



Taken

A DARK CAPTIVE ROMANCE

M J JAMESON

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WARNING

The following story is a work of fiction and contains mature themes that some may find offensive. There is dark and triggering content between these pages. It is intended for adult readers only (18+). I advise you to skip this book if kidnapping, graphic sexual and physical assault, non-con, dub-con, profanity, PTSD, depression, anxiety disorders, cheating, and abuse are sensitive topics.

BLURB:

They say there's a thin line between love and hate.

For months, Aliana and Kade have been straddling that line, questioning their relationship.

He is arrogant, obnoxious, and downright impossible.

She is stubborn, exhausting, and unrelenting.

But none of that seems relevant when a breakdown turns sinister.

Aliana and Kade are assaulted, held captive, and tortured in inexplicable ways.

Their captors peel away at every ounce of self-worth they possess.

With no way of escaping, all they have to cling onto is each other, the comfort of memories, and the fading hope of a future.

Can two people survive a fate worse than death and come out unscathed?

ONE

ALIANA

WHY DO people fall in love? Is it for companionship, friendship, great sex? Maybe all we're searching for is a witness to our lives, someone to be there at the end and let us know we matter, that we are seen. Whatever the reason, I have repeatedly asked myself this question lately.

Sometimes, I look at Kade, or I listen to something arrogant he says, and for the life of me, I can't remember why or how I could have possibly fallen in love with someone this arrogant, much less why I stay with him. It's easy to forget the good things when all he ever does is remind me why I would be better off alone through his words and actions.

Why did we complicate a perfectly good friendship by adding romance to the equation? The simple truth is that young love is the maker of fools. All those sweaty palms, pounding hearts, and butterfly bellies are not an adequate precursor to real life.

He's sipping coffee, head stuck in the morning newspaper, his dark hair falling over his eyes in a way I used to find attractive. Now, even his good looks annoy me because he's such a dick all the time.

When did good morning greetings cease to be the norm, having long

since been replaced by a vast stretch of empty silence and the both of us giving each other the cold shoulder?

Setting *The Times* down, he glances my way, his eyebrows drawn together, dark eyes scrutinizing me, the way he always does. Kade has a way of making people feel minuscule. I missed the days when his eyes lit up at the sight of me, the times he couldn't wait to get his hands on me any time of day or night. I miss the flutter of my heart when he looks at me over his coffee cup.

“You’ll remember to leave the studio at one p.m.?” he asks, frowning.

My fingers tighten around my cup. It is possibly the fifth time he’s reminded me this week. I have already rescheduled my appointments, with my last family photoshoot being at eleven.

“I’ll remember.” I mimic his deep, authoritative voice, and he shakes his head. It’s pretty immature, but who cares. His condescending tone deserves it.

“Well, you know how things you deem *unimportant* ‘slip your mind’.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“You have been pretty clear about your feelings toward Justin.”

I set the cup down, knowing that it will most likely land across the room in a few seconds if he doesn’t shut up. Of course, I hate his asshole best friend.

“And you blame me for that?” The fucking nerve of this man.

“Aliana—,”

I raise my hand to silence him. “I will be here on time.” I do not want to be dragged through all the reasons I am wrong about his friend or why Kade was caught on camera getting a hot and heavy lap dance at a strip club at said friend’s bachelor party.

We stare at each other across the room, neither one willing to move just yet, afraid that if we do, we’ll upset the delicate balance of this excuse for a relationship.

Why don't I walk away, you ask? I, Aliana Kingsley, am unwilling to walk away until I have done everything possible to salvage this train wreck. I promised myself I wouldn't hop from bed to bed like my mother did or give up the way my father did. If I found the *right* man, I would make my relationship work.

I may question my feelings for Kade James, but letting go of someone I have shared all my firsts with isn't easy. So despite myself, I am attending Justin's wedding this weekend as Kade's plus one.

Kade nods. "I have to get going. See you later."

He stops in the doorway leading to the living room, and for a moment, I wonder if he's going to turn around and say something, maybe apologize for being such a prick. Instead, he keeps walking, without so much as another look back.

When I hear the front door slam, I grip onto the edge of the counter and have to bite back a sob.

Why do people fall in love? Maybe it's because we enjoy the feeling of being pulled under the water until we forget to come up for air.

GABY, my best friend, and business partner puts the finishing touches on our already perfect client, Ryleigh Patterson. Ryleigh does an annual boudoir photoshoot. I love Ryleigh's confidence and appreciation of herself. Gaby is a stylist, and she is brilliant. I always tell her she does eighty percent of my work. Her makeovers are transformational.

She shields Ryleigh's face and sprays some hairspray, enough that it has both Ryleigh and me coughing. She does a few touch-ups and stands back to admire her handiwork. "Perfect. Now, go relax in the waiting area. We've got some champagne on ice."

"You ladies spoil me." Ryleigh says, disappearing into the studio.

“Oh, I know that look,” Gaby says, glancing my way with a cocked eyebrow.

Setting my bag down in a huff, I raise my hand to shush her. “I am fine.”

“Like fuck you are. What did the asshole do this time?”

I wave her off, walking into the studio. A wooden stool sits in front of an antique mirror at one end of the room, and a four-poster king-size bed is on the other end. I love boudoir shoots, even though I have not dared to do one myself.

I set up my tripod and camera, standing back and letting out a sigh. This is where I am most at home. Seeing people through a lens is a gift I do not take for granted. Capturing their essence and creating memories is where I am in my element.

Ryleigh grins when she walks into the room in the sexiest gray and black lace lingerie I have seen. At forty-five, she is a looker. Looking at her, I can't believe she is a mother of three.

Many women who come in here for these shoots are nervous balls of energy, but Ryleigh is a woman who knows and loves her body with every perfect flaw. She and her husband were high school sweethearts and married straight out of college. As much as she does this for herself, she does one or two shots, especially for him.

I usually send those directly to him without her even seeing them. I have received more than a few bunches of *thank you* flowers from Mr. Patterson.

“You, Aliana, need to find yourself a man who appreciates you and puts you first,” she says thoughtfully as she saunters over to the mirror, raking her hands through her massive head of dark curls. I flush at the realization that she overheard us speaking, but she has known me long enough for me to take what she says seriously.

I snap a shot. Ryleigh is effortlessly sexy, and Gaby and I are unreservedly envious of her.

How can she be right and wrong at the same time? Kade used to be that

guy. He used to put me first, but that feels like a lifetime ago.

“I need a Gareth, don’t I?” I smirk, and she looks at me over her shoulder.
Snap.

“Every girl deserves a Gareth.”

I smile at that. Yes, every girl does. Kade was my Gareth once upon a time, and I believed we would be each other’s be-all and end-all.

Ryleigh and I decided on what poses she was comfortable with when she booked the shoot. But we tend to go off script a lot, and those are the best kind of shots. She’s a natural. We talk and laugh, and she is so at ease in her own skin.

After two hours, I have covered all the posing points, keeping her relaxed and her movements fluid.

Ryleigh, a former contemporary ballet dancer, does a few dance moves and random poses on the bed and the stool, which absolutely works and adds originality and personality to her photos.

Gareth is going to be one happy man.

After the shoot, I grab three beers, and we sit at the table in the garden. Ryleigh is over the moon, and I can’t wait to work on the edits of these photos. It will take a few days of being holed up in my studio, and I can’t think of anything I’d rather be doing when I get back from the wedding.

“So, you gonna tell me what’s going on?” Gaby says when Ryleigh has left.

I place my forearms on the table.

“Just Kade being Kade, Gab. I am so tired of complaining. So tired of feeling like this—frustrated, miserable....”

“Have you talked to him about it? Really talked? I know you’re fond of the cold shoulder method, but you guys have been together forever. It can’t just stay like this.”

I shake my head. “It’s like trying to squeeze water from a rock. He’s so pigheaded and every fucking thing he says and does is inexcusable. Maybe I

should just cut my losses.”

Gaby takes my hand in hers. “When we started working together, you and Kade were hashtag couple goals. I don’t know what happened to you guys along the way, but it better not have something to do with Ethan Wright.” She narrows her eyes at me.

Ethan, Gaby, and I started *Strike a Pose* together. We were all working at the same event and instantly hit it off. Ethan and I are both photographers. He does still-life photography, and Gaby is the beauty behind it all. The event planner wanted all three of us and invested a hefty capital into our business.

The truth is that it does involve what happened with Ethan.

“Nothing happened!” I blurt. There are some secrets I haven’t even shared with Gaby, but somehow she always hits the nail on the head.

“I always knew that guy was bad news,” she frowns. *So she did.* She and Ethan never got along.

“Well, he had nothing to do with the fact that Kade dipped his stick into his colleague Ashley, at their Christmas Party.”

“He did what?” Her eyes widen. “That fucking piece of shit, and he had a problem ‘cause you were sexting Ethan?”

“I was not *sexting* him.” I groan. “And me flirting with Ethan, even though I know it was stupid, can’t really be compared to him sleeping with another woman. He won’t even talk about it. Every time I bring it up, he just looks at me like I’m the crazy one. Right now, I don’t think we will ever come back from this.”

Gaby stands and walks over to my side of the table and wraps her arms around me.

“I wish you’d told me. I would have been there for you, Aliana. It’s what friends do. Right now, I want to sucker punch that asshole.”

I let myself feel comforted. “I just love him so much, Gab. I wish I didn’t, but I do.”

There’s truly a thin line between love and hate.

“Maybe this weekend away is what you need, Aliana; to help put things into perspective.”

“You’re right. I just don’t know if I have the energy to work on this relationship. It’s exhausting, especially when it feels like I am the only one willing to do the work. ” I let out a long sigh.

“Whatever you decide, make sure it’s worth it. My mom used to say that the hardest decision you’ll ever have to make is whether to walk away or try harder. Either way, it’s gonna take work.”

I think about what she said long after she’s gone.

TWO

KADE

THE LAST PERSON I expect to walk into my office is Ashley Kincaid. She's the one person I have successfully avoided running into. It helps that we work in different branches, so I make myself scarce whenever she's around. I even join our company's quarterly meetings virtually. I make a mental note to give my assistant, Jane, a piece of my mind for not giving me a heads up.

"Kade James," she greets, sauntering over to my desk. "I wondered where you've been hiding all these months."

"Ashley, I don't recall us having an appointment." I look up. My stomach roils as she approaches.

She takes a seat in the chair across from me, crossing her legs and waving me off. "Old friends like us don't need appointments. Besides, I come bearing gifts," she smirks flirtatiously.

Ashley wears confidence like a perfume, and she is more than aware of her effect on those around her. I mean, I let myself be sucked into her web once, and it nearly cost me everything.

"What do you want, Ashley? I don't have time for your cryptic

statements.”

I lean forward, crossing my arms on my desk.

“I have a proposition for you.” She flips her chestnut hair over a shoulder, blue eyes peering at me. “And it is going to make both our clients very wealthy.”

It is no surprise that Justin and I have been trying to get her client, Dimension, and ours, Gigabyte, to consider a merger. Each company on its own is successful, but together they’ll be a powerhouse.

“Don’t play games with me, Ash,” I say, the possibility already making me crunch numbers in my head. I lean back in my chair.

She reaches into her bag for a folder and slaps it on my desk. “A forty-nine, fifty-one percent partnership. They merge all assets and split all existing debt.”

My eyes widened. That is more than we’d initially pitched. Gigabyte would be foolish not to accept this. I try not to sound too enthusiastic when I say, “I’ll pitch it to my client.”

“Of course that will mean you and I are gonna be working together a lot more,” she says, standing and circling around my desk to stand beside me. Her proximity is too close for my liking.

“Justin will take the lead on this one, so I don’t see the problem. This is business after all.”

She reaches up and traces a finger along the side of my collar before leaning in and whispering, “Afraid to take the lead? You didn’t seem to mind mixing business with pleasure before.” I grab her wrist and push her aside. She may be my colleague, but that does not mean I have to tolerate her bullshit.

“We crossed the line. It won’t happen again.” I clear my throat, standing and taking a step away from her.

She smirks, stands, and picks up her bag, bending enough to give me a perfect view of her ass. “Don’t be so sure,” she chuckles.

I shake my head. The last thing I need is more drama in my already complicated life.

I pick up the phone and dial Justin. “You won’t believe who just stopped by my office,” I tell him when he picks up the phone.

“You’re still at the office, you’re supposed to be on the road already.”

“I’m just heading out,” I say. “But you are gonna be glad I didn’t. Dimension’s made us an offer.”

“You’re fucking with me?”

“Ashley just dropped it off. So, when you get back from that honeymoon of yours, we’re gonna be working our asses off.”

“And you’re okay with working with her again?” This merger is too good to pass up even if I wasn’t.

“Actually, I thought you could take the lead on this one?”

“If you’re good with that, so am I. Now, get yourself here. These women are driving me up the fucking wall.”

“Sure thing, what else is a best man for?”

I let out a sigh, leaning my head back against my chair. I may not want to get tangled up with Ashley again, but she is a colleague, and inevitably, we will have to work together now or in the future. But how will Aliana feel about me working with the woman that almost broke us up again? As much as I love Aliana, and I always will, a part of me wonders if our relationship is even worth saving.

THREE

ALIANA

“K, MY MAN!” Justin shouts, slapping on the driver’s side door of our black SUV. *My SUV*, I add selfishly because I feel like being territorial. His blonde hair is cropped short, and his baby blues sparkle when he sets eyes on his best friend. I didn’t always dislike Justin, but I can’t recall when that was.

Kade parks the car in front of a stunning house that suspends over the lake. It’s a looming glass and steel structure with uninterrupted views of Mountain Lakes’ hills. Smaller houses flank the main building, and despite my shit mood, I’m in awe.

There is something about the pull of nature. I can breathe here, away from the chaos and the hustle and bustle of the city.

“Dusty,” Kade laughs, slapping his friend on the back when he exits the vehicle. “This is something else. Isn’t it, *babe*?” I cringe at the use of that moniker, knowing he’s using it to get a rise out of me. It used to be *our* thing until Ethan used it in a text. Many things used to be ours until then.

“Like something out of a fairytale,” I say. “This is nice,” I say, and that is as much of a greeting as I will give the man. me

“Thank you, I guess,” he cocks a brow, that lopsided grin making me roll

my eyes.

I walk around the back of the car and pop the trunk, ready to drag out my bags. “We got that,” Kade says, not bothering to look at me. I drag my bag out anyway, and it lands with a thud on the ground.

He glances over his shoulder, “Well, if you’ve got it.” He sounds amused.

I ignore the part of me that wants to snap at him, grip the handle of my bag and make my way down the paved pathway, reminding myself that I had ample opportunity to back out of this weekend.

I follow the signs to the reception area to check-in. I hear the two men guffawing behind me, but I look ahead, uninterested.

“Aliana, hey!” Abby rushes over and envelops me in a hug. Justin’s fiancée is another reason I am here this weekend. The petite strawberry blonde has become somewhat of an alliance in the year that I’ve known her. A welcome distraction from the *terrible two*. “I am so glad you’re here early. I could use your opinion on some shots the photographer has taken so far. I’m not sure about the preset they’re using. If you don’t mind. I didn’t invite you to work.”

“Hey, Abby,” I manage when she lets me get some air back in my lungs, “Sure thing. I’d absolutely love to.” Any reason not to tolerate Kade and Justin for a couple of hours sounds heavenly.

“You get settled in your bungalow first, and there’s champagne on ice with our names on it. There’s a tent set up in the garden. You can’t miss it. My mom and sisters flew in earlier this week,” she says, her hand on my arm.

I look at her kind brown eyes and wonder how a woman like this can get herself saddled with a loser like Justin. To make matters worse, she seems genuinely happy.

Kade comes up beside me at the concierge desk and hands over his credit card, turning on the Kade James charm with the woman at the desk, who is unbashful in her admiration of him. I remember being on the receiving end of that.

“Enjoy your stay Mr. and Mrs. James.” Kade glances down at me, his eyes burning into my flesh, as he leans down and picks up my bag.

He doesn't correct her, and I hate how that makes my insides unwillingly flip.

FOUR

KADE

THERE'S a thin line between love and hate, and Aliana and I are skating on the surface. I'm afraid that one wrong move will send us crashing into the icy abyss. She laid down fault lines a few months ago, and I've kept to my end, but I'll be damned if I don't want to fuck that attitude right out of her. That fire drew me to her, and it's the fire that is turning my world to ash. The worst thing in the world is to find out that the one person you're supposed to trust the most in the world is nothing but an illusion.

When I was younger, my father would tell me that the worst thing a man could do was trust a woman. "They'll bleed you dry, son," he'd say, eyeing my mother with what I assumed to be hatred. She never cared for his jibes at her and made it known. I figured if he remained married to my mother for as long as he had, she couldn't have been that bad. And so, I tried not to let his warped views on relationships distort my own.

But the older I get, the more I wonder whether there was some truth to what the old man said. I should revisit that topic the next time I see him.

Aliana walks a few feet in front of me along the pathway toward one of the freestanding bungalows. She swipes the key card and walks into the cozy

and secluded space.

The sun setting on the lake casts a halo-like glow on her raven hair, and the view is breathtaking even without that backdrop. I can't help but admire how her white dress fits her slight curves in all the right places. For a tiny thing, Aliana has always had the curves I crave to grip. My mind wanders to all the places it shouldn't, and it takes everything for me to turn away and make my way to the other side of the room.

"You can take the couch," she says, not looking at me. Her attention is on the lake.

"Like hell. Don't trust yourself around me, Aliana?" I set our bags down and take a seat on the edge of the bed.

She glares at me over her shoulder, then looks out the window. "I just want to make sure we don't cross any lines. Being here doesn't change the fact that things aren't okay."

"Can we not do this now? It's an important weekend for my friend." I sigh.

"It's beautiful here. I might just stay in the room all weekend." She ignores my comment.

The truth is that I'd hoped that we could find some common ground this weekend. I should have known better.

"Not like you were planning anything else," I say under my breath. Aliana fucking pisses me off at times.

She laughs, but it's a sound that is void of emotion, signaling that she heard me. I'm glad she did.

"I need a drink, several maybe." I run my hands through my hair, rummaging through the bags on the floor for my cellphone.

I pause at the door, think better of saying anything more, and make my way back the way we came. Maybe, when I am drunk enough, I'll forget that the woman I love hates me almost as much as I hate her.

I close the door behind me and lean my head against it.

Where did we go wrong?

How did two people who have been inseparable for most of their lives drift so far apart? It's like we're strangers.

“YOU'RE in or you out, man. Whatever this is,” Justin motions between Aliana on the other side of the tent, and me, then takes a long chug of his beer, “it's bullshit.”

This drinks reception is a full-on party. A pop band plays eighties hits that have the guests on their feet. The vibe is good, but I feel sullen inside.

“It's complicated.” I say, taking another sip of my second scotch on the rocks.

“When Abby's being a bitch, I tell her, we fuck and get over it. What the fuck is it with the two of you?”

I wish I knew the answer to that. I watch as she chats animatedly with the photographer and Abby, a glass of bubbly in her hand.

“Aliana is not Abby.” What I mean is that my friend's wife-to-be is timid, Aliana is a wildfire, and the more you try to douse her, the farther she spreads.

“You know what I think?”

I let out a sigh and eye my best friend, “No, but I bet you're gonna tell me, anyway.”

“You need to take that woman back to your room, fuck her senseless, and get all the bullshit out of your system. That whole situation at the Christmas party was a fucking misunderstanding.”

It's been three months since we've even slept in the same bed, but I am not about to admit to that. There are some things that you can't just *get over*.

I catch her eye for a second and wonder if what Justin says is true. She looks away, and I down my drink.

“Enough with the Ted Talk. Let’s get wasted. Who knows when Abby’s gonna let you out once you’re hitched.”

Justin laughs and calls over a waiter for another round.

IT’S PAST TWO A.M. when I finally stumble into the bungalow. The moon casts a ghost-like Aliana’s silhouette. She turned in for the night a few hours ago, and I could not bear the thought of coming back to this room and getting into an argument about all the reasons things are the way they are. I stare at her for a while, dark hair cascading over the white pillowcase, her slight form curled around a pillow, her back to me. I try to make my way as quietly as possible across the room, peeling off my shirt and kicking off my shoes. I crawl under the covers.

I place my hands on her hip and squeeze it gently, my nose settling in her hair. I can’t help but react to her. I fucking feel her in my bones.

She places a hand on mine, pushing it off her hip.

All I want to do is bunch up the oversized t-shirt she’s wearing and fuck her the way I used to. Before bitter words and callous actions became our means of communicating. Instead, I let out a sigh, turn onto my back, staring up at the ceiling, Justin’s words running through my head again.

FIVE

ALIANA

WHEN I WAS thirteen years old, I fell in love with the boy who lived across the street. I didn't know what that flip in my belly, or the heat in my cheeks, was, but I knew that something changed when he sat next to me on the bus and asked me if I wanted some M&M's. The way he smiled at me had me doing cartwheels in my backyard, but then he asked Julia Summers to the dance, and my heart felt like it would shatter into a million pieces, and right that second I knew that if I didn't have Kade James, I would never be whole.

KADE CAN COMMAND A ROOM. It's what he does. Like he was built for all the attention. He tells them the story about when he spent a summer at his grandparents' beach house as a little boy and got stung by a giant jellyfish. After reading about it somewhere, he thought on his feet and urinated on his own leg. They hang on to every word, laughing at all the right places. I don't laugh; I just sit in a corner talking to Abby's younger sister Kayla, a beauty pageant queen, who believes I would be a great jockey, what with my height restrictions and all. She is a welcome distraction from my own thoughts and

the direction they take. Abby's older sister, a sexier version of Abby, is a bit too touchy with Kade, and he drinks it all up.

She's an accounts executive like Kade is, and they seem to have so much in common.

I wonder again why I bother and what I am doing here.

THIS REHEARSAL DINNER is for close friends and family, and I am neither, just Kade's girlfriend.

"She's a piranha, that one. You better watch that she doesn't sink her teeth into him."

"What?" Kayla's comment catches me off guard. I blink, dragging my thoughts back to the present.

"My sister, Allison, she's a piece of work," her nose scrunches up in distaste. "She was all over Justin the first time Abby introduced him to us. She seems to think every man in the world is after her."

"I'm sure she's just being friendly," I say, trying to be polite. "It is a wedding, after all. We're guests."

She snorts. "She is never just *friendly* with guys, especially those that look like Kade James. I know my sister."

"Well, you know what they say, no woman can steal your man unless he wants to be stolen."

She shrugs, still casting her sister a death glare.

Kade calls me over. "I have been summoned." I tell Kayla. "Thanks for the warning."

"Better get over there quickly," she smirks. We stand, and she makes her way over to the bar.

"Aliana, I was just telling everyone about the time we visited all those beaches so you could take pictures of driftwood."

"That must have been interesting," Allison smirks. The crowd around

them laughs. I don't.

"Oh, it was," he smirks.

I do not know why he would bring that up. It isn't exactly a party-starting conversation. It's sad, really, the thought of wood adrift, possibly from some wreckage. I've always been fascinated with the idea of waves carrying driftwood to shores across the ocean. It was something I thought he found endearing, hardly anything amusing.

"My work is pretty interesting. Who knows where my next road trip will take me."

"I think it's fascinating, taking pictures like that," Abby chirps. "I wish I was half as talented."

"It's hardly rocket science, Abby," Allison snickers. She's beautifully ugly, I realize. A lonely, unfulfilled kind of ugly. Abby glares at her and smiles at me apologetically.

"So how long have you two been together?"

"Since senior year," Kade says, throwing his arm around my shoulder. He's drunk, and his arms feel like lead on me.

"That long? I would have thought you'd have taken the plunge already." Allison's eyes roam over Kade.

I hate this subject. According to social norms, if you're dating for a while, you should be engaged, engaged too long, you should be married. Married people should have a family, children, pets. The list of expectations is endless. Although I know Allison means it in the cruel way it was intended, I don't expect what Kade says next.

"Oh, Aliana is not the committal sort." A hush falls, and people look at me, then Kade, who seems oblivious to the fact that he just insulted me.

"I thought I wasn't, until Abby," Justin laughs, and from the sympathetic look he gives me, he's trying to douse the situation before it flares out of control.

"When you know, you know, right?" Kade says, his stern gaze meets

mine.

“I guess I don’t,” I say, setting my glass down and making my way to the opening of the tent, Abby following close behind. I need air. I need space. I need to be anywhere he isn’t.

“He’s probably joking,” she says to placate me when we’re outside.

“Oh, he isn’t,” I laugh mirthlessly. “He isn’t.” The cool breeze spreads goosebumps over my skin. “But thank you. Now go on and enjoy the party. Don’t let him put a damper on your last night of freedom. I’ll be right in.”

I sit on the grass for a long time until the cold seeps through my dress. Kade has this way of making everything lose its luster. His jibes are sometimes so cruel, I wonder whether he even thinks about the things he says. Maybe I’m fooling myself. This relationship is going nowhere. We’re tumbleweeds, dried up, detached from our stems, and blowing in the wind. Maybe there is no coming back from *us*.

I walk down to the dock, kick off my shoes, and dip my feet in the water. The distant music from the party and the cool air is a welcome change.

I hear him approach. It’s strange how in-tune I am to his presence. It’s always been that way.

“I shouldn’t have said that,” he says with a sigh.

“Glad you did.” I snap. “I know where we stand now.”

“Where we stand? I figured you knew that when you told Ethan you wondered what it would be like if you were lying next to him at night.”

I shake my head, still not looking at him. “And that justifies everything else that happened after?” I scoff.

I hear him shuffling and look back to find that he’s undressing.

“What the hell are you doing? It’s freezing out here,” I say.

He strips down to his boxers and makes a run for it, plunging off the dock into the water. He shrieks as he hits the cold water, and I gasp when the water splashes on me.

“You’re fucking crazy,” I yell when he comes up for air, laughing. He

swims toward me, and my eyes widen. “You wouldn’t dare.”

“Wouldn’t I?” I try to shuffle up, but he’s too fast. His hands grip my waist, and he tugs me off the edge of the dock and into the water.

I gasp involuntarily, and it feels like I might hyperventilate. Adrenaline courses through my body, and I can feel the pounding of my heart in my ears. I come up for air, and Kade is laughing. I let out a scream from deep in my belly but then laugh.

“Feels good right?” He asks, and I nod, tipping my head back and floating on the surface.

We’re silent for a long time, two idiots in an icy lake, under the stars. I close my eyes, enjoying this small victory. When I open them, he’s grinning down at me. Water from his hair falls on my face, and he leans in and kisses me, just like that, upside down. It’s awkward and so fucking good. I feel like my heart will literally explode in my chest. It all happens so quickly, him kissing me, pulling me against his taut chest, and tugging off my underwear. I feel my pulse quickening, and my legs wrap around his waist, my arms around his neck as he swims us back to the dock. He sets me on the edge of the dock, pulling himself up by his arms, and doesn’t waste any time laying me on my back. Shivers course through me, and I don’t know if it is from the cold or the fact that it’s Kade and me, about to fuck right on this dock. He bunches up my dress and settles between my thighs, and when he sinks into me, I let out a guttural moan, which he steals with his lips.

His hips thrust forward, and I groan, loving how he fills me, almost to the hilt.

“I hate you,” I hiss and dig my nails into his back.

“Your pussy doesn’t.” He growls and bites down on my neck, then licks and sucks the spot. Shivers course through me.

He’s so fucking right, and I hate that he is. “This changes nothing,” I pant as my hips lift off the dock and meet him thrust for thrust.

“Just shut up and let me fuck you,” he growls, and his hips piston, and I

feel him so deep inside me, it's like he's trying to burrow his way into my soul.

The rush of an orgasm threatens as he rotates his hips, his hand around my neck. He feels good, too fucking good. He puts a hand over my mouth as he drives into me harder and faster. "Someone's gonna hear you," he pants as his hips grind against me.

Kade rocks harder, pressing me against the hardwood. "That's it, baby. Give in," my body responds to his cock thickening inside. "Come for me, Aliana," he's breathless and out of control.

My walls squeeze around him, milking him, taking every fucking thing these last few months have deprived me of. It changes nothing. I repeat, even as I feel myself crashing, sinking so deep, I don't know how I'll resurface.

"Fuck, baby," he cries out, sucking on my neck. The hand that was on it now digs into my hips. "You're all mine."

I come so hard; I see stars, and he follows soon after, the warmth of him making me shudder beneath him.

He doesn't collapse on me but leans on his elbows, trying to catch his breath. His lips crash against mine, and our tongues slide lazily over each other. My hands tangle in his hair and trace lazily down his back.

"Let's get out of here," he says, standing, gloriously bare, an Adonis. He offers me a hand, and I take it as he hurriedly gets his pants back on.

THERE IS something deeply cathartic about crying, and weddings provide the ultimate opportunity. I never thought attending Justin's wedding would move me, but it has. There is no doubt he adores Abby, and as much as I dislike the man, I respect that. The first time I met Abigail Houston, I thought they wouldn't last more than a month before she would see Justin for the asshole he is. But that month quickly turned into a year and the rest, as they say, is history. I suppose they balance each other. Her light compliments his

darkness and so on.

His vows literally moved me to tears and looking around me, there wasn't a dry eye in the chapel.

Kade stands proudly beside him, his best man. We haven't spoken about what happened last night. We showered *together*, then got into bed. He placed his arms securely around me, which robbed me of sleep. I enjoyed the sex but so much has happened that can't just be fucked away.

He sits at the main table during the reception with the rest of the bridal party, and I am seated with some of Abby's friends. They chatter and gush over the wedding, and I smile along with them, unable to get rid of the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

"Congratulations," I say to Abby and Justin when I see them later. "I wish you two all the happiness in the world."

"Thank you," Abby smiles, her eyes quickly returning to her groom.

"You all right?" Justin asks, and I nod. To think he, of all people, should be the one to ask me that.

"Of course." I wave off his concern. "Thank you both for having me. I should let you two say goodbye to the rest of your guests."

I hug Abby and shake Justin's hand. They're leaving for the Bahamas on the first flight out in the morning.

Kade wraps his arms around my waist from behind. "Dance with me?" he whispers in my ear. The heat of his breath along my skin awakens goosebumps.

I turn to face him, and he leans down and places a kiss on my lips. It's sweet and gentle, nothing like the hunger we felt last night. He leads me to the dancefloor, and we sway to Michael Bublé. His eyes never leave mine.

"About last night—"

I start, but his lips silence me. "What about it?" He asks when he breaks our kiss.

"Things are complicated, Kade. I'm confused about this, about us."

His hands tighten around my waist as he pulls me closer against him.

