can drink with us too."

"He's busy," I sharply say. The girls are taken aback by my tone but not Riaan, who I can feel fighting off his smile. "I mean, with the concert so close and everything."

The tension ebbs away and Monica shrugs, already forgetting my earlier words. "Okay, babe. Don't be late tomorrow."

“I promise.” I nod and hug her and Rashmi.

“Take care, Monica,” Riaan politely says before we step away from them.

As we silently walk toward his car, I feel his intensity growing like a live wire. If he can tell that I’m drunk, he doesn’t mention it. Although he does hold my hand when I trip on air with a low chuckle.

The moonlight shines down on us and I observe the crowd has thinned out. The only people remaining are couples hiding in some of the dark corners while others get high and drunk.

“So threesomes, huh?” he teases and I bite my lip. “You and your friends talk about dicks when you’re drunk?”

“No,” I murmur.

Grabbing my hand, he pulls me under a shadowed tree. A second later, I find myself being shoved against the trunk. The friction sends a tingling sensation down my spine and I shiver as I take in his eyes, which are dark like the sky. They steal my breath away.

My bag tumbles to the ground when his hands grab the backs of my knees until my legs are wrapped around his waist.

Grinding his hard cock against my throbbing core, he winds his fingers around my throat in blatant ownership. “You want both your holes filled at the same time, dirty girl?” he growls in my ear. “You greedy for two dicks to pleasure you, hmm?”

“Just yours, Riaan,” I rasp and moan when he thrusts his hips.

Biting my earlobe, he inches back and whispers against my parted lips, “Or do you want to bring a woman to lick and grind against your pussy? Maybe we should bring a third party. I’ll fuck her while she eats your cunt.”

“No. You won’t,” I threaten. My vision goes hazy with dark fury and jealousy as I fist his shirt and lick his lips. “I only want your cock, your mouth, and your fingers, Riaan.”

“Why? he demands.

“Because you’re mine,” I whisper, sliding my fingers in his hair.

“Good girl.”

Smashing his lips against mine, he kisses me savagely and I kiss him back with the same intensity and passion. I suck his tongue and he groans in pleasure.

His hips thrust and grind against my pussy and the friction has me moaning loudly, unashamedly.

Every inch of him is hard yet his lips are soft as they plunder my mouth.

His hand cups my ass so he can control my movement every time his dick presses against me. My hard nipples seek the sting of his teeth and I wish he would stop teasing and just fuck me. The alcohol, his touch, and his eager mouth has me dizzy and drowning in lust.

“Riaan.” I whimper against his mouth. “Fuck me. Please.”

“Is your cunt aching, filthy girl?”

“So much.”

His hand on my throat slides down to my left breast and he squeezes before twisting my nipple painfully. I shudder when his tongue licks the column of my throat and bites down hard on my pounding pulse.

My eyes open at the sting and my body stills when I stare at a wide-eyed Monica.

Riaan stops when I go completely immobile and leans back to look at me.

“Monica,” I gasp, and Riaan’s brows knit together before he follows my line of sight. I push him away until he lets me slide to my feet.

“Monica!” I shout, but she runs away.

Riaan calls my name but I can only stand numb and staring after her as my best friend disappears into the darkness.

I don't want to lose her... my mind and heart scream.

Chapter Forty-Nine

NYRA

I can't seem to catch a break.

Just when I'm picking up the pieces of one mess, another waits around the corner.

The next day, I'm dread the thought of confronting Monica throughout the ride to campus. I insisted on taking a cab to school, but Riaan wouldn't budge.

Last night, he tried his best to reassure me that everything would be fine. He knows how much my friendship means to me and confidently said it's the same for Monica. Riaan added that the way she worried about me when I was gone told him so.

But something this big could easily tear apart our bond.

Somehow, it's even worse than if we had a fight.

*Will she look at me differently? Will she feel disgusted?
Will she never talk to me again?*

If she reacts badly, does it mean I'll never have any friends? The more I think, the more my mind conjures worst-case scenarios.

The only thing I'm not worried about is that she'll never spread my secret. I trust her to guard it even if it ruins our friendship. I keep telling myself that true friends stick

together no matter what but I'm still scared. It'll hurt if she judges me too.

"Do you want me there, Nyra?" Riaan's worried voice pulls me out of my thoughts.

"I appreciate it but no." I give him a shaky smile as he drives. "I need to do this alone."

He nods in understanding before comforting me with, "She'll come around. Give her time."

"I hope so."

A few minutes later, we arrive at my college and I get out of the car. Riaan rounds the hood to my side and cups the back of my neck, my face tilting toward his concerned one.

A sudden feeling tugs at my heartstrings that has me going up on my toes and pressing my lips against his.

His body goes rigid with shock because I've never been bold or unafraid to touch let alone kiss him in public. Every time we have, he's the one reaching and claiming me like I'm his entire world.

Maybe it's because of last night.

Or maybe it's every hurdle we've come across and will continue to barrel my way that has me letting go of all my fears. Fuck everyone for trying to tear us apart.

Fuck them for judging us.

Fuck all of the people who only sees our love as wrong and tainted.

I'm done hiding us in the dark when he lights up my world like the stars in the sky. Bright. Blinding. Beautiful.

His hands grab my hips with urgency while he lets me control the kiss. His strong heartbeat grounds me, and I taste his lips softly. I don't know how I spent those months without him but I vow to never let it happen again. I pull away reluctantly when it becomes harder to breathe.

"What was that for?" he asks, smiling.

“Do I need a reason?” I say, tugging at his tie playfully.

It actually has become our morning ritual. He lets me pick his tie every day as he dresses up for work and I tie it for him. His only demand is that I do it while I’m naked, which got quite distracting because he couldn’t keep his hands to himself.

“I’m yours to do whatever you please, baby.”

The soft look in his eyes tells me he knows it was a big step for me. The happiness that shines in them conveys just how much it means to him. Not a surprise, though, because I kept him waiting long enough.

Sometimes all we need is a push to make the fall just to land where we truly belong.

“Call me after you talk to her, okay?” he asks.

“I will,” I reply. “I love you.”

“Love you too.”

Kissing me once more, he slides into his car and drives away. A smile forms on my lips as I catch a few boys standing in a circle a few feet away. They’re watching his sexy sports car with longing.

It doesn’t take me long to find Monica, who hasn’t replied to my texts or calls since last night. Riaan literally had to snatch my phone away and force me to sleep.

I was about to fight him for it but his stern and arrogant expression stopped me. He also might have threatened to spank my ass if I didn’t listen, so I had no other choice but to oblige.

She stands with her back to me and I speak past the dryness in my throat. “Hey, Monica.” I manage to say past the dryness in my throat.

She’s standing with her back to me, so I’m not sure if she knows it’s me.

When she turns around, I expect everything from disgust to anger to reflect in her eyes but not hurt. “Nyra.”

“Can we talk?” I ask.

Without a word, she walks ahead of me toward the building. I follow until we reach an empty classroom. Words remain struck in my throat as we stand in an awkward silence. The speech I prepared last night might as well be written in a foreign language, because I can’t seem to articulate any of them.

“Look, about yesterday—”

“I’m sorry I ran out on you—”

We both start at the same time and it lifts some of the discomfort. It’s the first time we aren’t able to communicate. I mean, we’d talked about threesomes just yesterday. Shouldn’t this be easy?

“Are you really hooking up with your cousin?” she asks in disbelief.

“It’s not a hookup. We’re dating,” I answer slowly. “We have been for a while.”

“Wow.” Her mouth goes wide in shock and I’m stunned to see her speechless. She takes a seat at the desk as she processes this.

“Well, now you know my deepest, darkest secret. You obviously must be disgusted and thinking what a sick person your best friend turned out to be—”

“Whoa... Slow down. I’m not disgusted,” she cuts me off and winces, “I mean, it is awkward but I don’t think there’s something wrong with you, babe.”

“Please don’t lie to me. You wouldn’t be the first to think that,” I say with a sad shrug.

“I would never lie to you, Nyra.” Her voice is serious as she says this, and she curiously questions, “How long have you two been together?”

“Almost a year now,” I reply. “We did break up for two months, though.”

“Wait... Was he the reason you went home?” she asks, wide-eyed.

I ponder how much to tell her and decide to tell her the truth. I’m done with the secrets and lies. “My mom found out and she didn’t take it well.”

“I’m so sorry,” she consoles.

“Don’t worry. It’s in the past.”

“I can’t believe I didn’t see it. I always thought I imagined the jealousy on your face anytime I mentioned flirting or asking him out,” she says, amused. “I’m hurt you didn’t tell me sooner.”

“You seem to be taking all of this really well, Monica.” I laugh. “Especially after the way you ran away last night. I was sure you wouldn’t want to be friends with me anymore.”

“I told you I don’t judge people, Nyra,” she says genuinely before shrugging. “It will be weird when I’m around you both but I won’t stop being your best friend. You can trust me with your secrets.”

“I never doubted that.”

“Does everyone in your family know?” she asks cautiously. “Do you love him? Like want to spend the rest of your life with him?”

“Yes and no,” I answer without any hesitation. Leaning my hip against the desk, I cross my arms and stare at my feet as I share, “Other than our moms, our dads and Pri doesn’t know about our relationship. Despite my mom’s opposition, he’s the only man I’ve ever loved and will continue to love. What we have is strange and complicated to the world but for us, it’s as simple as breathing.”

When I look up, she’s watching me with a soft smile with her chin resting on her fist. “I wanna know everything as soon as we have another girls’ night.”

“Soon.”

“Do you guys live together?” she suddenly asks, then gasps. “Is that why you never let me visit your apartment?”

“Maybe.”

“You sneaky bitch.” She curses and I laugh. “Important question. How big are we talking?”

She brings two of her fingers to a fist and slowly widens the gap.

“Seriously, Monica?” I shake my head as she asks me about the size of Riaan’s dick.

“Tell me when to stop,” she says sternly, and my cheeks flush in embarrassment. Gosh, I love her! She keeps spreading her fingers until they’re no longer touching. When I stay silent, she raises a perfectly shaped brow in appreciation. “Damn, girl.”

“I know.” I smile and shrug.

“Man, I wish I had hot cousins.”

If she only knew the half of it. Love like mine isn’t without its fair share of heartbreaks.

Without sacrifices.

Without *monsters*.

Chapter Fifty

NYRA

“You’re up early.”

I chuckle at the surprise and amusement on Riaan’s face as his sensual gaze roams over me as I prowl toward him slowly.

He stands behind the island in the kitchen, newspaper in one hand and coffee mug in the other. Looking freshly showered with his hair still wet and only wearing low-hanging sweats, I know he just came home from the gym.

“I’m just excited for tonight,” I reply with a huge grin. “I’ll finally go to my first concert.”

Setting his mug aside, he lifts me up the second I’m close and sets me down on the counter in front of him. Pushing my thighs open, he stands between them and his fingers slowly unbutton the shirt I’m wearing.

Each push bares my skin further, revealing the fact that I’m naked underneath. He licks his bottom lip while staring at the hickeys he left behind last night.

“What will you wear?” he asks, his head tilted to the side while his hands slide open my shirt so my body is exposed to him. I ache for him to touch me but he only meets my gaze as he waits for my answer. I become even more hot and bothered the longer his hands don’t caress me.

Wrapping my legs around his waist, I lean forward and run my nails over his abs, the sexy V, and the happy trail that leads to his hard cock. I have to bite my lip when the crown of his dick pushes against the top of his waistband.

“Nyra.” His voice is husky, and I smile teasingly.

“Sorry,” I say even though I’m not. I focus on his question and reply, “I’ll wear the leather skirt I bought last week and a crop top.”

“I see... Your plan is to torture me.”

“Not my fault you’re so easy to rile up, Riaan,” I sass, and naughtiness dances in his eyes.

“Don’t get cocky, baby,” he warns and smirks sadistically. “You know what your taunts does to me.”

My nipples harden into tight peaks at his voice laced with dark intentions. Yet I don’t bow down, enjoying our banter too much. “Maybe that’s why I do it.”

He chuckles low and husky, sending an electric shiver coursing through me and eliciting a throb straight to my clit.

His gaze becomes heavy and hooded when I shift restlessly on the surface. He doesn’t miss my body’s reaction to his proximity, and his chiseled face darkens with lust.

I’m so desperate for his touch yet he continues to torture me by making me wait.

Tilting his head to stare at my wet pussy, he commands, “Play with yourself, baby.”

My breath stutters, pulse racing as I lean back on one hand and bring the other to my pussy. I’m so fucking wet that my fingers slip as I push inside my folds and lazily rub up and down. Shyness fills me because I’ve never touched myself before like this.

He watches with rapt attention while his fists rest on the sides of my hips.

“You’re so fucking soaked, filthy girl,” he rasps. “Don’t touch your clit yet.”

“But—”

“I said no,” he growls sharply. “Give me your fingers. I want a taste.”

After rubbing around my wetness, I bring them to his mouth and my core clenches when he sucks and licks my juices greedily. Our eyes stay locked and my lips part when his teeth lightly bite them. After he’s tasted me, he lets my finger go with a pop.

“Push those two fingers inside and fuck yourself.”

I circle my entrance before thrusting inside my walls. Although it feels good, my fingers are nothing compared to his long and calloused ones. They know exactly where to push to send me over the edge or keep me dangling.

“Finger-fuck yourself, Nyra,” he orders. “I want to hear the sound of your palm slapping against your clit.”

“Ahh... Riaan.” I moan. The friction hitting my bundle of nerves almost too much.

“So pretty,” he praises. “Faster.”

My head drops as I lose myself and I shiver when I feel his hot breath on my nipples. The pleasure intensifies when his tongue flicks the tip of one breast but not sucking it like I want him to.

“Riaan... Please,” I beg.

“Push those fingers in your ass and I’ll give you more, my little fuck toy.”

My eyelids fall open while my body hums in pleasure at his rough demand. He’s never asked me to do this before and it feels ten times more intimate. He stares at me from between my breasts in a silent command.

“I want to see you shatter like a dirty little pain Slut with your fingers in your ass.”

Fuck! That word should make me feel degraded but the way he says it sounds like a beautiful praise. I come undone every time.

With a trembling hand, I slide my drenched fingers lower and his head tilts down to stare with primal need.

“Good girl,” he coaxes as I push even harder against the tight ring of muscles when they resist. “Push them to the hilt. Just like that.”

My eyes close at the mix of pleasure and discomfort. Taking my time, I pull my fingers out before thrusting again. He never looks away the whole time and it entices me to keep going.

“Fuck yourself.” His guttural voice pierces through the haze of lust.

My back bows when his mouth wraps round my nipple and he sucks hard.

“Yes. More.” I moan.

Sharp teeth sink into my breast and his tongue flicks, licks, and bites while I finger-fuck myself harder and deeper. The familiar ache builds deep in my core like hot lava.

“You’re close, aren’t you?” He smirks while his hands remain on my side.

I’m a fucking mess while he looks like his control hasn’t even wavered. But when I look down, his fist is stroking his hard length. The tip is glistening with pre-cum.

“Touch me, Riaan,” I demand.

I almost cry when his hand spreads my legs wider and he rubs the purple head of his dick over my clit in tight circles. He doesn’t thrust inside me and intends on making me come on the friction alone. I don’t stop fucking my ass when he slaps his dick on my slit.

“I’m going to cum.”

“No.”

“Please, Riaan,” I beg. “You feel too good. I can’t stop.”

Suddenly, my hand is torn away and twisted behind my back. His girth slides between my folds as he fucks me

without penetrating. I watch his clenched jaw, the pleasure darkening his hard features.

I push against his hold vainly. My orgasm is so close yet out of reach.

“Stop being so cruel,” I whine and his lips tilt, making me beyond mad. “I hate yo—”

His mouth smashes against mine and when I defiantly don’t allow his tongue inside, he bites down on my bottom lip savagely. I have no choice but to let him kiss me hard. With my lingering taste in his mouth and the pressure of his soft lips, I lose the battle and kiss him back.

“Your orgasms belong to me, Nyra.” He grunts against my lips. “You only come when I allow it and only when my cock is inside you.”

The second I submit to him, he groans in pleasure and hot spurts of his cum land on my pussy. I can hear it as he strokes himself roughly while covering me with his seed. Once he’s finished, he leans back to admire the mess he made.

Pushing his cock inside his sweats, he meets my gaze. A part of me is thrilled when I see a dark glint casting over his face. It holds so many dirty promises.

