



The

WOMAN

RIN SHER

The Woman

Rin Sher

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Cover Photographer: Amy Hinrichs [@amyhphotography](https://www.instagram.com/amyhphotography)

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Note From The Author

In this world, women are treated as objects and used for male gratification. If any of that makes you uncomfortable, proceed with caution.

To all the women who are different..

*Don't ever let a man change you. Only let him love you for
who you are.*

W.O.U.N

WOUN:

Woman/Women Of Unusual Nature

See also: "*Defect*"

Chapter 1

“A man who gets sex regularly is more likely to perform better at their job, Phoenix.”

My grandfather rises to his feet, adjusts the button to his dark charcoal-colored suit, then clasps his hands behind his back as he saunters over to the enormous floor-to-ceiling windows, his salt and pepper hair glistens in the mid-afternoon sunlight shining through.

“You’ve done well so far with brains and logic, but it’s time you use passion and heart. That’s what a woman will bring out in you.” Turning to me, he adds, “It’s time for you to pick a woman. I sent the request, and it has been granted. We’ll go tomorrow to choose one.”

I shift in my seat, bringing my ankle up to rest on my knee as my heart begins to thunder in my chest, a crawling sensation traveling through my veins.

Senior partner and owner of this company, my grandfather Jeffrey, is someone you don’t ever cross. Carsen Architecture

is the most prominent architectural firm on this side of the country, second only to one in the entire country, and they deal more so overseas.

My father, Allard, who can be almost as fearsome, is second to him, and I've just been promoted to Junior partner, not to be mistaken for Junior Architect. Once my grandfather is gone, my father will replace him, and I will replace my father.

Being a part of a powerful company like this means you have a greater stature in life, more sway, and more opportunities. And the more power you have in this world, the more choices you get to make. Hence, my being able to choose my woman tomorrow.

However, the pounding of my heart is not from being excited like others would be.

No, it's from anxiousness.

Irritation.

Being unsettled and having no real control over the situation.

Even knowing this was a possibility hasn't lessened the dread forming in the pit of my stomach, overtaking the happiness I should be feeling about being promoted.

Not all men get to pick theirs. In fact, most are just given a woman when they reach the age of thirty; they either have to accept the one they receive or live without one. I'm apparently one of the lucky ones, where at the age of twenty-five, I have the opportunity to browse through a selection of them and pick who I want.

But I don't *want* to pick one. Nor do I need one. I personally think she'd only be an annoyance. A *burden*.

I won't show him that, though. I remain poised, my face stoic and appearing calm.

"Take the rest of today off," he continues. "And make sure your penthouse is set up for another person. Go get more pillows and all that shit. She won't come with much."

"Thank you, sir," I answer with forced gratitude.

No way would I ever go against what he tells me to do, no matter how much my mind screams at me to do so. I want this promotion badly. I've worked hard for it. So, if that means I buy some shit and pick a woman, I will. I can always ignore her. I don't *have* to have sex with her. Some men even lend out their woman to friends or others who haven't gotten theirs yet, so there's always that option.

A large hand lands on my shoulder before I'm able to stand, and I turn toward my father sitting next to me. "Congratulations, son," he tells me in his gruff tone. "You'll enjoy having one. And you'll do good in your new position."

I nod at him, my lips still pursed. "Thanks."

The desire to get to my feet and walk out of the large office as the two of them begin discussing something else entirely has more to do with the lunch I just ate suddenly not sitting right in my stomach than an eagerness to go on this shopping trip.

I close the door behind me, nodding to Gary, my grandfather's assistant outside his door, and then Mike, who sits outside my father's office. Soon, I'll have an assistant, too.

Deciding to make a detour, I peek into the office that is to be mine. It's half the size of the other two up here but still quite large, with one entire wall being floor-to-ceiling windows – a personal favorite of mine – and a water feature wall on the opposite side that is unique only to this office. Water runs down the length over a textured back-splash and into an almost hidden gap in the floor. There's also a large mahogany desk in the corner with a plant next to it, and a private elevator off to the side for if I don't feel like taking the main one. A couch sits on the opposite side of the room, with a door to my personal bathroom next to it. The rest of the room awaits my personal touch.

Making my way out again, I step into the main elevator and lean back against the wall, looking at my distorted reflection in the shiny interior panels. I can make out my black hair, short on the sides and longer on top, neatly combed back, but my gray eyes aren't as easy to see. It has me contemplating the woman I have to choose.

Do I pick someone with dark hair? Or maybe red? Then there's the eye color to consider – the height as well. So many choices. Fuck, it's just one more thing I have to think about in my already packed mind. She's already a distraction, and I haven't even gotten her yet.

Until my father mentioned the possibility of being able to pick early in passing last month, I hadn't given any thought to having one. Not since I was about eighteen when someone had taken their woman to the bar I was having a drink at after work.

I remember thinking she was *beautiful*. It's not uncommon for females to be seen out in public, but it's not often that they're brought into a bar, and I couldn't stop staring at her. It wasn't that I wanted *her* specifically, but that I wanted my own – at the time. I had gone home and watched the instructional videos on how to have sex and then stroked my cock until I came all over myself.

The problem was that I kept doing that day after day, until I realized just how obsessed I had become with it and how much I was slacking at work because of it. I knew then and there that I didn't want a female in my life if they could have that type of control over me. I had to stop *anything* to do with women and throw away the videos so I could get my focus back on more important things – like my career.