“Did you mean it—what you said yesterday—about me being non-committal.”

He sighs, frowning down at me. “Can we just have a good time for once?”

“That isn’t an answer.” He twirls me around, and when I look at him again, he’s smiling down at me.

“If I asked you, right here, right now, to marry me, would you?”

I scoff. “That is not the point.”

“Oh, but it is. You can’t even answer a hypothetical proposal.”

I glare up at him. He has no fucking clue what seeing him with another woman did to me. I was transported back to when I was a little girl, and everyone in school teased me because my father was seen kissing my teacher or another person in town. I promised I would never let that happen to me. That I’d rather be single my whole life than being made a fool of. Kade changed me. He made me hope, made me believe, and all of that dissipated the day he fucked his colleague.

“I never asked you to fuck that woman.”

“And I never expected you to flirt with your business partner.”

I let out a mirthless laugh and tear myself away from him. “Excuse me,” I say.

“Non-committal.” He scoffs, then walks away, grabbing a bourbon off a waiter's tray on his way out.

I STAY and awkwardly converse with people I don’t know for an appropriate amount of time before returning to my bungalow alone. I don’t bother seeking out Kade.

Non-committal? How dare he say that to me *again*. Him. I let out a laugh as I tied my hair into a messy bun. I fling my clothes into my bag.

We're going to have to head out early tomorrow morning. I'm due back at the studio at midday. I have a stranger couples shoot scheduled. Like other photographers around the globe, I have followed the trend and set up these, often out of this world, couples' shoots of total strangers. The anticipation is thrilling, and hearing that most of them go on to date is the highlight of my career. So much more fulfilling than stoic upper-class family shoots and crying babies. I mean, babies are cute, but why do they have to cry so much.

Thoughts of my work always calm me down, and I curl up on the couch with my laptop, scrolling through some of my recent work. It's impossible to be unhappy when looking at something beautiful you created.

"YOU HAVE AN EYE FOR A GREAT PICTURE," Kade tells me. We're sitting in my room, with the pictures I took on the secondhand camera my mom got me for my fourteenth birthday. Kade and I went into town to have them developed, and I have to say, some of these are fantastic.

"You're just saying that," I say, not wanting to come across as arrogant.

"Seriously, and you know it."

I look down at the pictures. It's mostly objects, a few of my mom and one of Old Man Jenkins from down the road. He's perched on his rocker the way he often is, nodding off.

"I don't see any pictures of me," he smirks.

"That's 'cause you aren't all that photogenic," I laugh.

"That so?" He reaches for me, and in seconds he's pinned me to the floor and is tickling me until I swear I'll pee my pants. He stops suddenly, hovering above me, his face inching closer. I feel my heart thud in my chest. Is this it? The day Kade James finally kisses me. I close my eyes, my chest rising and falling, breaths unsteady.

"Come on, chimp," he teases, moving away from me. My eyes open, and he's standing with his hands outstretched to help me up. The moment is gone.

The spell is broken. I feel my cheeks heat. What did he think of me closing my eyes like that, puckering my lips the way I did? I take his hand, and he grabs me in a light chokehold, ruffling the top of my head.

I STARTLE AWAKE, and it takes a minute for me to realize where I am. By the color of the sky, I know it's early morning. My laptop is still in my lap. I must have fallen asleep on the couch. I look at the bed, and it's unmade.

Letting out a sigh, standing and stretching the kinks out of my neck. I make my way to the bathroom, feeling unhinged by that dream, or memory rather. It was a long time ago.

"Kade!" I call out, to be met with silence.

I brush my teeth and shower, adamant on leaving with or without him. I'm zipping my bag when he staggers in through the door, disheveled and red-eyed. His bowtie is undone and hanging from his neck. He stares at me for a second, then runs a hand over his face. How is it possible that I still find him attractive even when I am angry at him?

"I thought you'd stay at the party last night, talk maybe," he says. "Look, what I said...."

I raise a hand to stop him. "Can we talk about this when we get home? I've got a few calls to make. I'll meet you in the car in fifteen minutes," I say, rolling my bag behind me. "I have a shoot at lunchtime."

When he doesn't respond, I let out a breath. "Your hot and cold will fix nothing, Kade."

"Neither does anything else I do," he says, leaning against a pillar.

"I guess that makes the two of us." With that, I leave the bungalow and a frazzled-looking Kade and make my way toward the main reception area with the keycard in hand.

The fresh air is a welcome reprieve. The lake sparkles beautifully. This weekend could have gone a whole lot better. Hell, I expected it to. But what I

think will happen and how it turns out rarely aligns. Maybe I could have reacted to his touch the other night, given in, and let myself feel all the things I don't let myself cave in to. We've just gotten so used to living around each other, it's become second nature.

Out of the corner of my eye, I spot a flash of blonde. Allison walks out of a bungalow in a flimsy red nightie. "Oh, Aliana," she calls out, and I stop. "Kade left without this," she says, holding out his phone.

I look at the phone in her hand and the bungalow behind her. I let out a laugh, shaking my head. "He did, huh?"

I snatch the phone and storm past her. After checking out and blatantly ignoring the girl at the front desk asking me how my stay was, I climb into the driving seat of the car. My breaths are unsteady, and I have to push them in short puffs to get them out. I place my hand on my chest and swallow back the bile that threatens. I close my eyes and shake my head. How could I be so stupid?

The trunk door slams and my eyes fly open, my head spinning around to meet his gaze.

"You're driving?" He asks, his brow cocked. He knows I hate long drives.

I don't reply, turning around and breathing deeply. It is always going to come down to this. Kade's way of punishing me for the one mistake I made.

We should have called it quit a long time ago. When we get home, I will tell him it's over. We both deserve to be happy, and we aren't happy together.

I start the engine, and he climbs into the passenger seat.

"Allison returned this," I say, flinging the phone in his lap.

SIX

KADE

I AM HUNGOVER AS HELL. I drank so much more than I should have last night. After Justin left, a couple of the guys and I went over to the bungalow Allison shares with her sister for an after-party. I left the party in the early hours and slept in the car. Wanting Aliana fucks with my brain sometimes, especially when she's being a bitch.

I close my eyes, resting my head back, somewhat glad that I don't have to drive. Aliana seems pretty pissed off, nothing new.

"And I am the one who is *non-committal*," she blurts half an hour into the drive.

"What?" I say, my head aching.

"That is what you said to all those people the other night and repeated on the dance floor. That I don't want to commit."

I let out a sigh. "Do you have to do this now? I preferred the silence."

"You know what? We fucking do. We need to do all of this now. Where were you last night?"

"What do you mean where was I? I was at the party." Is she serious right now? Justin was wrong. Fucking her only made things worse.

“Where’d you sleep?” I stare at her, her jaw tight, spine straight as she looks ahead. I used to think she looked cute when she was angry. I don’t anymore. What the hell is she asking me all these questions for?

“Where’d you get my phone?” I ask.

“From Allison, it seems you left it there last night.”

I let out a laugh. “Oh, you can’t be serious. You actually think....”

“And you’re gonna deny it?” She spins toward me, her fingers so tight around the steering wheel her knuckles turn white.

When she’s like this, she doesn’t listen. She rants. Nothing I say is going to make any difference.

“That is fucking rich coming from you.” I look out of the passenger side window. Done with this conversation.

“Don’t you dare pin this on me,” she says, her hand flying out, her small fist connecting with my arm. “I hate you.” She yells. “You made a fool of me in front of all those people and then you go and sleep with the sister of the bride.”

“Just keep your eye on the fucking road, psycho.” I say, shaking my head. I didn’t sleep with Allison. She may come onto me, but I shut her down pretty quickly. She hooked up with one of Justin’s other friends, and I barely saw her at all last night.

“Psycho? I’ll fucking show you psycho.” She slams my arm again, harder this time. A small part of me wants this side of her, the anger, the jealousy. All the things she doesn’t allow herself to show.

I shove her hand away, and her other hand slips on the wheel. We both look ahead, and there’s an oncoming vehicle. It takes a second for her to register, and she reacts by swerving and pulling over to the side of the road. My heart is pounding in my chest. I can taste metal on my tongue. Aliana’s wide eyes find mine. I reach over and unhook my seatbelt; leaning in, I capture her mouth, and she gives in, opening up and letting me taste her. My tongue flicks against hers, and my fingers grip the back of her head. She’s the

fucking air I breathe and my kiss of death at the same time. Her lips are soft, and it makes me want to taste every other part of her right here in this car. She breaks away suddenly, and her palm connects with my cheek.

“The fuck, Aliana,” I say, my cheek stinging.

“Don’t. Just fucking don’t.” She says. She slams her hands against the steering wheel, spewing shit I do not have the fucking time or inclination to listen to.

“You’re exhausting, fucking exhausting,” I say, reaching into the glove compartment and pulling out a pack of cigarettes.

Her eyes widen. “I thought you gave that shit up?” She spits.

“I just started again, want one?” I ask, climbing out of the car, slamming the door for good measure. I need a minute. Just one fucking minute.

My feet crunched gravel as I inspected the car for any damages. Thankfully, everything seems intact.

Letting out a sigh, I glance up and down the highway. It’s quiet.

When I hear her door open, I let out a groan, walking further away. I look at the woodland area on the side of the road, and I wonder what getting totally lost out there would be like. Away from Aliana, away from the complicated mess our relationship has become. Three months ago, we were happy. At least, I thought we were. How did we take a one-eighty like this?

“I am still talking to you, Kade? I want to know what the fuck happened with Allison?” Her voice is too loud, and she is far too irate to listen.

“I thought you were done with this?” I point between us. The more I look at her, the angrier I become. “Just get in the car and wait for me. I’ll be right back.”

I take a few steps toward the trees, needing to get my anger under control, not wanting to say something I’ll later regret.

“You’re disgusting,” she shouts after me. Yeah, I heard that before. “I’m leaving you here, asshole. You can get home on your own.”

I ignore her and continue walking.

Sometimes, the only way to stay sane is to remain silent.

SEVEN

ALIANA

INTENT ON LEAVING HIM STRANDED, I turn the key in the ignition, only to be met with a rapid click and choke. “No. Fuck!” I say under my breath, trying again. After the fourth attempt, I conclude that the engine is dead.

I look out of the window, hoping Kade is making his sorry way back. I pick up my phone and groan when I see it’s dead. I rummage in the glove compartment for the power bank and let out a defeated groan when I discover it isn’t in there.

I see Kade’s phone on his seat and pick it up, hope springing, only to find that he doesn’t have a signal. Climbing back out of the car, I walk a few meters on either side, but still nothing. We are in the middle of nowhere, and I’m suddenly struck with the reality that we may have no choice but to wait for someone else to drive by and ask them for help.

Lucky, Kade.

If this car had started, I’d be on my way.

I get back in the car, pick up a pad, and start doodling while I wait for him to finish his cigarette. I have done Doodling since I was a kid to pass the

time and ease my nerves.

“OKAY, tell me one thing you love the most about me.” I ask him. We’re lying in a tent fort in the middle of the living room, with only the sheets wrapped around us. We’ve spent the day in here, only taking the occasional bathroom and food break.

Kade leans in and kisses my bare shoulder. “Oh, there are a lot of things I love about you,” he peppers kisses across my collarbone and down my chest, his hands working the sheet off me until they slide down my side and under me, squeezing my ass.

The rain falls hard outside, and there is a chill in the air, but here my skin heats, and my thighs clench together.

He hovers over me, using his hand to hold mine above my head, pushing my tits out. “I love your smile.” His lips touch the corners of mine, and I smile. “These lips, your eyes, the way you doodle when you’re lost in thought. These tits.”

He positions himself between my thighs, his erection nudging my entrance. His mouth covers my nipple as he sucks and nips at it.

Shivers cover my skin as he sinks into me. I let out the breath I was holding, my eyes fluttering closed at the feel of him. And when he moves, it’s exquisitely slow, as if he wants me to feel all of him. He stops the torture on my nipples, and his lips crash against mine, our tongues dueling as his thrusts get harder. He pulls out and slams into me so hard my body jerks. I lose it when he rotates his hips and meets his every thrust.

“I love the way you feel around my cock,” he whispers in my ear, and I let out a moan as he sucks a lobe into his mouth.

“I love the way you moan for me.” he sucks a nipple into my mouth, his movements quickening. He reaches between us and rubs my swollen clit. I cry out as I come apart, my nails digging into his back.

“Every fucking thing. I love everything,” Kade growls as his body shudders and his warmth fills me.

MY PULSE QUICKENS, and my mouth is dry. I look at my watch and realize Kade has been out there for half an hour, and I have doodled the shit out of the page. He really is a lucky bastard that this car didn't start. But now, I doubt I will make it back in time for the photoshoot. I can't even get in touch with Gaby to let her know. The last thing I want is to disappoint my clients, but this is just out of my control.

I consider going after him, and just then, a silver-gray car pulls up behind me. I sigh, absently continuing to doodle, and then perk up at the realization that help is here. Maybe I'll get lucky, and some tall, dark, and handsome stranger will rescue the damsel in distress and her baggage. I chuckle at the thought.

When three men get out of the car, my plan to flirt evaporates. I suddenly feel uneasy. They're big, as tall as Kade, six feet or so, but burly. They're dressed in black, and the way they approach the car sends my hackles up. Something about them doesn't feel right.

They remind me of a pride of lions approaching a zebra at the waterhole. They move slowly, but it's calculated. Maybe my mind is playing tricks on me, and I am overreacting.

But, I have been around assholes my whole life, with the trash my mother dated when I was growing up, to know trouble when I see it.

I scribble down their license plate, my heart thudding in my chest, and get out of the car quickly, clutching the small notebook in my hands.

“Kade,” I call out as they continue to edge closer. Maybe knowing I am not alone will scare them off. One of them breaks the line and heads in the direction I am looking. The others stalk toward me. One has a cigarette pressed between his lips, his shoulder-length dirty blonde hair hangs over his

face.

“Need some help, miss?” He asks.

“No, all is good here. My boyfriend just needed to hit the head real quick.” I let out a short laugh, trying not to sound as nervous as I feel. His eyes roam over me, causing a sickening twist in my belly. That sense of foreboding. I’m alone out here, and there isn’t a house or stop for miles. The next stop is at least an hour's drive away.

“You sure?” His voice is full of malice. “Cause my brothers and I would love to help a little thing like you, all alone out here in the woods.” Surely he doesn’t think he’ll get away with attacking me out here in the open. Anyone could drive past.

The other man chuckles, stepping too fucking close to me. He smells of alcohol and cigarettes. A navy cut and eyes so dark they’re almost soulless. I start to back away, hoping to get back into my car, to have some kind of barrier between them and me, but he only advances.

“Who knows the kind of dangers little ones can get into out here,” he reaches up and twists a strand of my hair around his finger.

My blood heats. “Stop that. What the hell?” I shove his hand away. “Now, you can both carry on, my boyfriend should be back any second.”

His hand drops to his side. “I like a spitfire, brother,” he looks over to blondie. “This might be fun.”

I spit on his face, and the second I turn my back to him, I realize my mistake. His hand grabs a fistful of my hair, tugging me against his chest. “Such a pretty pet you’ll make,” he sniffs my hair, and it sends unwelcome shivers down my spine. “We’re due for fresh meat.”

I am trained in self-defense, but the odds are stacked against me right now.

“Kade! Help!” I yell at the top of my lungs before his hand closes over my mouth. I struggle against him, elbowing him in his solar plexus and stepping on his foot. It only earns me a chuckle, his hold unyielding.

I feel the hot burn of tears, and my body is lifted off the ground. This can't be happening. My notebook falls from my hands.

He'll find it. Kade will. He'll come after them. He'll come for me.

Fight dammit, I think as he carries me further away from my car. Don't let these fuckers take you. *This isn't you. You don't get kidnapped or have god knows what done to you by these vile men.*

I struggle against him and bite down hard on his palm. It's salty and disgusting, but I keep biting.

"You bitch!" He drops me instantly, a scream filling the air, echoing through the trees.

I hit the ground hard and quickly scurry away from them, enough to get on my feet.

I try to make a run for it, but big arms circle my body in a hold that is so tight it's suffocating. This man is stronger. It's blondie.

"You're gonna pay for that bitch," buzz cut says, groaning and shaking the hand that I bit.

"Let me go! Let me go, right now!" I yell at the top of my lungs.

"Shh," blondie says in my ear as Buzzcut approaches me. I try to kick him, but he throws me to the ground, straddling me under his weight. My hands are pinned at my sides, and I can't move. I can barely breathe.

Buzzcut moves my hair away from my neck, and I shudder when I see a syringe between his fingers.

I shout with everything in me, squirming and struggling under the man straddling me. I feel the small prick against my neck, the burn of whatever it is they're drugging me with, and I hear the man holding me, singing something. A lullaby. *Hush, little baby...*

My vision blurs, and then nothing.

EIGHT

KADE

“KADE, ALIANA IS HERE,” my mom shouts from the bottom of the stairs. I look at myself in the mirror, combing my hair back with my fingers. Maybe I should have worn the black tee. Too late to change now. I cross my arms, preparing for the onslaught of Aliana Kingsley. I don’t know what changed. Actually, everything did. She grew up, and she became the girl standing on the threshold of my bedroom, observing me in denim cutoffs and a Guns N’ Roses t-shirt. I feel myself twitch in my pants. Fuck, am I glad I’m wearing loose sweats.

“Come on in.” I say, moving books off a chair.

“You all right, lame ‘o?”

“Yeah, just nervous about the math test.” She ignores the chair I offer her and climbs onto my bed, crossing her legs and spreading her books out in front of her. The sight of her on my bed has my mind wandering to places it shouldn’t. Not when she is this close to me. Aliana has no idea how beautiful she is and what she does to me, simply by being herself.

“You coming or what?” She pats the spot next to her. I’ll be coming all right.

I clear my throat. "I need to use the bathroom."

"Oh-kay." She says. When I don't move, she tilts her head. "Want me to show you the way?"

I laugh, then make my way out of the room fast. I lean against the bathroom wall, slipping my pants down. This is going to be one long study session.

"Well, that was a long bathroom break?" She says when I walk back into the room. "If you aren't going to take this seriously, just tell me and I'll leave."

"No, of course I am. Sorry," I say, settling in next to her. I know she hates to study at home. Her mother is well known in the neighborhood, and not in a good way. "Another friend over?"

She sighs. Her dark hair falls in locks around her, shielding her face from my view. Her mother doesn't need a man to support her, which is probably the real problem because she doesn't give a shit about the riffraff she brings home.

"Yeah, what's new with the infamous Gail Kingsley. She's got a real keeper this time, too. He's a stockbroker, married, and looks at me in a way that makes my skin crawl."

"Did that fucker touch you?" I move her hair, tucking it behind her ears, and her hazel eyes meet mine. She looks so small, unsure. We're sixteen, and while she should be out with friends, she's often the only one peeling Gail off the bathroom floor.

I let my fingers linger there for a while. "No, I don't think anyone is that dumb." She smirks, and she's my Aliana again. I don't know when she became this interesting, no longer the chimp climbing trees, but a young woman and the most beautiful girl in school.

"Ready to study?"

She nods, and we settle into equations and inequalities.

I DON'T KNOW how long I've been sitting on a tree stump, thinking about Aliana. Thinking about the way things used to be. She moved into our neighborhood when her parents divorced. A nine-year-old tomboy. She wanted to do everything the boys did, and she, more often than not, did it better. I've known her for most of my life. She was and still is the most important person to me. Life has a way of giving you enough bad times. You sort of forget that there was any good at all. And we had good times.

"This is bullshit." I say to nobody. But it is. We're going to talk, really talk, and she will listen. Growing up, with the way my parents fought, I figured I'd be single for life, but then Aliana hit puberty, and my world tilted off-axis.

I stand, and the blood runs cold in my veins when I hear her calling out to me for help. "What the fuck?"

I don't second guess myself, weaving my way through the small line of trees separating us. "Aliana, I'm coming."

I can see our black SUV and a car parked behind us. Relief momentarily floods through me. Maybe she was just calling me because someone stopped to check if she was okay. I shouldn't have been sitting there daydreaming.

I move forward until I hear the crush of twigs behind me. I turn, and someone steps up behind me, a thick branch in his hands. I duck out of the way just as he takes a swing. He misses, and I ram my body into his torso.

We go down hard. I straddle his waist quickly, slamming a fist on the side of his face.

"Who the fuck are you?" I shout, but he just smirks, then punches my face, shoving me off him. I recover quickly and lurch for him as he tries to stand, but he's fast and kicks back, his boot connecting with my face.

Groaning, I try to reach for him again, but he's on his feet, the branch in his hand. I stagger up, swaying slightly.

He swings fast, and it hits me on the side of my head, and pain shoots through me. I want to keep standing, moving toward Aliana, but my vision is

blurry. The last thing I see is her being carried, then shoved into the trunk of the car, a silver one, two men, one behind me. I close my eyes, my head heavy, and darkness takes me.

NINE

ALIANA

I WAKE UP IN DARKNESS, heaving slightly at the heat. Kade knows I hate the dark, and when he turns the air-con off. It is yet another selfish Kade thing he's done to add to my ever-growing list. I'm tired, my eyes feel heavy, so heavy, and my mouth is so dry my tongue sticks to the top of it. "You didn't leave the bathroom light on," I groan. I lift my hand, which slams against something. I take a second to realize that I am not in my bed. I'm not at home. It all comes back to me as I feel around me. Felt. I'm in the trunk of a car, a moving one. The smell of fumes is heavy in the confined space.

A shrill pierces the air, and I cover my ears against the sound until I realize I am the one screaming. There is a pungent smell in the air. I feel someone stir behind me, and another bout of screams rips through me.

"Aliana," Kade croaks, and I feel the tears slide down my face as sobs wrack my body. Relief. Horror.

"Kade? They...they got you, too."

"He caught me off guard in the woods. I heard you calling out for me."

I scream, pounding my fists against the roof of the trunk.

"Shh, you need to calm down," he says. He makes a wincing sound. How

the hell did they get all six feet of him in this trunk?

It hits me that if Kade is here with me, it means nobody knows we're missing. We could be god knows where by the time Gaby realizes I am gone. We hardly speak to our parents.

"This can't be happening, Kade. Nobody knows where we are. Why would they do this to us?"

"I don't know. But you need to just focus okay, did they let anything slip about where they're headed?"

"No, of course not. It's not like I could pay much attention," I sniff. "They're dangerous Kade. I just feel it."

"Maybe I can punch out the taillight, wave down a driver," he says and reaches over me, punching at the taillights.

"Ow, shit! It's fucking solid." He tries a few more times, but we both know that it is a losing battle because the lights seem to be covered by some kind of solid reinforcement. It will be impossible to smash through that.

"It's fucking useless," he spits.

"Maybe someone will find our car, right?" I whisper.

"Those assholes could have started our car. One of them could be driving it right now to wherever it is they are taking us. They could have towed it for all we know."

I scream, slamming my palms against the trunk walls. "Let me out!"

"Calm down, Aliana. We don't want them to stop the car. Let's get to wherever it is they are taking us, and we'll find a way to get out. I promise you, we'll find a way out."

He pulls me close, and I want to sink into him in this nightmare, but then I remember we are in this situation because of him.

"Get off me. Off me." I yell, pushing against him. "You did this. This is your fault. If we hadn't been arguing, I never would have swerved, or stopped, or gotten taken." My voice cracks, and it hurts so much I can't breathe. Maybe it is not fair to him, but I want to hurt him right now. I need

to hurt someone for this. What are the odds that we can fight against whoever has taken us? Will they ever let us go? I saw their faces. If they got us bound in this trunk once, they could do it again.

He doesn't respond, just breathes hard against my hair. We fall into silence. I shut my eyes, willing myself to wake up from this nightmare. We read about these things in the news and in books. I read all kinds of fucked up books, but what happens when it becomes your reality?

I read about an elderly British couple kidnapped from their yacht by Somali pirates and held captive for a year. An American couple was held captive for five fucking years, enduring all kinds of abuse and terror. Is that what we're going to have to endure?

"What if we never get out? What if..." I can't bear to think of it any longer.

"Don't, Aliana. I will protect you. It's me and you." He says the words, but they hold no conviction. I know he is as scared as I am.

I feel the laughter bubble up from deep inside me, and it comes out in a venomous, maniacal burst.

"You don't get it, Kade." But maybe neither do I. I can't imagine why these men would kidnap us. What could we possibly have that they could want? I am a photographer, for god's sake, and Kade is a businessman in a job that could hardly make enemies. No, we were not targeted. We just happened to be in the wrong place at the wrong time.

THE VEHICLE SLOWS TO A HALT. My heart is in my mouth at this point, thudding in my neck and ears to a point where I can barely hear anything. My head pounds with a niggling headache.

"Kade," I whisper.

I hear the sound of doors opening, then slamming shut, and muffled

voices that get louder as they get closer.

“Kade!” I shove him with my elbow, and he grunts awake. “We’ve stopped.” I don’t even know how long we’ve been driving, but by the ache in my body, it has been at least a few hours.

“Breathe. Don’t fight them until you’re on your feet, and if you break free, just run, get help, don’t look back.” His words give me an excruciatingly painful flickering hope. He thinks at least one of us can get out of this. He believes we have a chance.

The trunk opens, and the light from the flashlight is momentarily blinding. I may have seen their faces, but I’ll never be able to pick them out in a line-up. Everything happened so quickly. Dark hair, soulless eyes, big, wicked.

Three looming figures come into view. “Tie these on, tight.” One of them says, shoving something into my hands. “Him too.” I catch a hint of an accent I can’t place. Russian maybe.

Blindfolds.

Kade takes a blindfold from my hand, his fingers brushing mine for just a second.

“Hold on,” he whispers. I want to, but the fear of the unknown is crippling.

I tie mine on. The man grips my arm, his fingers digging painfully into the flesh as he tugs me up and out of the trunk. I stumble, and he holds me upright, pressing me against his hard frame.

“Hands behind you, little one.” His voice makes me sick, but I do as he tells me, and I feel my hope sink when my hands are bound tightly at my back, something coarse and tight scratching against my wrists.

I hear swearing and shuffling. Kade. He’s going to get us out of this.

“Nasty bump you got there,” A voice says, laughing. “I got you good, didn’t I?” More laughter.

“You fucking assholes!” Kade growls. “You will die for this.” Chuckles

follow.

I hear a few thumps, and Kade groans.

I can't see what they're doing to him, but by his pain-filled groans, I know it's terrible.

"Ivan, quit damaging the merchandise. Get him bound and let's get inside," the other man says. He let a name slip—Ivan.

Merchandise. Is that what we are to them? Is that why they took us?

"Kade!" I yell, stepping forward blindly, only to be tugged back by my restraints.

"Oh, your boyfriend's alright, little one, just put him to sleep for a little while." The man called Ivan says. With Kade unconscious, what hope do I have against these monsters? The air is chilly as they push me forward. I comply with fear. It feels like we're walking endlessly before we come to a stop. I can't even hear the sound of cars in the distance, which tells me we're somewhere secluded.

My hands are untied, and I try to swipe at the man. He laughs when I meet air and stumble to the ground. He drags me up by my hair this time, and a burning ache stings my skull.

I spit, and I feel a fist connect with my jaw. I double back at the impact.

I hear the distinct sound of a gun cocking, and my blindfold is ripped off my face. I quickly glance around me. The lighting is dim, but by the size of the space, I assume it is a warehouse of sorts. I file that away along with Ivan's name. *Three men. Accents I can't place.*

"Now you're going to behave, do as you are told, or he dies."

I look in the person's direction and gasp. Kade is on his knees, head slumping forward, and a gun is held to his temple.

I nod, my lips trembling. Not in fear, but in outrage at these men. "What do you want?"

The monster circles me, a predator stalking his prey. My eyes follow him as I tip my chin up.

“We’ll get to that. For now, be a good girl and walk into that room over there.” He points.

“I am not leaving him,” I stare at him point-blank.

“Move! I will not say it again.” He glares, gripping my chin between his thumb and forefinger. Having him this close causes bile to rise, but I grit my teeth.

“I will go once I know he’s alright.”

What they want is a meek slave. That is not me. “Let us go.” I say, hating the shake in my tone.

“No! And if you keep disobeying me, we’ll make his death a slow and painful one, while you watch.”

I look at Kade. He’s unconscious. I want to hurt them all, but I’m one woman, alone.

When he shoves me in the direction of the room, I move willingly. When I look back, Kade is being dragged along behind me.

The room is dark and smells of wet dogs. “Sit,” the bastard commands, pointing the flashlight in my face. I do as I am told. Kade is dragged in, and I see a gash on the side of his head. He’s not moving.

“He needs a doctor, asshole,” I say. The vile beast crouches down beside me, grips my cheeks again, and spits on my face.

“He’ll survive, but a wild thing like you might not.”

He shoves my head back, and I hit the wall. I follow the sound of his heavy boots until he leaves and locks the door behind them.

It’s just us. *Oh God, we’ve been taken!* The reality of our situation comes down on me like a ton of bricks. I struggle to suck in air in this foul-smelling prison.

I get on my knees and crawl over to where I know Kade is lying.

“Hey,” I whisper. “Come on, K, wake up.”

He stirs and groans but doesn’t wake up. I throw myself over his body. It’s uncomfortable with my hands tied, but I need his warmth. I need

something tangible in this illusion.

“We’re gonna get out of here. You promised,” I whisper to his sleeping form.

When I was a little girl, my mother always told me that if I continued to sneak out at night, I’d end up on a milk carton. I wasn’t scared back then. It’s funny how you see all those missing faces, some people you might have even passed on the street one time or another, but you can still distance yourself from it. That bubble of naivety keeps us young because the moment it bursts, you see the world for what it truly is. A dark and cruel place.

I close my eyes and wish this all away. I want to go back to the lake, and that night we made love under the stars. I focus on beautiful things, like the view, Abby in her wedding dress, Gaby with a make-up brush tucked into her messy bun, and my studio. Tears sting my eyes as I curl around Kade. I miss that light and airy space where I create magic and bring people's memories to life. Will I ever see the light again?

I STARTLE awake at the sound of keys rattling in a lock. I scoot back against the wall. Early morning light streams through a small window, but the sun isn’t yet out.

Kade stirs awake. “Aliana...” his voice is weak.

“Shh, they’re coming.” That's all that I can manage.

“You had a good night, I hope?” The man asks. As if we’re his guests and have spent the night in the lap of luxury.

“Please, if you let us go, we won’t say anything.” I plead. “You have no reason to hold us here.”

The man cocks his head to the side, a blade in his hand. “Now, why would I do that? I have so many plans for us.” The way he says it makes my insides twist.