“You really love leaving me on edge, don’t you?” I pout.

“You have no idea,” he growls before smirking. “But you love it.”

“You do it to teach me a lesson.” I cock a brow questioningly and wind my arms around his neck while his circle my waist. “I didn’t earn it today.”

“I have devious plans for you today, sweetheart.”

“Tell me.”

“I’d rather show you.” He grins. “But first, shower and eat breakfast.”

Picking me up, he stalks toward the bedroom and I laugh. “You already took a shower, Riaan.”

“Not with you,” he retorts, like that should be obvious.

Almost an hour later, both of us finish having breakfast and while he’s busy handling a few important calls, I decide to get dressed.

The people won’t start coming for the concert until five in the evening but the official staff still has to come early. Riaan was supposed to leave early but decided to go with me while his team handles the last-minute preparations.

I asked if he’ll be able to enjoy the show because I didn’t like the thought of him being busy the whole night. He said his team will manage everything unless there’s an emergency.

Now that Monica knows, I have no reason to hide our relationship. Besides, tonight wouldn’t be perfect if he isn’t by my side to enjoy it with.

I’m also intrigued by what he has planned for me.

I have a feeling it has something to do with claiming another part of me. My heart palpitates faster in both fear and twisted anticipation.

Standing in the closet, I eagerly pull out my skirt because I’ve been waiting for days to finally wear it. The material of the leather is soft and black and flares a little around the hem.

The second I saw it, I knew I wanted it in my wardrobe. Quickly grabbing the sheer sleeveless crop top that stops just below my breasts, I hurry up to put them on.

I stare in the mirror to check my outfit and I smile in satisfaction because I feel pretty. The skirt reaches the top of my thighs, making my legs look longer. I curl my hair and let it flow down my back in waves.

I’m almost done with my makeup when I stare at Riaan’s reflection as he enters behind me.

His attention is glued to his phone so he doesn’t notice me right away. I bite my lip to hide the smile when he stops on

his tracks the second he sees me. His awestruck reaction making me feel a thousand times sexier and beautiful.

His handsome features sharpen in thick lust as he says, “Fuck, baby. You look good enough to eat.” Covering the space between us, he tilts my face while his thumb caresses my jaw. “You look stunning, Nyra.”

“Thank you.” I blush at his sweet compliment.

As if I’ve caught him in a stupor, he shakes his head before softly kissing me on the lips.

When he pulls back, his gaze is heated and predatory. He looks ready to devour me and it sends a shiver down my spine. His voice is edgy and domineering. “Wait for me in the bedroom.”

Leaving him to get ready, I sit on the bed while waiting. Meanwhile, I reply to the text my mom sent me. I feel the guilt coming but I push it down. I promise myself I’ll tell my parents the truth after this weekend. I can’t keep the act up any longer.

I also text Monica whose questions are seemingly never-ending about my taboo relationship. It certainly is better than the alternative.

When I hear footsteps, I put away my phone in time to see Riaan as he comes out of the closet. Dressed in all black except his tie, he’s deadly in a gentlemanly suit. His messy hair is styled back, bringing out the sharp angles of his face and his chiseled jawline hidden beneath his short beard. I’m so lost in checking him out that I miss the fact that he’s holding a small box in his hand.

My curiosity is piqued as I tilt my head to meet his gaze as he stops in front of me. His calloused finger runs along the side of my face as he pushes one wayward curl behind my ear.

“Turn around and bend over,” he commands.

I shift and slowly lie in the position he wants me in, feeling his hot gaze on my back like a caress. I can’t see but hear as he opens the box and takes out whatever was inside.

My lips part when his palms run over the backs of my thighs and flip my skirt up. Cool air teases my already burning skin. I'm wearing a thong so my ass might as well be naked.

He's done nothing but issue one command yet my pussy is soaked.

His fingers slide underneath and pull my thong down my legs until it pools at my heeled feet. He's quiet and it's a fucking turn-on.

"Spread your cheeks for me, baby," he says after straightening up behind me, and I show him every inch of me like he asked. "Tilt your hips."

I moan when he spreads my wetness to my asshole and I just know, tonight he will finally take my other virginity. It brings another wave of desire and it drips on his fingers.

I hiss when something cold presses against my tight muscles and I realize it's lube.

"Riaan." I moan his name when he rubs it around until I'm slippery. My back bows when he pushes a round object against my back entrance while my body resists it. It feels different and bigger than his fingers. Despite preparing me, it still hurts even though it's nothing compared to his cock. "Ahh... Fuck."

I can't believe he actually bought a sex toy and a butt plug, no less. I still haven't forgotten how he used a ball gag and handcuffs on me the last time we were surrounded by his brother's sex toys. That memory lives in my head rent-free.

"Relax for me, baby," he says seductively. "Let it in. It'll feel good and help when I claim your ass tonight. Be my good little girl."

I take a deep breath as he pushes the butt plug farther while my body submits to the invasion. There's a slight discomfort when it's completely in. But I forget it when Riaan flicks and rubs my clit until the tension vanishes and I push my hips back against his fingers.

"That's it," he praises before sliding the thong back up my legs.

I feel full when I clench around the plug and I'm surprised it doesn't slip out. I'm turned onto my back and Riaan leans over me to take my mouth in a savage kiss that I feel down to my bones.

"How does it feel?" he asks, pulling back slightly.

"It's strange yet good."

"I knew you'd like it, dirty girl."

I blush at his intensity. "Am I supposed to have it inside me the whole day?"

"Yes. I want you mindless with need for tonight. Nobody except me will know the naughty girl you are as you dance and laugh around your friends."

"Guess we'll both be tortured today," I reply and he smirks.

"Only you," he says deviously. "Come on. We'll be late."

Helping me stand up, I fix my clothes and glance one last time in the mirror. He lets me walk in front of him as we make our way to the door.

A shudder racks my body out of nowhere, and I stop walking as a moan slips past my lips. My eyes close in pleasure at the sensation between my legs and I gasp in shock. Whirling around, I stare at a smug-looking Riaan who watches me with a satisfied expression.

He didn't just put a butt plug inside me but a fucking vibrator.

Oh my God. He expects me to walk around while he controls my body from afar.

"You arrogant asshole!" I curse, and he turns the vibration up a notch.

"Like I said, baby. Only you'll be tortured."

Chapter Fifty-One

RIAN

I was wrong.

It's fucking torture of the worst kind watching Nyra strut around in that sexy-as-hell skirt of hers that makes her look like she has legs for days.

I can't seem to take my eyes off her and my staff is beginning to notice it too. They know she's my cousin yet I can't stop looking at her. After the way she kissed me the other day without any fear or hesitation, it was the sign I was waiting for all along.

My heart had never beat faster than in that moment.

That woman is mine and I don't have to hide it anymore.

As if she can hear my thoughts, she searches for me in the crowd and when our eyes clash, a breathtaking smile brightens up her face. She is standing in a circle with her friends. And unable to resist, I turn on the vibrations in the butt plug I shoved in her ass this morning.

Her teeth dig into her lower lip as she tries not to react but I don't miss the way her tits move as she takes a ragged breath. Her eyes narrow on mine in warning and with a smirk, I increase the speed. She crosses her legs in an attempt to lessen the ache but it does the opposite.

I like that she's at my mercy without my hands on her.

I should've done this a long time ago.

Somebody asks for my attention so I stop the vibrator and turn to face them.

"I confirmed with the hotel that the Reet brothers arrived last night," informs Snehil.

"Was everything to their satisfaction?"

"Yes. The manager will text once they've left for the concert."

"Good," I reply. "Make sure the backstage and security team is ready. Everyone else should also be at their places once the crowd begins to fill the house. Let me know when the brothers are here."

"Yes. I will."

When Snehil goes to check up on the teams, I make my way to the empty teachers' lounge and send a text to Nyra.

ME: Come to the teachers' lounge on the second floor.

MINE: Okay!

I sit with my legs crossed on one of the chairs and a few minutes later, I hear soft footsteps coming closer. Nyra's nervous yet curious eyes clash with my hard ones as she enters.

"Don't close the door," I stop her when she makes a move to, making her swallow. Crooking one finger, I demand, "Come here, baby."

She doesn't miss the domineering edge to my voice. It's the same one I use when she's writhing and begging underneath me.

It always makes her body come alive.

Her defiance is hot but it's nowhere near as gorgeous as when she submits to me. Until her, I've never had the urge to control and dominate anyone in my bed.

To punish and praise them.

To own and have them at my mercy.

It's the trust and love that shines in her eyes afterward that makes me feel like the luckiest man alive. She's an addiction I never want out of my veins.

Her floral scent teases my senses as she stands before me while I roam my gaze down her body. It lands on her soft curls that I want wrapped around my fist.

Leaning forward, I let my hands hang between my spread legs while keeping my attention on her.

“Who do you belong to, Nyra?”

“You,” she says softly. *Proudly.*

“Get on all fours,” I command roughly. “Show me the toy.”

“Here?” she asks in a trembling voice, then she nervously glances at the open door behind her.

“Eyes. On. Me,” I growl sternly. “Don't make me repeat myself.”

I keep my gaze pinned on her as she lowers herself to her knees and lifts her skirt over her ass. I watch as she shyly slides her thong down to her knees so she's bare. Shifting her long hair over one shoulder, she faces away from me on the floor.

All the blood rushes to my dick when she brings one hand to spread her cheeks for my awaiting eyes.

The flat surface of the toy shines while stretching her tight hole. The longer I stare, the wetter her pussy becomes. I can't wait to sink my cock inside while she screams my name. No inch of her will be left that I haven't claimed, marked, and branded as mine.

I keep quiet as I turn on the vibrations to max and she moans loudly. Her muscles clench around the toy and her hand slips as pleasure sparks inside her. She shifts her hips to seek friction but she can't.

“Riaan... fuck.” She cries out when I tease her by slowing down.

“Rub your clit.”

Sneaking her fingers between her slit, she does as she’s told. Her back bows while she chases her orgasm. I can always tell when she’s close. And just like the filthy girl that she is, Nyra writhes on the floor, her moans echoing in the room, as she fucks her cunt with her ass full.

“Look at me,” I gruffly order.

My fingers ache to grab and fuck her but I barely hold myself back. I’m going to push us both past our limits and only then, I will take her. She’s going to beg me to pound into her ass and I won’t be gentle.

When she stares back at me, I tilt my lip and stop the vibrator right before she’s about to come.

“No!” She whimpers when I steal her orgasm once more. “Let me cum.”

“Not yet.”

“Riaan,” she whines when I snatch her hand and bring it to my lips. Sucking off her juices, I right her clothes before sitting her on my lap. “I don’t care. Just fuck my ass already. I can’t take this anymore. Please.”

“I decide when you’re ready, baby,” I softly murmur against her lips. “Do you trust me?”

“Yes,” she answers without missing a beat.

“Then be my good girl.”

Tilting her head, I slide my tongue past her parted lips and kiss her until she’s breathless.

The next few hours fly by fast until it’s time for the entry gates to open for the concert. Nyra hangs out with her friends while I’m busy handling last-minute arrangements.

I'm talking to the dean when we're informed that the Reet brothers are about to arrive at any minute. Both of us walk toward the private entrance behind the stage where we'll greet our guests.

Most people would already be celebrating for accomplishing another event but I don't celebrate until they're finished. My team and I go out the next day after our events are successful and have gone without a major hitch. The high is like no other because I'll never forget the day I started this company. It's one of my biggest achievements.

It used to be the only important thing in my life. My only priority.

Now everything's flipped upside down.

Because I would give it all up in a heartbeat for Nyra. She comes before anything and everyone I ever treasured. That's how much she's come to mean to me.

It should scare me yet it only fills me with satisfaction and contentment.

I'm pulled out of my thoughts because of the loud cheering of the crowd outside as someone announces the singing duo has arrived at the university. I, myself, feel invigorated at their excitement. But I'm even more eager to get to Nyra.

I pull my hand out of my pocket when I hear footsteps coming our way. The bodyguards positioned here go alert the second we see the Reet brothers and their team approach. Kadin and Kieran Reet are as different as day and night. It's what leaves the audience awestruck and mesmerized when they perform in perfect harmony.

There are controversial rumors surrounding them and the most shocking is that they hate each other. There was one particular interview that sparked this news but it could have been easily manipulated. Other than the fact that they were orphans, their past is a complete mystery.

The only thing I hate about my business is the ego of some of the celebrities I've had to work with. They like every

whim to be met and want to be treated as if the world revolves around them.

I school my features into a professional smile when Kadin—the friendliest of the two—steps forward, while Kieran lingers back with an almost bored expression. I try not to make assumptions until I've met them personally.

“Mr. Reet. Glad to have you and your brother here.”

“Call me Kadin,” he replies before nodding at his brother. “This is Kieran. Heard the crowd is big.”

“You have lots of eager fans.” His lips tilt into a smug grin as he nods. “My team will show you around. If you need anything, do let me know.”

“Thanks.”

Kadin smiles before greeting the other members and some even ask for his autograph. Kieran never once tries to mingle with anybody and when his manager says something, he only glares. It's almost like he's being forced to be here.

The second they both go away to prepare for the show, which is due to start in a few minutes, I go in search of Nyra. She said she couldn't just leave Monica, so despite wanting her all to myself, I reluctantly agreed to let her go.

But on the condition that she watch the show from the VIP room reserved just for us.

I smile knowing she'll regret the choice she made because, alone or not, I won't be a gentleman.

Chapter Fifty-Two

NYRA

The sun has set but everyone's mood around me is high and buzzing with loud cheers and hoots.

Music plays through the speakers while colorful lights blind us. The campus is unrecognizable and I never imagined our stage could look so stunning.

It hits me that it's all because of Riaan and his team.

The past few weeks I've seen how much time and focus he dedicated day and night for tonight. It's remarkable that he's achieved this at his age. When most people are only trying to figure out what they want.

"This is freaking epic," shouts Monica from beside me.

Both of us are in the VIP area that's closed off from the main crowd, whom we can see below us as we stand from this height.

Apparently, there are different levels of VIP because this isn't the place which Riaan showed me earlier. It was more private and even had a couch with a perfect view of the stage as well as a TV on the wall.

Our university obviously hasn't spared any expenses when it came to this event. Considering how famous the duo is, I'm not surprised.

“I can’t wait to get drunk and dance my ass off,” says Monica.

“Me too!” I shout back over the music.

She’s dressed similarly to me except she’s wearing shorts instead of a skirt. It does wonders for her ass and has eyes turning left and right. She’s flirty and outgoing by nature but unlike me, she’s not interested in a serious relationship.

However, I have no doubt that when she does end up dating, she’ll create tons of ruckus in the poor guy’s life. The vision makes me laugh but he’ll be lucky to have her.

She’s one of the most loyal and loving people I know.

“Do you think the brothers are here?” she questions with an expectant grin.

“Riaan texted me that they are on their way.”

“Which one do you think is hotter? Kadin or Kieran?”

“Honestly, Kieran is intense and scares me a little. Kadin is intense too, but at least he smiles sometimes. Both are equally hot so it comes down to their personality.”

I’ve been a fan of them ever since they went viral. Their voice just draws you in and reaches your soul. Their songs are beautifully haunting and laced with deep emotions. I might never get this chance again so I’m going to ask Riaan to get me their autograph.

“Who gives a fuck about that? I just wanna get fucked by either of them.” I tilt my head and, she shrugs. “Or both.”

“You’re incorrigible,” I tease, and she winks.

“You love that about me.”

“I do.”

“Let’s have a shot,” she says.

Intertwining our hands, we push through the throng of people toward the corner. Alcohol isn’t allowed and yet Monica sneaked a bottle past the heavy security.

We drink straight from the bottle and the vodka burns my throat on the way down. I take one more sip before passing it back to her.

The song “Afterhours” by TroyBoi begins to play through the speakers and I drag Monica to the middle to dance. We throw our hands up in the air while singing the lyrics. My eyes close and a smile forms on my lips as the beat of the music takes over my body.

The song switches to a slow and sensual one and Riaan’s face flashes behind my eyes. Just like that, my pussy throbs at the memory from earlier today.

One second I was worried anybody could walk in on us and the next, he had me forgetting my own name. I’ve never been so primed and on edge that one touch from him and I’ll combust.

Every time he played with the butt plug, I had to fight to keep the moans inside. My cheeks would heat in embarrassment when Monica noticed the flush on my skin twice.

He made sure he was on my mind constantly.