I had successfully ignored any thoughts of a woman and worked my way up in the company.

Now, I'm being forced to have one, and it frustrates me. I'm not that same man who'd become obsessed beyond control anymore, but the thought of having someone without a mind of their own hanging around constantly, used for companionship and sex, is not appealing.

Running a hand through my hair, I shift on my feet. Jeez, it feels stuffy in here. I adjust my collar and take in a deep breath, holding it in for a few seconds before releasing it, trying to calm myself down before exiting the elevator. I undo the button of my dark blue pinstripe suit and finally step out. A few of the other guys who work under me pass by, returning from their lunch breaks. They give a friendly wave and say, “Hello,” But I barely offer them a glance in return as I pass.

“Mr. Carsen,” Alex, who was walking a little further behind them, greets me with a head nod.

“Pixton Place file on my desk by this afternoon,” I reply, turning to face him.

He pauses, turning around, his forehead scrunched. “This afternoon?”

“You heard me.”

“But—” he starts and then cuts himself off when he sees my pinched brows. His shoulders deflate a little. “Okay, sure.” I’m almost disappointed at his lack of fight but pleased that it will be done while I’m gone.

As soon as I step outside, there’s a black car waiting for me, with Patrick, my driver, holding the door open. “Where to, sir?” he asks as I slide in.

I can purchase most of the items that I need to get from any store today, but I won’t be able to buy her clothes until I’ve made my pick and know her size. I silently grumble to myself. Another inconvenience of having to make *another* trip. I

should just buy her whatever I feel like today. Too bad if it doesn't fit.

“Take me to Monctons,” I tell him.

He nods and closes my door, then sits in the driver's seat. I'll be able to get all the extra pillows and house shit from there.

Tapping my fingers on my thigh, I contemplate what I should do while he clicks on his seatbelt. Then, coming to a decision, I add, “And then we'll go to Sherron.”

He quirks a brow at me through the mirror but says nothing as he pulls into traffic. Everybody knows Sherron is where you go to get women's clothing, and he knows I don't have mine yet. She'll just have to make do with whatever I get her.

With a few minutes to kill, I pull out my phone and read the text I got from my closest friend.

Edison: How did the meeting go?

Me: Got the promotion.

Edison: I didn't doubt you would. Good for you!

Me: Seven @ O'Malleys?

I already know I'm going to need a drink tonight, especially after having to pick up all this extra shit today.

Edison: Yep. See you there.

I pocket my phone and lean back into the seat, watching the buildings go by. I just need to focus on the positives, I guess. I got the promotion. I'll have an office on the top floor. A pay raise. So what if I have to keep a woman at home?

We get to the store, and Patrick sits idling by the front door, waiting for me.

This place is ridiculously big, containing almost all home accessories, from bedroom to living room to kitchen items. There are even some things for the yard if you want it. If I had an assistant already, I would have just sent him.

I grab a cart, first putting two pillows and pillowcases into it, as well as an extra blanket. I won't be sharing mine with her. Next, I add a couple of extra towels and then make my way over to the kitchen items, glancing at all they have to offer. I already have a couple of extra dishes for when I have the guys over, but I decide to grab a couple more anyway.

I continue on, throwing some more items in, not even really caring what I'm picking up at this point. I'm sure we'll be able to get by with what I've got until I make another trip back. But even just the thought of having to do that when I could be focusing on other things pisses me off again, so I add a few more random things into my cart just in case and then head to the check-out.

I'm in an even more sour mood by the time we make it to Sherron. Standing in front of some dresses, I scowl at the delicate flowery material like it offends me. A chuckle from nearby hits my ears, and I turn to see a man and his woman checking out some of the other dresses, looking happy and holding hands. He holds one up in front of her, and she nods.

She would smile and nod at anything he held in front of her, though.

Turning away, I throw the dress into my cart and end up just grabbing enough clothes for her to wear for a week, not caring what they look like. It doesn't matter to me since I'm not planning on doing any looking. She can wash and wear the same things the following week. I grab a fistful of underwear from a bin of assorted ones and then pick a handful of shoes. Then, I'm finally done.

When the guy behind the counter gives me the total, my eyes just about bug out at the amount.

Why the fuck do their things cost so much? It's not like I can't afford it, but that's not the point. I don't know why men get so excited about having a female when all of their items are double what they are for us.

I begrudgingly hand my card over to the cashier and pay for everything, then leave, letting out a heavy breath as I sink into the back seat once again. It's not until we're halfway home that I realize I also need to get extra food for her to eat. *Fuck.*



Chapter 2

By the time I make it to O'Malleys, I'm in the shittiest of moods, and not even the hockey game they have playing on the screens can lift my spirits.

“Would you like to be seated in the VIP section, or will you be staying out here this evening, sir?”

I look to Derek, the host who has worked here for the past five years at least, and then glance around the room before my eyes land on Edison sitting by the bar.

“I'll stay out here.”

“Very well,” he replies, nodding and leaving me be.

I walk over to Edison and slide onto the stool next to him, letting out a sigh of annoyance from the day I've had.

He turns his head of effortlessly coiffed blond hair my way and passes me the second beer that was sitting in front of him, frowning when he catches sight of my face.