“How about we start with getting you out of those clothes,” another man

says, and the other two men guffaw. There are people like this who exist for the sole purpose of hurting others.

“As a start,” the other man says. Ivan. “Then we can start playing with our toy. It’s been a whole month since we had a pretty new one.” He seems to be the most manic of the three. The one talking to me comes across as the leader, but the man in the corner scares me the most. His silence is unnerving.

“We should introduce ourselves first. I’m Samael,” he says.

Samael points his knife to the other man, “Ivan. And that is our older brother, Michael.” I wonder if those are their real names and what that means for us.

“Now that we’re better acquainted, strip,” Samael orders. I shake my head from side to side, unable to form words. My stomach drops at those words. I have only ever been naked around Kade. We’ve been together since our senior year. These men can’t defile me in this way. I’d rather fucking die.

“No,” Kade splutters. Ivan drags Kade’s body up like he weighs nothing, snapping Kade’s head back harshly.

“Do it!” Ivan commands. I look at Kade, and he’s shaking his head.

I can’t let them hurt him. I close my eyes, and when I do, I transport myself to another place, where I am not standing in front of three strangers and my boyfriend, about to take off my clothing. I keep telling myself that I am doing this to survive, but a part of me wonders if we will or if I would want to after whatever these filthy bastards have in store.

I start to unbutton my shirt with shaky hands, tears streaming down my cheeks. Once I’m down to my underwear, I stop.

“All of it,” Samael growls, and I do as I am told. Goosebumps coat my skin, and I attempt to cover myself up with my hands. “Why are you doing this? If it’s money you want, we can get it. Just tell us how much.”

Michael laughs. “Not enough, little one. Come along, we need to inspect the goods more closely,” He nods behind me. *Goods. I am nobody’s fucking goods.*

Samael pulls on my arm, but my feet are rooted to the spot.

“No. Get your filthy hands off her,” Kade’s voice cracks, and he attempts to stand, only to be pummeled back to the ground. I kick Ivan in the shin while he’s down, and Ivan loses his balance and falls. He was back up again and raining down punches on Kade. Ivan stands, his feet connecting with Kade’s stomach, chest, and legs, beating him into submission.

I can only stand and stare in horror.

He pulls Kade upright again, and I notice the gash on his head and the blood on his shirt more clearly now.

“Try that shit again, and we’ll fucking slit her throat right here.” Michael says, still not making an attempt to come forward. The fact that he lurks in the background makes him that much scarier.

“Stop. I’ll do whatever you say.” My voice is shaky, foreign. “Just don’t hurt him anymore.”

“We have a smart bitch here.” Samael’s voice sends shivers through me. I let him lead me away, my eyes landing on Kade curled in a fetal position on the floor. I catch sight of a syringe, and I know they’re going to drug him.

When they lock the door on him, I feel a shudder course through me. I’m alone, so fucking alone.

TEN

ALIANA

IVAN LEADS me into another room. The white light is harsh. There is a hospital bed in the middle of the windowless room, and it reminds me of an operating room. One wall is a mirror, and when I catch a glimpse of myself, I cringe. I have always been confident in my body, but them looking me over like this makes me feel grotesque.

He runs a finger down my spine, and I feel bile rising. “What I’d like to do to these, his hands squeeze my ass cheeks together.”

The heat of his body is behind me, and I shudder when he nudges his erection into my back as his hand snakes around me and presses against my stomach.

“Look what this body does to me. Imagine what it’ll do for the rest of them. You are gonna fetch us a good price.”

So, this is their plan, sell me off. All the horrible news headlines about trafficked women fill my mind. There’s a small window—a few days at most, for anyone to find me.

“And then we’re going to skin your boyfriend, and set the dogs on him.” His words send ice through my veins. This can’t be happening.

His hands seem to roam every dip and curve. I shut my eyes and imagine being anywhere but here.

I can't describe what happens next because it is the very definition of an out-of-body experience.

He pulls out a syringe of black liquid and slams it right into my arm. It stings, and I have to grit my teeth not to scream.

He turns his back on me and switches on a monitor. The room comes into view, with me standing right in the middle of it. Whatever he injected me sends heat coursing through my veins. It feels like I'm on fire. I feel woozy. The anguish and drug mixed together are a heady combination.

"Get on your knees," my body wants to respond to the command, but I can't. There is still defiance in me. A will to protect myself. He walks toward me and removes my restraints. My wrists burn, and I run my fingers over the red bracelets the rope created.

I try to make a run for it when his back is turned, only to have him yank me back by my hair. A guttural sound leaves my lips, and the room spins slightly.

"You are going to do as you're told," he growls.

"I won't—"

That earns me a slap across the face. It stings, and I lift my hand to touch my cheek. "If you want to live, see that boyfriend again, you will play nice. Unless you like it rough? Because I sure as fuck do."

I drop to the cold concrete, but my mind is somewhere else.

The monster circles me, his eyes assessing me. "Look at me," he commands, and I do. All I see is a sinister expression on his face.

He tugs at my hair, wrapping his massive hand around my throat, lifting me until I am standing against him.

"Look at how good you look, slut?" Ivan grabs my breasts and squeezes them until a painful mewl falls from my lips.

His hands drop, and he crosses the room again, returning with a camera.

“You are so fucking hot. I can’t believe you dropped into our laps like this. Now I need some pretty pictures, and you’re going to give me your best.”

I know one thing, I have to obey. If I don’t, they’ll kill Kade.

I have never liked being on the other side of the camera. It’s never appealed to me.

It’s like I no longer have any control of my body as he starts posing me in suggestive positions. I’m reminded of the shoot I did last week. I mechanically do whatever he tells me to, letting him handle my body like the wooden mannequin that sits on my desk in the studio.

“You are going to make a nice addition to the line-up we already have. We’re gonna have to get rid of your spare out there though, ” he smirks, and I look away.

Addition? Do they have other women here?

He doesn’t have to elaborate on the last thing he said. I know they want to get rid of Kade.

I can hear Kade’s voice somewhere in the distance, calling out for me. I hold onto his voice, powerless to do anything but shiver as I’m exposed in front of this monster.

I am slipping into a drugged haze, and I feel myself dying inside, the life slowly draining from me.

I think about my mother. Gail always said I was an ice princess and behaved like I was made of porcelain. According to my mother, men wanted women like me because they would eventually break me. Was this the point of no return for me?

Ivan crosses the room, his large hands resting on my breast. He pinches my nipples so hard, I have to bite back a sob. I won’t give him the satisfaction of my tears.

His hands travel south, and all I feel is repulsion. When he reaches the apex of my thighs, he stops.

“Look at me while I break you,” his smile is sinister as he slips his hands

between my legs.

I grind my teeth, my muscles quivering. I'm dizzy, disorientated, but I won't go down without a fight.

"Don't fucking touch me," I slur, shoving his hands away with such force he actually staggers slightly. I don't waste any time; moving forward, I bring my knee up, connecting it with his balls. I stumble back a bit.

A loud growl leaves his mouth. "Bitch, fucking stupid bitch!"

The door swings open, and his brother, Samael, stands there, an evil glint in his eye. He looks between the two of us. "Do we have a spitfire, brother?"

Ivan recovers quickly and is in my face in seconds, the back of his hand connecting with my face. I fall to the ground with the sheer violence of it, one side of my face throbbing. "I'm gonna enjoy breaking you, slut."

He grabs a fistful of my hair before dragging me out.

ELEVEN

KADE

I HAVE ALWAYS PRIDED myself in my ability to handle my own from a young age. I have always fought my own battles and come out victorious. Being here, my head aching, dried blood matting my hair, and covering my clothing, I run through all the scenarios where this doesn't end badly for us.

I am cuffed by one hand to a pipe in a cell-like room. It's dark, and all I can hear is the sound of my own breathing. I kept fighting after they took Aliana away, and it only got me locked in here. I won't stop fighting for her. I need to build up my strength, not deplete it.

What if two unassuming words with the power to destroy a man's soul.

What if I hadn't left her.

What if I hadn't turned my back on her.

What if?

I don't know how long I've been out when the door creaks open. The light switching on overhead is almost blinding. One of the men drags Aliana in, and she's chained to the wall next to me. Her head lulls from side to side.

What the fuck is this place? The fact that a cell like this is available makes me think we aren't the first people here. How much of a fighting

chance do we have if they have done it before?

“Aliana.” I call out, but she simply curls up on the floor. The man fastens one of her ankles to a chain on the wall.

I regret calling her name.

I regret them hearing it and the desperation in my voice.

“What have you done to her?” I ask through gritted teeth. The bastard just sneers down at me, flashing a set of unnaturally white teeth.

“Get her a fucking blanket, man. Her clothes, anything.”

“The pet hasn’t been a good girl. She’ll get some clothes when she knows her place.”

“We’re not animals.” I say, tugging at the hand that’s bound.

That only makes him laugh. He steps closer, and this time I expect the kick to my stomach. I cough and splutter, but I don’t say another word. When the door shuts behind him, the silence is deafening. I suck in a breath, then pull myself back to a sitting position.

“Aliana, please, talk to me.” I start to remove my bloody shirt, ripping it off at the shoulder that is cuffed. She is close enough to touch, but the way I am positioned won’t allow me to. I throw the shirt over her, and she scoots away like I’ve touched her with a hot iron.

“Shh, it’s me. Are you okay?” I whisper. It is a stupid question. My whole body shakes with rage, and I pull against the restraints again. “Fuck!”

“Don’t. Don’t touch me.” She hisses.

I settle against the wall wanting to know but needing to respect her.

“We’re going to get out of this.”

She doesn’t respond. We sit in silence, each of us in the prison of our minds.

My head starts to pound, and I close my eyes. Just a minute, I tell myself. Just to get back some strength.

I DON'T KNOW how long I was out for. Aliana is still curled beside me, her back to me. I want so much to reach out and let her know that she is not alone but not at the risk of scaring her. God knows what those fuckers did to her. The thought makes my head spin.

“Aliana? Did they...” I can't even say the words out loud.

She doesn't respond, and if it were not for the rise and fall of her shoulders, I would think she was dead.

“We're going to get out of here.”

“No, Kade. We're not.” Her voice is flat and hits me right in the chest.

“What the fuck do they want?”

“Me.” One word, and it carries the weight of the world.

I look over at her when she says that.

“Well, they're not gonna have you. You hear me?” I guess that is what I feel right now, a sense of agony like nothing I have ever felt before. Suddenly it doesn't matter who started what argument. I'll be wrong every day of my life if I can get this one thing right.

I reach for her, my hand settling lightly on the edge of her shoulder. She doesn't move away, and I call it a small victory.

LAUGHTER FILLS THE ROOM, and my eyes whip toward the door. The room is still shrouded in darkness. The overhead light flickers on, and that has Aliana curling up further into herself, my shirt draped over her.

“Oh, we're gonna have her all right.” The menacing voice jeers, making me realize that we are being watched. “We'll have her any way we like.” Those fuckers can hear us; do they listen to everything we say? If so, it is possible they can see us too.

A sob breaks free from Aliana, and she finally looks at me. “I-I can't, Kade, I can't...”

“Trust me.”

A key rattles in the lock, metal against metal. We really are in a cell. Two fuckers walk in. I remind myself that soon, all this will be over, and I'll make them pay for everything they did to Aliana. Ivan's face contorts into something reminiscent of a Jack-in-the-box clown as he moves toward me.

"A bathroom break. We need one." The men look between themselves, then back at me.

"If you try any funny business, you're both dead." I know better than to do that, but leaving this room means I get to see more of where we are being held.

One of them uncuffs me from the pipe and secures my hands behind me. The other does the same with Aliana. I catch her gaze and shake my head slightly so only she can see. We're not going to run, not yet.

They lead us down a dimly lit corridor, and Aliana is shoved into what I assume is a toilet. She's given two minutes. I scour the area with my eyes, but there is nothing much to see. The corridor stretches for what seems like half a mile. There are doors on either side.

When Aliana emerges, she's dragged by her arm back in the direction we came, and I get my two minutes, but I only use one. This is fucking useless.

"We are going to have so much fun today," one of the men says when we are back in the cell and secured to the wall. He reaches behind him and draws a blade. His metal toe boots slam into my stomach for good measure before the knife is pressed to my throat.

"Make her cry, Samael," the brute says to the man who undoes her hands, dragging her up by the hair. Her screams echo in the room.

"Kade. Oh, God!" She is hysterical, and I can do nothing about it. I press against the blade in my attempt to stand, and I feel the sting of it grazing my flesh.

He flings Aliana across the room, ripping my shirt off her. "I like it better like this," he says, "don't you?" The question is directed at me.

My eyes meet hers in the dim light. "It's just you and me," I mouth. Just

you and me.

TWELVE

ALIANA

SAMAEL PUSHES me to the ground.

“We want a little show,” he smirks down at me, and the look in his eyes makes my insides turn.

I have no idea what that means, but I know I’m going to hate it. He hands me something, and my eyes snap to him when I realize it’s a dildo.

He laughs at my expression. “Don’t tell me you haven’t used one,” he says. “I am not allowed to test the merchandise until my boss does, so this is the next best thing.”

I shake my head. “You fucking monster.” I whisper, looking down at the offensive object.

The weight of what he expects me to do is too much to bear, but I remind myself he hasn’t defiled me—yet.

My hands shake as I grip the thick, rubbery instrument. The bastard points a gun at me.

“No—” Kade’s protest is cut short when Ivan brings a knife to his throat.

“If she doesn’t do as she’s told, we end you both right here.” He runs the muzzle of the gun over my cheek. The icy metal sends shivers down my

spine.

“Make it good, or we spill his blood right here.” His words are cold.

Tremors run through my body as I position myself on the ground. “Go on...” the sick fucker taunts, motioning to the dildo. I place it at my entrance, my hands trembling, my stomach in knots.

The monster takes a few steps back into the shadows, and I make out the red light from a recorder, a video camera.

“Look at me,” Kade’s voice is like a salve on a wound that has already festered to the point that it needs surgery. “I would rather fucking die than let you do this,” he shouts. That earns him a kick by Ivan.

“Stp!” Don’t hurt him,” I say, defeated.

Something in me dies every second I am in this place and knowing what this man wants me to do, knowing that if I don’t, I am responsible not only for my fate but Kade’s too, shifts something inside me.

I turn the dildo on.

“Full power,” he commands, and I do what he tells me. The vibration causes my body to jiggle along with it. I feel nauseous at the traitorous way my body responds to the stimulus. Fear is a strange thing. I let the dildo rest at my entrance, my eyes anywhere but on Kade. I can’t see the look on his face watching me do something so intimate in front of these monsters.

“Ah, yeah, be a good little slut for us,” Samael’s deranged voice makes a tear slip down my cheek, trailing its way to my chin. I can hear the strain in Kade’s voice, begging me to look at him. But I can’t. I can’t see the pity.

I slowly push the instrument inside me. The intensity of the vibration makes my stomach twist. I don’t have to look at the piece of filth to know what he is doing. His grunts that fill the air are enough confirmation that he is getting off to me.

I close my eyes, pushing it in deeper, my body tensing and relaxing. My mind wanders to a better time, Kade hovering over me, Kade thrusting inside me. My toes curl from the feel of being filled by him, the man I love. I began

rocking my hips against the dildo, my eyes on Kade again. I let my body do all the work while keeping the dildo deep inside me.

This is sick. I am sick. But it is the only thing I can do to keep us alive.

Footsteps approach and my eyes snap to the monster. He works his length faster, calling me his little one, his little whore, and when he has seen enough, he slaps me across the face hard, twice. “Look how wet you are.” Then he comes on my face and breasts. His breaths come out in spurts.

He shoves his flaccid cock in his pants, and I fling the dildo away and throw up.

“Look what a filthy whore you are,” he kicks me in my ribs, walking out of the room, his minion following after.

THIRTEEN

KADE

THE RED LIGHT flashes in the dark. I count the seconds to keep sane, despite knowing every blink of the light, every sporadic switch of the dim light overhead means that one of those monsters will be coming. They'll hurt Aliana, and there is not a fucking thing I can do about it. I have struggled against my restraints until my wrists and ankles bled, shouted to the point where my voice is hoarse and unrecognizable, but I watch in defeat as they inflict one torture after the other on her. I've begged and pleaded, to no avail.

"Hey," I whisper in her direction. Her sobs have stopped, and I can make out the dark ball in the corner. "We're still here. We're gonna get out. It's you and me Aliana, you and me against the world."

She sniffs, but otherwise, nothing.

It's been about four days since they brought us in here, but I can't be sure. All I know is that the men holding us captive get more and more depraved every second they enter this room.

I am no stranger to pain. I have broken enough bones growing up as the Captain of the Football Team. I took beatings from my father to spare my mother, but this kind of pain is something I have never felt before. Every

time they look at her, each time they touch her, it sears me to the bone.

We heard women shouting yesterday, and then a metal door slamming. There are more of them here. This is some kind of operation. Bigger than just a chance kidnapping of a couple on the highway. She cried, and my heart broke that I could offer her nothing, no hope, no protection. I talk a big game, but I am forced to watch them break her.

“You remember the day you broke my nose?” I let out a mirthless chuckle. She seems to curl up even deeper into her corner. If she just looks at me, she’ll know she isn’t alone. I’d cut off a limb if I could take away what she’s been through.

I lean my head back against the cold cement of the wall behind me. My back aches from the iciness, but it’s all that’s teetering me to reality. “I called you a chimp because all you ever did was climb that tree in your front yard, staring out at the neighborhood. I even saw you climb that tree in the rain once and stay up there. I never knew what you did up there, and it annoyed me that you were so...free.” I bow my head.

“And so, I walked over there, called up to you and when you looked down at me, instead of telling you how beautiful your eyes were, or that my heart did a funny thing when I looked at you, I called you a little chimp.”

“We were twelve, chimp.” My voice cracks on that old nickname. One I haven’t used in what feels like forever.

“Eleven and a half.” Her voice is so small I wonder if I imagine it. Slowly, she uncurls herself. She groans, and I hate myself for even bringing it up. She scoots back against the wall, wrapping her arms around her knees. She shivers, her hair falls limply over her face and shoulders. “It feels like a long time ago, Kade.”

I can only just make her out in the dim lighting, my eyes taking in every single thing I possibly can. It flickers on and off, probably another form of torture.

The rattle of keys in the lock and the light is bright once again overhead,

which has us both shifting closer to the wall. The yellow glow makes me squint my eyes, and when I open them, my eyes find her glassy ones.

Oh, chimp, how I want you to be free again.

“Reminiscing, are we?” One of the fuckers says. He’s around our age, in a tailored suit. I know that the others are watching from another room. “We find these little chats entertaining. In fact, tonight we have some company, so you both better behave.”

He brings his gun out of its holster and waves it between us. There is the distinct sound of shuffling and footsteps from the speakers.

He crouches in front of Aliana. “Now, we need to clean you up before they see you. Can’t have this mess greet our guests, can we?”

She is silent. “Leave her the fuck alone.” I say through gritted teeth.

He stands and turns toward me, a sinister grin on his face. “Oh, I’m not going to touch her. She’s gonna be a good girl and clean herself up all on her own.” He taunts.

I thought I felt hate before. My father. My spineless mother. God. But nothing, nothing compares to what I feel now. Maggots festering and reproducing inside me.

The asshole turns on a faucet, and I gasp when the cold water hits me from above. My teeth chatter and my insides feel hollow. I look over at Aliana, and she’s silent. The cold stream cascades down her small form that seems to have shrunk since we were taken. *Eyes on me.* I silently beg, *don’t let them break you.* But as her vacant eyes stare at me from across the small cell, I know she’s left breaking point behind a long time ago.

When the water stops, the asshole laughs and stalks over to me with a syringe in his hands, and at this moment, I am not afraid for myself. What will happen to Aliana if I am out of it?

Whatever he injects me with burns. He stands, sneers down at me, then walks away. “Our clients want something unique and you two are going to give us that. But for now, we have some other pets to play with. Don’t go

anywhere,” he chuckles as he walks out of the room.

When we’re alone, she looks at me. “Those women. He’s talking about them, isn’t he?”

I nod. I want to tell Aliana that she can’t worry about the plight of others right now, but that would be like asking her to rip out her heart. Aliana is the most unselfish woman I know.

“We’re going to be okay.” I say, but I don’t really feel the conviction. I can’t make her these empty promises.

After a few minutes, I feel tired, woozy, like those moments before you fall asleep. But I can’t sleep. Aliana can’t be alone. So, I start to talk.

“Senior year...” my words trail off, “...it’s when I knew I’d love you for the rest of my life....”

Aliana looks at me in the dim light.

In our senior year, Aliana fell ill. She missed school, which was highly unlike her. I climbed into her window that afternoon, and one look at her discolored face had me carrying her over my shoulder and into my Jeep.

Turns out her appendix ruptured, and she hadn’t even complained about it. She figured it was period pain and just wanted to sleep it off. The doctors were utterly confused about how she could endure the level of pain a ruptured appendix puts the body through.

She got really sick in the days following the operation, so ill her mother was warned that her septicemia was spreading. It was the first time I felt real pain, and it hit me. I could not, no, would not, live another day without telling her how much she means to me. I sat at her bedside day and night, missing school myself. I couldn’t function knowing she was in pain and not knowing how to make it better.

“After the whole appendix scare, I became overly protective of you,” I force a laugh. Maybe that is an understatement because it got to a point where she had to tell me to back off.

“You were suffocating me.” She says in a small voice.

“Anyway, the gloves were off the day Elliot Spencer asked you out.”

“He released butterflies for me, Kade. How sweet was that? You were dating that cheerleader if you forgot.”

“That day I knew Elliot Spencer would not have you. Nobody would. Nobody could.”

I feel myself fading.

“Stay with me, Kade,” her voice suddenly sounds far away.

“I’M REALLY sorry about today, okay, I overreacted.” She casts me a sideward glance.

“Oh, you overreacted, did you?” She runs the brush in her hands through her hair with such force I wonder if it hurts.

“Aliana, he’s a fucking prick, and you know it.” I say.

“Elliot is the prick? And you pummeling him in the locker room after gym class makes you what?”

“A friend.”

She shakes her head, her eyes meeting mine in the mirror.

“Well, I could do with fewer friends like that. You should leave, Kade,” she says, getting up and opening her bedroom door. “Through the door this time.”

I have snuck through her bedroom window for as long as I can remember, but I have a feeling she won’t be leaving it unlatched in the future.

“You know what the funny thing is?” she scoffs. “You think you actually have a say in my life. We may be friends, but you will not tell me who I can or can’t date. If you hate the fact that I may be interested in some other guy, why don’t you grow a pair and do something about it, Kade, instead of hiding from emotions like a fucking coward,” she spits.

“So, leave, and you do you and I’ll do me.” She motions for me to leave. I cross the room, and when I’m inches from her, I reach up and swipe a stray

wet curl behind her shoulder. I don't miss the way her breath hitches. I could leave, but I like the glow behind those hazel orbs.

Before I overthink it, I slam the door closed and back her up against it.

"You're mine, Aliana. All fucking mine."

My lips crash against hers. I kiss her hard, and deep and she responds by moaning into my mouth, pulling onto my jacket to bring me closer to her. Her mouth opens greedily, and I slide my tongue over hers, hoisting her up until she wraps her thighs around my waist. She was made for me. Fuck! Aliana tastes like sweet sin. How could I have waited this long?

Our kiss seems to last forever, and when we eventually come up for air, she's out of breath, and her lips are swollen. I set her on her feet but don't move away. Instead, I run the pad of my thumb over her bottom lip.

"I think I just grew a pair," I whisper, my fingers trailing down and running over her collarbone.

"About fucking time," she smirks, her hands finding the nape of my neck and tugging me down to meet her lips again.

MY HEAD FEELS like lead when I try to lift it. A ringing in my ears grates on my nerves. I open my eyes, and the yellow light is now a dim red glow. I can hear breathing next to me, but I must be dreaming. Fever dreams are common in these scenarios. "Wake up, Kade," she whispers, and it takes me a second to come back to the present. I jolt upright, surprised that my hands and legs aren't bound to the wall but to a chain that runs across the floor. They undressed me while I was out.

I turn, and my heart gallops at the sight of her. A wet, shivering mess, but she's inches from me. I want to cover her nakedness with my own.

"How long was I out for?"

"Not long," she whispers. "They're watching."

I hear the sound of laughter and look around. We're alone again, but not quite. I know that beyond the glass, they are there, watching our every move, listening to every single word we say.

I try to stand, but I'm slammed back by the restraints.

"TSK. TSK. TSK," the familiar voice taunts. "Now, for our entertainment tonight, you're going to play a scene for us. If my guests like it, you live. If they don't, well, let's just say that you don't want to find out."

I turn toward Aliana, my eyes meeting hers. "What the fuck does he mean?"

She shrugs and sinks back against the wall. The bruises on her skin, visible even in this lighting, make my stomach churn.

"You don't want us to demonstrate now, do you? You still remember how to fuck your girl."

My eyes widen. "I won't. I won't fucking do it!" Spittle splashes from my mouth as I yell at them.

"You have to, Kade. It can't be them...." She says softly, her voice void of emotion, trailing off.

She shifts a little, so she can fall back on the floor. I am not a man who cries easily, but this takes every ounce of my restraint.

"I can't. Not here. Not with them watching."

The rattling of the door has my head spinning. Two men walk in. "Well, Pussy, if you're not gonna entertain us, I guess, we're gonna have to make do with another kind of game."

"No!" I shout as the men approach. I turn toward her. "I'll do it," I growl. The men laugh. I glare at them as I hover over her body. Her eyes meet mine for just a second, but then she turns away as I settle between her thighs. It's strange how an act that is like breathing to us now feels like a death sentence.

She turns her head away from me, her body trembling with sobs. "Look at

me.” I urge.

When she doesn't. I grip her cheeks between my fingers, forcing her to look at me. I beg her to forgive me. I beg her to trust me. I beg her to believe that I'll be with her no matter what happens.

It doesn't matter where we are. We're here together.

My cock refuses to co-operate with me, and I feel her hands slip between us, grasping me in her hands. It only takes a few strokes, and I'm hard enough to fuck her.

Intimacy has never been a challenge for us, yet here we are, like strangers fumbling in the dark. The body I've become so accustomed to lies rigid and unresponsive beneath me.

“Only you,” I whisper against her ear as I enter her slowly.

She cries out, and I know it's from pain so much deeper than I can imagine.

FOURTEEN

ALIANA

I WANT to be transported somewhere, anywhere, but here. I can feel their eyes on me. The monsters lurking behind those tinted glass windows. I can hear Kade. I can feel him, but I can't bring myself to look at him. He thrusts into me, telling me about the first time he made love to me. I want to see it all the way he does, but I can't. All I know is that these monsters have taken everything sacred and tainted it. I can feel myself breaking, fading away into the abyss. I hear Kade call out to me, but I'm numb. An empty vessel.

He's taunted to fuck me in ways that meet their sick needs. I gag at the thought of them jerking off to this.

After what seems like hours, which is likely less, Kade growls, stiffens above me, his body rigid and taut, and when he slams into me hard, pouring himself into me, my mind goes blank. The sound of men laughing has tears streaming down my face.

"I'm so fucking sorry," he says against my neck.

I say nothing.

He has nothing to be sorry for. He saved me just by doing that. If it hadn't been him one of them would have done it.

They open the door, and I hear a woman scream. “Another little pet needing attention,” he says casually, and it makes me sick to the gut. “Enjoy each other while you can, because tomorrow I’m not gonna be so kind.”

Kade wraps his body around me once they have left, and I let myself take his comfort. The lights go out a few minutes later.

“I am so sorry,” he continues, whispering against my ear. “When we get out of here, they’re going to pay. Every last one of them.”

I can’t see the light at the end of this godforsaken tunnel.

I am losing track of time as the days fade into each other.

I haven’t felt the sun on my face in what feels like forever. When you’re in a situation like the one Kade and I are in, you realize how much of the small things in life we often take for granted. Knowing we may never see the light again is like a dagger in my chest.

Does my mother know I’m missing? Do his parents? Did Gaby alert the authorities? Are they looking for us? I feel a tear slip from my eyes, and I shut them, not wanting to feel more than I should. This is my life now.

I used to pride myself on my resilience. I have never been a person who gives up or shifts responsibility. I guess I have my mother to thank for that.

When my parents divorced after my father’s sordid and often open affairs, my mother broke. It is the only way to describe it. It was a slow process. Loneliness crippled her, so she sought solace at the bottom of the bottle. When she became immune to the effects of alcohol, she moved on to men who did nothing but use her. My mother was pretty well off financially after the divorce settlement. I never wanted anything but her affection and a little respect. I grew up pretty fast without it.

My father never even tried to be in my life. We’d heard he remarried a twenty-one-year-old. We marked the close of a chapter in his life. So yeah, I am pretty resilient.

But lying in this cell, often in darkness, did something to me. I can feel myself shatter with every passing second.

A week. That is how long it's been, and every night since the night they watched Kade fuck me, they've had a different masked man come into the cell and *inspect* me. I guess I should be grateful there have been no takers as yet. Most want their girls younger. That angers Samael as if it is my fault. Like I asked for him to take me. It doesn't stop them from violating me.

The monsters give us bathroom breaks, always separately and lately blindfolded. I think it's because of the other captives.

We're still in the warehouse, and I don't see an end in sight. They throw us scraps, bread, and half-eaten sandwiches. We drink water when we take a cold shower.

"How long can they keep this up?" Kade's voice is no longer like a balm. It's a painful reminder. He still screams and swears until his voice is raw when they come near me. I have stopped trying to get the monsters to see reason. Let us go.

"As long as they want," I say.

"We were happy, weren't we? For a long time."

I close my eyes, lean my head against the wall. "We were."

"So, what happened?"

I let out a small laugh, shaking my head. I look over to where I know he is. Even though I can't see him, I feel his eyes on me.

"We got too comfortable. We stopped talking." I say honestly.

We stopped talking, and it drove us apart. It drove me to confide in a man who wasn't my partner and drove Kade into the arms of another woman.

"I have to tell you something," he says. He lets out an audible sigh.

I don't know what he wants to tell me or if I have the energy to take it.

"I never slept with Ashley."

I laugh, and the sound seems foreign. I can't believe that he would choose now of all times to lie to me.

"I walked in on you two, remember."

"I let you believe that is what you walked into, because that is what you

wanted to hear. You wanted me to be the villain so much, you wouldn't have believed me anyway. Yes, I flirted with her. I was wrong to do that, but that night at the Christmas Party, I was drunk, wandered into my office, and there she was waiting." He takes a deep breath.