My heart would race a mile a minute at the sadism I would see in his dark eyes whenever he’s nearby.

His devious intentions are unmistakable.

As I dance in the crowd, I’m taken back to the night in the club. Just like then, an awareness pricks my senses and I feel him watching me like a hunter ready to capture his prey.

A shudder racks my body as I search for him in the dark.

My lips part on a gasp as a bright light flashes for a second and our gazes collide. My feet move closer to him of my own accord. His pull too strong.

I find him leaning against a corner, one hand in his pants pocket, no jacket, and the sleeves rolled up. It’s as if he’s run his hands through his hair too many times because it’s messy with a lock falling over his forehead.

It makes me feel all sorts of hot and bothered when he makes no move toward me. He knows I won't run away this time.

“Dance with me.” I hear Monica's piercing voice from behind me as she grabs and pulls at my elbow.

I let her drag me to the middle and we sway to the music. Not once does Riaan's attention stray from me. His eyes devour me as I run my hands over my breasts teasingly before sliding them into my hair.

I might be dancing with my friend but it's all for him.

The world ceases to exist until it's just us.

When Monica begins to dance with a guy, I walk toward Riaan again. My stomach hollows with unwelcome emotion when a girl from my class approaches him with a flirty smile. She speaks to him even though he's completely ignoring her. Undeterred, she boldly rests her palm on his chest and my vision goes dark.

How dare she!

Closing the gap between us, I rip her hand away and stand between them. She stumbles back and stares at me in offense while I glare and claim, “He's mine.”

She appears shocked and stammers, “Isn't he your cousin?”

Hands circle my waist and pull me flush against a hard chest. His hard cock presses between my ass cheeks, betraying he's turned on by my jealousy. Confidence and possessiveness flare deep inside me and I lean against him.

The old me would have cowered in fear and shame. But now, I boldly hold the girl's stare and reply with a smirk, “Like I said, he's *mine*. Don't ever come near him again.”

I don't get to see her reaction before I'm flipped around. The next thing I knew, my back is roughly shoved against the wall and fingers circle my throat in a vicious grip. Pitch-black eyes burning with primal desire clash with mine.

Hungry lips bite my bottom one and pull before releasing it. “Fuck, baby.” Riaan growls. “I should make you jealous more often.”

“Only if you want me to do the same,” I threaten, and he squeezes my neck in warning.

“Brat,” he scolds, and I smirk. “I’m constantly jealous of every man that stares at you. Be glad I don’t keep you locked away.”

Fucked-up butterflies take flight in my belly at his raw threat. I want to blame my body’s reaction on the vodka I drank but nah, it’s all him. When an arrogant smirk tugs at his tempting lips, I ache to lean closer and taste him, but he teases me by pulling away.

“Kiss me, Riaan.”

“Ask nicely.”

“Please.”

His mouth descends on mine and I slide my fingers into his hair to pull him even closer. When I lick the seam of his lips and suck his tongue greedily, he groans and yanks my right leg around his waist.

The kiss turning ravenous and messy while his hips grind against mine. I bite his lip and he punishes me by pinching my nipple until I cry out.

He swallows the sound and tilts my head to control the kiss as he ravages my mouth.

I whimper in desperation when he pulls away all too soon; his weight the only thing keeping me from falling. Tilting my chin, he whispers against my swollen lips, “Dance with me, baby.”

Just then, the crowd cheers loudly as the singing duo steps on the stage. Riaan grabs my hand, pushes us to the front, and cages me in his arms from behind.

The energy in the air shifts when Kadin yells and his brother, Kieran, strings a chord on his guitar that makes everyone lose it.

The girls in the arena go ballistic, shouting their names in awe and lust. With Kieran's quiet intensity and Kadin's bad-boy charm, anybody would fall for the singing duo. I breathlessly wait for them to sing while surrounded by Riaan.

The familiar beat of one of their songs fills the air followed by Kieran's soulful voice.

The crowd screams and so do I.

I throw my arms up to the sky and dance to the music, feeling hypnotized. It's unlike anything I've ever felt. Almost like I'm taken to another dimension. Riaan's arm circles my waist and tilting my head toward his, I wrap mine around the back of his neck.

He stares down at me tenderly and wildly until I'm lost in his gaze.

My heart thuds violently behind my ribs knowing I found someone who makes me forget about the world around me.

I sigh when he leans down and places a soft kiss on my collarbone.

His breath teases my ear as he murmurs, "I love you, baby."

His thumb traces my lips as I mouth the words back.

Kieran's voice is replaced by Kadin's raw and husky one. The lyrics to their song is raw, sensual, and wicked. It's my favorite song because they remind me of my tumultuous and forbidden love—the kind of love that blossoms in the dark corners of our hearts.

Riaan rests his chin atop my head, our hands intertwined and resting around my waist while we sway to the music. For a moment, I forget all my worries, my tormentor lurking in the shadow, and the uncertainty of our future.

As long as we're together, no one can touch us.

No one can break us.

Chapter Fifty-Three

NYRA

With each song we dance to, the greedier our hands become.

Every inch of me is laced with tension and drowning in lust as his wandering fingers play me like a fiddle. All of my senses are heightened and attuned to his masculine presence as he holds me on a precipice.

It infuriates me that even though we both know his touch and close proximity are igniting a deep ache inside me, he won't give me any relief whatsoever until he decides to do so. .

Is it possible for your whole body to feel like a live wire? Because mine does.

Every time I move, my walls tighten around the toy inside my ass, and it brings a throbbing sensation straight to my clit. It's torture of the worst kind. My thong is soaked and sticking to my core in a delicious way.

The worst part, I wouldn't even care as long as he doesn't deny me anymore.

Soft lips nip the skin on my shoulder to my pounding pulse. My head tilts to the side so he doesn't stop. I grasp his hair when he sucks and tastes me with his tongue; his hungry hands digging into my hips, then down to my thighs as I dance against him.

“Riaan,” I moan, and he bites down aggressively before licking the sting away.

I grind against him when his hardness presses into my ass. His fingers dig into my waist, and I feel him smile. I bite my lip when those same fingers circle my belly button and go lower but stop inches away from my wet pussy.

My frustrated whimper is drowned out by the music and the loud screams of people around us. The darkness, the flashing lights, and the throng of people dancing somehow only heighten my desire to let it have free rein.

My lower muscles tighten when Riaan’s rough fingers graze my upper thighs and I feel drunk on dark lust. The soft touch electrifying and burning up my skin.

Teasingly, he inches them underneath my skirt and I nervously look around. If anybody dancing below us looked up, they’ll see him playing with my wet cunt.

I grip his wrist even though I don’t want him to stop.

However, my body and mind are at war. Before I can even decide, Riaan ruthlessly takes control and despite my protest, his hand doesn’t stop until he cups my throbbing pussy.

“Shh…” His teeth nip my earlobe and he growls, “Dance while I play with your cunt.”

As if I’m under his spell, I obey while my head drops to his shoulder, my arm winding around his neck as I grind my hips against his fingers. To anyone watching, we are nothing but a couple lost to the madness of the night.

They don’t know he’s a depraved man with his hand underneath my skirt.

They can’t hear the filthy words he’s whispering in my ear.

They’ll never know I’m his fuck toy, his little pet, and his *painslut*.

His hand tugs my soaked thong to the side and I cover my gasp against his neck as he slides his finger between my

folds. He spreads my wetness on my clit before pinching it painfully. I push closer as he circles my opening but doesn't penetrate me.

Toying. Edging. Teasing.

But never letting me chase the ecstasy his skillful touch brings. I feel empty yet full and it's a twisted sensation I wouldn't wish upon my worst enemy. Even now, his control hasn't snapped while I'm all sorts of fucked up.

My body craves the orgasm but its waiting for his permission.

My hand still on his wrist, I push in a silent plea to give me something. *Anything*.

I buck against his palm in wicked pleasure when he listens and shoves his finger in achingly slow.

Damn it! It's not enough.

Hating his power over me, I slide my hand down until I'm cupping his dick and start stroking him. My touch mirrors his tortuously slow and teasing strokes just to make him feel how I'm feeling.

Fuck being his good girl.

"Dirty little brat," he scolds roughly. His hard voice sending shivers down my spine, and I smile before biting on his neck playfully.

His length jerks in my grip but before I can gloat over my little victory, he stops playing softly. Grasping my throat from the front with one hand, he thrusts two thick fingers to the hilt inside my eager pussy with the other. I feel like I'm being stretched to my limits with his wicked fingers in my pussy and the plug in my ass.

Without letting me adjust to the fullness, he starts to ruthlessly finger-bang me.

Two fingers become three while his thumb presses against the toy in my ass. My teeth bites down on my lip so hard I taste blood from the pleasurable pain.

My eyes clash with his beastly ones as he leans down to lick my lip where I bit it.

His pace is relentless, and sparks explode behind my eyes as my pussy comes closer to heaven. That familiar pleasure keeps going higher and higher.

“Yes!” I scream as my walls clench around him.

“Look at me,” Riaan grunts as he flicks my bundle of nerves.

Our gazes stay locked and when my walls tighten around him, so close to taking the jump, he shakes his head. It's a clear warning to not come, but he doesn't stop fucking me.

The beat of the music gets louder, the crowd chanting with it, but my attention is fixed on him. Lust darkens his sharp features, and I couldn't help but feel turned-on even more. My pulse skyrocket as he continues to finger-fuck me, and the second I spread my legs to submit to him, he smiles in satisfaction.

My cunt protests when he pulls his fingers out but flutters wildly when he grabs my hand and pushes us through the mass of bodies. His muscles bunch and flex as he keeps striding ahead into a dimly lit hallway; the music now a soft hum.

Anticipation rises with each step we take and it's a miracle I'm still capable of walking.

I recognize the path to his private VIP room.

The moment we cross the boundary, Riaan goes crazy and whirls around with animalistic need. Hungry hands tear my clothes off until they puddle at my feet.

The one-way glass provides the perfect view of the stage and the people, while the music fills room through the big-screen TV. However, I can hardly pay attention to it when there's a savage man staring down at me with hunger. Desire. Madness.

“Your body is to die for, baby,” he rasps, his eyes hooded. “Play with your tits.”

“Riaan... Please. I can't take it anymore,” I mumble while cupping my breasts and flicking my hard nipples with my thumbs.

“You want my cock in your ass, filthy girl?”

“Yeah. So badly.”

Ripping my thong in two pieces, he pushes me down and snarls, “Wrap your lips around my dick first. Suck like a good fuck toy.”

Just as eager as him, I unbuckle his belt and hurry to pull out his thick length. My fingers tremble as he cocks his eyebrow arrogantly, fists my hair, and pulls sharply. His cock slaps against his lower abs, the head glistening with pre-cum.

Fisting him as much as I can, I take him in my mouth and suck hard. My lips stretch wide around his veiny girth while only taking him halfway and I stroke the rest of his length with my other hand. I want him to lose his mind.

I want him to choke me.

Hurt me.

Call me dirty names while fucking me raw.

“Pinch your nipples while I fuck your throat,” he commands before shoving to the hilt until I choke around his length. His hips thrust at a fast pace, going deep each time, and his balls smack my chin with force. “Cry pretty tears for me, Nyra. Show me how much it hurts.”

My pussy spasms at his filthy talk yet I don't stop teasing my sore nipples. His eyes darkening when my moan sends vibrations down his length. I rake my nails down his thighs as he grunts in pleasure. Deep-throating my mouth thrice more until my face is a mess of tears and spit, he pulls out.

I gasp when he gets down on his knees and lays me flat on the rug-covered floor. Cupping my ass, he yanks my pussy to his mouth and takes a long lick with his tongue. My eyes

roll back in my head when he draws my clit between his teeth and flicks it from side to side.

“Fuck. Yes! Yes,” I cry out at the intense pleasure. “More. Riaan.”

I look down and another wave of desire hits me at the way he eats my pussy: Eyes closed and hair messy from all my pulling as he drinks my taste with each greedy lick. The aggression in him has me losing my fight.

“I’m going to come, Riaan.”

His cheeks hollow as he increases the intensity of his licks. He doesn’t slow down and when his eyes flash open, locking on mine, he plunges two of his fingers in my cunt.

“Come on my hand, baby,” he orders. “Give me your cum.”

The string holding me together snaps and stars dance behind my vision as I orgasm with a scream. My voice hoarse as I moan and whimper at the power of my climax. I can’t seem to stop grinding and jerking my hips as it keeps going on and on.

Riaan’s fingers keeps fucking me through it and he holds me down when I try to push away. My clit throbs and when his fingers slide down my ass, I gasp.

“Relax for me, baby,” he coaxes and slowly pulls the toy out. My muscles protest, too used to having it inside. “That’s it.”

Goosebumps rise on my skin that he’ll finally claim another part of me but I’m shocked when he lowers his lips again and circles my asshole with his tongue. I feel open slightly, still riding the high of my first orgasm.

“Give me one more,” he growls, shocking me.

“I-I can’t.” I whimper.

Without any warning, he pierces my back entrance with his tongue and fucks me with it. The pleasure mounts again but it’s the slow and teasing kind. Two fingers tap my

clit before he inserts them in my pussy. The double sensation, different but intense, make me fall over the edge again.

“Good girl,” he praises, easing his hold. Pushing my hair away, he leans over me and says in a husky voice, “Now I’ll fuck your virgin ass.”

I swallow the nerves as he flips me onto my stomach and hooking his arm around my waist, he gets me on all fours. He promised he would take me like this.

We’re so twisted in our need to fuck that we don’t even make it to the couch.

Never have I been as aroused as I am now.

Can he smell it in the air? My face reddens at the thought.

“Spread your thighs,” he orders and my pussy clenches. “Wider. I want to see every inch of you, Nyra. Your pink pussy and your tiny ass gaping open for me. Do it.”

Oh God! His words shouldn’t turn me on. It’s so vulgar, forbidden, and filthy.

“So fucking wet.” His voice is guttural as he runs a finger between my slit and I shift my hips closer. The sharp pain registers a second after he spanks my ass and pulls at my hair, arching my back. “So you like being an illicit girl, hmm? Does the thought of your cousin claiming your ass turn you on, filthy girl?”

“Only because you love it,” I tease boldly. “You’re a deviant man too, Riaan. Always dying to fuck your innocent little cousin. You love corrupting me just as much as I love submitting to you.”

“Damn right I am.” His hard chest presses against my back as he takes a long lick from my collarbone to my earlobe before pulling it between his teeth. “We were always meant to be, baby. Your body was made to be defiled by me. Your sweet soul was made for my debauched one. You’re meant to be loved by me. No one else.”

Pushing me with his hand between my shoulder blades, he grabs my waist to lift my hips higher. The wide crown of his cock slides between my folds before he points it at my back entrance. I wait to feel the burn but he keeps circling it, making me feel dizzy and my heart race.

“Riaan... Please,” I beg, pushing my hips against him.

“Is my baby aching and desperate to be fucked? Are you feeling empty, dirty little girl?” he taunts.

“Yes!” I groan. His fingers gripping so tight that I know I’ll have bruises later.

I want them imprinted on my skin.

“I can’t decide which hole to fuck first.” He hums, his dick sliding between my slit as he says, “Your pussy.” My muscles clench as he inches his length upward. “Or your ass.”

“Wherever you want,” I cry out. “I need you inside me, Riaan.”

In the next second, I feel pressure against my ass and I gasp. My nails dig into the rug while my hair falls around my face as I feel him push against my tight ring of muscles. He’s bigger and thicker than anything I’ve taken so far and I tense despite the wetness.

“Riaan,” I whisper as he carefully but relentlessly pushes himself inside me.

“So goddamn tiny and tight.” He groans once the tip slips inside and it’s just as painful as the time he took my virginity. Trusting him to bring me pleasure as always, I relax and take deep breaths. “Just like that. Take every inch like a good girl, baby. Feel as I make your body mine.”

“It hurts,” I say and his thumb slides to my pussy to rub my clit, and pleasure hums all over me. He keeps paying attention to my bundle of nerves while thrusting inside my ass until he bottoms out. “Fuck! You feel huge.”

He hardens even more while my body adjusts to his size. He stays inside, unmoving, and soft lips press kisses down my spine until I melt underneath him.

His fingers pinch my clit and I jolt at the onslaught of desire and fullness assaulting me from all sides.

“You’re doing so good, baby.”

When the pain ebbs away, I grind and shift my hips, making him groan.