“I thought we were celebrating? Why aren’t you smiling ear-to-ear after getting the promotion? Ah, who am I kidding? Your facial muscles don’t even know how to do that. But why does your face look like *that*?”

“I need something stronger than this,” I grumble, pushing the beer back to him and catching the bartender’s attention.

“What can I get you, sir?”

“Give me a shot of Macallan. Actually, make it two.”

“Whoa. The last time you drank like this, you lost the contract to design that island hotel. What the hell happened?” Edison asks.

The bartender places both shots in front of me and then lingers there like he’s waiting to hear some secrets he can maybe sell.

We should have sat in the VIP section. Anybody who works in there signs an NDA, preventing them from acquiring information and then selling it to our competitors. They’re always trying to do that with any big businesses.

“Leave,” I demand. Once he shuffles away, I swallow down my first shot and turn back to Edison. “I have to pick a woman tomorrow.”

His eyes widen, the frown disappearing. “What? Really? Why do you look so angry about it?”

I scowl in his direction before swallowing down the second one and setting the glass down roughly in front of me. “You know my focus is my career. Do you have any idea how much

she's going to annoy me? Always being in my home or in my way." My gaze drifts to the side as I picture it, my jaw clenching. "I'll have to think of her well-being as well instead of focusing on work. It's just a hassle I don't need."

His lips twitch. "You're literally the only guy I know that's pissed about having to have a woman. And getting to pick her, no less. So many guys would *love* to be in your position, me included. Besides, it's not like you didn't know it was coming, whether it was now or in five years." An irritated groan rumbles from my throat, to which he adds, "Okay, okay, well, just tell your grandfather you don't want one now, then."

The tone of his voice sounds like he's being sincere, but the sparkle in his light-blue eyes and the smile he's trying to contain tell me that he finds my predicament amusing rather than a major inconvenience.

He's the light and easy-going to my serious, slightly up-tight persona and one of the only ones who talks to me the way he does, earning my respect. We've known each other for twenty years and have been best friends for most of that. It's the only reason why I feel comfortable enough admitting to him that I don't want one.

"I can't tell him any such thing," I answer, appalled at the very idea. "He's proud that I'm following in his and my father's footsteps in not only the company but also being able to pick a woman at twenty-five. It looks good for our family line, and I'm not going to fuck it up."

He full-on smiles now, then takes a swig of his beer before speaking, “Then I guess you gotta suck it up, buttercup, and stop being so pissy about it. Besides, I’ve heard sex can be unreal.”

Men who have their woman have a tendency to talk about their sex life, and I have heard the same comments over the years. But I resist letting my mind wander to the videos I watched several *hundred* times when I was eighteen. Edison doesn’t know just how obsessive I got over it at one point.

A distraction. That’s all that was.

But I’m not going to let it consume me like it did when I was young. I would rather focus and continue advancing in the company and maybe eventually make it to number one in America.

Besides, who wants someone around who doesn’t challenge them or make them a better person?

“I don’t see what’s appealing about having someone around who doesn’t really think for themselves, has no emotions except being happy all of the time, and only does what you tell them.”

“You like telling people what to do.” I do, but not always with no resistance. And who wants to have sex with a rag-doll? “I think she’ll be good for you. You can let go a little.”

“What about you?” I ask abruptly, twisting the shot glass in my hand and changing the subject. “Any news yet?”

Edison is a lawyer at a very prestigious law firm, but since he's only twenty-four, at this point, he still doesn't know if he will have to wait until he's thirty or not for his own woman. Right now, he's waiting on news as to whether he will be made partner or not.

“No, not yet.” He lifts the second beer, finishing it off. “But my dad thinks by next summer at the latest I'll be made partner.”

I raise my hand to the bartender, signaling for another beer for Edison and one for me this time, then turn to him again. “You will. Just keep your head down. Focus on work and no other bullshit.”

He rolls his eyes at my advice like I figured he would. “Not everyone has to be as focused on their career as you, Phoenix. Some of us like to work *and* play.”

“That's not how you get ahead.”

He snickers but doesn't say anything more on the matter, instead focusing his attention on the hockey game playing with a smirk lifting the side of his mouth.

Once I'm home and getting ready for bed, all I can think about is what's to come tomorrow and how it will change everything. I'll always be coming home to someone. I'll always be sharing my space. Will I even be able to play my piano or relax on the couch by myself?

Probably not.

I don't realize just how harshly I'm brushing my teeth as I think about everything until I glance up from the toothbrush holder to my reflection in the mirror. Blood mixed with toothpaste drips down my chin.

Slapping my toothbrush down, I yank the pink one I picked out earlier today from the holder and stalk into the other bathroom closer to the guest bedroom. I don't know why I put it in mine in the first place. After tossing it onto the counter, I calmly walk back into my bathroom, pick up my toothbrush, and focus back on brushing with much softer strokes.

That's better.

Chapter 3

I discreetly run my finger behind the collar of my shirt, trying to create a bit of space as I stretch out my neck. It's too fucking tight, and there is no airflow back here.

“Is something wrong?”

My eyes cut to my grandfather sitting opposite me in the car, and I drop my hand, forcing it to relax on my thigh. I guess I wasn't as discreet as I thought.

“No,” I answer, lowering my shoulders as well.