"I called you to pick me up just before that. That is how drunk I was. And Ashley quite literally climbed in my lap and started kissing me when you walked in. I barely had time to react when I saw you."

"Bullshit," I hiss. "If you were not fucking her, why didn't you come home that night? Why was your phone off?"

"I saw you at the door, but you were already walking away when I shoved her off me. I tried to follow, but fuck, I was so fucking intoxicated, I had to head to the bathroom to throw up."

He falls silent. "Justin found me there, took me to his place."

"Why did it take you this long to tell me about it?" It makes no fucking sense. If he didn't cheat, why the fuck wouldn't he clear it up?

"Would you have believed me if I did?" He asks, his voice breaking.

"I don't know," I say honestly. "I don't. But I wouldn't have spent so much time despising you."

"I thought about it, but then you were meeting with Ethan again," he says. "I mean, I knew you two met a few times after he left the studio, that you were still close, but when I got home and heard you crying on the phone, talking to him about how unhappy you were. I figured it didn't matter what the truth was. Maybe everything happens for a reason."

Ethan, the man I let myself get too close to. The truth is that all relationships have dips, and sometimes we take the first escape we can get. Ethan was a little too friendly, too attentive, and when he made a move on me a year before everything happened with Kade and me, we agreed he should take the opportunity he had lined up out of town. But we never stopped keeping in touch, and some of those conversations were bordering on inappropriate.

When I saw Kade with that woman at the party, the thought of losing myself with Ethan crossed my mind. I just couldn't do it when it came down to it.

"You should have said something." I let out a sigh. "So much of what we have to say is lost in the silences we allow to fill the space between us."

I start to doodle on my thighs, and I still my movements, "Kade, I-I wrote down the license plate...." My heart thuds in my chest. How could I forget that?

"What license plate?"

"When they pulled up behind me on the road, I wrote their plate in my doodle pad. I don't know why, but I just did."

"If it's in the car, they probably towed it here and it's not gonna be of any help to us."

"That's the thing. I had it outside the car. When I got out. It must have gotten lost in the struggle."

"Maybe someone will find it. Gail must be worried if you miss your lunch dates. My mom, too. You had that photoshoot, remember...Gaby must have told someone."

"I don't want to hope, Kade. It hurts too much."

"Hey, we're gonna get out of this. I'm gonna take you for ice-cream at that old diner you like."

I let myself smile. "Strawberry lime." I say.

"Yeah, and I'll love every bite."

He won't. The last time he tried it, he almost threw up. "Maybe you can put some chocolate fudge sauce on it."

He chuckles. I missed that sound. "I love you, chimp. Always have and always will. I promise you, when we get out of here, I'm gonna be the man you need me to be. The man you deserve."

I sigh. "I want to go home, Kade. I want a puppy. I know I said I didn't, but I want one."

“Anything. Everything.”

My eyes sting from the tears I don't want to set free. All this talk about what our life will be like when we escape makes my chest hurt.

My wrists ache, my body is battered and bruised, but my heart is in the worst state yet.

THE SOUND of the door opening has my gaze snapping in that direction. The overhead light comes on, and Ivan walks in. He's a brute of a man, with dark hate-filled eyes. The brief lightness from earlier is doused by his presence.

Ivan, like his brothers, isn't wearing a mask and has a bottle of alcohol swinging in his hand. He staggers over to me. It makes me wonder if there is any chance for us.

He walks over to me and takes a seat on a chair. “They might not like what they see, but I do.” He runs his tongue along his bottom lip, and the sight makes me gag inwardly.

He leans closer, and I scoot as close to the wall as I can. My eyes flitting to Kade.

“Stay the fuck away from her?” He growls, the clank of his chain against the pipe rings in the cell.

“Or what?” Ivan laughs.

The brute stands and stalks closer to me. A predator circling his prey. “Such a pretty toy.”

The sound of his belt buckle has me tugging on my own restraints, and it only makes him laugh harder.

“Don't come near me,” I shout.

In one swift motion, his hands are tugging the hair at the back of my head. I try to pull away, but it only seems to excite him more. I know that this

time is different. There is no coming back from this. I am about to experience another kind of torture.

When he shoves his cock in my mouth, I immediately gag at the disgusting foreignness of it. “Bite me and you fucking die, whore!” He barks.

“Fucking piece of shit!” Kade’s voice breaks through my ordeal. “I’ll fucking kill you!”

He laughs as he continues to use my mouth. My eyes water, and saliva leaks from my mouth. His grunts and tugging on my hair finally bring up bile. I feel the minimal contents of my stomach burn through my esophagus. And when I retch, he slaps my face so hard I fall to the ground, my body wrenching.

“Disgusting bitch!” He kicks me in my ribs, and I fall back, the pain coursing through me.

He shoves his disgusting dick in his pants and opens the cold water. I cough and splutter.

“You’re gonna pay for that.” He spits. “So, fucking bad.”

I turn to the wall, letting the icy water cascade over me, freezing my skin and my senses. I try to cover myself from his gaze, but it’s no use. Death would be a better sentence than this hell.

When he thinks I’m clean enough, he shuts the water off, drags me to a dry patch, and shoves me roughly to the ground. I grab hold of the shirt Kade gave me on our first night here and cover myself up.

My entire body tenses at the sound of his buckles, and when he strikes me for the first time, I let out a howl.

Kade protests, screaming and yelling profanities at Ivan, begging to take the punishment. The second strike feels like it’s cut through the skin on my back. The third time he hits me, it feels like I’m on fire. And just when I think he’s had enough, he shoves me onto my back and positions himself between my thighs. My whole world tilts off-axis. I struggle and squirm, trying to get him off me, but it falls on deaf ears.

“Whore’s need to be taught a lesson.” He spits, glaring down at me.
“Unlike my brothers, I don’t care about sampling the goods before the boss.”

He enters me with brute force

"So fucking tight," he grunts.

My brain tells me to scream, say no, and do something, but I can’t. I can’t feel anything anymore. I feel myself fading. He keeps going increasing pressure. He stills for a moment before thrusting violently in and out of me in a punishing rhythm.

The sound of Kade’s obscenities, Ivan’s grunts and groans, and all feeling in my body evaporates. There is only a dark abyss waiting for lost souls like me. My body aches from his assault, his hands grab and dig, and I lie there motionless, a body without a soul.

When he’s done with me, he turns on the water again, and I shiver but say nothing. I don’t think I will ever be able to say another fucking thing.

At this moment, I know it’s possible to die while still alive.

FIFTEEN

KADE

I HAVE ALWAYS BEEN protective of Aliana. When we fought, and she wouldn't talk to me, I would still check if she was at the studio, even if it was through Gaby. So being bound, having to watch as they humiliate and abuse her, makes me sick to the stomach. He finally defiled her, right before my eyes, and it makes me wonder if I am a man at all?

My father was a piece of shit. He thought that being the sole breadwinner, providing a lifestyle and all the things we wanted, gave him the right to hurt his family. He'd hit my mother, and when I got older and got in the way, I was on the receiving end of that wrath. I told myself that I would never be that man. I would protect my wife and children if I ever had any. I would be better, stronger, and more secure in myself as a person.

So watching helplessly as the woman I love is being broken cuts deep. Rage burns like an inferno deep inside me. This is my torture. At times, it feels like they have forgotten I am even here. They enjoy my pain. It thrills them. They beat me for it. My face has seen the toe of many of their boots, and I probably have a fractured rib, but it is nothing compared to what they are putting Aliana through.

I meant every word I said to her. Every single one. I will be better *when* we get out of here. I will make them pay, one way or another.

“Aliana.” She’s been quiet since that monster left. So quiet I’m afraid that she will never speak again. “Don’t let them take your soul, Aliana.”

It is easy for me to say. I am not the one they target every single day to act out their depraved fantasies.

When I finally claimed Aliana as mine, I knew that wherever she went, I’d follow. When she decided to apply to NYU, I did too. They had a brilliant art program, and with her being so interested in photography, there were no two ways about it. I could study business wherever I went to school. We both got in as luck would have it. Fate, she called it.

Moving to the city was something we both always wanted to do after graduating from college. We spoke about what we’d do when we got there, together. She’d take photos, and I’d be a CEO of a major corporation. She’s doing what she loves, and I may not be a CEO, but being an accounts executive for a software company suits me just fine. Not much has changed. I will follow her anywhere. As dark as the depths get, I’ll be there.

We were happy until we let misunderstandings and miscommunication tear us apart. I won’t let that happen again.

I feel my eyes closing as I lie on the floor. I need to stay awake. I need to be present. Here.

The sound of the door again has my eyes flying open. They don’t put the light on, but in the darkness, the fuckers come in. Two of them. I can tell by their heavy footsteps and whispers.

I have never been a religious man, but I pray with everything in me that they leave her alone. One of them grasps my arm in the darkness. “What the fuck...” A sting against my neck is the only proof I’m being injected. I swing out my arm that isn’t cuffed and connect with one of their legs. The man punches me in the face, and I don’t even see it coming.

Aliana screams, and I try to kick out again.

“Leave me alone! Where are you taking me?” Her voice shakes. What are they doing to her?

“Aliana!” I shout when I hear them dragging her toward the door. “No!”

“You aren’t gonna see your little whore again,” One of the fuckers says.

I yell her name, but there’s no response. They probably sedated her. I feel myself fading, my eyes fluttering closed, my breathing slowing. I try to hold on to consciousness, but it’s a losing battle.

The darkness comes, and it swallows me whole.

I will fight for you till my last breath. You hear me, Aliana? With my last fucking breath.

SIXTEEN

ALIANA

I WAKE UP IN A DAZE, groggy and slightly disorientated. I struggle to keep my eyes open. I look up and see myself reflected on the ceiling.

Mirrors.

How did I get here?

The woman strapped to a table with leather belts is unrecognizable. There are bruises on my arms, torso, and face. My hair falls limply around me.

One argument. One angry drive. One wrong move.

It hits me all at once. They came last night in the dark, drugged me, and brought me here. I try to speak, but there is something in my mouth, a gag.

There are several men around me. Not just the beastly brothers. I can't see their faces because my eyes won't focus, and they have masks covering their faces. My eyes focus on the wall on one side, where two girls are tied. They're young, no older than eighteen. They're scared as they watch me.

"This is a fine piece, Samael, worth the million you asked for. I would have given you more if she was a virgin, and not so battered and bruised. What have you been doing to her?" He laughs. He's older, his hair salt and pepper.

“She’s a feisty one,” Samael answers. “And that is why we’ve brought your other prizes to watch what happens to the disobedient.” They look over in the direction of the girls and laugh.

The man’s face comes into focus. He’s so close. Too close. His cold hands rest on my cheeks. “*Bonjour, ma chérie,*” he says in a low tone. I don’t like it. His hands travel down over my breast, and I buck off the table, the straps digging into my wrists.

“Shh, *Je suis là,* I am your Master now,” he whispers. Having him in the room, with his hands on my body, should bring me some comfort.

“My brothers and I are going to have so much fun with you,” he says, his eyes moving around the room. “Let’s see how many of us this pussy can take.” He thrusts what feels like two fingers into me. The brutality of it makes me cry out against the gag in my mouth. Tears slide down my cheeks as the men advance on me.

I need Kade. I need him to tell me to hang in there. My thread is fraying, and I don’t know how much longer it will take to completely disintegrate. The men start removing their black robes, an assortment of bodies now on display, their hands wrapped around their hard-ons. It is disgusting, and I feel like throwing up. I struggle again, and it only excites the man who bought me. He shoves another finger inside me. I can hear myself screaming, but I know there is no sound. The other men laugh, stroking themselves.

Cameras are perched around the bed. “Many people want to see this, *ma chérie.* They’ve paid a good price for this showing.”

If what he is doing to me isn’t enough, what they intend to, I realize I am about to be gang-raped live on camera.

One man holds a knife to my neck. There’s a slight sting, and I know he’s drawn blood.

“We don’t want to keep you, princess. When we’ve all taken a turn in every hole you have, I’m going to enjoy slitting this pretty throat and fucking that wound.” His laugh is sinister, and his eyes hold a dark promise.

No. No. No.

No.

Kade. Come for me.

SEVENTEEN

KADE

I OPEN my eyes to complete silence and darkness.

“Aliana!” The overhead light has been left on.

To my surprise, my hands are free. I rub my wrists and stand on shaky legs.

A small monitor has been set in the corner of the room, and I stagger toward it.

“Aliana!” My hands slam against my mouth. She’s tied on a bed, surrounded by men. Maybe a dozen of them.

I cross the room to the door and try the handle. It’s locked. Why did I think it wouldn’t be? My hands are free, but I am fucking powerless to get to her.

I beat on the door, over and over again, until there was no feeling in my hands.

Every hit on this door is one of these bastards. Beating on the door, my knuckles become bloody, but I don’t stop. I can’t. Not when she needs me. My breathing is ragged as I slide my back down the door and sit on the ground to catch my breath.

I figured there was no God a long fucking time ago, watching my mother try to salvage her bust and bloodied face in our bathroom instead of going to the hospital. Hearing my father beat her, then force himself on her when he got home after a drunken night out. Watching her lie repeatedly, that she fell, was clumsy, in an accident, all in a bid to protect the man who hurt her. He was an upstanding gentleman, a pillar of integrity in the community, a man of faith. My father. The fucking cunt!

But right now, I want there to be a God up there. I want someone to protect Aliana. I need to rely on anything that isn't me.

I slip to the ground, unable to look at that screen again. Unable to even fathom the atrocities they are doing to Aliana.

I want it all with her. The house, the dog, children even.

I manage to drag myself up, staggering over to the monitor. Those fuckers will pay for this. I let out a guttural roar just as the cell door swings open. Ivan stands in the doorway, a smug look on his face.

“Enjoying the show?” The asshole asks, sauntering into the room. My eyes never leave his. “Time to go,” He says, holding up a knife toward me. We're the same height. He may have a few pounds on me, but I can take him. Before overthinking it, I lunge for the hand that holds the blade, catching his wrist. He throws a blow to my rib, but not before I bend his wrist. A roar leaves his mouth, and I use the fact that he's in pain to twist his arm behind his back and shove him against the wall.

“Not so tough man to man, are you?” I say, my breath coming out in puffs. I grab the chain on the wall with one hand, and I have it wrapped around his neck in seconds. He shoves against me, but I have him pinned with one hand, the other twisting the chains until I feel the skin on my own hand cut.

“Motherfucker—”

His words are cut short with one more twist of the chain. He breaks his hand free, bringing it up to his neck, but it's no use. His chokes and gurgles

fill the air. Ivan reaches back, trying to claw at me. I don't see him anymore. I see Aliana, helpless, broken, used by these fuckers. I hear his neck snap. I feel him going slack in my hands, but I hold on until beads of sweat drip down my face.

I fling his filthy corpse to the ground, bending to rummage through his pockets. I find a Glock, some cash, but no cellphone. My dirty jeans are discarded in a corner, and I slip it on. Glancing at the monitor, I know I don't have much time. If I can make it out of here, I may find a phone and dial 911.

I shove the gun into my back pocket. I can't wait when Aliana is in that room with those monsters. I cast one look at the monitor, and I'm bolting out of the cell. I walk down the corridor that leads to the bathrooms. I hear voices and follow the sound. Two men stand guard outside the door. One is smoking what smells like a joint, the other is scrolling through his phone. They don't see me coming. I grab the guy smoking the joint and bring the knife up to his throat. "You're gonna pay for this," he spits.

"Shut up!" I hiss.

I press the blade against his skin. "Put your weapon on the ground and don't make a fucking sound." I tell his partner.

Instead of doing as he's told, he brings his pistol up and points it directly at me. "You really think this is a good idea?" He smirks.

"As good an idea as any," I spit. His finger rests on the trigger, and for a moment, I think he's going to shoot. Instead, he places the gun down. His buddy takes a second to connect his fist below with my solar plexus. I stumble backward, winded, the knife still in my hand.

They both advance on me, and I notice they haven't done anything to alert anyone to my presence. I swing my arm forward, the blade in my hand connecting with the first guy's side. He growls and lurches for me, tackling me to the ground, raining punches down on me.

Unlike with the fuckers who took us, I expect it and grip his throat, flipping us, so I'm straddling him. I bring the knife handle down on his

temple, and his head lulls to the side. His partner is on me, dragging me backward, a gun to my head.

The sound of several footsteps approaching has him whipping his head to the side, and I hear words I have never been so happy to hear, “Police, drop your weapon.”

He uses me as a shield, backing up toward the door I know Aliana is behind.

“If you come any closer, I’ll blow his head off.”

The officers don’t budge. Their weapons still pointed at us. “I don’t see this going well for you. Let him go and place your hands behind your head.” He drops his hand slowly, sobs leave me as I fall to the ground on my knees. Several officers storm into the space, their weapons pointed at the man on the ground next to me and me.

“They have her,” I manage to say. “They have her!” I shout as they press me to the ground and cuff my hands behind my back. “Please, just listen to me.”

“You have a right to remain silent. Anything you say can and will be used against you in a court of law,” they recite from memory either to me or the piece of shit in cuffs next to me. Unfortunately, they have not lived the last few weeks in this hellhole, having to watch the things I have, having to do the things I have done. I don’t fear their words.

“In there,” I yell, and thankfully one of them listens to my plea and walks over to the door. I lay my head on the ground, defeated and too exhausted to continue.

“Find her, please, before it’s too late.”

“Identify yourself,” a female officer demands.

“Kade. Kade James. My girlfriend, Aliana Kingsley, and I...we were taken by those men in there.” The words feel like a lead weight being cast from me.

I try to push myself up, but another officer holds me down. “Calm down,

Mr. James. We're going to get to her, but you have got to stay put for a while."

I nod my head. "They have other women in the warehouse. I don't know how many or where they are, but we heard them shouting for help."

I listen to them speak amongst themselves, but my mind is racing too much to focus on anything.

Someone helps me up and leads me away.

"Wait. You have to get Aliana," I try to push against them, but it's no use.

"Let us do our job," One of the male officers tells me, throwing a blanket over my shoulders.

They lead me into the night. The sound of gunshots rings out behind me, shouting fills the air, and sirens greet me as I'm rushed away from the warehouse. I can barely suck in air fast enough. I bend at the waist, my hands on my knees as I try to even out my breathing. I won't be okay until I have her in my arms.

EIGHTEEN

ALIANA

WHEN I WAS little and my parents fought, I'd crawl under my bed, pretending that I was in an alternate reality. I could see the places I imagined so vividly. It was as if I was right there, in a fairy castle surrounded by unicorns and pixies. It's where my love for capturing beautiful things began.

And so I take myself to another place, where men aren't touching my body in the most obscene way. Where a man is not prying my legs open, ready to take my dignity and self-respect. I picture Kade, the first time we made love. Homecoming. He'd danced with me all night, then got us a carriage to drive us to a hotel. Not the cheap motel the rest of the boys were taking their dates, but a four-star place paid with his summer job money. Kade, with his dark unruly hair and soft brown eyes. Kade, whose kisses still make me see stars and whose laugh still gives me butterflies. My Kade.

The sound of shouts, gunshots, the word *police* brings me back to the present. The man is being dragged off me. Officers swarm in. The monsters pull out weapons, and I am caught in the crossfire, unable to breathe, unable to move. There is too much commotion around me. The shots are too loud. I stare at it all in the ceiling mirror, and it plays like a movie in front of me. My

hands are still restrained. I don't know what is real and in my head anymore. I can't tell if the police are winning this war or if my monsters will find a way to destroy them and finish what they started.

Maybe this is all in my head. Maybe I want to be saved so badly I am hallucinating like a mirage in the desert. Maybe they've already killed me, drained the life from me, bit by bit.

My ears ring, and then the noise fades. I close my eyes. I am not in this godforsaken place waiting for an absolution that may never come.

Instead, I'm eighteen, sipping champagne for the first time with Kade James in that expensive hotel room.

I feel heady and so fucking happy I think I might be floating.

"WE DON'T HAVE TO," he whispers. His voice is breathy, his hands tremble as they rest on my breast. It's strange how he's touching me, hovering over me, but holds his body up, so his weight isn't on me. I feel my own lips tremble when he looks down at me. All of me. Bared just for him.

"I want to. I've been waiting for this moment for a long time, Kade James."

He brushes his lips against mine. "Tell me what you want."

"Love me," I moan, grinding my hips, needing the friction.

"I fucking do." Kade's lips crash against mine. This kiss is different, more needy. His tongue dives into my mouth, dueling with mine. My hands tug at the hair at the nape of his neck as I bring him closer, needing to feel so much more than he's giving me right now.

He kisses a trail from my earlobe, down my neck, and across my collar bone, leaving goosebumps in his wake.

When he latches onto my nipple, I moan at the warmth of his mouth. His hands roam the contours of my body in a way he is already so familiar with. And when he dips his hands between my thighs, I let out a breath. He's

touched me many times, brought me to my peak, but this time feels different. It feels like so much more.

Kade looks down at me, and in his eyes, I see myself the way he sees me.

“Beautiful, you are so beautiful.”

I gasp as a finger enters me, and he rubs slow, sensual circles on my sensitive clit. If he keeps doing that, I’m going to come undone right now.

Just as I am reaching the precipice, he withdraws his fingers, reaching up and sucking on them.

“I have never tasted anything this good,” he smirks down at me. My cheeks are on fire.

When he climbs down my body, peppering kisses on my stomach and hips, I nearly lose it again. My hands tangle in his hair, tugging at it slowly.

Crouched before me, Kade trails his tongue from my calf to my inner thigh, driving me fucking mad. He spreads me open with his fingers and flicks his tongue across my clit. “Like that?” he asks.

“Mmm…” That’s all I can manage.

Kade’s fingers dig into my thighs, spreading me wide. I lift my ass off the bed, needing him to suck me harder.

He traces his name with his tongue inside me. The letters K-A-D-E. “Mine.” He growls. I am so wet, and the ache and need to come is almost painful.

“I need to come.”

“I’m not done eating,” he smirks and dives right in, both hands now grabbing my ass as he feasts like a starved man.

This side of Kade is new. I briefly wonder if other girls have had this too, if they were more experienced than me.

He must see something on my face because he stops. “You, okay?”

I nod.

“I love you, Aliana. I love you.”

Kade slides his tongue inside me, sucking me until my toes curling and

my moans could probably hear the next room over. I cry out as he bites down on my clit lightly.

“Fuck me. Fuck me, please,” I don’t recognize this needy, wanton mess I am.

Kade rises, and when he’s on his knees between my legs, he leans over and reaches under my pillow. He rips the condom packet between his teeth, and it is probably the sexiest thing I have ever seen.

Spreading my legs wide, he pauses at my entrance, kisses me once more, and then slides into me so slowly I can feel him stretch my walls. When he pushes further, my breath catches in my throat. It fucking hurts like a bitch. I close my eyes, bite my bottom lip to stop from screaming. My hands tremble. He stills, and I groan as I adjust to his fucking big cock.

“You alright?” He says breathlessly.

He slides out and repeats the motion. This time it aches, but it’s also so good I let out a moan.

“Look at me, Aliana. Look at me as I make you mine.”

He starts moving slowly at first. “You feel so good,” I moan.

“Fuck, Aliana. I need to move, baby.” And his movements pick up pace. I feel so beautifully stretched. Each time he enters me, it hurts a little less.

I dig my fingernails into his back, and it seems to drive him off the edge because he thrusts harder into me.

“Make me come, please!” Kade slams into me then, and I understand what I’ve been missing. This completeness.

“Oh, my god!” I cry out, wrapping myself around his body.

If it’s even possible, he grows bigger inside me. I lift my hips and start to meet his hard thrusts. Our bodies move together like they were made to do just this, caress, collide, consume. When I come, I see stars calling his name like a banshee.

I feel him pulse inside me, and his body shudders. My name on his lips sounds like a prayer.

He falls onto his back breathlessly. “One minute okay,” he says, kissing my cheek. I watch him stroll into the bathroom. He returns with a warm cloth and takes my breath away once again when he reaches between my legs to clean me up. I feel my face heat up. “It’s my job to take care of my girl.”

He curls an arm around me until I’m on his chest, also out of breath and satiated. Kade strokes my back with a tenderness I have never experienced before.

“I will always love you, Aliana.”

He places a kiss on the side of my head, and I curl into him.

“ALIANA? ALIANA KINGSLEY?” A woman’s voice drags me back. I don’t want to be here. I don’t want the gray fleece blanket they have thrown on me. I don’t want to come back to this place.

“I’m officer Keaton. This is officer Barnes. Ma’am, we need to get you to an ambulance.”

I turn my head and look at the older woman’s face. She’s old enough to be my mother, but she’s calling me ma’am. They’re dressed in uniforms. The younger woman, Barnes, doesn’t meet my eyes. Pity.

“Ms. Kingsley!” Officer Keaton says again.

I can’t respond because if I do, all this becomes real. It’s not. Not real at all. I am dreaming.

“I’d like to help you get into these,” she holds a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and while she holds the blanket out to shield me from the rest of the room, I numbly follow her instructions and slip the clothes over my small frame.

I look around me, and the first thing I see is vacant eyes staring back at me. Samael. He’s lying on the floor in a pool of blood, a gun in his hand. There are others on the ground, two men in uniforms, others cloaked.

“Is he? Are they?”

She lets out a breath. “He’s dead. We still have to identify some of them.”

I nod and let her lead me through the crowd of officers, onto a waiting gurney, down a corridor, and into the cool night. I suck in a breath, long and deep.

Red and blue light up the night sky. From my place on the gurney, it looks almost magical, a light show just for me. I focus on that and not on the sound of sirens and the voices. So loud. So close. Gunshots still ring in my ears.

A paramedic on one side of me offers me a small smile. Officer Keaton says something to him. It’s inaudible. Her presence soothes me, but I feel like I am forgetting something.

Kade always told me I had the memory of an elephant. *Kade!*

“Where’s Kade? He was there. I have to see, Kade.”

“He’ll be right behind us, I assure you,” she says.

Officer Keaton nods to the paramedic, then looks at me. “Julian here is gonna take good care of you,” I look between her and the medic. “I’ll go check on Mr. James, and see you at the hospital, okay?”

“No,” I shake my head. “I won’t go with him.” I can’t be alone with him, is what I am not saying. I don’t trust him. I don’t trust anyone. I start to sit up, but her hands rest on my shoulders gently.

“He’s a medic, Ms. Kingsley. Nobody’s gonna hurt you. You’re safe now.”

“I am not safe!” My pulse quickens, and my head spins. I spring up, pushing her aside, throwing off the thin cotton blanket draped on me. I’m barefoot in the gray sweatpants and t-shirt officer Keaton had me dress in.

“I won’t go!” I yell. “Don’t you see? I will never be safe!”

“You have to see a doctor, Ms. Kingsley,” Officer Barnes says in that voice that tells me she’ll strap me to that gurney if I don’t move.

“I want to go with her.” My head turns at the sound of his voice, and I’m

across the small space between us and in his arms in a few seconds. I wrap myself around his frame and let him hold me.

“Shh, it’s alright baby, I’m here.” This time when Kade says it, it feels different. It feels nice. He pulls me up against his broad frame, wrapping me in his warmth. And this is about the only place I want to be. Sobs wrack through me, and I let out a guttural sound. He whispers in my ear, “Only you, it’s all I see.”

Kade rides with me in the ambulance. He’s wearing clothing that matches mine. One side of his face is bruised, almost purple in the lighting in the ambulance, cuts on his lips and above his eye, but he has never looked more handsome. His eyes are sad or scared, maybe a combination of both. He is scared of what they’ve done to me.

“You’re okay.” He says and takes my hand.

“I’m going to put up a drip,” the medic tells me, and I shake my head.

“No! No! No!” I shout, trying to sit up.

“It’s just something for the pain.” The medic, Julian, tells me.

“Can she have oral medication for now?” Kade asks, and the medic nods sympathetically. They hook Kade up to a drip. He’s propped in a seat instead of lying down.

“We’re going to be alright.” Kade’s voice is soft, and he brings my hand up to his lips.

I feel myself slipping, exhaustion and relief flooding through me.

We were found. But the relief is slowly replaced with crushing anxiety that has me gasping as I fall and fall into a dark abyss. My chest hurts. I can hear Kade’s voice in the distance, calling for me to hold on. I can’t. It’s all too much. The pressure in my chest gets more intense, and I finally give in and let myself drown.

NINETEEN

KADE

IVAN STANDS at the foot of my bed. The marks around his neck were prominent from the chains I used to strangle him. “Thought you got rid of me, did ya?” He laughs.

I try to move, but my hands and legs are bound. “Help!”

“Nobody’s gonna help you,” he says, rounding the bed. “It’s just you and me, and when I’m done with you, I’m going after the little one.”

He’s inches from me now. His hands grip my throat, and he squeezes.

I wake up in sweats, my breathing ragged. Incessant beeping rakes on my nerves. I lift my hand and swipe a sheen of sweat off my forehead. It was a fucking nightmare. He’s gone. They’re gone. I focus on the sound of voices in the distance. The light is harsh, a welcome reprieve from the darkness I’d become accustomed to. Aliana had a panic attack in the ambulance and had to be sedated. Seeing her so scared crushed me.

Officer Keaton appears at the door, “Good, you’re up. How are you feeling?” She’s a tall older woman, slender, with graying hair tied in a knot at the nape of her neck. I recall her checking in on me throughout the night as I slipped in and out of consciousness. The medication they gave me was

supposed to help me sleep, but all I felt was restless.

“Better than I did last night,” I say honestly, sitting up in my bed.

She nods and settles in the chair next to my bed. “Mr. James, I know you and Ms. Kingsley have been through an ordeal. But I have a few questions. She’s still asleep.”

“It’s Kade. And can questioning her wait? She...” I trail off.

“It can wait, for now.”

“What were the two of you doing out in the middle of nowhere?”

“We were on our way home from a weekend at the lake. My best friend got married.” I take a deep breath. It all seems like a lifetime ago. “Aliana and I were arguing. It was stupid stuff. We’ve been having some issues, and it kinda blew up on our drive home. She lost control of the steering, swerved by accident, and we stopped on the side of the road.”

I recount everything I remember, and she listens and takes down notes.

“I—I shouldn’t have walked away.” I look down at my hands, then into her soft brown eyes. “Leaving her alone like that was a bonehead move.”

“This isn’t your fault, Mr.—Kade,” she says. “Those men have been running an underground crime syndicate we’ve been tracking for the last two years. Human trafficking, drugs. While we don’t believe you were targeted, they saw an opportunity and took it. That’s not on you.”