“Fuck me, Riaan,” I softly demand. Desperate to feel all his intensity. His domination. His dark desire. “Own me.”

“I can’t be gentle, baby. I need to fuck you so bad,” he warns, voice thick with restraint. “Tell me you want it hard. Beg me to make you come with my cock in your ass.”

“Make me come. Use me,” I say before whispering the words that will unleash his beast, “I’m your pain Slut, Riaan. Make it hurt.”

I scream when he thrusts savagely and growls, “Say it again.”

“I’m your pain Slut.” *Thrust.*

“Your fuck toy.” *Spank and thrust.*

“Only yours.” *Thrust.*

“Mine,” he yells while piercing me with his cock ferociously. My body shakes like a ragdoll as his balls slap my ass with each thrust. The wet sound is so erotic and wrong when he bottoms out.

His fingers circle the back of my neck to tilt my head sideways so he can see the pleasure, the lust, and the tears on my face. My mind realizes through the haze that I’m naked while he’s still wearing his clothes. The difference turns me on even more.

“So pretty.” He hums. “I thought your cunt was tight but your ass... it’s heaven and hell at the same time. I’ll fuck it just like this whenever you disobey me, sass me, or taunt me.”

“I’ll be a good girl, then.”

“I’ll still fuck it anytime I want,” he promises with a low chuckle.

Using his grip on my neck as leverage, he grabs my hip with his other hand and fucks me hard and rough. He holds me hostage as he takes his own pleasure like a savage. I'm surprised when an unfamiliar but sweet ache builds in my pussy.

I didn't think I could come again but my body tries to prove me wrong.

I whimper when Riaan pulls out before I can and flips me around.

"I need your nipples in my mouth, dirty girl," he grunts, and they pucker into hard points.

As he leans over me, I pull at his shirt to feel his skin against mine.

"Take it off," I whine when I can't do it fast enough.

My mouth waters when his abs appear in my line of sight and I run my nails over them. But he shoves both my wrists over my head and thrusts inside my ass again roughly. His cock throbbing inside my walls, and I feel so goddamn full.

"You take what I give you," he taunts with a smirk.

Any smart reply I had dies when he wraps his lips around my breast and thrusts mercilessly.

"Ahh..." I moan as his hips rock and drill into mine so savagely. "Harder. Please."

"Look at you. You're taking my dick like a good little pain Slut and begging for more. Where am I fucking you, Nyra?" he demands.

"M-My ass."

"Come with me," he roughly commands. "Choke my dick and milk it."

The unfamiliar feeling rises in my lower belly and I chase it. As if I'm not full enough, he shoves three of his fingers in my pussy in one brutal thrust.

“Riaan!” I scream but he continues tunneling them in and out of me.

“Greedy little cunt.” He teases. “Your body is insatiable, little cousin.”

I gasp when his fingers hit a spot inside me and my body’s reaction has me gasping in shock and embarrassment. The more he fucks me in the same spot, the need to come and let go intensifies. But it also feels like something else.

“Give it to me,” he says as my walls tighten around him. “Come with me.”

Based on the way his voice goes raw and guttural, I know he’s about to come. His thrusts become uneven and deep. His balls pull taut. I want to fall with him but my body wants something else.

“I can’t. You need to pull out,” I whisper, cheeks red.

“No. I’m going to fill your ass with my cum,” he snarls. “I know you’re close.”

“I-I need to...” I trail off, unable to say it, but something in his expression shifts. Wonder and dark desire flickers on his face and a wicked smile graces his lips. His fingers fuck my cunt faster and so does his cock until I’m gasping for breath.

“Riaan.” My control snaps. “Please stop.”

“Shh... Let go, baby,” he whispers. “You want to, don’t you? I won’t stop until you shatter around me.”

My lips part and he covers them with his as he kisses me deeply. When he pinches my clit, I lose the battle and I cry out. My pussy doesn’t stop spasming and the pleasure is unlike anything I’ve ever felt. I can’t seem to care as it goes on and on. I feel his thrusts slow down and his fiery gaze watching me as the tremors pass my body.

When I open my eyes, his hard cock pulses inside me as he growls, “Fuck! Nyra.”

I realize what I did and cover my face. “Oh God!”

“Baby.”

“I can’t believe you let me do that, Riaan,” I whisper and he tugs my hand away.

He grips my throat as he smiles down at me, “You squirted.” he says in awe. “It happens.”

“I thought I…” I trail off when he gives a shallow thrust and if it’s possible, his cock hardens even more.

“Well…” he teases, but there’s nothing but desire reflecting on his face and I blush. “It was hot as fuck.”

Pulling out completely as I gasp, he lifts me in his arms, fists my hair and smashes his mouth against mine. His tongue slides so deep into my mouth so I taste my lingering cum.

He doesn’t let me up for air and kisses me punishingly. My shocked moan is swallowed by him when I feel his dick harden against my pussy.

Smacking my ass, he bites down on my bottom lip and drops me on my feet. Circling my throat, he pushes me against the glass behind me and slaps my breasts.

“Oh God!” My head drops as shivers race down my spine.

My hooded eyes take him in his half-naked glory. His shirt is unbuttoned while his pants rest below his ass. Keeping me pinned against the glass, he strokes his cock with one hand.

“Riaan,” I whisper and swallow when he watches me dangerously.

“Turn around,” he orders while taking off his shirt.

I’ve been fucked within an inch of my life yet my ass and pussy throbs at his low and sensual voice. Twisting away, I rest my hands on the glass and even though the people on the other side can’t see me, I feel bare.

I like the fantasy that he’s fucking me for the world to see.

That they are watching.

I hear the rustle of his pants before feeling his heat covering my back. His hands slap my thighs wider and pulling my hips back slightly, he plunges his dick back inside my gaping ass in one sharp thrust.

Tugging my head to the side, his teeth bite down on my collarbone like an animal marking his mate as he pounds into me. His heartbeat is in sync with mine as his thrusts become unhinged, brutal, and deep.

His angry grunts and my cries of ecstasy mix with the staccato of the music and I see stars behind my eyes. My orgasm triggers his own. I feel him spill inside me again as he marks and claims me and growls in my ear.

“Mine.”

Chapter Fifty-Four

NYRA

“I don’t wanna sleep.”

I pout while straddling Riaan’s hips as he lies beneath me with his hands behind his head. Even relaxed, his muscles are hard like steel beneath my palms. I trace the lines and cuts of his abs while he watches me under his hooded gaze.

It was one in the morning when we finally came home right after he ruthlessly took my ass. I lost count of how many orgasms he stole from my body. An hour later, I’m somehow still not tired. Amusement shines on Riaan’s face as his fingers trace the tops of my thighs.

We’ve been talking ever since we laid down on the bed naked. Because he wanted to stare at the hickeys, he left me naked and wouldn’t allow me to wear his shirt.

“Hmm, I obviously didn’t fuck you hard enough.” He narrows his eyes playfully.

The opposite, actually. I wouldn’t be able to walk without feeling him between my thighs for days. Even now, I can feel the slight burn and soreness. He ran me a warm bath as soon as we got home which helped a little.

“My pussy and ass are broken, Riaan.” I roll my eyes while his face darkens at my words.

“I’ll lick it better tomorrow.” I shake my head with a smile and his gaze softens. “You need rest, baby.”

“But we never talk like this,” I say. “I love hearing stories about your work.”

“You mean you love the gossip,” he teases.

“Well, duh.” I shrug before frowning. “You also never got me the Reet brothers’ autographs.”

“No way was I going to let them see how you look after being fucked,” he growls possessively. “It’s for my eyes only.”

“Fine,” I grumble.

“Give me a kiss.”

“No.”

I yelp and chuckle when he spans my ass and yanks me down to steal a kiss for himself. His tongue dances with mine and I moan in pleasure.

My phone suddenly pings with a notification but I ignore it. When it chimes again nonstop, both of us pull back. Dread settles in my stomach because only one person could be texting me in the middle of the night, but the continuous notifications don’t any make sense.

Riaan must see the terror on my face because he sits up and tries to reason, “It could be Monica, baby.”

My gut says otherwise. The room temperature drops from playful to tense. Fear paralyzes my body and I can’t move.

Grabbing my waist, Riaan places me on his side and leans toward the nightstand to grasp my phone. I don’t even stop him as he unlocks it since he now knows my password.

He scrolls and my heart drops when he doesn’t immediately eradicate my doubts. Instead, his grip tightens on my phone while his shoulders tense. His expression turn into stone and his lips morph into a flat line. There’s anguish in his eyes when he finally meets my frightened gaze.

“Riaan.” I ask, my voice trembling, “What is it?”

I snatch my phone when he remains silent.

“Nyra!” he warns, but it’s too late.

An ugly pain stabs me in the ribs. Then numbness as time stands still.

My vision turns blurry as I read the words over and over again.

The video of Riaan and me on the terrace stares back at me like a horror flick.

My blackmailer posted it.

No warning. No demands. He’s finally pulled the trigger of his invisible gun.

I stare at the page where he shared it anonymously. It’s my college’s confession page. The caption reads “When you like to keep it in the family” with several hashtags attached to it.

My eyes dilate in horror as I scroll through the page. This can’t be happening. There are already hundreds of comments and likes. Each more degrading and derisive than the last.

Isn't she from our college? I thought I saw her with this guy.

What a fucking slut.

Is she that desperate for dick that she took her cousin's?

Are they really family? God! That's disgusting.

They only become more debasing and humiliating as I read on.

“No! No! No,” I chant, panicked as tears sting my eyes. “Oh my God!”

The phone is ripped away from me as Riaan’s strong arms pull me against his hard chest. All of a sudden, several emotions attack me at once and I scramble from the bed at their intensity while pushing Riaan away.

The video doesn't stop playing in my head. It's as if it's on a loop.

Fate is once again playing a sick joke on me hours after I was rejoicing in the fantasy that Riaan claimed me at the concert. *Careful what you wish for...* taunts my mind. Because in this moment, everyone is seeing me.

Did my blackmailer see us and decide to punish me tonight for being happy.

Strong palms cup my face and tilt my head back while wiping the tears away. Seeing the devastation and anguish on Riaan's face breaks my heart, and I can't help but lash out, "Don't you dare say you'll fix it. It's too late. We lost."

Hurt flashes behind those dark orbs of his, yet he doesn't call me out on my misplaced anger. It cracks my heart even more with guilt and I fall apart.

"He—he r-released it, Riaan," I stammer past the thickness in my throat.

"Baby... Please don't cry," Riaan whispers, eyes pained despite being hard and furious. "I'm so sorry."

I thought I was prepared but I couldn't be more wrong. The barrage of emotions I believed I had control over is nothing compared to the harsh slap of reality. The dark cloud that followed me like my own shadow finally bursts and chaos rains down on me.

The peace I had felt these past few weeks was the calm before the storm.

The wreckage.

The downfall.

Riaan says nothing and presses my head in the crook of his neck while I sob uncontrollably. The cruel taunts keep echoing in my head. I will myself to be strong but I fail.

My worst fear came true.

I promised Riaan I would fight and yet I'm shattering into pieces right before his eyes.

I could handle the taunts and the insults about my taboo relationship. But to have such an intimate moment between us out for the world to see is crushing and mortifying. It's more disturbing than anything I've ever imagined.

It's all my fault because I convinced myself I'd stop whoever was blackmailing me. Maybe it was his plan all along: To deceive me into believing I was safe and under the illusion of control, only to snatch it away when I least expect it.

Riaan may seem calm and collected but his fury is unmistakable. I press closer to desperately seek his warmth. And find solace in his strength.

In a split second, my world is flipped upside down. The sadness and cruelty has replaced the happiness I felt the whole day. It was perfect and romantic until this. Now, I want to hide away forever.

"Is it the same video?" he questions, his voice restrained as if he's hanging on by a thread. "The one he blackmailed you with?"

I nod slowly, incapable of forming any words. I don't need to see the video because it's imprinted in my mind. The disgust that I finally buried returning with a vengeance.

I'm startled by the loud ringing of my phone and when I stare at the screen, the word *Mom* in bold letters flashes in my screen. *Did she see it? Why else would she be calling in the middle of the night?*

"I can't talk to her, Riaan," I say with a shake of my head. "If she saw it..." I trail off.

"It's okay," he says, bringing my attention to him. I don't relax even when it stops ringing. If I was in a better mood, I would've been a little pissed off that Riaan is treating me like a caged bird by leading me back toward the bed and murmuring soothingly. But right now, I couldn't care less. I just feel mentally, emotionally, and physically drained. "Let me take care of you."

Taking my phone away from my sight, he comes back with his shirt and dresses me. His familiar scent makes me feel comfortable and safe.

“Why would anyone do this, Riaan?” I numbly whisper. “I-I can’t ta-take this anymore.”

Kneeling down before me, he rests his hands on my knees and fiercely vows, “They can’t hide forever, Nyra. I promise I will hunt them down and make them pay for each time they’ve hurt you.”

“What if we don’t?”

His gaze turns stormy at the hopelessness in my voice and he growls viciously, “They won’t get away.”

Softening his expression, he stands up and presses a kiss on my forehead. “I need you to be brave for me, baby.”

When he rises to his feet, I ask, “Where are you going?”

“I have to make a call and then I’ll be back. Okay?”

“Who?” I ask out of curiosity.

“Someone I shouldn’t have waited to call,” he answers mysteriously before walking out the bedroom.

I lie down beneath the comforter, feeling miserable and drained both emotionally and physically. I’m afraid to even close my eyes without Riaan by my side. His strength is the only thing holding me together.

I tell myself everything will be fine and try to convince myself that I’ll survive this too.

All my grave fears have come true so nothing worse could possibly happen.

At least, I’m not alone this time.

A sad laugh spills from my mouth because my sacrifices were all for nothing.

I was never in control.

It was all an illusion.

Chapter Fifty-Five

NYRA

Morning comes way too soon.

Despite wanting to stay and hide in bed, I can't. I've been so lost in my dark thoughts that I fell asleep without even knowing, and only woke up once during the night when Riaan came back. Snuggling in his arms, I let sleep take over me.

I wanted to ask about his secretive call with the mysterious person but I didn't have the strength.

When I turn to my left, I realize that his side of the bed is empty. I don't even hear him in the shower like I normally do every morning. My curls stick to my face and I push them away before throwing the covers off and sitting up.

My head fucking hurts and my mouth feels dry.

Memories from last night assault me and I search for my phone that Riaan hid away. A small part of me wants to avoid looking at it but I've learned my lesson. Pretending like it doesn't exist doesn't make the mess disappear, and neither does skirting around it.

Opening the drawer on the nightstand, I easily find it switched off.

I can't stop the trembling in my hand as I stare at the screen. As soon as it lights up, messages and missed calls flood my sight. Each notification drowns out the rapid beat of my heart as it sinks.

My legs give out from under me when my dad's name flashes at the top like a red flag.

There are dozens of missed calls and texts from him. The last message saying to call him or he'll fly to Pune.

Fuck! My whole body goes cold. My lungs collapse as if I can't get enough air and I know I'm going to faint. I count to ten and take deep breaths until my vision clears. I fall on the bed with my head in my hand and holding the tears at bay.

He knows, but how?

He couldn't possibly be following my college's unofficial social media page. Does this mean my blackmailer sent it to him? Or maybe Priyanka saw it and showed it to him.

No... She would have come to me first because there are missed calls from her too.

I thought I had time. But again, the choice is taken away from me.

I'm stuck in an endlessly toxic cycle. My life is no better than those hamsters stuck on a wheel.

A chime on my phone brings my focus back to it and my brows pull together as I notice the timings of the notifications. There are no new ones from this morning, everything is from last night. Curiosity has me clicking on one that leads to the awful confession page but I go still when it says the post is no longer available.

What the hell!

I refresh my screen, thinking my mind is playing a joke on me, but there's still no sign of last night's video. I go to my profile and check the tagged section but nothing's there too.

How is that even possible?

Hope flares in my chest at the thought of someone taking it down, when it hits me that Riaan went to make a private call last night. Something I forgot about for a second. Could it have something to do with the video being gone like it never existed?

I know the damage is already done. Our reputations are ruined and I doubt I could change how my dad looks at me after learning about my taboo relationship with Riaan. Yet there's no denying the relief I feel, knowing it's no longer out there for the world to criticize and poke fun of. My heart says with conviction that it has something to do with Riaan making a phone call and leaving shortly after.

But where is he?