My grandfather's eyes do this sparkle thing where they look a little brighter, and yet his lips remain unmoving. That's the biggest smile you'll get from him, but he has no problem expressing other emotions, especially when provoked. His serious demeanor, business ethics, and gray eyes are traits that were passed down to me.

“No doubt you'll be eager to get her home to get acquainted, but unfortunately, I'll need you to come back with me and get started on Anderson's project. Don't worry. Whoever you

choose will be delivered to your penthouse, and she'll be there when you get home.”

My only reply is a short nod before he returns to going through emails on his phone, and I go back to staring out the window. At least I'll get those few extra hours to work in peace.

After driving along a twelve-foot-high concrete wall with vines trailing down the length, we come to a large iron gate with a small booth sitting off to the side. Patrick gives the security guard the necessary documents, and after scanning everything and ensuring we are authorized to be here, he opens the gate, allowing us to enter.

A long driveway lined by luscious green trees on either side leads to a giant mansion. The lawns look immaculately cared for, with not a single weed or flower out of place.

My hands turn clammy at the sight of the building we're approaching. I've heard all of the stories about places like these. I learned about them in school, too. But physically being here has the reality of my situation crashing into me full-force.

Females are brought here at age five and hidden behind these walls where they're raised and cared for. They then remain here until they are chosen. The men-to-women ratio assures that they are all chosen or given away at some point or another.

As we round the circular driveway and come to a stop at the entrance of the building, the doors swing open, and two older gentlemen step out, walking down the few steps toward us.

Patrick opens the door for my grandfather and me, and we slide out, with me re-buttoning my suit jacket as I stand.

My grandfather makes the introductions, having been here a few times already, and I shake hands with both of them on auto-pilot. They appear to be more excited about this whole event than I am, bouncing my hand up and down with an enthusiasm I don't feel.

I follow them all through the formidable-looking double doors, and we're then led straight through another set of doors off to the left. The room we enter is definitely larger than my penthouse, with sizable arched windows looking out into a rose garden lining the entire left wall and ornate sconces along the right.

The high ceiling has elaborately crafted crown molding and carved floral murals centered around the base of two large chandeliers. I can appreciate the incredible architecture of this building, but I prefer my modern designs and clean, straight lines.

We're directed to take a seat in some plush armchairs at the far end of the room next to another set of doors. I sit rigidly, with my ankle perched on my opposite knee in silent anticipation as the others chat quietly.

There's a dull throbbing in the back of my skull from tension and lack of sleep that wasn't eased by the painkillers I took this morning. Just as I lift my hand to squeeze at the muscles in my neck, the door to the right of us opens, and another older

man walks through, taking a few steps before turning around and gesturing toward us to whoever is on the other side.

My eyes drift to the door, and a moment later, the first woman walks through.

I let out a long, quiet breath, my shoulders remaining stiff, watching as she walks in our direction. Another follows her, and then another, all of them moving in the same way. The amount of women who continue filing into the room is surreal.

Once the first one reaches us, she dips her head in greeting and then turns to walk away. The ones after her do the exact same thing and then go and stand next to her in the middle of the room, beginning to form a line.

I try to keep my scowl from deepening as I watch the scene, but my eyes glaze over when they continue coming. Sure, I find this whole production a little intriguing, and sure, I find the scents that follow them as they pass me to be interesting – less musky and spicy and more sweet and floral – but I have no more desire to pick one today than I did yesterday. She’s just going to be wasted on me.

The room continues filling up until there are multiple rows of women dressed in the same black pants and white top, standing evenly spaced, waiting for me to choose one of them.

“Go on, take a closer look,” one of the men encourages from my left.

My grandfather and the two men intently watch as I get to my feet and step forward, clasping my hands behind my back

like I've seen my grandfather do a thousand times. I walk past the first row of women who are staring ahead blankly as I run my eyes over each of them.

It's odd, being this close to a female, let alone a group of them.

If it weren't for my audience, I'd have just picked the first one I saw to get it over with, but I need to make a show of choosing the *right* one for me. I wouldn't want to embarrass my grandfather in any way.

This place is known for its large selection of options, which would explain why I've been presented with so many. Any type of woman you can think of fills this room. Thin, thick, tall, and short. Dark-skinned, pale, and bronzed. There are women with straight hair, women with wavy hair, and ones with curly hair. All with different colors, and all beautiful in their own way.

But on the inside, they're all the same. No personality.

The weight of my grandfather's stare increases the pressure I already feel, causing sweat to break out across my back by the time I make it to the third row. The women in this line are all thin and tall, much like the ones in the first two rows; all except for the woman on the end. For some reason, she stands out.

She's half a head shorter than the others, and as I get closer, I notice she's got a little more meat on her as well. Blonde hair falls in waves down her back, and her eyes ... they're a striking blue, almost purple in appearance. *Violet*. As I

continue past her, it appears as if she locks eyes with me, causing me to pause for the briefest second. But when I stare at her face, her eyes are trained straight ahead, just like the rest.

I continue moving through the rows, one after the other, my fingers digging into my opposite palm behind my back as my annoyance at having to put on this show grows with each step I take until I reach the final one.

“So, Phoenix, which one catches your eye?”

I walk slowly toward the front of the room, my eyes running over the rows one last time as I go.

Finally, after some long seconds, I answer. “This one.” I point to the blonde one closest to me.