She may believe that, but I don’t. Not for one fucking second.

“We came across a man in a cell we believe to be Ivan Solonik. Found a few items of clothing.” She takes out her phone and shows me a headshot of Ivan, and scrolls to what looks like my shirt and Aliana’s skirt.

I bow my head. “I did that. I killed him.”

She nods. “And he would have killed you if you hadn’t got to him first.”

“The other brothers, are they?” I can’t even bring myself to say the word in case it jinxes something.

“We’ve positively identified Samael Solonik and another man we believe to be his brother, Michael. Two other men, whose identities we can’t disclose

right now, were also found at the scene. We've made several arrests." Their names make my insides churn. Knowing that they have relations, identities makes it all that much more twisted.

"Will we have to testify?"

"For now, we just need your statements. Because of the nature of this case, we will do what we can to keep yours and Ms. Kingsley's identities protected."

"And the other women?"

"We managed to rescue three women from the warehouse. If Aliana's notebook hadn't led us to you, those girls probably wouldn't have been reunited with their families. You both did good, Kade."

I nod, not feeling like I did anything *good*.

"I'll let you rest." She says, standing and turning toward the door.

"Officer," she turns to me. "How did they find us?"

"Gabriella Hernandez, a friend of yours, called in and reported that she hadn't heard from Aliana in a few days. She initially thought you guys were away, but quickly got worried when two days passed with no word. Your girlfriend didn't show up for a few shoots. We eventually learned that you'd left the lake house on that Sunday."

"Your cellphone signal was lost close by. Ms. Kingsley's too. We found the phones tossed in the woods, but no sign of your car."

I listen, replaying everything.

"We eventually found a license plate number scribbled in a book along the route you were traveling on."

Her doodle pad.

"Aliana." I say.

She nods. "Smart lady, you got there. It took longer than we thought to trace them, but once we did, we didn't hesitate. "

A nurse walks in and checks my drip. Officer Keaton smiles at me. "We'll talk more later."

“Can I see her?” I ask. The officer exchanges a look with the nurse.

I have cooperated as best I can and answered all their questions, but all I really want is to be with Aliana. I have been in this bed for the last day and I need to go to her. She should not have to recount any of this alone. The sheer sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach grows heavier the longer I am away from her.

I climb out of bed and carefully maneuver my drip stand in front of me.

“Mr. James. You really should be in bed.” The nurse says, glancing at Officer Keaton.

“I need to see, Aliana. I am going to see her right now with or without your help.”

The officer nods as if I need her approval.

“Follow me,” the nurse says, leading me down the corridor. I don’t miss the glances my way. The man who survived being kidnapped. They must know I am also the man who failed my girlfriend in the worst possible way. I want her forgiveness, but I will never forgive myself.

Her hair falls over the pillow, and she’s curled on the bed, a light blanket covering her. She turns when I enter the room, and the smile on her face has me floored.

“Aliana,” I say, taking a seat in the lazy boy next to her bed. I hold her hand, and she scoots off the bed and into my lap.

“Don’t leave me again,” she whispers, and I pepper kisses on her head.

“Not a chance.”

“No drip?” I observe.

“Can’t stand the thought of needles right now.”

I hold her tight, running my fingers through her hair.

“You’re okay. That’s all that matters.” Her head is on my chest, and soon, her breathing evens out, and I know she’s asleep. If I could stay in this moment forever, I would.

I stay at her bedside every day, and a week later, we are both given the

green light to go home.

My head injury was superficial, and most of the bruises I sustained will heal. They're already fading. I sprained a rib. Aliana's bruises on the outside are healing too, but it's the ones on the inside that I am more concerned with.

Time, the doctors tell us, will heal those too.

I want to believe it. I do. I just don't know if I can.

Sometimes when she looks at me, I wonder if she can really see me.

Reporters shout at us as we make our way to the police car. Cameras flash, trying to get a shot of the couple that *got away*. I tuck Aliana under my arm and try my best to take the brunt of it. Her anxiety levels are at an all-time high, and I wish the police had arranged another exit for us. They shout questions at us, and it all just fades into the ruckus. We don't have anything to say. Having lived through what we did, the last thing we want to do is relive it for the media.

TWENTY

ALIANA

MY HEART THUDS *in my chest. It's dark, so dark I can't see in front of me. Everything hurts. They've come for me. They found me. I thought I was safe.*

The monsters claw at my clothes, and they rip them off my body until I'm left exposed. It doesn't help to try and cover myself from their evil gazes because they see all.

They hear all.

"You'll take it little one, and you'll enjoy every second." He says, his dark, soulless eyes boring into me, holding me captive.

I'm choking, gasping for air, and then I hear it, the ear-shattering screams bouncing off every wall.

"ALIANA, shh, hey it's okay, you're safe. You're okay."

I open my eyes and stare at Kade's concerned face.

I grab a fist full of his t-shirt, burying my face in the familiar scent of his minty fresh body wash. It doesn't matter how close we are, how tightly he

holds me. I can't get close enough.

My breathing evens as he rubs small circles on my back, whispering that I'm okay and safe.

I don't want to cry.

I don't want them to win.

But I don't know how to move on from this.

We've been home for two weeks, and there isn't a day I don't check that the doors are locked every hour. Every noise unnerves me. The pipes, the houses expanding, it all makes my pulse race.

Kade has been home with me, but I know what the new week brings. Time alone. Time to replay all the things that happened and what could have happened had they not found us.

I need to get lost. Letting go of Kade, I climb out of bed.

He rolls over, and I know he wants to follow me into the living room. "I'm okay," I try to assure him. The truth is, I want to be alone because when I am alone, I don't have to worry about his concern and, worse of all, his pity.

The room is dark save for the soft light the full moon casts on the space. I walk over to the bar and pull out a bottle of whiskey. This seems to be the only way I can fall asleep these days. This and the pills they prescribed me for anxiety. "*Don't take them with alcohol,*" my psychiatrist warned, but I do it anyway because they're more potent like that.

I don't want to be left struggling to suck air into my lungs. It's like being set on fire from the inside, like burning continuously.

Pouring myself a double, I take the bottle over to the bay window, turning on the reading light and settling at the chaise lounge sofa. I take a sip of my drink and enjoy the warmth of the amber liquid as it slides down my throat. Whiskey burns my senses, wine numbs it, reality disintegrates it.

I pick up the camera I keep on display and turn it in my hands. I wonder how I'm going to find beauty again. I face it out into the darkness and almost click. It seems like all the color has been drained from the world and what's

left behind is dull and lifeless. Artists need color and life to create. At least I did. Now that I'm surrounded by darkness, where do I turn to?

Some mornings I wake up, and I almost forget what I went through. I wake up and go to the bathroom, and I feel *normal*. That changes when I look in the mirror. It changes when I see the hollow eyes and dark rings. When I slip off my gown and see the scars still healing. Will they truly heal? Will I wake up one day, and they'll be gone from sight?

I see *them* all the time, surrounding me, closing in on me. A pack of hungry wolves ready to eat me whole. To rip me limb from limb until there is nothing left.

I covered all the mirrors the first week I got home, but I knew they were there. I realized that I couldn't cover every glass surface that reflected this same bruised face and body.

I down my drink and pour another, then another. I lose count at some point, but I feel myself swimming in an ocean of my own tears. It hurts. Every fucking thing hurts. Why did it have to be me?

I feel Kade's arms around me, lifting me up, the way he has the last few nights.

I sink into the softness of the bed, and I hate the comfort. I want to hurt. I need to feel something, anything.

"Touch me," I whisper. "Make me forget." It's the alcohol in my veins, I know it, but I need him to take me to some other place. All I want is to get lost. To find oblivion.

"Let me hold you, baby," he whispers against my ear, and I feel the tears come in waves, and I hope they'll drown me this time. That is all it takes to make him comply like he always does, fear coating every word, fear behind every action.

His hands snake between my thighs, prying them open. I feel nothing as his fingers stretch and sink inside me. I lie there, needing to feel, dying to feel. He doesn't take anything from me in return, just rubs against my numb

flesh, suckling my neck, until I fall asleep. It's cruel what I'm doing to him, but I don't know what else to do to feel.

MONDAY. Kade stands at the kitchen counter, sipping on his coffee. He doesn't read the newspaper, and he doesn't ignore me. His eyes are on me, always on me.

"I could stay. I have vacation days."

It is what he's been saying the entire weekend. I know he will stay if I ask him to, so I don't. He needs normalcy. Whatever the fuck that is. I need a drink, maybe two.

"I'll be okay. I have an appointment with Dr. Luke today. I might see my trainer later." I take a sip of orange juice.

I signed up for Krav Maga. It's supposed to empower me, make me gain back some of that control those fuckers took from me.

"I'll be home by midday, latest," he tells me.

Those words sound so familiar. It is how this started; me coming home at midday so we could leave for a weekend I really wasn't looking forward to. I nod.

Kade walks over to me and crouches beside me, his hands on my thighs. "I love you, Aliana. If you need me, just call. I'll be here."

I know he will. Kade will move heaven and earth for me. Sometimes all his attention is suffocating. It's strange how the one thing I craved before the kidnapping makes me feel uncomfortable.

"I know. I love you, too." I say. I don't remember what love means. I buried it away along with all the other things that brought me joy once. I say it, though, because it is expected and because I know I can't live without Kade. We are two parts of a whole.

When Kade leaves, I help myself to that drink. I have to drink enough to

breathe but not enough to raise red flags with Dr. Luke.

He's about our age but looks more mature. I suppose if you've heard the stories he has within four walls, you will age too. This is my third appointment outside of the hospital. Third appointment in less than seven days.

I don't know how much these appointments help. They're an outlet, yes, but I'm not sure it's worth it.

I shower and throw on black sweats and one of Kade's oversized shirts, which I tie at the waist, tying my hair in a messy bun. I call a *Lyft* and share my trip location with Kade. Climbing into the backseat of a silver-gray sedan, I look outside the window. I specified on the app that I wanted a female driver, that I don't like small talk or listening to music, and that I need the air-con. The only men I can stand are Kade and my therapist.

The woman is older, mid-forties maybe, stocky, with blonde hair that is graying fast and brown eyes. She wears a white shirt and black slacks. No ring on her wedding finger. A rosary hangs from the rearview mirror, and the car smells like fast food and floral perfume. The kind of perfume *old* people wear.

It's odd how after an ordeal like I have been through.

She drives along the streets in my neighborhood, roads I know like the back of my hand, yet somehow everything looks different. I feel like a tourist in my own life.

I've had to sit in Kade's car every day before I got to the point of letting him drive me. The first time he did, I had a panic attack.

I breathe in and out. The warmth in my cheeks from the whiskey slowly fading.

I pull out my hip flask and refill my system. The driver's eyes meet mine, but she says nothing. I guess she does follow instructions. She hums a tune as she drives and doesn't look back at me again.

DR. LUKE IS SITUATED in a two-story house instead of an office building. I suppose I like this better. Feels less—clinical. It isn't his residence. Several doctors practice here. Every kind of doctor you need.

The lawn is well-manicured, the reception area warm and inviting. Dr. Luke's staff are friendly, not overly chatty.

The last sip of whiskey I took hit home and now I am in a warm, fuzzy place. I can't wait to talk to him.

"Ms. Kingsley," Janice, his assistant, calls. Janice is middle-aged and quirky and perky, a ray of sunshine. I imagine Janice is the perfect wife and soccer mom. She wears nursing scrubs, and her strawberry blonde hair is tied in a ponytail at the nape of her neck. I stand and make my way down the corridor and toward the last room on the left.

Dr. Luke stands when I enter and smiles. He has a kind face and kind eyes. When I first saw him in hospital, I wanted nothing to do with him. I didn't trust him, and I didn't want to be treated by him, let alone be left in a room with him alone. But he won me over with his kind words, and as the days went on, I started thinking that he may actually be good for me. I guess it helped that he is handsome too, in that nerdy, Clark Kent way.

"Aliana, come in, please." He says and motions for me to take a seat in one of the armchairs. He has a couch that I assume some of his patients use, but that feels cliché. I prefer this.

"How have you been?"

"Good." *Lies.*

He nods. I like that Dr. Luke doesn't take notes incessantly. I always found that to be impersonal, distracting. Growing up, I would tag along to appointments with Gail. I'd sit in a corner, coloring or playing blocks. Gail insisted that we see a doctor together. Process our loss, as she referred to her divorce. I suppose it was a loss. A loss of *normalcy*. That world again. A loss

of a family member. Love. Trust.

“Are you sleeping all right?” He asks.

“Fine.”

“Without stimulants?”

I smile.

I notice the way Kade looks at me when I drink. It’s not judgment, really, and there are times when I wonder if that would be better. I’d like him to call me a drunk, tell me how pathetic I’m being. Instead, he looks at me with a sadness that crushes me. Dr. Luke, on the other hand, doesn’t pity me. I can see it in the tilt of his head.

He crosses an ankle on the opposite knee.

“We talked about this. The medication I prescribed is meant to curb the need to *overindulge*.”

I stand and cross the room, running my hands along the spine of his books. Medical Journals and self-help guides.

“Do you read anything else? Romance, maybe?” I ask.

“I do. I’m a fan of crime fiction myself, mysteries, thrillers. Harlan Coben and the like.”

I nod. I didn’t expect a response, but I appreciate it.

“I tried to get Kade to sleep with me, twice.” I say, returning to my chair.

“And how did he react?”

“He acts like I’m a porcelain doll now, untouchable, breakable.”

“And you’re not.” He says.

“On the contrary, I am very breakable and accessible. I mean, he was there, wasn’t he?”

He taps a finger lightly on his knee. It’s the first time I have willingly opened up about my time in captivity.

“I want to forget. I want him to make me forget. So he touches me, but he doesn’t give me what I need.” I lean my head against the headrest. I have an urge to ask Dr. Luke to touch me, but that would be inappropriate. It doesn’t

stop me from imagining it sometimes when I am alone. What if he used these sessions to coerce women into fulfilling his dark and depraved needs? I wouldn't need much convincing.

“What are you trying *not* to say?” He asks, and I respond with a laugh. Maybe this is why Gail drank. I spent years judging her for the shitty mother she was, hating her for the number of times I had to clean up after her or drag her to bed after a night of binge drinking. But what if all she was trying to do was break free from all those nightmares that scraped and clawed at her back?

“I don't think you're ready for that, Dr. L.”

“You'd be surprised. Try me.”

“I have these fantasies about them. About being forced by them. It isn't like the times they did it when they held me against my will. In my fantasies, I enjoy it. I ask for it.”

“Rape or forced sex fantasies are common sexual fantasies both men and women have, especially if they have encountered something traumatic,” Dr. L says.

“But I want these things in reality.” I tell him. “I crave these things, and that scares me. The difference now is that I want to be in control. I want to allow it to happen, not have it happen to me if that makes sense.” I say, not feeling the need to hide the shameful reality of my thoughts.

“Have you been trying the hypnosis I prescribed?”

“Yes.” *When I remember.*

“You need to fill your mind with empowering thoughts constantly. You need to remind yourself that these urges can be worked through.”

“What if I don't want to work through them?”

“You wouldn't be here if you didn't, Aliana. How do you feel about being on your own now that Kade's back at work?” His eyes are the stormiest gray, dark clouds rolling in. A pair of dark-rimmed glasses sit on his nose. “You were anxious about it last week.”

I shrug. “It had to happen eventually, right? I mean, I appreciate that he cares so much, and that he’s been around. All this affection is something I wanted—before. But, sometimes I just want him to see me the way he used to.”

“How’s that?”

“Like a woman—Aliana—not a victim.”

“Is that what you think he sees when he looks at you?” The question makes me pause for a second.

“Maybe.” I say truthfully. “I can’t be sure.”

I meet his gaze just as his timer goes off. He doesn’t move to end the conversation, and that tells me the timer is probably set by Janice to keep him in check.

“You’ve both been through something very few people understand, and the only way to really know what someone is thinking is to talk to them about it.”

Standing, I let out a long breath, then glance over at his bookshelf. “You should add some of the books you actually enjoy reading.”

He gives me a small smile. “See you Friday, Aliana.”

TWENTY-ONE

KADE

THREE MONTHS. Ninety-one days. That's how long it's been. There is the time before we were taken, then after, with a vast expanse of nothingness in between. That's what those weeks were, an endless nothing. There was no concept of time in that place, only fear. For our lives, for what the next hour would hold.

I watched helplessly as Aliana faded away in front of me, and I felt myself slip.

But the day we were rescued, I made a conscious decision not to feel that helpless again.

I can still hear the sound of gunshots through the noise reduction earplugs and earphones at the range, and the power of the 9mm in my hands is a rush. It's become somewhat of an addiction. I'm in MMA class if I'm not here during my lunch hour.

"You're a fucking animal," Justin says to me when we hand in our guns and gear. "You took that target's head clean off."

He insists on joining me despite Abby being anti-guns.

"Hey, you alright, man?" He asks when I don't respond.

“Yeah.” I say, but he knows me better than that. Still, talking isn’t something I can do with Justin or anyone anymore. My therapist says that I need to process this. I just don’t think recounting every detail of the worst time in my life is a way to go about it.

“Wanna grab a beer?”

It’s Friday night, and if this was before, I’d say yes, text Aliana that I’ll be late or not. But it isn’t before, and I am not the man I used to be.

“Maybe, next time. I told Aliana I’d be home early.”

What I don’t say is that I want to make sure she’s safe. Or that all I ever do is watch her self-sabotage with no end in sight.

He slaps me on the shoulder. “If you need me, anytime of day or night, you just call.”

“Thanks, man.” I say. Justin has picked up the slack for me more than once these last two months, and I appreciate it. He cut his honeymoon short. He took care of my clients, and he continues to be a friend even when I don’t know what that means anymore.

Abby sends us meals every week. It is the only home-cooked meals we get between takeout.

Aliana has never been much of a cook. That was my job. I enjoyed it. I don’t anymore. I can’t imagine enjoying anything anymore.

PULLING UP TO OUR HOUSE, I take in the modern structure. It’s a symmetrical glass and wood structure that Aliana and I fell in love with when we set eyes on it. We were fortunate to get it at a price a couple just starting out could afford. I used to love coming home to Aliana. Before the Christmas Party incident and the fucking texts between her and Ethan, which all seem trivial right now, I could expect to find her naked in my bed or lying on the counter, ready and waiting for me. Now, as I open the door and the familiar

scent of stale wine and whiskey hits me, I wonder if I should have sat in the car for a little longer.

“Hey, baby,” she slurs, rushing up to me and leaping into my arms. I hold her small body against me, ignoring the smell of alcohol. She’s safe. She’s here. All I see is her.

“Hey, did you miss me?” I say, dropping my briefcase to the ground and shutting the door. I carry her to the couch easily and plop down on it with her straddling my hips.

I can’t help it. I react. It’s her. My girl. Beneath the darkness is my Aliana, and she just needs to find her way back.

She notices and bites her bottom lip, grinding herself playfully atop me. Fuck. But as soon as I feel that pull, I know I don’t want her like this. She only ever wants to fuck when she’s drunk or after she’s woken up from one of her nightmares.

“So,” I clear my throat, which earns me an eye roll. “What do you think of going out for dinner?”

She stands, sways slightly. “I think I want to stay home tonight.”

It is always the same response, but I try anyway. Aliana can barely walk straight. What was I expecting? “That’s okay. Wanna pick something from the fridge while I shower?”

She nods, but I know she hasn’t heard me. She’s pouring another drink and making her way to the bay window. She’ll stare out into the darkness until I get her.

The warm water cascades down my face and body, and I feel some of the tautness from my muscles dissipate.

But as quickly as the comfort comes, I turn the faucet to cold and feel that familiar shudder through my body.

I lean my fists against the wall and slam against it. Once. Twice. Three times. I continue the motion until my body adjusts to the cold.

When we got home, when those nightmares started plaguing her, I knew

this was going to be a long road. But I believed that with me by her side and counseling, she'd begin to process what happened. I knew it would be slow progress, but what I didn't anticipate was her turning into something she swore she never would.

I HEAR my window crack open, and I sit up, yawning. Aliana climbs in a few seconds later. Her robe flaps open to reveal the tiniest sleep shorts and tank she's wearing. Fuck! I stop my train of thoughts when she crawls into bed, sniffling.

"What happened?" I whisper, wrapping my arms around her.

She sniffs. "Gail's drunk again, and we got into a huge fight. We both said things we probably don't mean."

She looks up at me; the moonlight illuminates her glassy eyes.

"I'm sorry, Aliana. You're here now, you're okay."

She nestles against my chest, and I hold her tight. "I can't wait to go to college, to be away from her. From all this."

Placing a kiss on her forehead, I inhale the floral scent of her shampoo.

"Kade," She says quietly. "What if I end up like her?"

"You're not your mother, Aliana. Even she isn't herself when she's drunk. We just gotta hope she finds her way, baby girl," I whisper against her head.

"Promise you'll tell me if I'm ever going down that path."

"I promise."

IT'S past three in the morning when I turn over and find Aliana in bed, her hair still damp from her shower before bed. She's so fucking beautiful, and seeing her like this, so peaceful, makes me fucking hard. I roll her onto her back, and she moans in her sleep. Hovering over her, I kiss her cheeks, nose,

and eyelids. When she opens those beautiful eyes and smirks up at me. That is all the permission I need to slip her shorts off her hips and nestle between her thighs. I suck on one peaked nipple through her tank top, and she lets out an audible gasp. When I enter her pussy, I bite against the growl threatening to break free. She moans softly, and I am transported to years ago, fucking her just like this in my bed after comforting her.

Aliana squeezes her eyes shut and bites down hard on her lip.

“Keep your eyes on me,” I whisper, and she does. Her eyelids flutter each time I pull out and thrust back in. “You feel so fucking good, baby.”

I circle my hips, slip out, and back in again and she responds the way I intend. My tongue brushes along the seam of her mouth, dipping in until she’s moaning in my mouth.

I move in her, slow and steady, feeling her walls tighten around me.

“Do you like that, baby?” I say breathlessly in her ear.

“Harder,” she hisses.

Aliana bites down on my shoulder, her nails raking down my back, and it drives me fucking mad. I plunge into her, intoxicated by her tightness. My thrusts get harder and faster. She moans, and I know this is how she wants it.

“Oh fuck baby, if you keep this up, I’m gonna come.” I pull out and slam back into her, and she seems to enjoy that. I suck on her nipple harder, feeling my orgasm building. I’ve missed this, missed fucking my girl.

“I need more, baby,” she says breathlessly. “Hurt me, make me forget,” I still inside her. She’s not here. She’s back there in that dark place.

“What?” I say, out of breath. “Aliana...”

She’s still grinding her pelvis against me, her hips digging into me, taking pleasure, oblivious to the fact that I’m no longer fucking her.

“Take my cunt,” she growls. “Use me.”

It takes a few more movements, and she’s shuddering around my half-mast, and the fucker betrays me because I’m hard instantly, thrusting into her, sucking and biting every ounce of skin I can find.

“Tell me how you want it, fucking say it.”

I thrust into her harder than ever before.

“Fuck me hard! Like your whore,” Aliana yells.

“Fucking whore,” I cry out, unable to stop myself. I grab a fistful of her hair in my hand, tilting and exposing her neck as I pound her pussy so hard she screams. This is what she wants. I bite down on her neck, then wrap my hand around it. She’s so slender beneath my palms.

Tugging on her hair harder with my other hand, I slam into her relentlessly. Over and over again.

She gets all my anger, all my pain. Every fucking thing.

When her body bucks off the bed and she cries out in pleasure, I slam into her one more time before emptying inside her, my body shaking, my nerves shot.

I feel hot, angry, fucked up tears as I ride out my orgasm.

She opens her eyes and looks at me in confusion. “What’s wrong?”

I don’t say anything. Instead, I pull out of her, slam a fist on the pillow next to her head, and walk into the bathroom.

I hear the bedroom door slam, and I know she’s seeking solace, the only place she has these last few weeks.

Aliana is fading.

I’m fading.

We’re lost.

TWENTY-TWO

ALIANA

DR. LUKE DOESN'T SEEM FAZED by my confession. The fact that I don't enjoy or want to have vanilla sex doesn't seem to surprise him.

"But he seemed angry," I tell him.

He still doesn't write.

"Do you blame him?"

I sigh. "I want to connect with him, feel something again. But unless that something is earth shattering, it isn't enough." Kade and I have always had a good sex life. It was sweet when we needed it, rough at other times, but always enough. It hasn't been enough for me lately.

"Have you told him what you want?"

The straight answer is no. I need it one way, and Kade treats me like a fragile thing he has to coddle. I shake my head. "I don't think he can handle that side of me."

"What do you think about when you're having sex with him?"

I laugh. "What do you mean?"

"Just that. What do you think about?"

I frown, stand, and make my way to the window. Dr. Luke has a stunning

view of the national park from his window. I have used that as a location for shoots many times. It's been a long time since I thought about pictures. Gaby has called in a favor from one of the freelance photographers, who is apparently doing a great job.

"Have you been to the park in winter? Seen the way the snow covers almost every surface. It's my favorite time of year."

"Is that what you think about when you're asking Kade for rough sex? That you're covering up something?" I haven't said the words out loud, even to Dr. Luke, and I can tell that is what he wants me to do. He wants me to admit that I picture *them* when I fuck my partner.

I look at him over my shoulder. His glasses have shifted down his nose. I stroll over and stand in front of him. He frowns but doesn't flinch when I reach out and shift his glasses back. Dr. Luke is not easily intimidated.

"Boundaries, Ms. Kingsley," he says. He alternates between calling me Ms. Kingsley and Aliana. I notice that it is often when I'm stepping over those patient-doctor lines that he uses my last name.

"Do *you* like rough sex, Dr. Luke?" I ask, settling back in my chair. I tug my lower lip between my teeth, and his gaze follows.

After feeling powerless for almost a month of my life, I refuse to feel that way anymore.

He lets out a long sigh. "What I do, or don't like, is hardly a topic for discussion. This is about you and what goes on in your head while you're with Kade."

My gaze roams over the man Dr. Haden Luke is really attractive. He knows he is sexy as fuck and maintains an aloofness that makes him so much hotter.

He's not Kade James, but he is something.

How is the meditation going?" He asks when I don't respond. Onto other things, then.

"I have tried to practice more, but I have never been good at visualizing,

well, not the right things anyway,” I say honestly.

“So, what do you visualize?” That’s a trick of the trade. Get me to tell him all the deep, dark secrets I hold. Help me process.

“I visualize *you* when I’m with Kade, rubbing that stubble against my inner thighs.” I lie. Although, now the image sticks, and I wonder.

This is a game of sorts. I know that if I am not careful, he’ll allocate me to another doctor. But I need to walk this tightrope. It’s a kind of cheap thrill, but I can’t help it.

“I don’t think you do. I think you say that to avoid delving into the places you actually go to.”

The truth is that he knows where my mind goes, every explicit detail.

“I guess you’ll never know. Are you married, Dr. L?”

I glance at the ring on his finger. He doesn’t respond.

The alarm sounds, and I stand, pick up my bag and head toward the door.

“I’ve been to the park in winter, but it isn’t for me, Ms. Kingsley.”

“Too bad.”

His assistant smiles at me. I wonder if she reads my file when Dr. Luke isn’t in the office. Does he write about the things I say, the way I flirt with him? Does he enjoy it in some small way?

My *Lyft* is waiting outside, and I ask to be taken to the nearest bar, which happens to be a block away. It’s five o’clock somewhere in the world. I don’t have a Krav Maga class today, and according to my trainer, I am progressing well.

I climb out of the car and stand on the sidewalk. A man crosses the street, walks toward me, and it makes me take a sharp intake of breath. He passes by me without so much as a glance in my direction. I shake my head. I need to stop being afraid.

I enter the bar and make my way to the counter. The bar has a retro vibe and is pretty busy, considering its location.

The barman is a few years younger than I am, twenty-three or so. He’s

cute and blushes when I compliment his tattoos. I wonder if he'd be keen on roughing me up a bit.

I order six shots of tequila and hot sauce. The only way to drink tequila. I take two shots at the bar, and he's highly impressed by my poker face.

I pull out my phone, switching it off before taking another shot. I have never been one to drink alone. I remember picking up Gail from places like this and swearing it'll never be me.

Drinks usually mean Gaby and me out on the town on girls' night.

My mother has called and texted. Much more than I expected. I haven't felt like talking to her. I don't want her to see what I've become. I wonder if it is shame I feel or regret? Either way, I don't want her opinion.

I'm chasing my last shot with a beer perched on a barstool, flirting with the barman, my top three buttons undone, when *he* walks in, six feet and in hospital scrubs. There is nothing sexier than a doctor in scrubs.

He looks around the bar, in no hurry, not particularly interested in anything, then makes his way to the counter and orders a drink.

The barman turns his attention from me, hands him a shot of what must be whiskey or brandy. He downs it, and I am mesmerized by how he tips his head back.

He turns and looks straight at me. It's like he doesn't see anyone else in this bar. I lean over the bar, my skirt no doubt lifting, and I tug the barman forward by the front of his shirt. I crush my lips to his and moan when his tongue enters my mouth. He tastes of mint and smells like beer. A nice combination. But he isn't the one I'm doing this for.

"I get off at eleven if you're sticking around," The barman says when I break the kiss.

"I won't be sticking around that long," I say, looking at the man on the other end of the bar, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

I grab my drink and saunter over to him, climbing onto the barstool next to him.

“You gonna buy me a drink, or just stare at me all night?”

He chuckles. It’s a nice sound. He motions for the barman, who is still flushed in the face from our kiss, to come over.

“The lady will have a refill.” He turns toward me. “Charlie there doesn’t seem like he’s your type.” He smirks, and I am drawn to the dimple on his right cheek.

“What makes you think I have a type?”

“Women like you always do,” he takes a sip of his drink, his eyes roaming over my body. “And he isn’t it.”

I laugh at the confidence in his voice. He’s right. Kissing the barman was impulsive, and I did it to get his attention. For the first time in all the years that I’ve been with Kade, I allow myself to wonder if going home with this guy right here might be something I could do. Maybe I need a distraction. Someone who will fuck me senseless without a care in the world.

“I’m Dean by the way.” He holds out his hand, and I take it.

“Aliana.” I take the drink served to me and down the contents

“So what brings you here, Aliana. You are definitely not a regular. I would know. I come here at least three times a week. I work at the hospital.”

“Just passing through,” I say, not interested in sharing anything more about myself. His dark eyes consider me, and then he smiles the kind of smile that makes me clench my thighs.

“You wanna leave with me, Aliana?” He says, downing his drink and setting the glass on the countertop. I suppose this is the question I’ve been waiting for. I bite my bottom lip and smirk at him.