I amble out of the bedroom on bare feet and the apartment is too quiet. I don't hear the soft clanking and clattering coming from our kitchen when he cooks breakfast.

My shoulders drop with anxiety when I find every room empty and silent, even the balcony.

Yesterday, I was too raw and shocked at the bomb that dropped that I forgot to check if he was all right or not.

He's always so strong, impenetrable, and protective that I never realize he could be hurting too. I've been so busy wallowing in my own misery and wounds that we never talked about how everything's been tough on him as well.

He knows everything I went through those two months I was away from him, yet I know nothing about him.

I can't believe I've been so selfish.

Staggering to the kitchen to get water, my eyes catch the sticky note on the fridge. Stepping closer, I read Riaan's handwritten note.

Baby,

I had the video taken down.

I wish I could've stopped it from being released.

Forgive me.

I'm going fix everything.

I love you

- Riaan

Emotion swells in my chest as I re-read his heartfelt note and I wish he were here so I could tell him I'm so grateful to have him. I don't know how he made it happen, but the fact that he did it just so I didn't have to live another day with the video out for all the world to see, has me bursting with tears and love.

Grabbing my phone, I call his cell, desperate to hear his voice, but it goes straight to voicemail. He never leaves for work without kissing me and making sure I finish my breakfast because I always skip it.

He's not one to break our morning ritual for any reason.

Last night, he kept his dark emotions tightly leashed. I'm afraid that's not the case anymore. And that scares me more than anything. He won't stop until he's found the person who did this.

I only pray his hunt doesn't destroy us.

I'm torn between wanting to uncover the person and forgetting last night—hell, the last few months—ever happened.

My phone chiming with a text makes me blink back to focus and I realize it's from my aunt.

AUNT VANDANA: Riaan told me what happened, kiddo.

I'm here if you need to talk or simply spend time with.

Before I can reply, the doorbell rings followed by a loud, insistent knock. I feel the person's impatience through the door and hurry to open it.

My eyes widen in surprise when they clash with Monica's extremely worried ones.

"Oh my God! Nyra." She steps forward, pulling me into a hug. "I'm so sorry. I saw the video. I swear I'm going to

kill whoever did it. Please tell me you're okay."

"How did you get here?" is all I can mumble out in response.

"I bugged Riaan until he gave me your address."

"Oh."

"Tell me you're okay, Nyra. I can't believe someone did that," she says in concern and it warms my heart. "It's deleted now. Thank God! I reported it as soon as I saw it."

"I'm still processing it, Monica," I reply in a low voice.

She frowns sadly and nods in understanding. Closing the door, I bring her past the hallway and into the living room.

"This isn't how I pictured your first visit to my apartment," I confess as we flop down on the couch. "I wish it were under better circumstances."

"I know," she agrees. "I wanted to come last night but your phone was switched off. Luckily, I had Riaan's number from the last time he asked for my help. I called him as soon as I woke up and came here. I didn't even take a shower."

I chuckle while counting my lucky stars I have a best friend like her. "I'm glad you came. I would've gone crazy. I haven't even found the courage to call my parents. They saw it too."

"Fuck!" she curses in sympathy.

"Exactly. I'm fucked."

"Do you know who did it?" she carefully asks.

"No clue," I answer, looking away. "Everybody saw me, Monica. How am I ever going to go to college now?"

"You don't have to until you're ready," she consoles. "It'll blow over and everyone will forget about it."

"What if I never am?" I whisper brokenly. "My parents will probably take me away again and I won't have a choice. My life is ruined, isn't it?"

Monica slides closer to me and wraps her arms around me while rubbing my back. Tears escape my eyes as she holds me and softly murmurs, “Shhh... It’ll be okay. You don’t need to worry about anything right now. It sucks and I can’t imagine the pain you’re in but I’m here for you. Besides, with a man like Riaan on your side, you’ll be fine.”

With the video gone, I feel marginally better but the shock doesn’t wear off. I pull back before I wet her shirt and give a shaky smile. “He’s the reason the video got taken down, Monica.”

“Really?” she asks, eyes wide with shock.

“Yeah.”

“He really loves you, doesn’t he?” she softly says with a tilt of her head. I nod and she smiles. “You’ll both get through this, Nyra. I just know it.”

“Thanks, babe.”

“Is everyone in your family against the two of you?”

“No. Riaan’s mom has been supportive of us.”

“Then maybe you should talk to her. She can even help convince your parents. If you trust her, then ask for help.”

“She texted me before you came, actually,” I tell her. “I was going to visit her. She’s the sweetest and the most loving aunt I’ve ever met. She sometimes reminds me of Mom. If anything ever went wrong, my mom would be the first I would run to and it hurts that I can’t do that anymore.”

“That’s awesome,” she says encouragingly. “You can meet her later. Until then, let me make you feel better.”

“I don’t have booze,” I joke. Since it’s always been her go-to to brighten the mood.

“Just so you know, I have other tricks in my bag,” she brags.

“Oh yeah, like what?”

“Like watching a naked Michele Morrone.” She sighs dreamily before winking. “He’ll make us forget the world.”

For the next two hours, my best friend distracts me the way only she can, making me feel blessed about our friendship.

The second Monica leaves, loneliness and sadness stab me in the chest. I haven't looked at my phone, knowing my parents must still be reaching out to me. I'm still trying to process it all and don't know how to explain everything to them.

I'm scared to hear the disappointment in my mom's voice for making her live through this again. I'm scared to feel the anger and shame for humiliating my dad.

Mostly, I'm scared to face him and hear him say I disgraced our family by loving Riaan.

If he asks me to choose... I can't even finish the thought.

Riaan hasn't come home and I don't know who to talk to. I feel the weight of the impending disaster trying to tear me down. My phone buzzes on the couch and I pull away as if it's a landmine I don't want to step on. When it dies down, a breath I didn't know I was holding whooshes out of me.

Perhaps I should listen to Monica's advice and visit my aunt.

Because the longer I stand in the haunted silence of the room, the darker my thoughts become. I feel suffocated and frightened. It's as if the walls are closing in on me.

Unable to handle it a second longer, I grab my jacket from the back of the couch and hurry out of the apartment. I leave my phone because hardly any good news comes from it. As if someone's cursed it.

Flinging open the door, I take the elevator down and hail a cab to my uncle's home.

Chapter Fifty-Six

NYRA

The world is a harsh place.

It doesn't stop or slow down for anyone. You can be hurting, dying, or simply existing, but it will go on. We, people, are only to blame.

My life was falling apart and the world was laughing and joking at my expense. In a few meaningless words, they degraded my love and called it a freak show.

It's sad that a person's reputation can be easily destroyed. And it's all because their actions were beyond society's norms.

The sad truth is it will never change. Accepting it is even harder.

I push my depressing musings into a corner never to be touched. I stopped trying to figure out the world a long time ago and I'm not going to start now. Especially when I have other troubling things to worry about.

No matter how fast I run away, I never get far before I'm dragged back down.

Life is a cruel bitch. It always shakes the ground beneath you the second you become comfortable. There's no stopping it except praying you survive the collapse and aftermath.

I'm almost to my aunt's house and I sigh in relief when I find cash in my pocket since I didn't carry my purse. In my haste to leave, I forgot I was only wearing Riaan's shirt and my sleep shorts from last night. My jacket is hardly covering all of me, so I shift closer to the window to avoid my leering cab driver.

Or maybe I'm imagining him leering at me...

I don't know anymore. The ugly video has me rattled and doubting everyone around me.

When the car stops outside my uncle's house, I jump out of the car and give the money through the front passenger window. My gaze flicks around nervously as if I'm afraid somebody will jump out and taunt me about the leaked video.

Will I always fear something would happen when I go out?

I ring the bell and knock on the front door. I realize I should've called or responded to the text before I decided to show up unannounced. My aunt and I are close, especially after talking the last time I was here and her continuously checking up on me afterward, but still I don't want to impose.

Minutes pass and no one opens the door, even though I see my aunt's car parked in the garage.

I knock harder and I stumble when the door creaks open.

Did she leave it unlocked?

That's strange because every time I've visited in the past, that's never happened. I instantly regret not bringing my phone. My feet have a mind of their own as I push the door wider and step inside.

Maybe she forgot to close it and is resting upstairs like she usually does in the afternoon. It could be the reason she didn't hear me. Plus, I can't just go away without at least making sure their house is safe. They live in one of the wealthiest areas in the outskirts of city, but still. Anything can happen. Criminals don't discriminate.

Ominous silence welcomes me as I walk down the dimly lit hallway. The living room comes first to my right and it's empty and so is the kitchen around the corner. The house is eerily cold and I pull the jacket tighter around me.

"Auntie" I call out and wait. No one answers and the strange feeling in my stomach intensifies. I shout louder once more, but hear nothing in response.

Something whispers in my head to turn around and get the hell out. There's a weird energy in the house I've never felt before. Menacing. Troubling. Frightening.

It could be because I've had a rough time, but I know very well by now to listen to my instincts. I slowly back away, intending to leave, when a voice calls out my name. Startled, I jump at the sound of the voice while controlling my racing heart.

"Nyra? Is that you?" My uncle's voice pierces my eardrum.

Thank God! My first thought was that a burglar got inside or something. But, of course, they wouldn't know my name.

"Yeah, Uncle," I answer back as I look at the top of the stairs, expecting to see him standing there. But he doesn't come out so I shout instead, "I came to see Auntie Vandana. Is she with you?"

He doesn't answer back. I guess he didn't hear me so I climb upstairs, my feet making a soft thudding sound on the carpeted stairs. I know their bedroom is on the left so I prowl in that direction. The door is ajar so I knock in case they need privacy.

I jolt back when it's ripped open without warning.

"Uncle, I..." My words trail off as the air is knocked out of me.

Why is it I realize danger when it's too late?

My uncle stands in only a towel before me, his naked beer belly on display. I want to cringe and hide my eyes and

turn around, but my legs don't listen to my brain.

Furthermore, what has me lurching in stark, cold fear is the two-inch scar on the side of his stomach. It's diagonal and deep, the skin white like the stitches weren't done properly. My eyes stare at it in horror while willing it to disappear as I blink rapidly.

No. No. No. It can't be.

"Kiddo," he says in that same warm voice. But his eyes, they gleam with malice. It's predatory and disturbing to look at.

My lungs feel like they'll collapse any second from the lack of oxygen as I stagger back.

It was him.

Close family. Older. Reputed member of society. Successful.

My mom's words replay in my mind. He's the man who sexually assaulted her. The scar is exactly how she described it. He stares, enjoying himself as I connect the dots.

"You all right, kiddo?" he asks again. He is not concerned, though. The word *kiddo* almost sounds like a degrading taunt, holding no warmth like it used to before. He says it lecherously and my body flinches.

Suddenly, it hits me. The morning text. My aunt never calls me kiddo and it's what she said in the message.

Fuck! Did he send it to lure me in here? Wait, how did he know about the video?

I'm so stunned, each revelation knocking into me like a ton of bricks and I can't form words. My intuition tells me that I can't be alone with him. I have to leave.

"I-I'm fine," I reply casually so as not to spook him, but it's too late. The monster is out of the shadows and I willingly knocked on his door. Maybe I can walk out unscathed. "Is Auntie Vandana here?"

"No. She went to the market."

It takes every bit of the self-preservation and strength I possess to not run while he stands before me half naked and unashamed. I have a feeling he'll chase me if I attempt to make a run for it. I need to be smart and not raise any suspicion that I know it was him who hurt my mom.

"Oh, okay. I'll come later then," I calmly say.

"Why in a hurry to leave, kiddo? You and I never spend time alone."

I want to cover my ears every time he calls me that.

"I have classes in the evening," I say while stepping back.

The second his expression turns hard at my lie, terror like no other freezes my body. Fight-or-flight response takes over my senses and I run just as his hand flies to catch me.

I hear him snarl and prowl behind me as I race to get away, almost reaching the staircase. I'm halfway down when I'm shoved hard from behind between my shoulder blades.

A pained screams hurls past my lips as my ankle twists and I tumble down. My elbow collides so hard with the ledge and I hear my bone crack. The pain is so excruciating that tears burst from my eyes as I land on the hard tiled floor with my head spinning at the ringing in my ears.

My uncle laughs manically as he slowly ambles down the stairs, like he has all the time in the world. My broken ankle brings me down when I attempt to stand and hide from the monster before me.

I whimper as I crawl backward. He smiles evilly as he comes closer.

"Like mother like daughter," he taunts with his head tilted to the side. "That haughty bitch fought me too. It always bugged me how she got away. Now, you'll pay for it."

"Please don't do this, Uncle." The desperate plea spills out of my lips.

"Keep pleading, it only makes me harder, kiddo." He chuckles while grabbing his hard dick, which is only covered

by his boxers. His threat makes me want to puke.

All these years, he's been hiding the darkness lurking below his cool facade and I never saw it. The times we sat as a family, celebrated festivals, and shared conversations with laughter flash behind my eyes. It was all a big fucking lie.

I stare around the room to find anything I could use to defend myself with, but he has me trapped in the hallway. With my broken ankle, I can't even run and hide in any of the rooms. Nobody even knows I'm here.

Real terror grips me that no one will come to save me.

"Let me go," I say, fear palpable in my voice. "I won't let you get away with it."

"And who's going to believe you?" He sneers. "After seeing you fucking my son. You're nothing but a whore and I'll treat you like one."

"Ho-How do you know about that?" I question. Maybe if I keep him talking, I can figure a way out.

"Know?" He quirks an arrogant eyebrow. "Who do you think released the video?"

Every inch of me trembles at his proud tone and the deplorable truth. He must have been the one to record it while I stupidly thought it was Zain.

My uncle was blackmailing me this whole time. I flinch when he leaps over my prone and wounded body. His fingers pull at my hair so harshly to get me on my feet. Once I'm barely standing, he shoves me backward. My back collides with the table in the corner, and my face contorts in pain.

He squeezes my neck while I scratch him with my nails and struggle, but it has no effect on him. He's just as tall and broad as his son. Even though he's withered with age, he's strong and his frame is filled with aggression.

He's going to kill me.

Tears fall down my face and I am repulsed when he licks one off my cheek. I choke when he growls, "You're just like Sara. Seducing and taunting men with your doe-eyed

innocence and when I tried to give her what she was begging for, she accused me of being a rapist.”

“Y-you a-are.” I snarl. He rips open my shirt and dirty hands grab my breasts.

My disgust, fight, and tears only makes him harder and rougher as he violates me. Every single touch cuts my soul, and I feel numb. Weak. Raw.

“After I’m done with you, I’m going to send the pictures to your mom. She may have won the last time, but she’ll have to live with the truth that she couldn’t save her daughter. My son will see what a lying, cheating whore you are and I’ll finally get my revenge.”

Riaan’s face flashes before my eyes and I want to cry harder in defeat, but my body decides to fight back. My mom’s strong words ring in my ears, and before Uncle can see it coming, I ram my knee between his legs. His grip loosens as he howls in pain and kicking him once more, I whip around and hobble toward the front door.

I hear his body fall with a thud to the ground as my hand grabs the doorknob.

“No!” I scream when he catches me. I try to claw at him, but he slams my body against the door. The air leaves my lungs when his rough fingers picks me up and throw me down on the ground like a rag doll.

“You little bitch.” Uncle snarls as he flips me onto my back. My head whips to the side when he backhands me.

Despair claws inside my ribs when I realize I’m trapped. I try to fight him with all my strength, but he’s tougher. Stronger. His aggression and intent to hurt me evident in his eyes.

I close my eyes and think of Riaan. Our lives will never be the same after today. I might never hear his voice or touch him again.

When hands tug at my shorts, it’s like I’m living that recurring nightmare from two months ago. The blurry face is replaced by my uncle’s. The evil voice is now his.

Too bad I can't wake up from this nightmare.

"No one can save you," he grunts.

I fought, Riaan...

Is my last thought before darkness consumes me.

Chapter Fifty-Seven

RIAN

Chaos comes in waves.

When they crash into the shore, they bring long-buried secrets with it. You think you're so brave and invincible that you keep wading through the choppy waters.

What you don't know is that it's just the beginning.

Each wave is progressively worse. They shake the root of your core and your entire world upside down until all you're left with is the harsh truth that everything was built on a lie.

Lives are destroyed. Trust is broken. Betrayal runs deep.

The truth is staring me in the face, yet I don't want to believe it.