“You’re sure? You do have thirty days to make one exchange, but once that is done, we can no longer help you.”

I nod. It doesn’t matter to me. I won’t be making use of her like they expect and will probably just end up loaning her out. That’ll keep her out of my hair.

Thompson, one of the two men, walks toward her, placing an arm around her shoulder as he leads her away from the others. “The rest of you wait here,” he says loudly but kindly to the remaining women. “Your supervisors will return shortly to lead you to your regular activities.”

Coming to a stop in front of me, Thompson makes a sweeping gesture in my direction. “This is Phoenix. You’ll be living with him now as his companion. Tell him your name.”

Those almost violet eyes lined by thick dark lashes swing up to my face before dropping to my chest. “My name is Avery. I’m honored to be chosen.”

Ignoring her, I turn back to Thompson. “Is there anything else that needs to be done?”

“Everything else is taken care of,” he answers. “She’s been given her shot for three months of birth control. Since you won’t be returning to your penthouse right away, we’ll have her delivered within the next two hours so that she’ll be there for you when you return.”

I unclench my jaw, the action probably exacerbating the pain in my head, and give a curt nod. “Very well, thank you.”

The female, *Avery*, glances up at me before being led away, and then it’s time for us to leave.

My grandfather switches tunes seamlessly, wanting to discuss another project I’m starting next week as we travel back to Carsen Architecture headquarters. He seems to be in good spirits, no doubt happy with the way everything went, but it takes me longer to get my focus back.

It’s not until I’m taking a seat behind my new desk in my new office that those extra pounds I was carrying on my shoulders start to lift. This, right here, makes it all worth it. Not the room per se, but what it represents – my promotion.

Peeling off my suit jacket, I glance around the room. I was only able to sit here briefly this morning before I had a meeting and then had to leave with my grandfather. My father

had all of my belongings moved up here after I went home yesterday, but it's still fairly empty.

My mood improves as I stare down at the stack of papers on my desk, and for the next several hours, I let my work be my sole focus. My time is filled with phone calls, meetings, and getting started on a virtual rendering for an important client my grandfather gave me. Unfortunately, I wasn't happy with it and ended up scrapping it.

It's already dark outside when my father knocks and enters without waiting for a reply. He was out for most of the day and probably just arrived back at the office. I toss my pen onto my desk and lean back in my chair, stretching out my back and neck.

"I didn't get a chance to tell you yesterday, but I'm proud of you," he states, walking over to me.

"Thanks," I tell him, watching as he takes a seat on the opposite side of my desk. I know he was the one to suggest I be promoted now instead of waiting any longer.

Unbuttoning his cuffs, he gets a little more comfortable now that his workday is over. "I heard you picked a pretty one today." I shrug in response, and his sharp eyes narrow. "You were given a great privilege to be able to do that at your age. We do not take these things lightly, Phoenix."

"I know."

"What are you still doing here, anyway?" he asks. "You should be home already, spending time with, what was her

name? Ava?”

“Avery,” I mumble, picking up my pen again to continue what I was doing.

“Right. You should be home with her. It’s your first night, after all.”

Leaning over my desk, I flit my eyes up to him for a second and then back to the work in front of me. “I need to finish this first.”

“It will still be here in the morning. You’ve done well today. Go home.”

I continue flipping through some pages, signing and dating on the appropriate lines. “This will just take another hour or so.”

“Phoenix,” my father responds. I keep working while waiting for him to continue, but when I don’t look up and acknowledge him, he presses a finger on the top of my pen, halting my writing. “Go. Home. Spend time with Avery.”

Finally glancing up again, I’m met with my father’s steely gaze and the firm set of his jaw. His tone left no room for arguing of any sort. He may not be as fearsome as my grandfather, but he is still not someone I like to go against. Dropping my pen, I nod once and slowly get to my feet.

“Yeah. Alright.”

My father also stands, waiting as I slip into my suit jacket and close my laptop. I guess he’s not going to be satisfied

unless he sees me actually leave. Switching off the lamp on my desk, I follow after him.

It's going to be another long fucking night.

Chapter 4

Hesitating outside my apartment, I listen for a minute, trying to see if I can hear any sounds from the other side before finally entering my code and walking through the heavy door. I make a mental note to reset my door code at some point since I had to give it out earlier today.

It's silent when I step inside, and I wonder if maybe I got lucky somehow and she was delivered to the wrong address. I would just leave her there if that were the case.

I slip my shoes off and kick them to the side. The foyer is almost the size of my guest bedroom, with a high ceiling and multiple teardrop lights hanging down. The large mirror to the left makes it appear even bigger, and I run my fingers through my hair as I glance at myself and slowly make my way through the room and into the main living area. The living room, dining room, and kitchen are open-concept, with high ceilings as well.

At first, I don't see her as I make a quick scan of the area, but as soon as I look toward the kitchen, all of my hopes come

crashing down, and my blood pressure begins to rise. There, Avery sits at my breakfast bar, reading a sheet of paper in front of her.

When she notices me, her eyes widen just the slightest bit before she straightens up and offers me a small smile. “Good evening.” I don’t reply at first and instead decide to continue on past her toward my bedroom to get changed. “I’ve been waiting for you,” she calls after me. “Can I get you something?”

“No,” I mumble and continue on.