I lean in, but someone beside him catches my eye. Kade.

He doesn’t smile when our eyes meet.

Dean turns to look over his shoulder, “Anything I can do for you man?”

“You can walk away, and I won’t break your nose.”

Dean stands, and in a second, he and Kade are toe to toe. “What did you say, man?” He says to Kade.

“She’s my girlfriend.” Kade says through gritted teeth.

Dean holds his hands up, “Whoa man, I had no idea. It’s cool. I’m leaving.”

I watch Dean exit the bar without so much as a look behind him.

Kade doesn’t say a word to me.

I don’t expect him to.

I also don’t expect him to disappear in the direction of the bathrooms with a look over his shoulder. I wonder for a brief second if it’s the tequila, but it sure as fuck seems like an invitation.

Everything south of my belly tightens, and I know I have to find out.

Bar corridors are a filthy place, and yet when I walk down it, all I feel is anticipation as I make my way toward the ladies' room. Adrenaline rushes through me in waves, and all I can hear is the fading music from the bar and the thud of my heartbeats in my eardrums.

What the fuck am I doing?

I spot the exit sign between the two doors, and I chance it, opening the door and walking out into the cool air. There’s a slight breeze and not another soul in sight. Just me and him, under cover of night.

He leans against the wall, watching me. Dark eyes trail over my body. He’s a predator, assessing how quickly I’ll run. I won’t. I’ll never run. I have met my greatest fears in that warehouse, and nothing out here will ever compare.

“Come here.” It’s a command, and I respond by edging closer.

A cigarette is pursed between full lips. It strikes me that he doesn’t look like a smoker in his expensive suit.

His hands wrap around my throat in seconds, “Were you gonna let him fuck you like a whore?”

I shake my head, struggling to move and breathe at the same time as his fingers restrict my airways.

He laughs mirthlessly. “Liar!”

“Yes,” I admit, struggling to get the words out.

The alley is dimly lit. One small light flickers overhead. It casts shadows over his chiseled jaw.

He stares down at me, and my heart is beating so hard I wonder if he can hear it.

“Then let’s see if you can handle it.” He lets go of my throat, and I suck in a deep breath.

Reaching behind me, he painfully grabs me by the hair and shoves me up against the wall.

It’s cold and rough, foreign.

I remind myself that this is what I have been asking for. Begging for.

I don’t know how he found me when he did, but I am too turned on to question fate.

His hands are under my skirt, and his fingers violate me without warning in one raw thrust. I forget to breathe for a second as I attempt to adjust to his thick digits as they thrust inside me. This is so wrong, so fucking wrong, but my body reacts to his violence. I crave all the darkness he can give me.

“Oh, fuck, yes—” I moan, pushing my ass back.

“Don’t say a fucking word,” he growls in my ear, and my nipples ache against my shirt. Anyone could walk out here, see us in this alley, but all I can think about is the way he keeps thrusting his fingers in and out of me. I feel his knuckles slide against my walls.

I cry out, and he shoves my cheek against the concrete. “Not a fucking sound.”

He rips my underwear off, discarding the material on the floor, and I hear the distinct sound of his belt and zipper. My ears buzz in anticipation.

The monster doesn’t ask permission when he enters me. It’s rough and hard, and I see stars at the feel of being stretched by his cock. The darkness calls out to me, and I answer by pushing my ass back so he can go deeper.

“This is what you like.” It’s not a question. His fingers are in my mouth

now, “Suck.”

I lick my arousal off his fingers ravenously. That seems to please him because he groans in my ear. “Filthy whores are my favorite.”

His other hand painfully tugs the hair at my scalp. His hips slam against me as he continues to fuck me so hard my whole body rocks. My head drops back against his chest as he uses me like a rag doll.

“Fucking tiny whore,” He groans. “I like using you like this.” When he speaks, I don’t see him. I see someone else, someone who violated me in the worst possible way. I’m sick. This is a sickness, but I don’t want a cure.

A grunting moan escapes my lips as he goes deeper than I can possibly imagine. I don’t know how I can take a man this thick, but here I am, being mauled by him. Hands clamp around my throat, and he squeezes hard. I’m gasping for air, and for the first time since I entered this alleyway, I am fucking scared. But fear is my favorite aphrodisiac.

He plunges into me over and over again until I’m screaming at the top of my lungs, an orgasm ripping through me so hard I retch. He clamped a hand over my mouth. “Filthy slut. Take all of me,” he murmurs as he slams his hips against my ass. He’s cruel and sadistic in his thrusts, and all I see is them, as they used me, another orgasm pushing me farther down the rabbit hole.

He stiffens, and, as impossible as it is, he seems to grow inside me, and then he empties inside of me.

I let him come in me.

I let him fuck me raw.

I let him, just like I let them.

He pulls out of me and shoves me away. I should feel bad, cheap even, but my body is still thrumming from being fucked like that.

He grips my cheeks and slips his tongue deep inside my mouth. The act makes me gag, but all he does is sneer down at me before letting me go. He straightens up and backs away, walking down the alley. I use the wall as my

vice as I keel over and empty the contents of my stomach.

My mind drifts back to the day on the side of the road as it often does, and I remember wanting to flirt my way to a lift to get away from Kade.

Dr. L says I'm inflicting self-blame, but what if it's all true? I was the one that responded to texts I knew were crossing the friendship line with Ethan. If those texts didn't happen, I would not have believed that Kade cheated, he wouldn't have gone out with strippers, we wouldn't have felt the great divide that resulted in an argument that destroyed everything. I brought it all upon myself.

WHEN I GET HOME, all the lights are out. I can still feel the places *his* hands were on me. I know there'll be bruises that will be hard to see in the light of day, hard to explain. I am sick, craving this kind of darkness after what I have been through. I'm broken, and I wonder if I should have let myself be hospitalized for the trauma.

The oven light is on when I enter the quiet house. I move toward it, slowly, my heels in my hands.

Kade is sitting at the kitchen island, nursing a drink. Half the bottle from the looks of it.

He gives me one look, and I wonder what he sees.

A woman who let herself be used in a filthy alleyway, or Aliana, his girlfriend.

When I was in that place, I wasn't Kade's Aliana. I was someone else, someone vile. I wanted *him* to be someone else, and he did that for me. He fucked me the way I wanted, the way I craved, but he looks at me with guilt in his eyes.

Standing here and watching Kade is killing me.

"I'm going to bed." He says. "There's lasagna in the oven."

With that, he throws back his drink, flings the glass against the wall in front of him, and leaves the kitchen without so much as a glance back at me.

I let out a breath I didn't realize I was holding. I'm trembling.

After cleaning up the mess he made, I sink to the cold tiles and lie there, curling up tight. Maybe if I wish away my sins, I'll wake up whole again.

TWENTY-THREE

KADE

MAYBE I SHOULDN'T HAVE TRACKED her location on *Lyft*. It isn't me. But her phone was off, and that freaked me the hell out. When I walked into that bar, and I saw that spark in her eyes as she looked at another man, I knew I was losing her. And so I wasn't going to fucking let that happen. Aliana is mine.

I don't know how to reach her, but seeing her flirt with another man, had me seeing red. I never expected to fuck her in an alleyway the way I did. But I'll be lying if I said it didn't feel good to show her who was in charge of her every fucking orgasm.

I can't save her if she doesn't want to be saved, but I won't lose her.

Aliana craves a different kind of fix, and last night was like shooting up. The truth is that I wanted to hurt her. I wanted her to know that she was fucking mine. Maybe if I give her what she needs, I'll eradicate those monsters from her mind.

But, what if I'm delving too deep into her darkness.

I found her asleep on the kitchen floor last night, curled up where I left her, like a little child. I carried her to bed and held her close. My lost girl. My

heart aches for all we've lost, all she has lost.

There is darkness where light used to be, and I'm getting sucked into it for fear of losing her.

Dr. Peters, my therapist, is a middle-aged man, prematurely balding, and has a no-nonsense way about him. He isn't the coddling type, he's not new-age, and he's certainly not that fucker treating Aliana. Dr. Luke has no fucking clue what is going on in Aliana's head.

I sit in a chair opposite him, running my hands through my hair. After a few rounds on the range, I'm pumped, strung after binge drinking last night. The fact that I wanted to fuck Aliana while she slept made me realize I'm sinking and needed someone to help me navigate this.

"Didn't think I'd see you again, Kade?"

"Neither did I," I admit, leaning my elbows on my knees and steeping my hands. The last time I was here, I practically told Dr. Peter that he could go fuck himself. I was dealing with my shit, and I didn't need his psychoanalysis and delving into my past and family life. It has nothing to do with what I went through.

"I'm glad you're here," he says, and I almost believe him. I know this is the standard line he feeds to all his patients. "So, what can I do for you today?"

I let out a sigh and lean back in my chair. I have no idea where to begin.

"Things are a bit *complicated* at the moment."

"Complicated? Well, after what you and Aliana have been through, I would be concerned if it wasn't."

"It's fucked up," I admit. "She's changed. And I understand that it's inevitable after what we went through. I just didn't expect...."

He hasn't started writing, which means I haven't given him much to go on.

"What she went through, you can't imagine being there, doc, watching those men hurt her the way they did. But ever since we got home, anytime

we're intimate, she wants it rough. Begs me to hurt her." *And so I fucking did.*

I sigh. "She also has these fucked up fantasies. It's messed up..."

I stand and pace the room. "I get it, doc. I will never fully fathom what she went through, but hurting herself can't be the fix."

"What exactly disturbs you about these fantasies? Is it not just her way of processing her trauma?"

I shake my head. "I don't know. I just don't know how far she'll take it. I can't be with her twenty-four seven."

I never want her to doubt that I love her ever again, but I also don't know how to move forward from this or how to help her. How can I trust that these are just the effects of PTSD?

"Have you done anything to show her that you're in her corner?" I sigh. I could tell him that I role-played what I thought she wanted. Used her like a common slut. I have to get my emotions in check because I got off on that visual twice this morning. I am already thinking of ways to make her sorry for what she did.

"I want to be the man who's there. I'll do anything, but I don't know how much of this I can take."

"Be there for her, Kade. And understand that not trusting her is normal, but that trying to control how she processes her trauma isn't. But I would suggest that you talk about how you feel."

There we go again: *talk about how you feel*. What good is that going to do?

"Have you two been getting out much? Trying to get back into the things you used to enjoy?"

"Whenever I bring it up, she sinks deeper into herself, or she doesn't even acknowledge what I've asked. I don't want to push her."

"Only when she's ready, Kade."

I sigh. "There's more. She has these episodes where she almost seems

like someone else. I used to think it was just the drinking, you know, but it's like—like she's two different people.”

I should tell him the whole truth, but I'm too ashamed to admit that I violated her the way I did. I like to believe that I was doing it for her, but if I really was, I wouldn't feel so shit about it. I fucked her brutally in that alley with no regard for the repercussions.

Cloning our phones may have also not been the best idea. Registering on those sex chat rooms Aliana is in is another bad idea. Hearing the things she says to those men. Her fantasies about her doctor and those monsters who held us captive. But what makes matters worse is that I respond to her anonymously, of course, but it is still me. I lurk like a fucking psychopath, craving her truths like a drug.

“Have you considered that it might be time to convince her to get some more in-depth help?”

I meet his gaze. Of course, I have thought of that. I have considered talking to her doctor about that, but I keep holding onto the hope that this is not how our lives will always be.

“Sometimes,” Dr. Peters says, “we need to make those hard decisions if we want a different outcome.”

WHEN I LEAVE the therapist's office, I feel no better and find myself sitting in my car, unable to start it. In fact, when my phone pings and I see an alert that Aliana uploaded a video to one of the sites she's registered on, I feel a hundred times worse. I close my eyes and take a deep breath as I open it.

She's naked on our bed, legs spread wide as she fucks herself with a dildo, her juices coating the black instrument.

I feel rage coursing through my veins, the kind of self-destructive rage I have spent my life fighting against. And at this moment, I want to hurt her. I want to see her bleed for me. Give her the darkness she so desperately craves.

Show her that I can be part man and part monster, too. We're all tethering on the edge of madness. It takes one small push in either direction to tip the scales.

What sickens me is that knowing so many others are watching her makes me hard. I reach down and, with shaky hands, and unbutton my jeans right there in the parking lot. At this point, I don't give a fuck who sees me. Letting my cock spring free, I grip it hard and stroke myself as her moans fill my car. She is so fucking beautiful. Her moans fill the car. She arches off the bed and fucks herself harder.

"Fuck," I hiss, unable to take my eyes off her perfect tits, the way her hair falls around her, those thighs.

I am so turned on, it only takes a few strokes for me to squirt all over my hands, imagining it's her face, her tits.

I shut the page, my pulse racing. I feel like a fucking hypocrite as I clean myself up. What kind of monster does this make me?

TWENTY-FOUR

ALIANA

THE MONSTER WALKS TOWARD ME. *His is the only face I see in the dimly lit room. There is no Kade, no other goons, just him and the serrated blade in his hands. I open my mouth to scream, but no sound comes out. I'm suspended from the ceiling, my toes barely touching the cold concrete beneath me. I try to move, but all I can muster is blinking. This is it, the end. He's kept me alive too long, anyway.*

"Little whores who don't do as they're told have to be punished," he says as he steps closer to me.

I let out a silent scream as he wraps my bare legs around his large frame, thrusting into me with one fluid motion. I'm full, so fucking full. The blade cuts through the flesh in my throat, and my eyes widen. He doesn't let up the torture. He thrusts, he cuts. Blood is everywhere. He sinks it deeper and deeper.

Crimson coats his hands gushes from my wound, and all he does is laugh at me manically.

DR. LUKE, the hypocrite, is hanging by a thread. I know he's considering involuntary hospitalization. Even I have not displayed any behavior that would suggest that I am a threat to myself or others.

"Kade got my mother to fly out here. She says she's staying for as long as I need her. If that is the case, she never should have come." I'm getting tired of being treated like a head case.

"It may be good to have some company, someone other than Kade, for a while," he says, his fingers tapping on his knee. "Have you spoken to Gaby yet?"

I sigh. "No. I don't have anything to say to her." I stare down at my nails.

"She's your best friend, isn't she? You never needed anything specific to talk to her before."

"Well, things have changed a whole fucking lot since the last time I saw her."

"Of course it has. But, maybe seeing people again will be good for you."

"Help me feel normal again," I laugh.

"There isn't any one definition of normal, Aliana, and that is where the world gets it wrong."

"How have you been sleeping?" He asks this every time, and I respond in the same way.

"I sleep when I need to. No use wasting eight precious hours unconscious." Sleep is difficult. I'm lucky if I drink myself into a comatose state for two or three hours every night.

"What about the nightmares?"

"They're increasingly violent. And before you ask, I am taking my anti-psychotics and whatever else you're giving me."

The truth is that the longer I close my eyes, the longer I have to endure being locked in that room. Unlike in my waking moments, the monsters are more vivid in dreams, cruel and deranged. They want to hurt me in unfathomable ways.

“Shall we talk about the incident at the bar the other night some more?” I sent Dr. L a drunk text about it. A very detailed drunk text.

I smirk. “No. I think I’d rather not.”

“You know it can’t happen again. You need to find other ways of coping like we discussed.”

I stand and walk closer to him. “What is wrong with role playing with my boyfriend, doc?”

When my knees touch his, he shifts in his chair. “That is not what I am talking about.”

He is talking about how I picture them when Kade fucks me like that. That picturing them turns me on. I crave their wickedness, and that is my ugly truth.

I straddle his lap, and he falters his breathing quickening. “What’s wrong, Dr. L? Cat caught your tongue?”

“You can’t do this, Aliana,” he says, and I smirk because I can feel his thick erection pressing against my core. This crosses legal and ethical boundaries. I know this. But it doesn’t stop me from grinding against him. If he really didn’t want this, he’d have said so. Forcibly removing me off his lap. He’s got muscle and height on me.

“Do you ever imagine it, Dr. L? You fucking me like that? We could do it right here and no-one will be any wiser.”

I realize that I’m an addict, constantly chasing my next high. He closes his eyes for a second. “Get off me, Ms. Kingsley.” He says, gripping my hips, but that just turns me on, and I start to rock in his lap faster. He seems conflicted, so I make the decision for him, grinding against him, my nails raking over his shoulder, until he’s groaning, his fingers digging into my flesh.

“Come for me, Dr. Luke,” I say breathlessly, and my stomach clenches as that familiar wave crashes over me. My movements quicken as I move back and forth in his lap, moaning while throwing my head back.

The buzz signals the end of our session, but he doesn't make a move. His hands find my neck, and he squeezes gently.

"Fuck! Yes," I choke out. When I cry out, he places his hand on my mouth to silence me, and it makes me shudder in his lap. I feel the warm wetness between my thighs and know I've pushed him over the edge.

We're free-falling as we come back to earth out of breath.

He looks frazzled, so I climb off his lap, adjusting my skirt and running my fingers through my hair.

I look down at the telltale damp patch in his crotch. This seems to embarrass him, and he looks anywhere but at me when he says, "You should leave."

I tilt my head while staring down at him, then take a step back and cross the room, opening the door as he scrambles behind his desk to hide his sins, no doubt.

"Nice to see new titles on your bookshelf."

I walk past his receptionist, flashing her my friendliest smile, "Dr. Luke says to hold his next patient," I whisper conspiratorially, leaning over her desk. When I reach my Lyft, there's an ebb in my adrenalin rush, and my hands shake a little as I climb in the back.

"You alright, Miss?"

I glare at the woman and nod sharply. That is the only response she will get. Dr. Luke proved that men are weak creatures. He probably gets a sick thrill from my pursuits. Why else would he let me do that? Weak. They're all fucking weak!

GAIL KINGSLEY IS in my kitchen cooking. I remember when she could not keep track of the days, let alone whether her daughter ate or not. She used to have no time for such things, and now she's standing in my kitchen with

Kade's apron on. I suppose I should be grateful she made sure the microwave meals were in the fridge, and she let me go over to Kades whenever I wanted to. My father broke her. A man broke her. Was I letting the same thing happen to me? Our situations are different, but she sought comfort with the same vices I am.

I hang my coat and cross the living area, which is spotless. None of the empty bottles and takeout boxes are anywhere to be seen.

"You're in a good mood, mother." I say, grabbing a glass from the cupboard and a bottle of chilled white table wine from the cooler. I pour myself a glass, not bothering to offer her one. Gail is post-recovery. Sober for the last two years. The crisp liquid is like manna from above.

"Well, I'm glad to see my daughter and figured I'd cook you two a meal since I'm here."

"Why are you here?" I take a large gulp of my wine. "Shouldn't you be playing house with your latest conquest?"

"Cruelty is not your strong suit, Aliana. And for your information, Eric is well, " she comments as she stirs in some kind of creamy sauce. Whatever she is cooking smells great, but I am not about to admit that to her. Eric is one of the good ones. I didn't think they would last, but they've been going strong for two years. He's also a divorcee with a daughter around my age.

I take my wine glass and bottle and make my way to the den. I could use a bit of distance. Her perfect hair and those court shoes make me sick.

I switch on the television and watch some cooking shows on the food network. I used to enjoy these. I have never been much of a cook, but because Kade is, I was drawn to the art of cooking. I used to take pictures of his above-average culinary skills and even made a photo cookbook for him as a birthday gift.

I change the channel to a sitcom when that familiar tinge of sadness knots my insides at the memory of what was. I look at my camera bag, which is still on the couch where I left it that fateful Friday, discarded in too much of a

hurry to get to the wedding venue. I haven't even tried to set foot in my home studio and office.

My phone rings, and I see Gaby's name on display. I hit ignore and settle back in my seat and drink the rest of my wine, refilling my glass. I should feel guilty for what happened with my therapists. I should feel bad that I cheated on my boyfriend, but I don't. I liked having that power over the good doctor, and I may do it all over again if he didn't kick me to the curb. He probably won't. I saw and felt how much he enjoyed it.

DINNER IS A SOMBER AFFAIR, with all three of us not making much effort to keep the conversation flowing.

"So how's work?" My mom asks. I can tell she means the both of us from the way she glances uneasily between us.

"Great," Kade says between bites and looks at me. My cue.

"I haven't been back, but then you know that, don't you, Mom?" I say, shifting my food on the plate. Her pasta dish is nauseating, and the wine swims in my empty stomach. I feel light-headed, and I miss parts of what they're saying.

"You're so talented, Aliana. I bet your clients are missing your work."

"Well, we have a freelance photographer and she is doing pretty much the same amount of clicking I did," I say sarcastically.

My mother lets out an audible sigh and continues to pick at her food.

"It's nice of you to cook tonight," Kade smiles at my mom.

"Oh, it's nothing. I might as well make myself useful around here."

What the actual fuck is that supposed to mean? Is she planning on staying longer than one night?

"I'm not really hungry." I push my plate away, rise, and make my way into the bedroom.

Crawling into bed after a shower, I listen as the sound of my mom, and

Kade's voices drift through the slightly ajar door. I don't have to hear them to know that they are talking about me. My mother sounds sad. Kade sounds hopeless. I am hopeless.

He climbs into bed an hour or so later, and I'm still awake but pretend to be asleep.

"She's just trying to help, you know." He whispers, his hands wrapping around my waist. "I am too. I love you, Aliana. So much."

I close my eyes at the sting of his words. My once arrogant and cocky man sounds broken.

I am broken. Together we are two souls in the wreckage of our own creation.

"Justin and Abby have invited us to dinner on Friday night," he says. "Maybe we should take them up on it."

I turn in his arms and look up at him. I have not been out in the last four months, except for my doctor's visits and the occasional stop at the bar on my way home.

"Maybe we should." He kisses my forehead, and I sink into the comfort he gives me. Maybe I'm selfish. Maybe I should be trying harder to move forward.

I sigh.

"One day at a time, baby. Just one." He wraps his arms tighter around me, and we fall asleep like that.

WHEN I ARRIVE at Kade's office, he's sitting behind his desk. He looks up when I enter, and I shut the door behind me, locking it.

"What are you doing here?" his icy tone sends shivers down my spine.

There is a mix of hunger and anger in his eyes, and a big part of me likes the thought that I put that emotion there.

I told him what I'd done with Dr. Luke this morning. How much I liked it, and he walked out on me without so much as a word.

"You left this morning without so much as a word about what I said."

"What am I supposed to say to that, Aliana? You tell me you were grinding in your doctor's lap, that you wanted him, and I'm supposed to tell you it's okay? You should leave. I can't talk about this right now."

"Then when will we talk about it?"

"Not now!" He growls. I want his anger. I need to know that he feels something. That the fact that I almost fucked another man affects him. When I'm done and have my fix, I'll go home and play nice.

"It doesn't bother you that another man is on my mind."

He lets out a mirthless laugh. He doesn't know the depths of my depravity, and he doesn't have to know, not now.

I slide my black lace halter top over my head and start to peel off my jeans.

"Aliana, what the fuck are you doing?"

"Apologizing." I say.

I smirk, then remove my bra. His eyes land on my breasts. I kick off my heels, then remove my underwear.

"And from that look on your face, I can tell you like what you see?"

He runs his thumb over his pouty lower lip. "I do, but I want you to remember that this changes nothing."

"Get on your knees, and crawl to me like a whore," he says. What is it about a dirty talking man that gets me all hot and bothered?

I drop to my knees and crawl over slowly until I'm kneeling between his legs. He leans back in his chair and watches me, his head tilted to the side.

"You've been bad, very bad, and bad girls get punished, don't they?" His jaw is rigid, and I don't think I have ever seen him this angry.

I nod, and that earns me a slap across the cheek. The strike is unexpected, and I gasp. He grips my cheeks painfully. "Use your words when I speak to

you. You sure had a lot to say a few minutes ago.”

My pussy clenches at his words.

“Yes,” I respond, looking down at the bulge in his pants, anywhere but in his eyes.

He undoes his belt and unzips his pants. His thick erection springs free. “Now, I don’t have to tell you what to do, do I?”

“No.”

“Good girl,” he says, leaning his head back as I place my hands on both his thighs. I place my mouth over the tip of his cock.

I circle my tongue on his tip, and he groans. My mouth slides over his length until he hits the back of my throat. The velvety warmth and thickness make me ache, and all I want to do is rub it away. I reach between my legs, and he grabs a fistful of hair.

“Did I say you could do that? You’re here for my pleasure. Because whores will do as they’re told.”

I immediately remove my hand, pressing my thighs together.

“I’m gonna fuck your mouth,” he says, standing and gripping the back of my head. His thrusts are slow at first, but as his pleasure mounts, so does his desire to see me break. Saliva drips from my mouth as his movements quicken.

“Such a good little girl?” he chuckles, but it’s a wicked sound, and it drenches my core. I feel myself squirm.

He pumps into my mouth relentlessly, hitting the back of my throat until I gag. “You want to drink it all, don’t you?” he grunts, then pulls out of me. His dark eyes meet mine, and I lick my lips at the salty taste of his pre-cum.

He sits, lifting me up onto his lap. His mouth crashes against mine, invading and devouring. Thick fingers dig into my thighs, and I grind against his cock. “Is this what he let you do?”

“Yes, oh, fuck, yes,” I try out. He’s so thick, and it is a heady sensation that he’s letting me do this.

“Look at me,” he commands, and I do as he lifts me and settles me over his tip. I sink down slowly, my eyes closing of their own will, as I let out a breathless moan.

“Ride my dick, Aliana. You may have been grinding in his lap, but I am the only one who owns this pussy.”

I start to move my hips, slowly at first but speeding up as he stretches my walls.

“Oh, fuck...” I moan, loving the feel of him. He wraps my hair around his fist and tugs it back, exposing my breasts to him. His mouth latches onto my nipple, and electricity courses through my nerves, right down to my core.

“Hurt me!” I cry out, and his teeth sink into the soft flesh of my breast. The sting is euphoric, and I rock myself harder on his lap. When my orgasm rips through me, it’s unexpected, and I scream his name.

“Shut the fuck up,” he groans, thrusting up. “You don’t want the whole office to know what a slut you are.”

When I look in his eyes, there’s only anger, and I climb off his lap, knowing I’ve overstayed my welcome.

“Where the fuck do you think you’re going?” He’s panting as he bends me over his desk, over files and papers, and sinks into me from behind. I let out a cry at the savagery, and that only makes him place a hand over my mouth. Kade pounds into me viciously, his cock growing to the point it hurts. I often wondered how the fuck he got that thing inside me, and in this position, he’s massive. His hips piston, and he groans my name as he slams into me a few more times until he stiffens and fills me. He pulls out of me, but thrusts two fingers inside me, stretching me painfully, then rubs our juices over my sore pussy.

It doesn’t take long for me to come on his fingers when he reaches my clit, circling it hard.

“Don’t think this is over.” He whispers in my ear. “Now go home. I’ve got work to do.”

I RUMMAGE through his bedside table drawer for a charger. I have no fucking clue where I left mine. I still when I see the little blue box. It can't be. My hands shake as I grip the small item in my hands. I flip the lid off and shut it instantly. But the vision of the solitaire diamond ring is etched in my mind. What is Kade doing with a ring?

We're not ready for marriage. I am not ready for marriage. How long has Kade had it? I'm startled at a knock at our bedroom door, and I shove the box back where I found it.

"Yeah?"

"I made breakfast. I thought we could eat together this morning." My mother says.

I woke up hoping that her being in my house was just a really bad dream.

I grit my teeth and shut my eyes. "Be right out," I yell.

I cast one last glance at the bedside table.

I should feel bad about what I am doing. Dr. L is right. It is reckless, and the fact that Kade's thinking about marriage makes my gut twist. He doesn't look at me the way he used to, not since I admitted what I did. I don't blame him. What would he do if he knew the rest of it? Fuck, I have even posted videos of myself on the internet, sexting with strangers as he lies next to me.

My mother is sitting at the dining room table when I finally drag myself out. She hands me a bowl of fruit, and I sit opposite her. "Any plans for the day? You were out all day yesterday, only got home before Kade did. Were you with Gaby?"

I meet her gaze across the table. "What is this? An interrogation? It's been years since I had to answer to anyone."

"Just making conversation, Aliana. You should try that sometime."

I scoff. My mother wants to make conversation now, all these years later. Where was her motherly side when I was growing up?

“Look, I know I have not been the best mother. Scrap that. I was the worst,” she says earnestly. I cock a brow. “But I want to be here for you, anyway you’ll have me. I can’t change the past but,” she swipes at a lone tear.

I sit back in my chair, my already fleeting appetite slowly dissipating.

“When you were missing, I felt like my heart was ripping in two. I asked the universe for one more chance, just one. And I hope you can find it in your heart to give me that.”

“You had your chance, and you wasted it on men and booze. But don’t you worry mother, I’m just a chip off the old block.”

Standing, I make my way to the bar, grab a bottle of vodka, and walk out to the pool. I can find far better ways to spend my morning.

TWENTY-FIVE

KADE

“IT IS SO good to see you, Aliana,” Abby wraps her arms around my girl, but I can tell she is uncomfortable by the stiff way she reciprocates. I can’t help but notice the contrasts between the two women, not superficially so, but the fact that Abby will never quite understand what Aliana has been through, and god forbid she ever does. There is a dark cloud over Aliana that wasn’t there before, and I want to do everything in my power to protect her from being engulfed by it.

Aliana is no longer carefree. She’s nervous, always looking over her shoulder. The only time she seems to be comfortable is when she is drunk or fucking around. I should be angrier. Walk away and never look back. Another man would, right? My girlfriend, the woman I want to marry, is dry humping her doctor, uploading explicit videos of herself, sexting and flirting with strangers, and I stick around. Maybe I am a pussy. The thing is, I love Aliana, and I’ll be here when she comes back from the place she is losing herself in. Until then, I’m gonna fight for her.

I can’t in good conscience say I truly understand what she is going through. I had to watch as those monsters violated her, but I was never raped

and degraded the way she was.

She will find herself again. I have to believe that, no matter how toxic the way she is going about it is.

Aliana smiles and offers a hi, but it's forced. She tucks a dark curl behind her ear, a telltale sign that she is uncomfortable.

Abby shakes hands with Gail, then hugs me. "It's good to see you, Kade," she says kindly.

We follow her to the outdoor patio area. It's a large deck, and the firepit is going on this chilly night. In the light, it has a wonderful view of the mountains. I've only been here once before Justin bought it.,

Justin joins us and places a kiss on Aliana's cheek, which has her visibly flinching. It's involuntary.