Sitting in my office, the last place I want to be, I watch the video that was posted last night on repeat. The memory is etched into my brain and each time I'd revisited it, it had brought nothing but happiness and satisfaction in my heart.

Yet it's the last feeling running through my veins today.

What was only meant for our eyes only, has now been laid bare for others to see. At least it was until this morning.

I'm not the kind of man who likes being in others' debt. But that was before I fell in love with someone so deeply that protecting them came first.

When I'd been living in Mumbai, I had met and made friends with the most dangerous and corrupt men who ruled the entire city with their fists. Darian Grover, one of the infamous kings of the valley, was one of them. Heir to a crime family with ties to the mafia, he's a ruthless and influential man.

I had run into him at a club where celebrities and criminals alike visited. One of his family's legitimate businesses is a security firm that caters to the wealthy and famous. He and his friends have connections that can make anything happen.

I'd kept his business card with me but never intended to use it until last night. If anyone could make the video disappear, it was him, so I called without a second thought. Owing him is bad but I'll worry about it when the times comes.

I'd get down on my knees if it meant Nyra would be safe.

I'd burn the world down to keep the light shining in her eyes.

I'd walk through the gates of hell just to spend an eternity with her.

Seeing the devastation on her face over the leaked video had broken me into pieces. I had finally brought back her spark before it was dulled once again. Consoling and taking care of her had become my first priority instead of letting the rage consume me.

Even after I'd gotten her to fall asleep, I laid awake while dealing with the consequences of my delayed actions. I made a terrible mistake waiting instead of going after the person the second she told me the truth.

I just wanted to give her an amazing weekend before I let the darkness shadow us.

Only for the darkness to turn murkier. Treacherous. Tumultuous.

Staring at the screen of my computer, I want to smash it against the wall the longer I watch the same clip. I can't believe Nyra didn't tell me that the fucking video was taken at my house. The last place we should've worried about.

It makes even more sense that she believed Zain was behind it all.

I would've suspected it was him again if it wasn't for the fact that there are cameras all over my house which my brother is well aware of. It was the both of us who got them installed as a safety precaution when a burglary happened in our neighborhood. He and I are the only two with access to them.

So, there's no way he would go through the trouble of recording us when he could easily download the tape.

And if it wasn't him, then only two people remain. *My parents*. I don't think my mind can digest the truth if I'm proven right. Neither is capable of committing such a horrible act and not even stopping there but continuing to blackmail Nyra. An ugly emotion unfurls in my gut that I can't shake away.

The clip is blurry, shaky, and no other voice can be heard except Nyra's and mine. Whoever made it was smart to stay quiet. This person also haven't captured the entire time we were together but only a few seconds. The only intention I can make out is that this person wanted to catch us like this.

Unguarded. Oblivious. Risqué.

But for what reason, is still a mystery.

With a calmness I never believed I possessed, I go to the security cameras and search for recordings from that night. As they download, I become restless and sickened by the thought of my parents' involvement. Whatever I see will change the course of my life forever, and I'm not prepared for that.

How could one be when they suspect a family member is capable of hurting someone you love?

The blue circle completes at the bottom of my screen, indicating the download is complete and I hurry to play the footage. Since it was around midnight when I met Nyra on the balcony before we left, I play the video from ten p.m. onwards.

The hallway and the terrace are both empty and I fast-forward it a bit to when I enter and hide in the shadows until Nyra's silhouette follows.

The shy smile lighting up her face as I sneak on her, tugs at my heartstrings.

Few minutes pass as we talk in the video and it's like I'm having the conversation again. Just when I push her against the wall, I catch a shadow lurking in the corner. I realize I had my back to the culprit which is why I never saw the person back then. And by the way I'm crowding Nyra on the video, I could tell she couldn't have seen this person either.

My body goes rigid as the person steps into the light. They say monsters hide in plain sight.

So did mine.

And I just sent Nyra alone into their den.

Fuck! I need to get to her. Pushing away from the chair, I shut my computer by ripping the cords off and grab my phone as I rush out of my office.

Snehil jumps back in shock and stands up from her desk when I slam the door open. "Riaan, is everything okay?"

"I have an emergency," I reply without slowing down and step into the elevator.

I dial Nyra's number to warn her but it keeps going to voicemail. Why is she not picking up? Worry stabs me when I'm unable to reach her.

I jog toward my car in the lot and slide into the driver's seat. I run a few red lights like the last time as I speed faster, only slowing down once I've reached my destination.

Shoving open the door, my eyes zoom in on the one person who stabbed a knife in my back.

“It was you,” I accuse, and my mom whirls around in panic and guilt. “How the fuck could you do this, Mom?”

I knew she’d be here because I invited her so Nyra didn’t have to be alone until I got home. Had I known my own mother was behind it, I never would’ve allowed her to come anywhere close to us. Never let her in. I knew her blessing was too good to be true. I wouldn’t have expected her betrayal. It’s my worst nightmare come to life.

“Riaan, *beta*. Let me explain—” She stammers.

“You were never on our side, were you?” I sneer. “It was all a ploy so we wouldn’t find out you were blackmailing Nyra all along. I can’t believe you actually released the video. Did you really think you’d get away?”

“What? No. I didn’t upload the video, Riaan,” she says, her eyes wide in horror and shock. “I swear.”

“Stop lying,” I yell, stepping closer to her.

“Please, *beta*. Yes, I made it, but I never intended to share it. Besides, I only found out now when you told me that it got released.”

I shake my head, not believing anything that comes out of her mouth. The fact that she’s admitting to recording it says she’s manipulative, twisted, and a liar.

“Why would you betray me, Mom? Why hurt Nyra?” I demand.

Her eyes harden into slits and burn with a hatred so deep that I’m taken aback. She has always been a loving and caring person yet this is a sight of her that I’ve never seen.

With her spine ramrod straight, she replies, “I wanted to teach her lying cunt of a mother a lesson.” Shivers march down my back as I hear her voice. It lacks remorse. “Wanted to show her that the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree. Did you know she accused your father of abusing her?”

Each hate-fueled word that spills out of her mouth has me angry and disgusted. Few pieces fall into place as I remember Nyra telling me about my aunt’s tragic past. I never

suspected my father of being her assaulter as I stare at my mom's angry face.

Is it even true? Our families have always been close, except for those last few years before my grandma died. My instincts tells me it has everything to do with this secret.

“No. I didn't,” I reply past clenched teeth. “But to use Nyra for your revenge... That's too low and vindictive. She was innocent.”

Her eyes slightly soften as she looks away before continuing, “I truly regret it. After I saw you both together at that restaurant, I thought she was using you. Or maybe Sara put her up to it. So, I asked her to break up with you and everything was moving according to plan, until Sara showed up. I didn't stop her when Zain took her upstairs because I wanted her to find you both. I would've gotten my revenge for wrongly accusing my husband. But when I heard her threaten to put you in jail for the same crime, I lost it.”

“I couldn't let her destroy your life like what she did with your father.” She growls unapologetically as she faces me. “So I continued blackmailing Nyra and asked for those pictures as evidence that she came onto you. I would only release it if Sara went ahead with her threat. I only did it to protect you, Riaan. I never wanted to hurt either of you.”

“Are you crazy? You ruined Nyra's life. Because of you, I almost lost her,” I bark. “I trusted you.”

“I-I'm sorry,” she cries. “I swear I didn't release the video.”

Suddenly, my body locks tight as I realize that in my anger, I forgot Nyra is nowhere to be seen. Ignoring my mom, I walk to the bedroom and find it empty.

“Where is Nyra?” I whirl around and ask Mom, who followed after me.

She swallows and her brows knit together. “She wasn't here when I came.”

Deadly possibilities hit my chest and I lose my calmness.

“Where is your phone, Mom?”

“Your dad accidentally spilled water on it and took it to an electronics shop for repair,” she replies.

Both of us realize the truth at the same time; he’s the one who leaked it.

I pull out my phone and my heart sinks when I realize that there’s still no reply from Nyra. If something happens to her, I’ll never forgive myself. I text Monica to see if they’re together since she visited in the morning and her reply pulls the rug out from under my feet.

“Call the police and send them to our house,” I yell at her as I rush out. “Now.”

Each second feels a little too late as I don’t reach Nyra on time. I have no other thought except to find her safe and sound. Never in my life have I felt like I’ll crumble, helpless, and afraid. *Please don’t let her be hurt*, I pray to whoever is listening as I drive once again.

My heart is lodged in my throat and my lungs constrict from breathing rapidly as I speed like a maniac. I’ve failed my baby twice already and I can’t do it again. I won’t break my promise that I’ll always save her.

I’m coming, Nyra. Be strong, baby.

I step on the brakes hard as my house comes into view and I leave the engine running as I run forward. My feet falter when the front door is ajar, and my vision goes black at the pained scream piercing my ears upon moving closer.

I slam the door open, the sound of it bouncing off the wall, and my world shatters.

“Get. Off. Her,” I scream, the sound rising from deep inside me.

Nyra lies unconscious on the floor while my dad lays on top of her with his boxers down. One hand is clawing at her naked breasts and the other is tearing at her shorts.

I grab him by the neck and haul him off of her before punching him square in the jaw. When his face contorts from

the impact, I slam him against the wall before hitting him repeatedly.

“How fucking dare you touch her?” His head snaps to the side, blood spilling from his mouth. “You sick bastard.”

“She’s just like her mother.” He chuckles.

I throw him to the ground and kick him in the ribs as he howls in pain. He doesn’t even fight back as I pummel him with my fists. My rage is so dark and intent on killing him. I don’t care if he’s my father. He hurt what’s mine.

“I’m going to kill you.”

I’m about to hit him when hands grab my waist and pull me back. Zain’s voice manages to pierce through my haze but I fight him off.

“Let. Me. Go.”

“Stop, Riaan,” he shouts back, still holding me. “Nyra needs you, brother.”

I go still at her name and my fists unclench despite the fury running through my veins. My dad is clutching his stomach and lying sideways as he coughs.

“Go to her,” Zain calmly reminds me.

I push away and as I turn around, tears sting my eyes as they land on my girl. I drop to my knees beside her and pull her on my lap. Hair sticks to her face and when I push them away, hand prints mark her cheek. I touch her carefully because I can see a bruise forming on her head as if he knocked her unconscious.

“Baby, I’m here,” I softly whisper. “Please wake up.”

Taking off my jacket, I cover her naked body while willing her to open her eyes. She looks so frail and small in my arms. There are hand prints forming on her throat as well, and desolation sinks in at the fact that he hurt her. I check her pulse and relax a little when I feel a steady heartbeat.

“Nyra.” I whisper. My breathing eases when her eyelids blink and seconds later, her soft brown pupils meet my

darker ones.

“Riaan.”

“I’m here, baby.” I bring her palm to my lips and kiss it. “You’re safe.”

“You’re here?” Her voice is low and hoarse. “I-I...”

“Nyra!!!” I scream in agony as she passes out again.

Carrying her quickly, I rush to my car and drive toward the hospital while I hear sirens outside my house.

She will be fine. I keep repeating to myself as if it’s my new mantra.

And my father will pay.

Chapter Fifty-Eight

NYRA

Numbness and suffocation has my eyes blinking open.

My vision is blurry as I gaze at my unfamiliar surroundings. The constant sound of beeping irritates my eardrums while every inch of me feels sluggish and heavy. An invisible weight is drowning me while my mind recognizes the room as a hospital.

Why am I in a hospital?

Soft murmurs disappear as a hushed silence falls upon us. A second later, I hear the scrape of a chair in the corner. Shivering hands push my hair back from my face, followed by my mom's relieved cry.

“My sweet girl, you're awake.”

Her voice carries through the fog in my brain as she peers down at me.

“Ma.” My words sound raw and scratchy as I speak. She helps me when I make an attempt to sit up. I try to say to speak again, but it's like I lost my voice from all the crying and screaming. As if my sensing that my throat is parched, my mom passes me a cup of water. I take a sip from the straw and feel marginally better.

My mind is racing a mile a minute as it tries to make sense of everything. The plastic cup falls from my grip as the memories slam to the forefront.

Video. Uncle's house. Him chasing me. The stairs. Hands on my skin.

I remember nothing except darkness and blankness afterward.

My chest constrict with sickness and panic when I can't breathe and I lose focus. I look down, afraid to see my torn clothes, but all I see is a white gown, my left ankle and right wrist in a brace. The awful sound of my bone cracking when I fell echoes in my head.

"Nyra, you're okay," my mom says, sensing the fright on my face while tears gather in the corners of her eyes. "It's all my fault."

"Did Uncle..." I can't even finish the thought as I stare up at her.

She cries and hugs me into her arms as she reassures, "No, honey. Riaan saved you, Nyra. He called the police and reached you in time. Thank God!"

I rack my brain for the memory but it's all fuzzy. How did he even find me? And why isn't he here?

"Where is he? I want to see him," I demand.

If he found me, it means he saw his father and I need to know he didn't go after him. I can't lose Riaan because of that monster.

My mom's conflicting eyes meet mine but before she can reply, the door flings open and Dad enters the room. Upon seeing me awake, his shoulders fall in stark respite as he rushes to my side.

His forehead crinkles with sadness as he gives me a shaky smile before cupping my face reverently. "My God, Nyra! You had us so worried. I would've died if something happened to you. I'm so sorry."

After everything that happened, the last emotion I expected to see was fear and concern in my father's eyes. I was sure he would turn his back on me and never to talk to me again now that he knows the truth. After all, he learned about

our relationship in a shocking way like my mother. Yet the way he found out was so much worse.

My mouth opens and closes but no words come out.

“Say something, sweetie.”

His loving voice only drives the knife deeper into my guilty heart. My parents’ closeness begins to suffocate me and I hate it.

I want to scream at my mom for not warning me about Uncle. I want to blame her for lying to me my entire life. Because of her mistake, I almost paid the price by falling into his clutches.

Although my heart senses that he’s close, the only one I want by my side is nowhere to be seen.

“I need Riaan,” I say, tugging my hand free from Dad’s.

The atmosphere in the room drops to icy degrees and I feel my parents’ expression hardening. Maybe I’m being cruel but I don’t have the strength in me to care.

Not only does my body ache, my soul feels broken and withered. Closing my eyes only traps me in darkness as I travel back to the house. I thought I was going to die after my uncle rapes me. A fate I wouldn’t wish on my worst enemy.

But Riaan is not one to break his vows.

He swore to protect me and he did. He found and saved me like always.

“Nyra.” My dad sighs and I open my eyes.

“Please.” My voice is a small whisper. “I know he’s here.”

“Okay,” says my mom.

I hear their footsteps as they walk out. The longer I’m alone in this depressing hospital room, the faster my pulse pounds. My fingers twist in the sheet as I stare at the door and when it creaks open, my heart thuds.

Everything fades into the background.

My gaze clashes with Riaan's tormented face and I fall apart as the weight of what happened to today hits me full force. There are shadows underneath his eyes, his shirt untucked, hair a mess, and I cry harder. I've never seen him so lost, broken, and distraught.

"Baby," he murmurs, tears in his eyes.

One second he's standing far away and the next, I'm in his arms, comforted in his scent. His hands clutch me so tight despite trembling and I return the hug with the same intensity. I want to burrow myself inside him and never let go.

"I'm so sorry. I didn't know my father could do this." Anguish makes his tone sound deeper and hoarse. "I've never been so scared in my entire life. I can't lose you, Nyra."

Pulling back, rough fingers caress my face and he places kisses all over me. The tears shining on his handsome face rips me open and I wipe them away. He touches me all over as if to assure himself I'm okay while his gaze becomes sorrowful at the bruises.

His head drops to my stomach as he holds me like I'm his lifeline and I slide my fingers through his hair soothingly. His shoulders shake with emotions and I wish all of it was just a nightmare we could wake up from. I wish I could turn back time and not have left the house.

But life isn't fair, nor is it easy.

I need to believe we'll survive this as long as we're together. My only thought before the fight left me was about him. The beautiful memories of us floods my mind, and I'm even more determined to not keep us apart.

Riaan straightens and tightens his fingers around my wrist as he kisses my palm. "When I saw you lying there, I thought I was too late."

"You weren't, though. I'm safe, Riaan. Because of you," I whisper, his forehead resting on mine and our breaths mingling together. "If you hadn't come—"

“Shh... He’ll never come near you again.”

“He hurt my mom. It was him all along. The texts, the blackmailing.” I frown when he pulls away with a guilt-ridden expression. I don’t understand it and dread makes me pause.