As soon as I step into my walk-in closet, the hand that was undoing my tie freezes as I take in the space. All of my things have been moved around and put on one side of the closet, and other *feminine* clothing has been added. My nostrils flare, and my lips purse. It hasn’t even been a day, and now this.

Storming back out again, I clench and unclench my fists a couple of times before speaking. “Did you go through my closet?”

Avery scrambles to her feet, possibly hearing the lethal tone of my voice through clenched teeth.

“Um—”

I scoff and cut her off. “Never mind.”

She would never think to do those things unless she was told. It was probably the people who brought her here, although I have no idea why they felt the need to set her up in my room and touch my things.

I glance around the area, sucking in a breath through my nose and then releasing it slowly, trying to rein in my annoyance. But as my gaze sweeps over my apartment, I notice other things have been moved around as well, things that I hadn't noticed when I first arrived.

What the fuck?

"I don't need people coming in here and changing things around," I grumble more so to myself.

"I'm sorry," she replies. But I don't know what she's apologizing for. "I thought it was helping."

"No. You can remove all of your clothes from my closet and put them back into the guest room. And I don't need all of my suits and shirts sorted according to color either. They were fine the way they were organized, according to the day." She drops her chin with a short nod, and I only now notice what she's got on. "And what the fuck are you wearing?"

Touching the fabric of the dress that's at least two sizes too small, she frowns. "I assumed you bought it for me to wear, so I put it on."

Fuck.

The dress – one I had obviously thrown into the cart in annoyance without a second glance – looks like it would be tiny on anyone, but the problem is that it's clearly too small for her and barely contains her breasts. The fabric is stretched so tight across her chest that it looks like it could tear apart at the slightest movement. It also forces her creamy swells to pop up

out of the top, making it hard to tear my eyes away from them now that I've noticed. Not to mention the full length of her legs are now on display since the dress ends barely below her ass.

I can feel the pulse in my neck throbbing harder with every passing second.

An aggravated huff rumbles from my chest as I spin around and march back to my bedroom, leaving her there.

“Change into something else. And put all the clothes back the way they were,” I call over my shoulder.

I'm already hating this whole situation, and I haven't even been home for half an hour.

I take a long, hot shower, trying to focus on what I need to get done tomorrow instead of the little blonde invading my home. Once I'm out and dressed, I peek into my closet, pleased when I see that things are mostly back to the way they were. My suits and shirts are back to being hung in a way that might seem sporadic to some, but it's order to me, and I know exactly what's going on with them. And all of her clothes have been removed. *Good.*

There is no sign of her when I walk back out into the living area and take a seat on the couch, breathing out a small sigh of relief, but I can still sense her unwanted presence surrounding me. Not to mention, there's an unfamiliar scent that's permeating the air.

Switching on a hockey game, I grab one of the pillows that had been organized from largest to smallest for some reason from the other end of the couch and place it behind my back. I contemplate replying to Edison's text and phone call from earlier today, but I'm not in the mood for his bullshit.

Seconds pass with me just staring ahead at the TV without taking in the actual game.

I'm unwillingly thinking about how that dress looked on Avery when suddenly I feel hands land on my shoulders, and my whole body jerks and shoots forward.

"What are you doing?" I demand, getting to my feet.

Standing on the other side of the couch, Avery wears a confused expression. "You looked tense. I was going to give you a massage."

"I'm not tense. I'm fine." Her eyes slide down to the remote control in my hand, and I realize I have a grip on it so tight that my knuckles have turned white. I drop it onto the coffee table. "I don't need a massage."

"Okay," she answers. "Is there anything you *do* need?"

"No."

She's got that look on her face that says she doesn't quite understand why I'm so irritated when she's here to offer her services in any way that I want. She's probably wondering why I didn't make use of her body as soon as I got home – why I haven't had sex with her. They've been trained to become a companion. That's their whole purpose.

But I don't need or want anything from her, and eventually, she'll get that.

The way she shifts on her feet has my eyes dropping to her chest again, and I notice that she did change like I told her to, but the tank top she put on isn't any better, it also being too small for her. Not only does it end above her belly button, but it's stretched across her chest and her nipples are poking through the material, holding my gaze captive. It feels like I'm going to have a fucking heart attack the way my heart starts pounding at the mere sight of it.

I'm going to have to go back and buy her a bunch of new clothes, ones that are at least five sizes bigger than these ones.

"I'm going to bed," I grumble, rubbing a hand over my face.

"But what about dinner?"

"I ate at work," I reply, switching off the TV again.

I was trying to stay away from home for as long as possible, so I got something delivered and ate at my desk in peace and quiet while continuing to work.

"Oh, okay," she states softly. "I had prepared one of your favorite dishes earlier tonight and then placed it in the fridge when you didn't come home."

My brows draw together again, and I'm about to ask how the hell she knows what food I like when I remember the information sheet I had filled out before I made the selection. It's given to our chosen ones to help them serve us better. That's probably what she was reading when I got home earlier.

“I’ll eat it tomorrow,” I tell her before turning around and walking toward the hallway. When I hear her footsteps trailing behind me, I swing around, leveling her with a glare that makes her feet stutter before coming to a stop. “What do you think you’re doing?”

“I thought I was to give you company tonight?”