Justin used to be an asshole, always partying and dragging me along for the ride. He's been a thorn in Aliana's side since they met, but he's a good guy, and in recent years, he's been nothing but kind and supportive. The party animal is long gone and in his place is a man who wants a family.

"Glad to have you all here," my friend says when greetings are out of the way. It's been a long time since we got together and the first time we've had friends over since we moved in.

Aliana looks disinterested. She's on her phone. Her mom casts me a worried look, and I shake my head. This has to be on her terms.

"How was the honeymoon?" Gail asks while warming her hands in front of the fire.

Justin's wedding weekend is not something I want to remember. The familiar anxiety surfaces whenever I do. But you can't blame Gail for wanting to make conversation.

Abby clears her throat. "It was nice, thank you," she says, her gaze shifting nervously over to Aliana.

As if she senses eyes on her, Aliana looks up. "No need to feel awkward around me," she says.

“Would anyone like a drink?” Justin offers, and I am grateful for the change in topic.

“You don’t have to ask me twice, a beer will be good.” I say.

“Wine, okay, ladies?” He asks.

They all nod. “I’ll give you a hand.” I offer, standing and disappearing inside the house with him.

“Thanks for coming, man.” Justin says, offering me a whiskey tumbler.

“I needed this. Haven’t been out since everything went down.”

He pulls out wine from the fridge. “She looks good. Better than when I last saw her.”

I shrug. “She’s getting there. It’s gonna take time.”

He leans against the counter after placing the three long-stemmed wine glasses down. “How about you?”

I meet his gaze. “Good.” I say, and he frowns.

“It’s me you’re talking to. I know you and you don’t seem *good*.”

“It’s been hard. Adjusting. Sometimes it fucking feels like I’m living a horror movie, and I’m just waiting to step off the set at some point.”

“I can’t imagine what you both went through, Kade. But I want you to know that I’m here if you need me. You don’t have to deal with this alone.”

The thing is, I am alone. So is Aliana. We have each other, friends, family, but we’re each suffering in ways that people who have not experienced our kind of trauma will never understand.

“Like what you’ve done with the place.” I say, taking a sip of my drink and enjoying the burn of it as it slides down my throat.

“It’s mostly Abby, I just fit the bill.”

I laugh.

“Before, you told me you wanted to ask Aliana to marry you?”

I sigh, bowing my head. “I still do, just not right now. I don’t think she’s ready, and I don’t even know if I am.”

He nods. “Let’s get these out to the ladies.”

When we join them on the patio, Aliana stares into the fire, warming her outstretched hands. She's so beautiful, so fucking perfect in every way.

I sit next to her and wrap my arms around her small frame, hoping that she knows I'm here if anything. I place a kiss against her temple, and she exhales softly.

My closeness seems to soothe her. She looks up at me with those hazel eyes, and I silently promise to do everything in my power to make her happy again.

She lightens up during dinner and even makes small talk with her mother and Abby. Abby is a paralegal at a firm that deals with family law and has tons of stories to tell us. Aliana actually laughs at something Abby says to her.

I meet her gaze across the table, and she offers me a small smile, and it feels like a victory to me.

“WHAT IF I'M BROKEN?” She sniffs. Her voice is so soft I might not have heard her if I'd fallen asleep.

“You're not.” I trace my hand down her arm, leaving goosebumps in its wake. “You're hurting and you're healing. That takes time.”

Wrapping my arm around her middle, I draw her closer to me in the bed, inhaling the floral scent of her hair. My cock twitches in my pants, but I try to suppress the urge to do something about it. I want her to feel safe, in control. When she's in my bed, she'll always be treated like the queen she is.

“Then don't treat me like I am. I'm not fragile. I'm not a porcelain doll. I want you to look at me the way you used to, and not see them, just me.”

I nuzzle my nose in her hair, and she lets out a small moan.

“I don't see them. Just you.”

“Then show me.”

That is all the encouragement I need. I turn her on her back and rest on my elbows, looking down at her.

“You’re so beautiful,” I say, letting my hand slip under the hem of her t-shirt, feeling the softness of her skin under my fingertips. “So goddamn, beautiful.”

My hand covers one of her breasts, and I massage it, tweaking a taut nipple between my fingers. Her lips fall open on a moan, and she arches her back, pressing her tits into my hands.

I slide my hand down her body and into her sleep shorts. Her bare pussy is like fucking heaven. Sliding my fingers over her clit, I smirk at how wet she is. Her legs fall open as I tease and taunt her with my fingers. She responds with a soft moan. Her eyes flutter closed.

“Look at me,” I whisper. Our eyes connect, and I drink in every change in her expression. “You’re mine, Aliana. All fucking mine.”

Her breath hitches and she thrusts her hips up to meet my strokes.

Kissing my way down her stomach, my gaze never leaves hers.

She’s perfect in every way, and I need her to understand that.

“I need you,” she moans, and I nip at her skin.

“Tell me what you want, baby,” I say between kisses and small nips while pulling off her sleep shorts and panties.

“Keep going, don’t stop.” Her words are breathy and needy. I blow against her pussy, and she gasps at the cool sensation.

Spreading her legs further apart, I expose her bundle of nerves, licking my lips at the sight of her arousal.

I flick my tongue over her clit, and her hips rock against the bed. “More?”

“Yes,” her moans are like music to my ears.

I lick from the bottom to the top of her slit before diving in and kissing her pussy hard, my tongue entering her until her pants fill the fucking room. My tongue circles her clit before diving inside her. Her juices coat my mouth, and I feel like I’m in heaven.

Sucking on her sensitive bud, I thrust my middle finger deep inside her until she's bucking off the bed. I pump two fingers into her, and she grips my hair, screaming my name as my fingers, and my tongue works its magic. I am fucking glad Gail is on the other side of the house.

Her thighs clench around my head, and she starts to grind her hips as she fucks my face. She's enjoying this, and I want her to take everything she needs from me.

I withdraw my finger, grab her hips, and flip her, so she's straddling my face. She seems to like that and starts to grind on me as my tongue assaults her pretty cunt.

She rolls her hips, and I spread open her ass as she rides my tongue.

"Oh, fuck, baby, yeah..." she moans. "Fuck me, fuck my cunt!"

She climbs off my face and starts to slip down my body. Our lips meet and the taste of her on my tongue is a fucking aphrodisiac. She climbs down my body, and just the sight of her has me brimming on the edge of insanity, and when she sinks down on my cock, I let out a growl.

She's so tight, her walls feel like they're squeezing the life from me. She groans as she settles on me, adjusting to my thickness. When she starts to move up and down my length, all I can do is watch in awe. Her small breasts jiggle as her movements get faster. She's enjoying this, and I am about ready to blow my load just watching her. Her breaths are uneven, and her small moans fill the room. I've missed this. I've missed her.

"Take what you need."

She uses my chest like an anchor. And I grab her wrists, needing to keep her close, not wanting to lose this connection. She uses me to get herself off, and it is the most erotic thing.

She leans forward, rotating her hips as her mouth forms an O. I grip her hips, and she fucks my cock hard. I'm so fucking close.

"Come for me. Show me how much you want this cock." I press a thumb to her clit, and it is all it takes to have her falling apart, riding my dick

wantonly.

I flip her over and thrust into her hard, in time with every one of our moans and groans. I rub her clit until she's crying out another orgasm, begging me to fuck her harder. And I do, I let myself go, forget the reasons why I should be tender, and moments later, I come hard, releasing my inhibitions and my seed inside this woman I'll sell my soul for, a woman I will do any fucking thing for.

“I fucking love you, Aliana.”

“I love you, too, Kade. So much.” I kiss the tears that form in the side of her eyes, still sheathed in her. I want to ask her the question I have held inside me for months, but I can't, not now.

TWENTY-SIX

ALIANA

MY MOTHER LEFT LAST NIGHT, and I finally feel like I can breathe. Kade is working late, and I have just opened my second bottle of Chardonnay. I made a cottage pie today. It isn't good, but it will do. I am scrolling through the online chatrooms. This is where I feel most seen, in these dark and depraved pages with faceless strangers, ready and available for whatever it is I want to say and, at times, do. I told Dr. L once that I've become somewhat of an addict. I crave it the way an alcoholic would his next drink, or a drug addict, his next fix. That is all I think about. It consumes me. Dr. L believes it is a side effect of the trauma and that, in time, it will fade. He is probably right. While I have always had a more than average sex drive, these fantasies, these compulsive acts, these dark and deviant desires are something I have never felt before. It is why I chose him as my therapist. He specializes in treating patients like me.

After Dark is online. He, and I hope to god he is a man, is one of the most depraved users. He always knows just what I need, and nothing I say is ever too much.

AD: What you doin'?

Me: Drinking some wine, feeling extra unhinged tonight.

AD: How unhinged? Wanna talk or...

Me: I am going to go with or...

He'd be the perfect online escape if he'd only send me videos like I send him. I know it's fucked up. After what I went through, this is the last thing I should be doing, let alone with people online, but I am in charge here. They can't hurt me if they don't know me. They can't touch me. I am invincible. How far I go is up to me.

AD: Fuck yourself with that bottle of wine, and send me a vid of you sucking on it.

I shouldn't even contemplate doing something like that. But my mind is wired differently now. My mind is twisted, bent in a magnitude of ways most will never understand.

Me: I thought of them today.

He types then stops.

AD: Do they still make you wet? Do you think about them when you touch yourself?

Me: Yes.

AD: Are you wet now?

Me: Yes.

AD: Then show me how much you want my cock.

I set up my phone on the tripod, open my legs, and place the empty wine bottle at my entrance. I switch on my audio and ask him to do the same. There is static on the other end. He never uses his own voice but a voice modification app. How I'd love to hear what he really sounds like.

I sink the wine bottle in my folds and moan as the cold glass connects with my walls. "Oh, God," I groan.

"That feels really good, doesn't it?" He asks.

I manage a nod, looking at the camera through hooded eyes.

"I have my cock in my hand just watching you. Do you remember all the

times they did this in front of you?”

“I do.” I feel a wave of nausea at that thought and at what I am doing, but I remind myself that this is a safe place. It’s just a harmless outlet.

“I want you to fuck yourself harder now. So hard, you squirt.” He’s panting, and I know he likes to watch me.

I do as he tells me, and the fact that he is on the other side watching me drives me so fucking crazy. I use my other finger to rub on my clit, moaning, my hips lifting as the smooth glass enters me.

“Come for me, little one!” His words have me writhing against the bottle, and when the wave of my orgasm crashes over me, I feel weak, dazed, and unable to move.

The intercom sounds and I nearly jump out of my skin.

“Fuck!” I sit up and turn off the chat. Fuck! Fuck! Fuck! I walk to the control panel and let out a groan when I see Gaby. I want to pretend I’m not home. Go back to my chat with After Dark. I want to leave her ringing the buzzer and forget she is even there.

I dress and sit on the lounge, hoping she will leave, but she keeps ringing. I get rid of the bottle, wash my hands, and drink some water. Resting my head on the cool wooden door, I take in a long breath of air.

I press the button. “Give me a few minutes.” I yell. I watch as she drives through the front gate. I pour myself another glass of wine and down it in one long gulp.

When I open the door, Gaby envelopes me in a hug so tight I struggle to breathe.

“Do not shut me out like that,” she says, her voice shaky. She lets me go, holding me at arm’s length. “I hope you left me some wine?”

I give her a short laugh and step aside for her to enter. She looks around the place like she’s never been here. “Where’s Kade?”

“Still at the office.” I say, pouring her a glass of wine.

I hand her the glass, and she takes a big sip from it. “Four months is a

long time to ghost your best friend.”

I sigh, “I didn’t ghost you. You knew where I was the whole time.”

“But you refused to see me, and that made me want to die.” We settle in the living room, and I curl my leg under me. She does the same. We stare at each other for a long time. “I’m sorry. I should have called. I just don’t know how to come back from any of it, Gab.” I let my head fall back on the couch.

“Are the sessions with your therapist helping any?”

I let out a long breath. “I don’t know. Everyone says to give it time. I’m trying.”

She walks over to my couch and sits down next to me. “How are things with you and Kade?”

“Okay, I guess,” I shrug. I want to tell her that I cheated on Kade with my therapist and that I am losing my fucking mind. That I didn’t fuck Dr. Luke, but I might as well have. That I’ve become no better than those monsters, who held me against my will.

“What aren’t you telling me?” She asks.

“Nothing. All I want is to drink right now. I could use a night without having to think about what happened.” She falls silent.

“That is why I am here,” she says, reaching for my hand.

“I am glad you’re here,” I say in a small voice.

“I can be here anytime you need me. You don’t have to be alone, babe.”

“There is so much of me that isn’t the same. I wouldn’t know how to pick up where we left off.”

“You don’t have to. We can start all over again if that is what you want.” She looks away for a second. “Just know I am so fucking sorry, Aliana. I just —” her voice cracks. “I wish I could have done more.”

“You did more than you know. Keeping the studio going, hiring the temp.”

“She isn’t you. I miss you. Your clients miss you.”

I sigh, taking a drink. “Will I ever be *me* again, Gaby?”

“You will. In time.”

“More wine?” I ask.

She holds up her glass, and I top her up. We spend the next hour talking about my clients and the shoots the temp has been doing. Gaby is dating someone new. I thought about telling her a watered-down version of what happened to Kade and me in that warehouse because I don't think she will ever be able to handle the whole truth, but I think better of it. It is hard enough talking to my therapist. I do thank her for alerting the authorities.

We eat really bad cottage pie before she leaves, and when Kade walks through the door, I'm on him in seconds, ripping at his clothing, needing to forget the nightmares. You can place the bad stuff at the back of your mind, but it's still there, threatening.

“I'm glad to see you, too,” he says, as his lips find mine and his hand slips under my t-shirt, pulling it above my head. I push down my underwear, stepping out of it. He picks me up and walks me toward the kitchen.

“Hungry?” I say breathlessly.

“All the fucking time,” he says as he places me on the kitchen island. Kade's mouth covers my pussy, his tongue flicking expertly over my clit.

“Fuck, yes,” I groan, lifting off the counter slightly and grinding myself against his mouth. He slips his tongue inside of me, circling and sucking until he's hitting my sweet spot. I'm out of breath and so close to the edge. His large hands grip my hips, securing me in place. He fucks me relentlessly with his tongue while my hands tug at his hair, needing so much more. His finger joins his tongue, and my orgasm plunges me over the edge until I'm shuddering in his hands.

“You taste so good.” He kisses his way up my belly and presses his lips against mine until I'm tasting my own juices.

Kade wastes no time in flipping me over the counter. He thrusts into me so hard I gasp.

He slams into me mercilessly, trapping my hands behind my back. “This

is what you think about, isn't it, Aliana?" He hisses, growls, and leans down to bite my earlobe between his teeth.

He fucks me with savage brutality, not pretending to be anyone but Kade. His fingers dig into my thighs as he lifts me until my feet are off the floor. I manage to wrap my legs around his waist from behind, and he slaps my ass hard until I yelp. "Hold on to that counter."

"I want to bury my cock so deep in this pussy, you'll never want another fucker in it," He growls as he rams into me with no finesse. I am a puppet on his string. His movements stop, and it feels like I'll explode right here on this counter. "Don't you ever forget who you belong to. They may be buried in your mind, but I am the one who owns your soul." His words cause an ache in my chest. How could he know that they were on my mind?

"Kade, please, make me come," I beg. I wiggle my hips, holding onto the counter for support. Everything south of me pulses.

He chuckles as he picks up his pace. "So fucking needy." He pounds into me so hard it hurts. His cock swells inside me beyond stretching point. His fingers dig into my hips and back, and he's so fucking rough it scares me. There is nothing sexier than a man who is so audible about his pleasure.

"You—" he growls, his words are harsh, his voice gruff, "—are mine." He rams into me, and it feels like I will split in two.

I scream—out loud—as an orgasm tears through me. I am fucking drowning and floating at the same time.

My stomach twists and I throb everywhere. His cock pulses inside of me, a steady thud against my walls. He pulls out of me, setting me unsteadily on my feet, and shoots his cum on my ass and back. He lets out a guttural sound as the warm fluid leaves his mark.

He pulls out of me and backs away, and I feel the loss of him straightaway. I slide off the counter with shaky legs.

I WALK into Dr. Luke's office, and he's sitting behind his desk. He looks up at me when I enter, and his gaze doesn't falter until I'm taking a seat in an armchair.

He stares at me for a long minute, and I feel panic set in. What if I pushed him too far? He can't cut me loose now.

"Aliana, I am only going to say this once. If you want to be treated—if you're going to get the help you need, your games have to end. I have thought about what happened the other day and the truth is that we've crossed a line in our patient-doctor relationship, which is why I am going to refer you to someone I believe will be able to help you."

I sigh, "I'm sorry. I know I crossed the line. But you can't just pawn me off now."

He cocks a brow, shakes his head, and removes his glasses.

"It will not happen again," I say. "I confessed what I'd done to Kade. I really need your help...."

He probably didn't expect me to be honest, but it is all true. I got a call yesterday, one I've feared for these last few months.

"They set a date for the trial," I say, looking at the ladder behind him, filled with various vintage-looking ornaments.

"I know. Mr. Williams contacted me this morning. He wanted me to be aware of it. You don't have to be in the same room with any of them, Aliana. The authorities have made sure of that. What are you thinking about all this?"

My attorney, George Williams, dropped by yesterday to tell me that many very influential men who worked with the Solonik brothers would be standing trial at the end of the month. I won't need to testify, but just the reminder of what those men did, what they said, what they could have done to me, was enough to make me shudder. The brothers were part of a Russian crime syndicate that operated in the city for years. They're dead. All three of them. But their associates, they're out there. What if they find me?

"I don't know how I feel. Numb mostly. Scared. It's been four months.

We both know I have not made much progress.”

“They can’t hurt you anymore, Aliana. That is the first thing you need to realize. None of them can or ever will.” Dr. Luke says. He stands and makes his way to the armchair across from me. “You have given your statement, and that is the end of it. You’ve gotta just wait and let the law run its course.”

I scoff, then meet his gaze. “These men, they have the resources to make this go away and who’s saying they won’t seek me out the moment they do.”

“You gotta have some faith in the justice system. They have kept your identity safe from these men. The paper trail doesn’t have any of your details on it. Like I said, this was a crime of opportunity. The fact that they set a date so soon is a good thing. You’re no longer their captive. The Solonik’s are dead and those men who trade women, they’re going to be put away for a long time.”

I look down at my nails. I’ve been chewing them since I heard the news. I can’t help but feel like something is going to go wrong, that they’re going to get away with this, or get out of prison and come after me. My heart thuds in my chest.

“They’ve taken enough from you; it’s time to take your life back.”

“I know you’re right. I just want this to be over. I don’t want to keep looking over my shoulder, wondering where the next threat is going to surface.”

He looks at me sympathetically. “It’s over, Aliana. What you need to work on is your own healing.” I nod, then suck in a deep breath. I want to believe that. But am I truly free to heal?

“How are things between you and Kade since you told him about what happened between us?”

“Tense. I can feel it. But he pretends that we’re okay.”

“You can be, you know. Honesty with him is a huge step.”

I let out a sigh and lean my head against the headrest. “I’m not honest about everything, Dr. Luke. I don’t know if he can handle some of the things

I've done."

"Well, there is only one way to find out. You can't expect to move on if you're not going to open up about the things that you're going through. And Aliana, I meant what I said earlier, I've referred you to a colleague of mine."

"So in other words, you're abandoning me."

He lets out a sigh. "On the contrary, I wouldn't be responsible if I continued to see you. Dr. Kahn is better suited to help you."

I don't blame him. I should have seen this coming. The truth is even though Dr. Luke faltered, he is a good man, and good men do not place themselves in uncomfortable situations.

AFTER MY SESSION, I think of going to the bar again. Maybe hooking up with the bartender. These thoughts enter my mind involuntarily. I hate myself for it, but I can't stop it at the same time.

I'm crossing the street when I feel it, eyes on me. A prickling sensation on my skin. I spin around, my eyes darting in every direction, waiting for the ball to drop.

"Miss, are you okay?"

"Yeah," I say, looking in my driver's direction.

"You looked a bit shaken up." She continues.

I straighten my spine. "I'm fine." Climbing into the car, I pull out a small bottle of vodka, not bothering to hide the shake in my hand.

"Where to, Miss?"

"Home. I want to go home." I settle back in my seat and look down at my hands, only to find that I am gripping the bottle until my knuckles turn white. *I am fine. Everything is fucking fine.*

Stepping inside our house, my eyes flit across the space. I haven't really *looked* at anything in a long time. The smell of stale take-out fills the air. I never noticed how much I've neglected our home until this every second.

Sure, Kade cleans and keeps things in order. The cleaning service still comes in on a Saturday when he's home, but I have always loved taking care of my space. I cross the foyer and walk into the living room, picking up an empty wine bottle and tossing it in the recycling bin in the kitchen, then return to open the curtains and let some light in.

I spend the next hour doing dishes, and when I'm done, I look around the space, feeling a lot better than I did in a while. Maybe I'm getting better. Maybe I'm going to be okay. After months, I walk down the hall and open the door to my home studio. The room is shrouded in shadows, and as I step inside, the heavy scent of dust hits me. I turn on the light and look around, reaching for my camera bag. Unzipping it, my eyes land on my Leica camera. My fingertips trace the device that has brought me the greatest satisfaction of my career. I let out a breath as I pick it up with trembling fingers. I set it down just as quickly, shutting the bag, my heart pounding in my chest.

I rush out of the room, slamming the door behind me.

TWENTY-SEVEN

KADE

ALIANA IS LYING on the couch watching an episode of *Suits*, a glass of wine in her hand. She looks up when I enter the room and offers me a small smile.

“Hey,” she greets.

I smile back. “Hey.” I take a seat at the other end of the couch. “How was your day?”

She shrugs, her attention back on the television. “Alright, I guess. I had an appointment, did the dishes.”

I lean against the couch. “Yeah? You wanna go out for dinner tonight?”

Instead of shooting me down, she nods. “I’d like that.”

“Anything in particular you’re in the mood for?” I ask, my hand resting on her ankle, tracing small circles.

“Surprise me,” she says, taking a sip of wine. It’s just dinner, but to me, it’s a small victory. It’s the first time she’s said yes to going out since everything.

“I’ll make a reservation then take a shower.” I stand and walk over to kiss her forehead.

She nods. “And Kade, I’d like to drive.”

My heart constricts, and I nod, leaning down again and pressing my lips against hers.

She’s standing in front of the full-length mirror in our bedroom when I exit my closet. The soft gray material of her dress drapes over her curves in a way that makes me want to skip dinner and move straight to dessert.

“Don’t just stand there staring, I need you to zip me up,” she smiles.

I walk over to her and place my hands on either side of her hips. “This dress should be illegal.” I lean down and place a kiss on her exposed shoulder. The slits that run on either side of the dress, from the hem to her hipbone, are fucking sinful. I want to run my hands over those thighs, then slide a finger inside her until she’s shuddering against me.

My fingers rest on the zipper, and I continue peppering kisses on her shoulder, then slowly zip up her dress, making sure to trail my fingers up her bare back. Her breath hitches, and I feel myself twitch in my pants. “If we didn’t have a reservation, I’d have entrées right here.”

She leans against me, back to chest, then brings her hands around to cup my hard-on. “We don’t need a lot of time. I’m not wearing any underwear.” Holy fuck! She spins in my arms and shoves against my chest until I’m sitting on the edge of the bed.

I make haste at undoing my pants and freeing my cock. I gasp when she wraps her fingers around my length and slides herself slowly down onto me.

“This dress is fucking perfect.” I say as she slides up and down my length, using my shoulders as leverage, her eyes never leaving mine. My hands grab her ass, moving her faster against me.

“So—fucking—good,” she says, small moans leaving her lips as she arches her back and rolls her hips. Her moans become soft pants as she rides against me.

“Fuck, baby,” I suck on her neck, biting down softly.

“I want to come,” She throws her head back, and I know I have never

seen anything as sexy as the way she groans as she rides against me to completion. My own release is at a precipice as I lift my hips and thrust inside her hard, her body jerking with the force of it. She cries out, and I grip her against me as I fill her. We sit like that until our breathing evens. Her head on my shoulder, my hands gripping her ass.

“That was so fucking good,” I say, holding her face between my hands.

She smirks, then kisses me on the lips. “I love you, Kade. So much.”

Her words twist in my chest, and I capture her mouth in response. The sincerity in her voice knocks the wind from me.

“I love you too,” I say, feeling myself growing inside her. I don’t know if we’ll ever leave this bedroom at this rate.

THE RESTAURANT HAS BEEN around for almost fifty years, and not many people know about it. Tucked away in a secluded street, it’s perfect for what I have in mind. After overthinking every aspect of my relationship with Aliana, I realize that it is time to take a leap of faith. She needs to understand that I am in her corner. We have been tried in ways many other couples will never understand, in ways I wouldn’t wish upon my worst enemy, and things aren’t perfect, but if you spend your life waiting for perfection, you might as well stop living.

The maître d’ leads us to a bay window table overlooking a stunning garden lit by angel lights. A couple dances under a garden cathedral, and soft jazz music plays in the background. Only a handful of other diners fill the tables, which seem strategically placed to ensure couples have privacy. It isn’t usually easy to get a reservation here, especially at short notice, so the fact that they had a cancellation makes me think tonight may be the night to ask Aliana to marry me. I want to spend my life with her, and I don’t want to waste another moment without her ring on my finger. Fuck the issues. We’ll survive them like we survived what we went through.

“This is incredible,” Aliana says, the candlelight dancing in her eyes. “I never even knew this place existed. It’s a few blocks from the studio. Can you believe it?”

“It is great, isn’t it? I heard about it from Justin and always wanted to bring you here.”

A server comes up to the table and pours us sparkling water, and sets two menus before us. “Welcome,” the young woman says kindly, tucking a lock of blonde hair behind her ear. “I’ll be over there when you’re ready to order,” she motions to the counter behind her.

“Yeah, sure,” I say in response.

Aliana’s gaze flits across the room, and I can’t take my eyes off her. The way her dark hair frames her face and falls down her chest, the way the eyeshadow compliments her olive skin and hazel eyes. “You’re breathtaking,” I say.

She smiles. “You’re just saying that.”

“I’m not in the habit of just *saying* anything.” She is fucking radiant, and I honestly have not seen her this relaxed in months.

“In that case, you’re not too bad yourself, Kade James. Did you see the way that waitress was checking you out?”

“I only have eyes for one woman tonight and she’s sitting in front of me.” Cheesy, I know, but I have never meant those words more.

“Look at you being all romantic,” she smirks.

“I have my moments.” I laugh. “So, what does the lady feel like drinking tonight?”

She taps her chin with her finger. “Mmm...how about some champagne? I feel like tasting the stars.” She smiles.

“Champagne, it is,” I say, motioning for the server while reaching across the table to take Aliana’s hand. The young lady comes over and draws out her little notepad. “This beautiful lady will have your best champagne.”

“Coming right up, sir,” she says, smiling at Aliana tightly. I don’t miss

the way she stares at me appraisingly. But I meant what I said. I only have eyes for my girl, and after having her wrapped around my cock before coming out tonight, it isn't just my eyes that are hooked on her.

"What are you grinning about?" Aliana asks when the server leaves.

"Oh, just thinking about what I'd rather be doing right now."

"We have to eat at some point," she says, but I don't miss the way her teeth graze over her lower lip, a clear tell that she's thinking about it too.

"Oh, I intend to do that all night," I say, earning me an eye roll. I missed this. The teasing, easy conversation, everything that we used to be. I don't miss the dark cloud that's been hovering over us for the last couple of months. I don't know how long we can stay in this bubble, but I know I'm not taking one second of it for granted.

"Kade James? I thought it was you."

Fuck! I look up into the smiling face of Ashley Kincaid. "Ashley, hi, you haven't met my girlfriend, Aliana," I say, looking over at Aliana, who is staring daggers at my colleague.

"Oh hi," Ashley greets. "We haven't officially met, but I know *of* you. Kade couldn't shut up about you when we worked together. So nice to meet you finally." The way she says it makes me wish she'd just fucking walk away.

"I can't say the same." Aliana says, her smile tight, her eyes ablaze.

"Well, I'll leave you two lovebirds. My husband, Jack and I are here celebrating our fifth wedding anniversary."

She's married.

Aliana catches my gaze.

"Well, congratulations," I say. Ashley sashays away after casting Aliana one distasteful look.

We sit in silence for a few moments, and the server returns with the champagne. She pops the cork and pours us each a glass, returning it to the ice bucket she just rolled over.

Aliana downs her glass without even bothering to toast.

“Are you okay?”

She shifts in her chair. “Yeah, why wouldn’t I be?” She pours another glass and sets it in front of her.

“I’m sorry about that. We can leave if you don’t want to be here.”

“There is no reason for me to want to leave, Kade. We’re adults and it isn’t like I’m a fucking saint,” she says, her jaw set. She turns her attention to the menu, and I take a sip of my drink, deciding not to push her on the topic. Fuck! How am I supposed to propose after that?

We both order seafood pasta and eat in near silence except for small talk about the restaurant and the food for the rest of the night. I decide that tonight isn’t the night to ask her anything important.

We drive past her studio when we leave, and she asks to stop. I pull into the parking lot, and she climbs out. I follow. She stands at the storefront window, looking in at the photo displays. I recognize some of her work before the kidnapping, but there are new pieces I have not seen before.

“She’s pretty good. The temp.” Aliana says, her nose to the glass.

“Yeah, but not as good as you. Have you been thinking about coming back?”

She turns and leans her back against the glass, staring up at me. She lets out a breath, a puff of cold air with it, then shrugs.

“I want to. I just don’t want to explain why I haven’t been around here for such a long time. My clients will ask. It’s inevitable.”

“You could get Gaby to tell them not to. I stick my hands in my pockets. I did that, and except for the nosy women at the water cooler, people respected that.”

“I wouldn’t know where to begin,” she sighs, and I want so much to hold her in my arms, but after the tension between us the whole drive here, I’m not too sure.

She starts walking to the car, and I follow.

“ARE we going to talk about what happened earlier?” I ask. We’re lying in bed; her back is turned to me. She hasn’t said a word to me since we got home and I’ll be fucking damned if I let her shut me out.

She turns toward me. “I know you didn’t sleep with her, but seeing her just brought up all those fucked up feelings.”

I reach up and touch her cheek. “She’s just someone I work with. I am with you. I love you.”

“I don’t want to talk about this,” she says.

“No. Bullshit. We are going to talk about it. That’s the fucking problem, we let things go unsaid when we should be talking about it, fighting about it, feeling it.”