“What aren’t you telling me, Riaan?” I mumble. “It was him, right?”

“It was my mom, but it was my dad who released it. He must’ve found out and decided to hurt you.”

My jaw drops open in shock as my ears ring. I must have heard him wrong, but when the truth shines in his eyes, my heart drops. I gasp as I sit up, stunned. I find it hard to believe that my sweet aunt could be so cruel.

The blows just keep coming and each one is more devastating than the last.

My aunt is my blackmailer.

My uncle tried to rape me.

Why am I being punished? Will the darkness and the torment never end?

“Please tell me you’re wrong,” I say pleadingly. “She wouldn’t do this to us.”

“I wish I was,” he murmurs, pulling me against him. “I’m sorry, baby.”

“Where are they?”

“They’ve been arrested,” he informs me past clenched teeth. “I’ll make sure they rot in prison for the rest of their lives.”

“Riaan,” I say, pulling him closer.

As he talks about his parents, his expression becomes impassive and blank. He’s burying his emotions, speaking as if they’re two strangers and not two people who’ve raised him.

This is as much a devastating betrayal to me as it is to him. Maybe even worse for him.

Whatever my mom did, she did it out of love and care. But his, it was out of hate.

“Are you okay?” I ask him softly. “Talk to me.”

His gaze softens as he peers at me, his brows knitting together in awe. “I’ll be fine, baby. It’s you I’m worried about. I might’ve reached you in time but he still harmed you.”

“But—”

“Let me call the doctor to check on you,” he cuts me off instead, and turns around.

My hands drop to my sides as he builds up his walls around him. I let him go, knowing he needs time to come to terms with everything before he’ll share it with me. This isn’t something we can forget and move on from overnight.

My body will heal but the scars, they’ll haunt me forever. Haunt him.

I hate not knowing where we stand.

Did we come this far only to rip apart?

When the doctor comes to check on me with Riaan, I notice that my parents are standing behind them. They don’t look at each other but the tension is a live wire in the room. Riaan stands by my side and I hold his hand with my uninjured one. Dad’s gaze flicks to it but he remains quiet.

“Hi. I’m Dr. Malini.” The female doctor smiles at me warmly as she speaks. “How are you feeling?”

“Tired, but no pain.”

She nods before informing me, “Other than a sprained ankle, a broken wrist, and mild bruises on your ribs, you have no life-threatening injuries. I have you on pain medications so you can rest. I’ll keep you here for a day for observation. Since you suffered a traumatic experience, I would suggest talking to a therapist. If you’d like, I can give you some recommendations. Please let me know if there’s anything I can help you with.”

“Thank you. We’ll discuss this and let you know,” answers my father while I nod.

“The police are here to take your statement, Nyra. May I send them in?”

“Tell them she’s resting,” Riaan says angrily, and I squeeze in hand to calm him down.

“No. It’s okay. I’ll talk to them.”

“Nyra,” he says, but I stop him.

“I want to get it over with, Riaan.”

Realizing I won’t budge, he nods in understanding and Dr. Malini leaves the room.

A uniformed officer enters shortly after and observes us before zooming in on me. His face is hard and unreadable but I read the sympathy in his eyes.

I don’t want to be seen as a victim my whole life.

Is that why Mom hid it too? Does Riaan feel the same?

“I’m Officer Singhal,” the man introduces himself. “Ma’am. Could you tell me what happened from the start?”

Repeating every second from the moment I entered the house till I passed out is like reliving it all over again. The worst part is that it won’t even be the last time. My mom cries while Dad and Riaan’s anger smothers the life in the room. The officer leaves and I’m left alone with my parents while Riaan gives us some privacy.

Mom rushes to my side and her hands cup my face as she apologizes, “I’m so sorry, sweetie. I should’ve reported him years ago. Please forgive me.”

“You should’ve warned me, Mom.”

“I know,” she whispers, remorsefully.

Dad steps into my line of sight and I ask him nervously, “Did you see the video?”

His expression shifts and he nods reluctantly. “It was sent to your mom and me. We called you so many times but

when you didn't pick up, we took next available flight to be with you."

"I was scared, Dad," I confess, my voice small. "I can't handle disappointing you."

In a split second, he's by my side and interlaces our hands before reminding me, "I told you that I'll never be upset with you, my love. I was concerned and angry that someone did that to you. I just wanted to know if you were okay."

"What about my relationship with Riaan?"

"Your mom had already told me, sweetie."

"What? When?" I gasp in surprise. My gaze dashes between Dad and Mom. "Why didn't you say anything?"

"I had overheard you two talking the day we left Pune. I confronted her until she told me the whole truth," he explains. "I was going to wait until you told me yourself."

"I wanted to, but I was afraid you'll react like Mom."

"I regret handling it all wrong *beta*. I'm sorry that I made so many mistakes," interjects Mom. "Please don't hate me. I already do, and will continue to live with it."

Her genuine apology makes my anger simmer down a little. Besides, I can't keep moving backward every time tragedy strikes. I'm sick of all the negativity and the devastation.

"I'll say it again, Nyra," says Dad. "I love you and nothing will ever change that."

"Are you okay with it, though?" I can't help but ask. I need to know.

He caresses my cheek and truthfully admits, "He's not the man I would've chose for you." My stomach drops in sadness at hearing him say that, but I sharply inhale as he continues, "But I also can't deny he loves you with all his heart. His actions have proven he's perfect for you. He protected you when I couldn't and I'll be forever grateful to him for that. Riaan will keep you happy and cherish you the way you deserve. It's all a father ever wants for his daughter."

“Thank you, Dad.” I sob and his arms circle around me as he rubs my back up and down.

Kissing my forehead, he pulls back and demands, “Promise me you’ll never keep secrets from us, Nyra. I’m always on your side.”

“I promise.”

“We’ll let you rest. Okay?”

“Okay.”

As soon as they leave, Riaan comes back in and sits beside me. Tucking my hair away, he runs his knuckles down my cheek as we stare at each other. The sadness I feel still lingers in the air around us but his closeness ebbs some of it away. When my gaze drops from his eyes, I notice the bandage on his left hand that I didn’t see before. Bringing it to my lips, I kiss his fingertips softly.

“Lay with me,” I whisper.

His chest rises and falls steadily as he slides into the bed carefully, avoiding my injuries. He tucks me into his side and plays with my hair. Our heartbeats in harmony until all the tension melts away from his body.

“I’ll be gone for few a days, Nyra,” informs Riaan after a while and I tilt my face toward him in alarm.

“Where?” I ask.

“You don’t need to know,” he says instead, face closed off. “Your parents will stay with you at your apartment.”

Not our apartment.

“When will you be back?”

“Soon.”

“Don’t leave me, Riaan,” I whisper brokenly. “Please.”

His fingers tighten around me while I fist his shirt as I feel him slipping away. Softening his features, he leans down until our lips touch. Kissing me softly, he whispers, “I love you, baby.”

“I love you too.”

A lone tear slips free and he kisses it away. “Sleep, Nyra. I’ll be right here when you wake up.”

I fight not to but my eyelids feel heavy as he continues caressing me, and soon I fall into a dreamless state. His proximity keeps my nightmares at bay as always.

But when I wake up the next morning, he’s gone.

Chapter Fifty-Nine

NYRA

My uncle is dead.

Apparently, he was killed at the prison he was being held at. It's only been three days after the assault. The police told us he had a fight with one of the other prisoners and that they murdered him.

The first time I heard the news, I felt bone-deep relief. Not shock or sadness but *relief*. Afterward, I felt like a horrible person for feeling that emotion. He was a terrible man but no one deserved to die so brutally.

My mother, on the other hand, took it hard.

I can't even imagine the pain my aunt Vandana, who's out on bail, and Zain must be feeling. She tried reaching out to me and Mom after realizing her awful mistake but the wounds are still too fresh for either of us to deal with her.

Zain had come to see me in the hospital the next day and apologized, telling me how deeply sorry he was for everything. We talked and decided to put the past behind us.

It's been a week since I was discharged from the hospital. My parents are still in Pune while my sister left after visiting me for a few days.

They have been by my side as I adjust and heal from the trauma. That day still haunts me but I did not let it

consume me. There are times when I feel low, scared, and alone but with each day, they've become few and far between.

I immediately began therapy upon Mom's insistence. She understands more than anyone what I'm going through and has been the source of my strength. If it's possible, it's brought us even closer.

Yes, I wish this wasn't the circumstances which brought us together, but destiny is never in our hands.

There are just some things we just can't control.

Tragedy. Future. *Love*.

All we can do is choose to move forward, be stronger, and love harder.

The black cloud that stalked me has completely evaporated as days go by. I'm surrounded by the people I love, except for one missing piece.

Riaan.

It's been ten whole agonizing days since he left without a word and I haven't heard from him since. My calls go to voicemail, my texts unanswered, and I feel abandoned. He's ghosted me and the longer I go without hearing his voice, the wider the hole in my heart becomes.

The first few nights he was gone, I was hurt and sad. And despite wanting to crumble, I woke up each morning. I spent my days sitting on the couch waiting for him to return home or staring at my phone to hear from him.

My sadness slowly turned into anger but now I'm just missing him desperately.

I want my shadow back.

I want my man back.

I want his passionate touch, his intensity that peered down to my soul, and his deep voice calling me his.

So if he isn't going to come to me, then I'll bring him back.

This time, I'm going to fight for him. For us.

Zain informed me yesterday that Riaan is back and has been for the past two days. I cried from the stark relief because I could finally bring him home. To me.

I had almost fell to my knees when I heard he had returned safely. I just know him leaving the city and learning about my uncle's death a few days later, wasn't a coincidence.

If it's true and he believes that I'll love him any less, he's fucking wrong. He's mine to love. His darkness is my home. And his twisted heart is mine to cherish.

I won't let him walk away from us now that our stars have aligned.

So without wasting any more time, I put on the summer dress he loves so much and hail a cab. The sun has fallen by the time I reach his childhood home. My feet moves to the one and only place I knew I would find him.

The balcony.

Where it all began with a stolen kiss.

The world calls us sinners. Maybe we are.

Maybe he's my Adam and I'm his Eve.

The only difference is that our love story is laid with more thorns and mayhem.

The door opens with a creak as I push it and for a second, my mind is stuck in fear as I stare at the dark hallway, but I don't stop. Nothing will stand in between Riaan and me ever again. Gripping the handrail, I climb the stairs and the closer I get, the harder my heart beats.

He's here.

The balcony is still the same as all the times I've been here, just not the people that frequents it.

My gaze locks on Riaan's broad back as he stands tall and imposing under the soft moonlight. He's wearing his favorite pair of jeans and black T-shirt—like the first night we met here—only now, he's smoking a blunt.

My soft footfalls fill the silence and his head tilts sideways.

“So this is where you’ve been hiding,” I accuse, my voice echoing in the dark.

He slowly faces me and quirks arrogantly, “Who says I’m hiding?”

His lips circle around his joint as he takes a puff.

Taking a step closer, I demand, “Then why did I have to find you?”

“Why didn’t you call?” Another step.

“Why didn’t you come back to me?” I shout, erasing the distancing between us. I push a hand at his chest as he stares down, eyes unblinking and intense. “Am I not yours anymore?”

His gaze darkens to the color of black coals and he growls, “What did you just say?”

“I said, am I not yours anymore?” I say with a stab of my finger in his chest before I curl my fists in his shirt and tilt my chin, “Because if you’re letting me go, then that’s what it means.”

The blunt falls at our feet as he throws it away. Grabbing my waist, he whirls us around and shoves me against the banister. “You don’t really mean that. Take it back.”

“No. You left me alone, Riaan.” I hate how shaky my voice sounds. “You broke your vow.”

“Nyra.” His grip on my waist tightens painfully as shadows fall on his handsome face.

“I woke up and you were gone.”

“I don’t deserve you, baby,” he brokenly whispers. “I only bring you darkness. It’s me who’s tainted, not you.”

My lips part while my heart cracks at his confession and the guilt he’s drowning in. While I had my family by my side, he’s been all alone. His family was torn apart, he lost his

father and yet, he's worried about me. I realize now the reason behind his distance.

"You're wrong," I fiercely say, wanting to erase his pain.

"My father's blood runs in my veins, Nyra." He roughly exhales. "How can you still love me?"

"Because you're not him. You'll never be him, not even close," I say, cupping his face. "I won't let you pay for his sins."

"I'm worse than him," he sneers before pushing away from me. My body sways from the loss. "He's dead because of me, Nyra. For fuck's sake, I don't even regret it and I'll do it again if I have to."

"Riaan," I whisper. I knew it, but it's still hard to hear.

"How aren't you scared or running away?" He mutters; his torment mingling with mine.

"You're my safe haven. My protector. My man," I confess. "I run to you, not away from you."

"Do you really want to be with a man who's a killer?" he demands, arms spread. "I need to know because once you say yes, I'm never letting you go."

"Yes," I answer before he even finishes his sentence. Steeling my spine, I tell him, "Nothing will make me stop loving you. That man was a monster and he deserved to die. He was going to do the same to me had you not saved me. Men like him are better dead."

I don't realize I'm clenching my fists until Riaan holds them in his palms and tilts my face toward his. Licking my lips, I speak, "Because of you, I sleep safely at night knowing he can't ever touch me again or anyone else. You are not a bad man. You selflessly protect the ones you love. I'd be a fool to walk away from you. I love you so much and if I have to fight for us like you've always done, I'll do it for the rest of our lives."

“I missed you so much,” he groans against my lips and I feel them down to my bones. He fills the hole around my heart by just saying that.

“Come home, Riaan.”

Kissing me, he places his palm on my heart that forever beats for him and whispers, “I am.”

“You have ten days of making up to do, Riaan,” I growl playfully.

“Then I better start.” He smirks before picking me up in his arms bridal style.

I smile through the tears gathering in my eyes as he carries us downstairs until we reach his car. We don’t look back as we drive away from the place that’s given us as much heartache as it given us happiness.

Our balcony will always hold a special place in my heart. But like all beginnings, they must come at an end.

As long as we’re together, we’re already home.

We hold hands the entire time we drive to his old apartment. The car’s engine hasn’t even turned off completely before he’s out of the door and by my side. Lightness fills my heart as we run inside and will for the elevator to hurry to his floor.

Our greedy hands is already all over each other while our lips meet in a messy kiss.

The elevator stops and once again, I’m in his arms. I wrap my legs around his waist and clutch his hair as I bite, suck, and lick his lips. Our tongues battling for control and my cries swallowed by him.

“Riaan.” I whimper when he tugs my hair sharply and dominates my mouth.

“Fuck! I missed your taste, baby.”

His hand fumbles with the lock for a second slamming the door against the wall. Shutting it behind us, he pushes me against it and grinds his hard cock between my thighs. I rake

my nails down his back as he rips my dress off, followed by my bra and wet panties.

“Ahhh...” I scream when he pinches my swollen clit.

Things clatter to the floor as he guides me to his bedroom, and my body burns hotter.

Somehow, we make it uninjured to his bed and he throws me down.

I lean on my elbows while biting my lip as he takes his clothes off. I rub my pussy as his naked chest comes to view and his gaze turns beastly as he catches me.

“Play with your tits,” he orders gruffly.

I squeeze and pinch my nipples and my head drops at the pleasure before my hands are ripped away. His mouth sucking my breast into his mouth, his tongue flicking the hard nub as I push his head down harder.

“I need you inside me, Riaan,” I beg.

With his eyes staring up at me, he licks my nipple before inching toward my lips and kisses me deeply. When he pulls back, love and possessiveness shines bright on his face. Our rough hands become slow as we feel each other.

We’re not rushing because no one is hunting us down.

Our darkest days is now behind us.

No longer him and I against the world.

Cupping my knee, he spreads my legs wider before sliding his hips between them. Skin on skin. Heartbeats in harmony.

I hiss when the head of his cock teases my clit. His hand pushes between our bodies while his gaze never strays from mine. A shiver races down my spine as his rough fingers spread my juices over my slit and my cunt.

I slide my hands around his neck and push until our breaths mingle. His forehead rests on mine, his eyes watching the lust cloud my senses as he continues pushing me higher toward ecstasy.

His fingers stroke my wet slit before he guides his big cock in my waiting pussy. My lips part as he pushes inside achingly slow, making me feel every inch and ridge until he's inside me to the hilt. Pulling out, he thrusts again at the same pace until I moan.