Eyes narrowing, I take a slow step toward her. “You are to do what I say.” My words and tone have her shrinking back a little, but those pouty lips remain slightly tilted. “I don’t need your company. You have your own room with your own bed.” I nod to her doorway, and she glances over her shoulder at it but doesn’t move. Clenching my jaw, I step forward, grab her arm, and lead her to the room, flicking on the light before pushing her through the door. “Your room.”

She turns to me, and I swear there’s a flash of something on her face before it blanks. “Okay, thank you.”

With a harsh exhale through my nose, I turn around and decide to head into my office instead. Once sitting behind my desk, I glance down at the hand that just held her arm. Her skin was so much softer than any others I’ve felt, almost like the delicate petal of a flower, and that sweet scent of hers ... Shaking my head, I open my laptop with more force than necessary and try to focus on starting that rendering again.

It’s not until a frustrating hour later when I hear some noises coming from my kitchen that I realize what this nagging feeling in the back of my mind has been that has stopped me from concentrating.

Rising to my feet, I walk to the door, gently open, it and peek out. From here, I can see into my kitchen, and there is Avery, bent over with her head inside my fridge. I told her that I had eaten, but I didn't ask if she had.

That's exactly what I was telling Edison at O'Malley's. Instead of being able to get a couple of extra hours of work done, my subconscious was busy wondering whether or not she had eaten and what she was doing out there.

I turn the light off and close the office door behind me with a defeated sigh. Nothing will get done tonight, so I might as well just go to bed.

Chapter 5

When I step out of my bedroom in the morning, I'm hoping that Avery will still be sleeping and I can avoid seeing her before heading off to work. But the scent of coffee wafting down the hall tells me I'm in no such luck.

“Good morning,” Avery greets from the breakfast bar.

I make a barely audible grunt and move into the kitchen to grab something to eat on my way to the office, as well as pour some coffee, but Avery comes shuffling around the bar.

“I prepared you a bagel with cream cheese and poured coffee into a mug for you. They're in the warmer. Let me get it.” She hands me the plate and mug and then smiles up at me before spinning around to take her seat again.

The sway of her hips has my gaze flitting down to the little shorts she's wearing today as she walks away, and I notice that half of her ass cheek is visible. Heat sparks in my groin at the sight of it and travels through my body. For fuck's sake.

I avert my eyes and clear my throat, annoyed that I keep noticing her body. “You didn’t need to do that,” I tell her instead of saying, “Thank you.”

“I wanted to,” she answers and takes a mouthful of her own food.

“Don’t say that,” I snap, deciding to sit and eat for a minute. “You didn’t *want* to. You did it because you’re supposed to.”

My mug is halfway to my mouth when she speaks again, halting my sip. “I *wanted* to.”

I turn my attention to her, a little surprised by her reply, but she’s not looking at me. Her attention is solely on her food. Perhaps I imagined it.

There is nothing more said between us as I quickly finish my food and get out of there as soon as possible, leaving her still sitting at the breakfast bar.

Tilting my head, I look up at Carsen Architecture in front of me as I walk toward the front doors. My grandfather, and to a certain extent, my father, have been doing things a little old-school and often follow outdated methods. I’m hoping I can bring in new revenue with a younger touch.

I can sense curious glances and scrutinizing stares on me as I walk through one of the main areas to pick up some copies of paperwork I need, but as soon as I turn in their direction, they quickly turn away. My eyes narrow, wondering what that’s all about as I pass them. I’m often looked at warily while they

wait for me to give them an important or time-sensitive task, but this is different.

I ride the elevator up with my arms crossed and a frown in place. My grandfather is leaning against his assistant's desk when I step out on the top floor. He checks his watch, murmurs something quietly to Gary, and then steps over to me before I can make it into my office.

“Phoenix,” he says, placing a hand on my shoulder and leading me into my office. “Tell me. How did your night with the female go? Was it what you were expecting?”

Stepping away from him, I move over to my desk and take a seat while trying to figure out how to answer. “She is an agreeable companion.”

He studies me a moment with searching eyes as he sits opposite me. “Agreeable?”

“And tidy.”

Eyes narrowing, he sits straighter. “You didn't have sex with her.”

I keep the surprise off my face, wondering if that is something you can easily tell or if it's just because he knows me. Was that why people were staring at me earlier, trying to determine if I'd had sex?

Before I can form a response, he speaks again. “You are not relaxed like a man who has just experienced extreme pleasure the night before or the morning of.” I try to relax my shoulders, but it's no use, he can tell. “Was it her doing? Is she

a defect? If she's a WOUN, we'll have to send her away. But we'll have to make sure it's done quietly and that no one else knows about it."

Shaking my head, I pick up a file from my desk. "She's not a WOUN. It was my choice. It was me."

"Are you defective, there?" he asks, perplexed, looking pointedly downwards.

"Nobody is defective," I answer defensively.

Everything works fine down there. But I am starting to wonder if maybe I am mentally off, seeing as I don't want to make use of her like others would.

And a WOUN? I highly doubt that. While I don't exactly know what to expect from a woman of unusual nature, I have heard rumors of crazy women who defy orders and act irrationally. They're not like the others, from what I've heard.

"I just wanted to get to know her a little first," I lie.