She climbs out of bed, and instead of letting it lie, I get out with her. She storms out of the room with me, hot on her heels. When she reaches the liquor cabinet, I scoff.

“Run away, Aliana. It is all you fucking do when it comes to talking about the real fucking shit in our life.”

She ignores me, pouring a drink.

“Is that going to fix anything?” I ask.

“Neither is you badgering me.” She says, knocking back a shot of whiskey like it’s water.

I am across the small space between us in seconds, my hands wrapping around her wrist before she grabs the bottle again.

“Let go of me!” There is fire in her eyes when she says that, and fuck if it doesn’t make me want to show her who the fuck is in charge. I know what she’s been going through. I have been right here through it, but this ends now. I pick her up and swing her over my shoulder in one swift motion before walking back to our bedroom. Her small fists pound my back, and I smack her ass so hard she yelps.

I lay her down on the bed, and she glares up at me. “Fuck you!”

I grip her hips and spin her around. “Let’s see how wet this pussy is.” I drag her soaked panties down, and she lets out a moan.

Shoving down my boxer shorts, I enter her with one hard thrust.

“So fucking wet and ready.” I say, and she cries out. I’m not gentle. Instead, I plunge into her cunt until her body rocks forward.

I grip onto my breasts as leverage, twisting her already taut nipples. I let out a groan when she screams my name.

“This is how you want me to fuck you? This is what you’ve been begging those fuckers online for?”

She stills. “Kade—”

“I fucking know!” I slam into her harder, thinking about all the shit I put up with. “Slut!”

“I’m going to come,” she moans, and I pull out of her, then slam into her again, my hands wrapping around her and tugging her up until her back is against my chest. Fuck, it feels good to fuck her like this.

My hands wrap around her throat as I drive into her harder and harder.

My fingers play with her clit, and she cries out an orgasm that has her body writhing as her hands wrap around my neck. I push her down on the mattress, my hands on the back of her neck as I fuck her mercilessly. “This pussy is mine to use,” I say as I find my release.

We lie in bed, out of breath, but I have never felt this content in a long time. Aliana is curled around me as I stroke her back.

“I’m sorry Kade, I know I hurt you. I was so fucking wrong. I’m judging you about Ashley, when all I’ve done is betray you.”

I pull her closer to me and place a kiss on her head. I don’t say it’s okay because it’s fucking not. But she’s mine, and we’ll get through this.

TWENTY-EIGHT

ALIANA

I WALK INTO THE STUDIO, and Gaby takes one look at me and rushes over. “Aliana!” She wraps an arm around me, and I sink into her warmth and familiarity. It’s strange how the little things become the big things when you walk the ledge between living or dying.

“Hey, Gab,” I say. She holds me at arms-length and lets out a sigh of relief. The sight of her kind blue eyes and rainbow-tipped blonde hair is just what the doctor ordered.

“Macey, and I were just talking about you,” she says, shouting for the temp photographer who rushes out of the office. She beams when she sees me. I may not know her, but something tells me she knows all about me. Her overalls are covered in paint splashes. She’s a tiny thing, a head shorter than Gaby and me.

“Ms. Kingsley. This is such an honor,” she says, almost shyly.

“Just call me Aliana, and the pleasure is mine. Thank you so much for holding the fort.”

Her face turns a soft pink, and I have to smile.

“I didn’t tell you, but Macey here is a huge fan of your work.”

“You’re pretty great yourself. I saw some of your pictures in the window,” I say.

“Oh, those,” she tucks a curly strand of red hair behind her ear. “Gaby insisted we display them. Now that you’re back—”

“Actually,” I interrupt. “I thought I’d observe for a bit longer. If you’re able to stay on, I’d very much like that.”

Gaby claps. “I told you she’d love your work.” The poor girl looks like the color will drain from her at any moment.

“I—I’d love to. Only if you’re sure. I wouldn’t want to get in your way.”

“Nonsense. It’ll be great working with another person behind the lens for a change,” I assure her. “Thank you both, truly.”

“Does that mean we’re going out for drinks on Friday?” Gaby winks.

“Sounds great,” I say, meaning it.

This morning, I deleted my online profile, removed the explicit content, and didn’t intend to visit the sites again. I need to get back some of what those monsters stole from me. I’ll never be the same Aliana I once was, but I need some control back. I want Kade and I to be happy again. I know it isn’t going to be overnight, but coming into work today is definitely a step in the right direction.

“Would you like to see what I’m working on?” Macey cuts through my thoughts.

“I’d love to.”

The bell above the door chimes, and we all look in that direction. A young man walks in with a bouquet of yellow roses, my favorite. “This is for Ms. Aliana Kingsley,” he says.

“That’s the lucky lady right there,” Gaby smirks. The delivery guy sets the massive arrangement on the front counter and hands me his clipboard and pen. I sign and hand him a tip.

I open the card and smile when I see that they’re from Kade.

The words ‘*One step at a time, beautiful*’ are printed inside.

I smell the sweet scent of the flowers.

“Kade James finally showed up then?” I wave Gaby off with a laugh. But I can’t help the smile plastered on my face as Macey and I work through her photos.

THE COCKTAIL BAR Gaby wants us to go to is usually packed, so I am thankful that she calls ahead and gets us a table in the VIP lounge. I text Kade to let him know where I am and send him a link to my location. We took a cab, splitting the fees three ways, so none of us have to be the designated driver. The music is loud, and the ambiance electric. It has been such a long time since I’ve been out with Gaby.

A waiter who is far too sexy for a place like this greets us when we’re seated. “Hello. What can I get you beautiful ladies tonight?”

“Hello, handsome,” Gaby says, leaning in so he can get a good look at her very impressive rack. “I’ll have a glass of you straight up.”

He smirks, and it accentuates his dimples.

Macey hides her face, and I can’t help the laugh that escapes my lips.

“Tequila,” I answer, giggling.

“Same,” Macey says, raising her hands like a kid in class.

“I guess the tribe has spoken,” Gaby says, her eyes undressing the poor guy shamelessly.

“Coming right up,” he says, “First round is on me.”

That earns him a whistle from Gaby. Macey laughs. I simply shake my head at my best friend's antics. I was worried about going out drinking. I haven’t had the best track record in bars of late, but being here with Gaby and Macy feels almost normal. I still look around the space for any shady characters, but this being an up-market bar makes me feel almost safe.

“This has been long overdue.” Gaby says. She looks stunning in her blue

cocktail dress. Her long hair is in a high ponytail.

Macey wears black shorts and a silk blouse, and she is a far cry from the usual paint-splattered overalls she seems to like to wear to work. She's admitted she isn't much of a painter but likes the artsy look.

I opted for a modest black and white cocktail dress and pump heels.

The waiter returns with two tequila shots each and a tequila and rum-based cocktail.

"Enjoy ladies, and just press this buzzer if you're ready for a refill."

One sip of the cocktail, and I doubt any of us will need a refill of it.

"Macey, don't look now, but a hottie at three o'clock has been staring at you," Gaby says after we've downed our tequila shots. The alcohol warms my cheeks.

"He is not looking at me," Macey says. "Besides, he isn't really my type."

"He is everyone's type." Gaby snorts. I have to agree with her. He's gorgeous. His chin looks like it was chiseled by the gods.

"He probably wants yours," she grins.

"Nonsense." Gaby says, standing and in true Gaby style, she makes her way across the VIP floor and slides into the booth the said guy is sharing with two friends. She waves us over, and I raise my hand to decline. That just results in the guys following her over to our table.

"Ladies, meet Jude, Marcus and Tate," she introduces. Tate is the hottie she's set her sights on for Macey.

"Guys, this is Macey, currently single, and Aliana, hands-off," we exchange pleasantries, and the guys pull up two more chairs so we can all sit together at the table. Macey is as red as a tomato, and Gaby is the life of the party as usual. I make small talk, and we get another round of drinks. I'm positively drunk at this stage.

"We should hit the dance floor," I tell them, standing.

"Sounds great," One of the guys says, and I take Macey's hand, pulling her reluctantly along. A familiar pop tune plays when we hit the small

dancefloor, and I let myself sway to the music. Gaby and Macey flank me, and the guys find themselves in a spot close by.

“This was such a great idea,” I shout over the music. Gaby takes my hand and spins me around. The alcohol and music combination makes me heady and lighter than I have in days. It’s while I’m spinning around that I see *him*. Sitting at the end of the bar, staring at me. I stop, my heart racing, adrenalin causing an iron taste in my mouth. I’m frozen as his soulless eyes meet mine. He lifts a glass, tips it in salute.

“Hey, you okay?” Gaby asks, touching my shoulder. I look at her.

“That man.” I turn back to the bar. *He’s gone*.

She looks in the direction I am staring. “Yeah?”

“Where’d he go?” I start to make my way through the crowd, my feet moving too slow for my liking. The sound seems to drown out around me. Someone is calling my name. Gaby. She’s close behind me. Macey too. When I get to the bar, I walk right to the stool I saw him sitting on. I stand staring at the spot for a long time. And then I notice it. The whiskey glass. I didn’t imagine things. He was here. My head whips in every direction. The crowd is getting too thick for my liking. My lungs fight to pull in air.

“Where is the man that was sitting here?” I shout at the barman.

He shrugs. “Lady, there are so many people in the bar. I honestly have no idea.”

“Aliana, is everything all right?” Macey asks.

“I think I need to go home,” I say, pulling out my phone from my jacket pocket and texting Kade. I’m too shaken up to take a cab home. I am too overwhelmed to pretend that I’m all right.

“What? Why?” Gaby whines.

“I just have to.” Something on my face has concern flooding over hers.

“We’re coming too. We can take a cab together,” Gaby says.

“No. You two should stay, really.”

“No way,” they say in unison.

“You look like you’ve seen a ghost.” Gaby says. The expression can’t be more accurate. “We’re not leaving you standing out there by yourself.”

We make our way to an empty table closer to the entrance. My hands shake when I sit down, and my eyes dart around the room. Gaby sets her hand on mine to try and calm me down.

“What’s going on? Who did you see?”

“I thought I saw…” my words trail off, and I shake my head, needing to drop the topic.

Macey orders three glasses of water, and we sit sipping from our bottles in silence. How do I even begin to explain that I think I saw one of the Solonik brothers? They’re all dead. That is what the cops said. What if I just overreacted? What if the man at the bar just looked like one of them?

Kade rushes in about twenty minutes later, and he gathers me in his arms. “Hey. You okay? Your text sounded urgent.”

I nod and bury my face in his chest. “I just want to go home. We can talk about it there.”

He kisses the top of my head. “Okay. It’s okay. I’m here now. Let’s go. Ladies,” he greets Gaby and Macey.

We pile into the car, and Kade reaches over the console to take my hand, giving it a tight squeeze. “You’re okay.”

I close my eyes and lean my head back against the headrest. Maybe this is all just the anxiety of being out again. Freedom after captivity comes at a price. Those who have known the feeling of being locked behind bars are the only ones who will truly understand that feeling. It’s like you’re not even free at all. The fear of being held against your will again, the knowledge that someone can take away your power, is debilitating.

After dropping off Gaby and Macey, we head home. The silence of the house is comforting after being out tonight. I kick off my shoes and crawl into bed without bothering to change my clothes. I pull the covers over me. Kade climbs in behind me soon after, wrapping his arms protectively around

me. I sink into his comfort, finally able to breathe again.

“I thought I saw one of *them* at the bar.” I say, my eyes shut. “I turned away for a second, but when I looked again, he was gone.”

He sighs. “They’re gone, Aliana. It’s normal to think you saw them. Maybe you even saw someone who looks like him, but those fuckers dead. They can’t hurt you. They can’t find you.”

I listen to his words and try to let them sink in. *They can’t hurt me. They can’t find me.*

“I know. I just—” I let out a breath. “I hate how terrified I felt. How powerless I felt.”

He kisses my head. “You are not powerless. And you had every right to be scared. You’re human, Aliana.”

“Don’t let me go, Kade,” I whisper.

He pulls me tighter against him. “Not a fucking chance.”

I smile, close my eyes, and let the exhaustion of the day take over.

They can’t hurt me.

They can’t find me.

TWENTY-NINE

KADE

“YOU’RE STILL HERE?” Aliana asks when she walks into the kitchen. Her hair is a mess, and she’s in my t-shirt, but she is as beautiful as ever.

Sometime last night, I fell asleep, then got up to an empty bed. I found her in the living room, freshly showered and in my t-shirt. An empty wine bottle lay on the floor. She’d been drinking again.

“I thought I’d work from home today,” I say, taking a sip of my coffee. She strolls over to the coffee machine and pours herself a cup.

“You didn’t have to do that, Kade. I just panicked last night. It was nothing. In hindsight, the lighting in the bar was dim.”

“You had every right to panic, and I’d just feel better being here with you.” I am not saying that even though I know she probably just reacted to seeing someone who looks similar to those fuckers, I won’t let her go through anything alone. If she needs me, this is where I’ll be. I spent too much time not communicating with her, and I refuse to ever do that again.

She walks closer and climbs into my lap. “Well, I can’t say I’m disappointed.”

Aliana wraps her hands around my neck and smiles sweetly at me.

“Thank you,” she says.

“I’ll always be here. You’re not alone.” I place a kiss on her lips, running my hands up her thighs, bare ass, and under her t-shirt. Her hands trail down my bare chest, and I’m hard just having her close to me.

I nuzzle my face into the neck. “You smell good enough to eat.”

“Keep that up and you won’t get any work done today,” she laughs. I like this, hearing her laugh, having an easy morning with my girl in my lap.

“I didn’t plan to, anyway.” I stand and pick her up with me, carrying her bridal style into the living room. Laying her on the lounge, I nestle myself beside her, helping her out of her t-shirt.

“You are exquisite,” I say, tracing a finger across her collarbone, between her breasts, over her stomach, and finally between her thighs. “Open these legs for me,” I whisper, and she moans as she splays her legs open. I love her confidence. I slide one finger over her pussy, and she shudders. And when I dip my finger in, she’s dripping. “This is what I like, a soaking wet pussy, just for me.”

She groans, her eyes closing. Her walls clench when I sink another finger inside her, running them over her clit before thrusting them inside her again.

“Fuck me, Kade. Fuck me hard.”

“What if all I want to do is play with this pussy all day?”

“Please,” a ragged moan fell from her plump lips, her hips lifting up to meet my thrusts.

She groans when my fingers slip out of her. Standing, I remove my gray sweatpants and position myself between her thighs, stroking my length. Her eyes are on my cock, and she licks her lips, spreading her legs wide. “How badly do you want this?”

“So bad, so fucking bad,” she bites down on her lower lip.

I line myself at her entrance and sink into her inch by inch. Her walls adjust to my thickness, and she throws her head back, her face a vision of pure ecstasy. I’m lost in her folds, stretching her, pushing myself deeper

inside her. I start to move slowly, her wet hole taking every inch of me.

I let out a growl as I fuck her, hard and without reservation. The time for treating this woman like a delicate flower is long gone. She's fucking irresistible, and if this is how she feels, then it's how I'll take her, again and again. Her pussy clenches around me, and I dig my fingers into her hips, holding her in place so I can thrust into her harder.

Aliana lets out a scream, and it drives me fucking wild.

"This—pussy—is—mine," I say between thrusts. Her perfect breasts bounce as I use her body for my pleasure. Leaning down, I suck a nipple between my lips, my tongue twirling around her areola. She cries out, thrusting herself against me.

Plucking her other nipples, I circle it before tugging hard. Her head falls back, and she utters profanities under her breath. My dick throbs, her pussy pulses, and I drive into her harder.

"Fuck, you feel so good," I groan, arching my back so that I'm sinking deeper inside her. Her nails rake down my back, and her heels dig into my ass. I am overwhelmed by the need to claim her, to mark her body, mind, and soul.

I piston my hips and thrust deeper. The sweet smell of her arousal fills my senses, and I'm overcome with the need to make her come hard on my cock. Her pussy and her guttural moans have me slamming into her hard.

She spasms on my cock, screaming my name, as I thrust into her at a relentless pace.

My spine tingles, and my mind goes blank as I come deep inside of her. She collapses beneath me, out of breath and clearly spent.

"This is how I want to see you, completely undone by me." I whisper against her ear as I slip out of her and curl my body around her. I could stay like this forever, just her and me in this bubble where nothing in the world can touch us.

THIRTY

ALIANA

I HEAR the front gate closing when I pry my eyes open. My first thought is that Kade is going out to get us lunch or dinner from the way my body aches. I yawn and stretch, still lazy from the aftermath of really good sex and lazy conversation all morning. I smile for the first time, feeling genuinely happy to simply be alive. Maybe what I needed was a scare to get me in check. Dr. L would be pleased to hear it. Proud even. But then I hear Kade groan behind me and feel him wrap his arms around me. We'd eventually made our way to our bedroom at some point, only to have him ravish me all over again.

I realize I must have been dreaming that the gate was closing. I pry Kade's hands slowly off me and head into the bathroom. Maybe I'll surprise him and cook something today. When I return to the room, I stand and stare at Kade for a while. He's still every bit as handsome as the day I knew I was falling for him. We were just kids back then, but maybe falling isn't the right word. I crashed and crumbled. I walk into my studio and open my camera bag, pulling out my Polaroid camera. It feels good in my hands as I slowly make my way back. I haven't taken a Polaroid shot in a long time. This was one of the things I did for fun with Kade. Sometimes a client booked me to

take Polaroid's for a party, but it is mostly something reserved for us. The light is beautiful, and he looks perfect lying on our bed. Peaceful. In a place, no one can touch him. After months, I bring a camera up, focus, and snap a shot of the man I love.

The roller ejects the photo, and I hold it in my hands, watching as the image turns from black to gray and eventually color. I smile down at the picture, my face breaking into a smile. I walk over to my dresser and pull a pen from the drawer. I turn the picture over, scribble one line, open Kade's bedside table slowly, and slip it inside.

I smile as I make my way to the kitchen.

My face drops as I stand in the hallway leading to the living room. I feel a chill creep up my body, and my gaze is fixed on a dark figure looming behind the glass panel beside the front door.

I start to back away slowly. I have to get Kade up. I spin around and blot into the bedroom, rushing to the bed and shaking Kade awake.

"Kade," I whisper shout. "Kade. There's someone at the front door."

"What—" He groans, "What do you mean, someone is at the door? Who is it?" His eyes open slowly.

"Someone I didn't let in," I say.

It only takes him a few seconds to register what I've said, and he's wide awake, reaching under the bed and drawing out a 9 mm I didn't even know was there. I know he's been spending time at the gun range over the last few months, but the weapon takes me by surprise.

He climbs out of bed, pulls his discarded sweatpants on, "Stay here! Lock the door and call 911. Stay here," he reiterates. I nod and watch as he advances to the bedroom door, shutting it behind him.

I pick up my phone, my hands shaking as I dial 911.

"911, what's your emergency?"

"There's an intruder on our property," I say in a rush of breath.

"What is the address of your emergency and the number you're calling

from?” The operator asks.

I rattle off our address and my phone number. “My boyfriend’s gone out into the living room to investigate. I’m in the bedroom.”

“Stay where you are, ma’am. Make sure the door is locked. Do you know if the intruder is armed?”

“Uhm...no,” I realize I have no fucking clue if whoever it is, is armed or not. The operator keeps asking me questions, but a loud bang and the sound of raised male voices have me dropping the phone and rushing toward the door.

I open the door slowly.

Kade’s back is to me, his gun steady, pointed at the man in a ski mask who now stands at our open front door, a gun pointed at Kade. It’s a stand-off, and neither man is backing down.

“What do we have here?” The man asks, dark eyes boring into me over Kade’s shoulder, and the sound of that voice sends shivers skittering over my skin and down my spine.

“Get back in the fucking room,” Kade commands, but I’m frozen to the spot. The man pulls the ski mask off, and we both gasp. He’s come. He’s found me. He’s not dead. Michael Solonik stands a few feet away, his face twisted in hate. “She should stay. I couldn’t stay away once I saw you last night,” his voice is laced with venom. “And now I am going to finish what we started.”

Kade looks over his shoulder at me, and I know in that instant I made a mistake coming out here because Michael is on him in seconds, twisting his wrist until the gun drops from his hand. Kade slams his other fist into Michael’s head, and they both fall to the ground. The gun is inches from me while the two men struggle.

They’re on the ground, fists flying. I can’t even tell who has the upper hand. But I drop to the floor and pick up Kade’s pistol. I pick it up with shaky hands, backing away.

“Michael, get the fuck out of our home!” I yell.

He stills above Kade, his eyes meeting mine, a sick grin spreading over his face. “You aren’t going to do shit, because if you do,” he reaches behind him and pulls out a gun, pressing it to Kade’s forehead, “he dies.”

Kade stops struggling beneath him. “Shoot, Aliana.”

At this moment, I see the monster for what he is, for what he and his sick brothers did and all they’d stolen from me, from us. It makes me sick to the stomach how they messed with my mind long after I was free. They made me into something I didn’t quite recognize. And now he wants to take the only thing that matters to me. The only thing I have left.

My finger squeezes against the trigger. The sound of the shot rings in my ears; Michael’s eyes meet mine, all a few seconds before armed officers storm into our home. I can’t hear what they’re saying, but I drop the weapon, my eyes not leaving the monster, who is now slumped over Kade. Officers pull me back, my hands are restrained behind me. It’s all a daze, more ringing in my ears.

They pull Michael off Kade. There’s blood oozing from his forehead. His eyes are open, but I know he’s gone. It’s over. I feel myself fading. Everything is a blur, and I let go and let the darkness take over.

THIRTY-ONE

KADE

Two months later

When I look back on that day, it feels like a blur. Seeing that man's face again, fearing all that he could do to Aliana, I knew that I would have given up my own life to save hers, but she saved mine. My brave girl saved herself and me in the process. For a woman who has never shot a gun a day in her life, she sure is a good shot. Those last few moments are still a blur for her, but she knows it's over, that she ended it. Michael Solonik escaped the raid, and it didn't take him long to locate us.

He had Aliana's car registration, something the cops didn't bet on. I don't know how long he'd been watching us, but he managed to jam our front gate motor and get onto our property. There is no doubt in my mind that he wanted revenge for his brother's deaths. Aliana was, after all, the one who got away, taking down their syndicate in the process.

I watch her as she works, fascinated by how engrossed she is in her art once again. I can tell just by the smile on her face that the client will be very happy with her maternity shoot. Abby glows, and Justin looks like a goof throughout the set. We're seated at one of the stone tables at the park. It's a warm day, but Justin and I find a spot under the shade of an oak tree. Looking around at the families and couples picnicking and children running around, I realize that I am at peace for the first time in a long time. She's safe, we're safe, and the nightmare is finally over.

"Justin, how about we get you on your knees where you belong, head on Abby's belly?" Aliana laughs, the breeze lifting her hair until it's flying around her face. It doesn't seem to distract her.

Justin rolls his eyes. "You're lucky you're the best photographer we know."

Aliana sticks her tongue out at my best friend, and my heart warms at how carefree she seems. I have missed this side of her. As if reading my

mind, she turns and smiles at me, and it warms me from the inside out.

They wrap up the couple's shoot and start with single shots of Abby.

Justin makes his way over to me, and I pass him a beer. "You two looked good out there," I tell him.

He smirks. "Your woman is probably the reason for that. I wouldn't know what to do with myself if it wasn't for her." He takes a sip of his draught. "She looks happy, man."

I let out a breath. "I think she really is. I know I am. Every time I see her work, and get into her photography like this, it makes me feel like we've really come a long way."

"I'm happy for you, bro," Justin clinks his bottle against mine. The ladies wrap up the last part of the shoot, and Aliana has meticulously packed up her equipment. They make their way over to where we're sitting.

"Non-alcoholic champagne for the mother-to-be," I offer.

"Absolutely," Abby grins, taking a seat in the chair next to Justin. I pour her a glass and hand Aliana a wine cooler.

"To the new parents," Aliana toasts. "May your baby get his or her looks and brains from Abigail."

"Cheers," I say, laughing at the expression on my friend's face.

"So, how about you two come over for dinner tonight? Justin's cooking," Abby offers.

"That sounds great," Aliana says, beaming.

"As much as we'd love to, I have plans," I smirk.

"You do?" Aliana looks surprised. She shrugs at Abby. "Next time then."

"Speaking of which, we should really get going," I say, downing my beer and standing. I gather up Aliana's equipment, waving her off when she tells me to be careful with it. I know these cameras rank pretty high in importance.

"SO, WHAT DO WE HAVE PLANNED?" Aliana says when we walk into

our apartment. Our house is on the market, and we've moved into a penthouse apartment with an incredible view of the city. We both agreed that we needed a change, a do-over, and a new home was at the top of the list.

"First, dinner," I say, walking toward the floor-to-ceiling glass doors that lead out onto the balcony. Aliana follows slowly behind, her eyes wide when she looks at the table set for two.

"How did you do all this?" She smiles.

"A magician never reveals his secrets," I smirk, filling out glasses with champagne.

"Is his assistant's name Gaby by any chance?" she laughs.

"Just get over here." I hold out my hand, and she takes two small steps closer.

"What's the occasion?" Aliana asks, smiling up at me, her eyes sparkling with contentment.

"Aliana Kingsley, we do not need an occasion," I pull her close to me by her waist, and when she's inches from me, my hands find her face angling it up to me. My lips find hers, and I kiss her gently because I know there is no hurry. We have our lifetime ahead of us, and I intend to show her how special she is to me every single day.

My tongue swipes against her soft lips, and her mouth parts on a breath. I'm torn between savoring and devouring. Her fingers tangle in my hair.

I break the kiss. "I love you," I whisper, smoothing the hair back from her forehead. She smiles up at me, and I feel like everything in my world is right.

The sun is just setting, casting a soft glow over her.

"I need to capture this," I say, and it makes her grin broadly.

"I thought I was the photographer here."

I kiss her nose, "I want to be the one to capture this face from time to time," then walk inside the house to grab her camera.

"How about a little photoshoot," I smirk, walking over to her.

She lets out a laugh, then strikes a pose.

I snap a few shots of her posing on the balcony, the sunset as a backdrop.

I fix the camera on her tripod, setting the self-timer the way Macey showed me.

I take her face in my hand again and kiss her with all the pent-up love and hope I feel before dropping to one knee and pulling out the engagement ring.

Aliana gasps, her hand covering her face. “Kade,” she whispers. I hear the camera still shooting. The look on her face is priceless.

Taking her hand in mine, I place a kiss on it. “Aliana Kingsley, I spent most of my life loving you, and I don’t intend to stop now. Will you marry me?”

She nods and shakes her head all at once, tears streaming down her cheeks.

“Is that a yes?” I laugh.

“Yes,” she says, and I slip the ring I’ve kept in my bedside drawer all these months onto her finger. It’s perfect. She’s perfect.

I stand and lean how to kiss her again, this time with the very ounce of my being. When we come up for air, she looks up at me with her tear-streaked face, and I know she has never looked more beautiful. “I love you, Kade,” she whispers. “With every part of me.”

I wrap my arms around her, drawing her close to me. I don’t know what the future holds, but I know that this is where I want to be for the rest of mine.

THIRTY-TWO

ALIANA

DR. YASMEEN KAHN meets me in the garden under an old oak tree. She and Dr. Luke are colleagues, and he and I both agreed that it was unprofessional and unethical for him to continue seeing me. I'm ashamed of what I did, of the position I put him in, and putting effort into my therapy is the best way to make up for it.

Yas, as she prefers I call her, is thirty-four and unmarried. She's beautiful, with her olive skin and raven pixie cut. She looks more like a gypsy than a doctor, which makes me feel at ease.

"Have you been spending time outdoors like we talked about the last time you were here?"

"I have," I say honestly. I guess it helps that most of my work requires me to.

"The more time you spend outside of your four walls, the easier it will be to remember that you're not bound." She repeats.

I suck in a deep breath, "I am not bound." I say, but that old ugly doubt rears its head.

"It's not gonna happen overnight. Not after what you've been through.

But it will happen. You will wake up one day and realize that you're okay."

I like that she understands. Some days I am harder on myself than others. I wonder when the walls will cave in on me. I get behind the wheel and go to the grocery store, and I still park closest to the entrance and walk out with a crowd. I look in the backseat more than a few times before climbing into my car.

I look down at the solitaire diamond set on a platinum band as it glints in the sunlight that breaks through the leaves.

"How did you realize you were okay?"

She smiles. "I stopped judging myself for what *he* did, and I stopped judging myself for what I did because of *him*."

Dr. Kahn is a rape survivor. Looking at her, it is hard to imagine this strong woman who spends her life helping people ever being vulnerable. It encourages me to know that she is free after spending years clawing her way out of the dark prison her perpetrator put her in.

I nod, smiling.

"How are you finding working at the Center?"

"Great. There is something magical in watching those women pick up a camera." I've been teaching photography at the local Crisis Center. It was one of the most difficult things to do at first. How do I convince others to see beauty in a world that is so flawed? But every day, every smile my work puts on a face, it gets easier.

"The counselors can't stop talking about you and the impact you have on those women. It takes a deep amount of courage to share your truth, especially the hard ones. You should be proud of how far you've come."

"But not without casualties." I think about Kade and Dr. Luke.

"And life is but a process of recovery, darling," she smiles. "Come, we should take a walk."

I stand and follow her down the familiar path around the garden.

“I CALLED MY MOM,” I say, chopping vegetables for the casserole I’m making.

“Oh, yeah.” Kade comes up behind me and slides his arms around me, leaning in and placing a kiss on the crook of my neck. “How is she?”

“She’s good. I invited her and Eric over for Thanksgiving. I figured if she could make an effort, the least I could do was to meet her halfway.”

“That’s great, babe.” His hands tighten around me. “I’m glad you did.”

I set down the knife and turn in his arms. Looking up at Kade, I feel a sense of contentment, and I breathe that in for a beat. “I invited your parents over, too.”

He groans but kisses the tip of my nose. “Might as well rip that band-aid off, right?” I smile because he is much more amenable to the news than I thought he would be.

“I love you, you know that? Not just ‘cause you’re sexy.”

He chuckles, then touches his lips to mine. We’re not kissing, just breathing in the same air.

“I know,” he whispers. “It’s me and you little chimp, always.”

THE END

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grateful.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

M Jameson enjoys writing steamy, taboo, and forbidden stories. Sometimes dark, sometimes angsty, but sexiness and HEA (albeit not conventional) guaranteed. Jameson loves to delve into the hard topics and pushing the limits, so if you're looking for escapism and like your boundaries crushed, she's your go-to.



ALSO BY M JAMESON

Always You (Standalone)

Untethered (St. Jude's Book 1)