His body makes love with mine. Our eyes never straying from one another's. I meet his thrusting hips as the pleasure reaches its peak. Interlacing our fingers together, he shoves our arms above my head and makes me his.

“Tell me you're mine,” he demands in a husky voice.

“I'm yours, Riaan.”

“Tell me you love me.” *Thrust.*

“I love you.”

“You belong to me, like I belong to you. Say. It.”
Thrust.

“I'll always belong to you.”

“Like it's written in the stars.” *Thrust.*

We both whisper against each other's lips as we fall over the edge together.

Epilogue One

RIAN

(A year later)

They say once you find a good woman, never let her go.

The only thing is... Nyra found me.

She consumed me whole, and ensnared me with her innocence until existing without her became impossible.

Last year was tough on both of us. Our secrets nearly destroyed our lives but when two souls are meant to be, nothing can keep them apart. Nobody is more deserving of a happily ever after than Nyra and me.

Almost losing her has only made my obsession for her run deeper. My father will never touch her again but the fear is still constant in my chest. On some days, the darkness swallows me whole. But Nyra brings me back before I drown in that dark hole.

We've become each other's strength and nothing will ever tear us apart.

Each day we spend together, we replace the bad memories with good ones. Shortly after her parents left, we went on a vacation. I took her to a private island owned by one of my friends. It was the perfect getaway to heal and push the past behind us.

A lot has changed in the past year but some things are still the same.

I'm still controlling and bossy as fuck. She says she doesn't like it but we both know it secretly thrills her. My possessiveness and need to dominate her body hasn't lessened either.

I still fuck her in every dark corner I could find, while she still loves being defiant until I teach her a lesson.

I live for those moment but it's nothing compared to the feeling of waking beside her and coming home to her every night. Even when I have to travel, I take her with me because the thought of leaving her alone terrifies me. I love her harder when she happily agrees.

Yesterday was different, though. When I demanded that she stay with me, she fought with me.

Of all things, I didn't count on stupid traditions being the reason.

Whoever said it's bad luck for the groom to see the bride before the wedding day was obviously fucking insane. They clearly hit their head somewhere before the ceremony.

Six months ago, I proposed to Nyra on our balcony. She would probably say that I demanded it, but all that matters is that she said yes.

I had purchased the diamond ring the day after we came back from our vacation. I wanted to surprise her with a huge gesture and take her on a beautiful date. But one night, I came home to her standing on the balcony while only wearing my shirt. When she turned to me with a teasing smile and blushing cheeks, I couldn't wait any longer.

I was so fixated on creating a perfect and special moment that I didn't see it was right in front of me.

It's just the two of us together with the stars shining down on us.

Before she could even utter a word, I crossed the tiny distance between us and said, "Marry me." That one lingering second when she was speechless, made me hold my breath until she whispered, "Yes".

So yeah, maybe I demanded it. Only later that night when she came to bed, I went down on one knee with the ring in my hand and asked her to marry me again. The stunned look in her eyes lives in my head and heart rent-free.

Afterward, I fucked her all night long while she wore my ring on her finger.

My proposal may have been simple but the wedding is anything but.

We decided to have the ceremony with only our closest family and friends who have accepted us. The day is finally here and I'm eager to make Nyra my wife.

We may be too young to get married but our lives have been building to this moment.

"Damn it!" I curse, staring in the mirror. "Why is it tilted?"

"For fuck's sake, how many times are you going to fix the turban?" Zain grumbles before smirking. "Please don't tell me you're nervous, bro."

"Who invited you again?"

He raises an eyebrow. "Your fiancée."

I shouldn't have been surprised that Nyra chose to forgive Zain because of her big heart. Her determination to mend my relationship with my brother was no match for my stubbornness. She said he's family and I need to move on. She also may have threatened that she'd spend time with him with or without me. No way was I letting her be alone with another man.

My girl can be sneaky when she wants to be.

"How are you allowed to wear a suit and I'm not?" I bark, annoyed.

Then I remember Nyra wanted a traditional wedding and I would never deny her anything. I've lost count of how many times my patience ran thin. She'll be my wife soon and that's the only thought that keeps me going.

"And here I thought brides are the dramatic ones," Zain retorts, scrolling on his phone idly.

"Fuck off."

He laughs before straightening up from his perch against the wall and smiles. "It's time. Congratulations, brother. You finally got everything you've ever wanted."

“Yep. I’m riding off into the sunset like you said.” I smirk, remembering his taunt, and his lips flatten but there’s no anger in his eyes.

“Whatever.”

I search desperately for a glimpse of Nyra, despite knowing I won’t see her until she walks out with her father. Our apartment is decorated with flowers, lights, and candles. My friends smile and bump my shoulder as I walk to the shaded balcony where the ceremony will take place. I wish time would move faster because I’ve waited long enough for this day. After today, no one would dare to question our relationship.

I follow the pandit’s voice as he walks me through the rituals I have to perform alone before the bride can come in. At one point, I glare at him so he would do it faster, and he does.

My breath locks tight inside my chest as time stands still when it’s time for Nyra to come. I stand tall and stare at the aisle laid with flowers. My heart stops beating when she rounds the corner and our eyes clash.

Dressed in a beautiful deep red lehenga, the long skirt flowing behind her and her hair curled around her shoulders in waves, she’s a vision to behold. My hungry gaze can’t get enough of her the closer she comes.

Everything ceases to exist until it’s only us standing on the makeshift altar.

The most beautiful bride to ever exist.

The only woman to ever bring me down to my knees.

All mine.

I swallow past the tightness in my throat as she stops before me. Nodding at my uncle, I grasp her soft hand in mine and cup her face with the other. She stares at me shyly and lovingly.

“You look breathtaking, baby,” I whisper against her lips. My voice thick with emotion.

She smiles and my heart melts as satisfaction and pride runs in my veins.

A throat clears behind us while Zain teases, “Thought someone was eager to get married.”

I glare behind Nyra at my brother while wanting to throttle him. Guests chuckle while Nyra shakes her head as she places her hand in mine. Monica helps Nyra with her skirt as we sit down and the pandit begins the final rituals. Nyra and I say our vows before waving the holy fire around in a circle. Everyone claps and throws rose petals at us while her parents cry as they hug us at the end. Her sister, Priyanka, smiles and teases that Nyra is a married woman now.

Tugging Nyra close, I circle my arms around her and lean down to kiss her deeply. Pulling back, I growl against her swollen lips, “You’re mine forever now, wife.”

“So are you, husband.” She grins.

I only last one hour before I steal my wife away from everyone. One day without her, and now I need her all to myself.

“There are still guests, Riaan,” says Nyra mischievously.

“I told them to leave.”

“Oh my God!” Her eyes widen in shock and I shrug.

“I want to fuck my wife,” I huskily growl. “And they don’t need to hear you scream my name.”

Her parents have already left so I don’t stop myself from carrying her in my arms bridal style to our bedroom. I’ve already asked Zain and Monica to empty the apartment and shut the door behind them.

Our room looks like a bridal suite with the candles lit on the bedside while rose petals cover the bedspread. Nyra’s eyes darken with lust while a blush covers her rosy cheeks.

Carefully placing her on her feet, I tug her head back with her hair in my fist and smash my mouth against hers. I tilt her face back before pushing my tongue past her lips in a hard kiss. She moans and I swallow the sound greedily while pressing her body into mine.

Her eyelids fall open as I tear my mouth away. “I couldn’t take my eyes off you, baby.”

“Can’t get enough of your wife, husband?” she sasses and I smirk.

“Never.”

“Fuck me, husband.”

My cock twitches and keeping my gaze pinned on her, I get on my knees and pull her feet out of her heels. Kissing her stomach, I unknot the tie holding her long skirt together and watch it puddle at her feet. Her lace-covered pussy fills my vision and I can smell her arousal.

I inhale her like a beast before biting her clit through the soft material. Her fingers grab my shoulders as she moans and presses into me closer.

“So wet,” I tease, sucking her slit into my mouth. “You have a greedy pussy, wife.”

Clutching her waist, I face her away from me before standing up behind her and sliding her hair over one shoulder. Baring her neck, I kiss her wildly beating pulse before untying the lace of her blouse. I slide it down her arms until her naked tits spill free and cupping them, I flick each of her tight nipples and pinch them until she cries out.

“Lie down on the bed,” I order gruffly. “Don’t touch your cunt until I allow it.”

I take my clothes off slowly while she obeys and her fingers fist the sheets beneath her. Her hair fans out around her. And surrounded by roses, she looks like my own personal temptation.

My forbidden fruit.

My sweetest sin.

Towering over her, I tug her to the edge of the bed and pull her panties down her legs. Spreading them wide, I crawl between them and stroke the crown of my dick over her folds and rub the pre-cum that leaks out.

“Fuck, Riaan.” She whimpers when I slap my dick against her clit.

“Who owns you, my dirty little wife?” I growl.

“You do, husband.”

I thrust my cock to the hilt in one hard thrust and she screams while her back bows. Pushing her wrists above her head, I hold them in one hand while circling her throat with the other. Taking her bottom lip between my teeth, I fuck her savagely. Ruthlessly. Mercilessly.

When she falls apart, I follow after her as she milks the cum out of my cock.

I fill her with my seed until it spills out of her cunt.

Kissing her roughly as we pant heavily, I cradle her against my side with my dick still inside her. Fingers trace my abs as she rests her head on my chest while we come down from the high.

Minutes pass before she tilts her face up and bites her lip nervously.

Grabbing her waist, I have her straddle my hips. A strange emotion flickers across her face and I ask, “What are you thinking, baby?”

Her cheeks heat as she whispers, “I have a surprise for you.”

Anticipation and awe tug at my chest and I smile. “Show me, baby.”

Leaning to the side, she pulls out a small rectangular box from the bedside table. I keep her on my lap as I sit with my back against the headboard. Her smile is timid and shy and nervous as she passes it to me and I unwrap it curiously.

When I open the lid and stare at what's inside, I go still in shock and feel my heart beat rapidly. I pull it out with a trembling hand and sharply gaze at Nyra.

“You're pregnant?” I murmur.

Tears shine in her eyes as she watches me hold the pregnancy test in my hand. Cupping my face, she nods her head and smiles happily.

“You're going to be a father, Riaan.”

My blurry eyes lower to her still flat stomach and all I can see is it growing with my child inside. I touch her belly in awe while meeting her gaze. “How long?”

“I'm a little over three weeks along,” she tells me. “Are you happy?”

“More than I thought possible, baby,” I confess, and tug her closer.

“It was a pleasant surprise to me too because I've been taking my pills.” She whispers shyly. “I know we wanted to wait.”

“As long as you're happy, it doesn't matter. Besides, if it was up to me, I would've gotten you pregnant a long time ago.” I tease while her eyes twinkle with lightness. “You're going to be an amazing mom, Nyra.”

“I always wanted to have a family with you, Riaan.” My heart soars when she utters, “You've made all my dreams come true.”

“It's only the beginning.” I vow. “I love you so much and I can't wait to hold our child.”

“I love you too.”

Epilogue Two

RIAN

(Ten years later)

My life has become a fairy tale.

All because of my broody dream man.

My first crush.

My first love.

My husband.

My forbidden man.

Riaan.

Small hands tug the notebook away from mine before I can finish reading and a smile tugs at my lips.

“Daddy!” says my baby girl. “You can’t read Mommy’s diary.”

“How do you sneak up on me every time, Riri?”

“Mommy says I learned from you.”

I laugh because years later, my habit of sneaking up on my wife hasn’t changed. Something about the way it lightens up her face when she realizes it’s me never gets old.

I thought I knew everything about Nyra until I found her little notebook with my name written inside. I was only going to read the first page but once I began, I couldn’t stop. It was like I time-traveled back to the past and saw our lives through her eyes.

I could feel every emotion, twisted feeling, the fear and the pain through each entry. The toughest was the days when we were torn apart. Those memories nearly broke me. As I continued, she put me back together too. Since then, I’ve made sure to always give her new, happy memories to write about.

So when I read them through her eyes, it brings me satisfaction like no other. It has become like a secret ritual that she has no clue about. Too bad because my nine-year-old daughter, Triana, might out me. She has my wife's beauty and pure heart but her mind is smart and ruthless like me.

Triana stands with her hips cocked, hair braided, and a mischievous expression in her eyes. Dressed in a floral frock because she likes twinning with her mom, she's a mini version of Nyra. Tugging her onto my lap, I tell her, "You can't tell her I was reading her diary, Riri."

I never thought I would find anyone more obsessed with Rihanna than my wife but then came my little girl. Ever since the first song she danced to was by the singer, she's been hooked and her nickname Riri came from it.

"What's in it for me, Daddy?" she says adorably. Like I said, she's smart.

"Two bedtime stories."

"And an extra cookie."

Kissing her cheek, I tickle her belly until she laughs loudly and I ask, "Say please."

"Please." She huffs.

"Let's go find your mom," I say and she jumps to the floor, running outside.

Putting her diary in its proper place, I walk out and follow the sound of their voices to the kitchen. Once Nyra told me she was pregnant, I began looking for a house away from the city. We fell in love with our three-story property the second we saw it.

The first year after Triana's birth, it was a little tough as Nyra was finishing her final year of college. Her parents were a huge help and I'm grateful to them. Every year they visit us during the summer and it's a fun-filled month. Though my brother and I are no longer on talking terms ever since he found out I had a hand in my father's death.

And this time even Nyra couldn't fix our broken trust. He talks to her sometimes because she can be stubborn but never to me.

Maybe one day, he'll understand why I did what I did.

The dark thought vanishes as a smile tugs at my lips when my gaze falls on my two favorite girls in the world. The ones I'll do anything to protect.

I watch as Triana tries to steal a candy from the jar while Nyra looks for something in the fridge. Without even looking, Nyra scolds, "No stealing, Riri."

"Mommy, I wasn't." Triana pouts as Nyra turns and narrows her eyes.

"Your dad has you spoiled."

My laughter has them turning to me and I cock an eyebrow at Nyra. She simply shrugs and goes back to cooking lunch. Triana goes running to the backyard to play with our dog, Brownie, and I prowl closer to my wife.

A shiver dances down her spine as I corner her against the island. Fisting her hair, I pull on it while circling her waist and whisper against her ear, "I spoil you too, my wife. Or did you forget the three orgasms I gave you last night?"

"Riaan," she warns, knowing our daughter is close.

"Answer me."

"No. My pussy is still aching," she whispers, and I smile.

Our desire to possess each other and be filthy still hasn't changed. I want to bury myself inside her every night and own her body until she begs me to stop. My need for her will never go away and it only grows deeper with each day.

Shifting slightly, I turn her in my arms and she goes on her tiptoes to kiss me.

"Happy anniversary, baby," I say, tucking her hair back.

“I can’t believe it’s been ten years already.” She sighs dreamily. “You’ve no idea how happy that makes me. I love you more and more.”

“I love you too, baby,” I say. “Thank you for giving me a family, sweetheart. For being mine.”

“Always yours, Riaan.”

My love. My soul mate. Mine.

Acknowledgement

I want to start by thanking all my lovely readers who've loved Riaan and Nyra as much as I have. Thank you so much for being patient as I wrote their story and joining me on the wild and emotional ride. This couple have a special place in my heart and not because they are my first but for so many reasons. It was a way for me to pour out my feelings for my forbidden man and how all the pain is worth it in the end when two people are meant to be. I hope you all connected with them the way I continue to do and though we may be saying goodbye to them for now, their journey is far from over.

My brilliant editor, Rumi, I want to thank you for believing in my story and turning it into the best version. Your feedback, appreciation and patience made me confident in Riaan and Nyra's story and I'm truly grateful. You were so easy and amazing to work with on this project and I can't wait to do the same in future.

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My Books

If you enjoyed the meant to be duet, don't forget to check out my other books.

1. Wicked Fate – A Dark Enemies to Lovers Romance.
2. Mayhem on the hills (Valley of the Gods #0.5) – Dark New Adult Romance

All my books are available on Amazon and free to read in Kindle unlimited.

About the author

My name is Simran and I'm twenty-four years old. I'm from a small city in India with big dreams. I have always been into reading romance novels and somewhere along the way, I had an urge to write my own book one day and it finally happened.

It still feels unbelievable and gives me the greatest joy in the world. Other than reading, I also enjoy binge-watching Netflix and listening to music which also plays a huge role in my writing.

I'm very active on social media and would love if you guys want to connect with me there and you can also sign up for my newsletter for all my latest updates.