His usual frown deepens. "Phoenix, that is not how things are done. You don't need to get to know her. They're all the same. She is there for your needs. Sex will help you accomplish more." Pushing to his feet, he adjusts his suit jacket. "You need to take care of it tonight, okay? You've been given a great privilege, and it's supposed to benefit you. We have a gala to attend this coming Sunday. I will not have you embarrass me with ridiculous notions of getting to know her." He stands there, waiting for me to reply, and only after I nod does he turn around and stalk out of my office.

Leaning back, I pinch the bridge of my nose and close my eyes. How the hell am I going to handle that? He's going to be watching and analyzing my every move. No doubt he'll accost me tomorrow morning as well.

Actually, no. My eyes fly open when I remember that tomorrow I'll be out of the office for two separate meetings with my father. Hopefully, *he'll* be too distracted to notice anything about me. That will buy me an extra day to figure it out.

With a sigh, I open my laptop, intending to go through some emails before my first applicant arrives to interview for the assistant's position, but the little icon in the top corner of the screen pulls my attention like a black dot on a white canvas. It's for the live feed to the only camera in my home, used for instances of a break-in.

I stare at it for several long seconds before finally clicking on it and then whipping my hand back like it was poisonous. The little box that appears, prompting me to log in, has my senses returning. What the hell am I doing? Irritated with myself, I close out of the app and open my emails. *A distraction.*

I finish replying to a potential client when my desk phone beeps with an incoming page from Gary, letting me know my first applicant is here.

“Send him in.”

A moment later, there's a knock before the door opens, and a scruffy-looking young guy saunters in. I'm immediately

displeased with his appearance and don't have high hopes for this one. Regardless, he made it here on time, so I gesture to the chair on the other side of my desk and press my fingers together under my chin.

“Thomas, right?”

He nods his mop of hair. “Yep.”

I keep my eyes trained on him, curious to see how this nineteen-year-old would react under my unimpressed gaze, but he just holds my stare all the same. Finally, dropping my sights, I scan over the information in front of me and note that he attended one of the low-class, run-down schools in the North district and worked as a cashier in a grocery store in the same area until three weeks ago. I didn't bother reading over these beforehand because I like to assess people in person instead.

“Why do you want to work here?” I ask, still looking at the paper in front of me.

“Honestly? I want to see how the other half lives, and I'm sick of living in a shitty apartment.”

My eyes swing up to him. “Where you live is not my concern.”

He shrugs. “I needed a job.”

“Also, not my concern. I'll ask you again. Why do you want to work *here*?”

He huffs. “I like buildings, okay? The design of them and all that stuff. I always have.” He then sits back, crossing his arms.

“You wouldn’t be working here to look at buildings or have anything to do with designing them. You’d be here to work for me and do as I say.”

“Yeah. I know,” he answers with a nod.

“Do you know computers?”

He shifts a little in his seat. “Um, no.”

I lean back in my chair. “It’s not looking good for you, Thomas. All I see is someone who will be useless to me and also looks like he just rolled out of bed.”

“With all due respect, what I look like doesn’t affect my work or how fast a learner I am. You look like a pompous asshole, but I’m sure that doesn’t affect how you work.”

My lip twitches. “Actually,” I say, tapping my fingers on the desk. “It affects a great deal. A lesson you need to learn. Tell me, what *will* you be able to do for me?”

He sits a little straighter. “Well, I learn fast—”

“You said that.”

“You didn’t let me finish,” he replies with a scowl. “I learn fast, so I will be able to handle the computer stuff. I’ll basically do anything you tell me.”

“Basically?”

“That’s right. I’m not going to say I’ll do everything because I probably won’t.”

This kid.

I rise to my feet. “Alright. Well, you can go now.”

“But—”

“You’ll get a phone call if you have the job,” I tell him, walking to the door and opening it.

He gets to his feet, avoiding looking in my direction as he passes me to leave. I watch as he walks to the elevator and then steps aside to let a guy wearing a suit walk out of it when the door opens. My next applicant, probably, dressed appropriately for the job.

A few hours later, I’m just closing the door after my last interview when my cell phone rings in my pocket. “So, how did it go?” Edison asks when I answer.

“It went as expected. I already know who I’m hiring as my assistant.”

“As your assistant? Wait, what?”

Then, when understanding dawns on him, his sigh on the other end of the line is as loud as a gust of wind, and I can almost hear his eyes rolling. I know he’s not calling about the interviews, but I had successfully put everything else out of my mind for a few hours.

“How did it go with *her*? You left me hanging after your ‘I’m heading there now’ text.”

I walk over to the windows and look out at the San Francisco cityscape, trailing my eyes over some of my favorite buildings. Some of them have been an inspiration for me, and some were designed by this company.

The Transamerica Pyramid sits directly in my line of sight, and for some reason, the image of Avery in her tight clothing comes to mind; the soft curves of the tops of her breasts bursting out of the top of her dress and tank top. Her curvy hips above smooth legs...

Tearing my eyes away from the outside, I step back toward my desk. "It was fine."

"Code for you probably ignored her and definitely did not have sex."

"Of course, I didn't. I was busy."

He snickers. "I just thought that once you actually went and picked her, and she was in your home, things would be different."

"I told you exactly how it would be."

He makes a tsking noise. "I don't get you sometimes, Phoenix. Are you seriously going to squander this privilege? I'd never let her go to waste."

Privilege. People keep saying that. How is it a privilege to have someone hanging around you who thinks about nothing?

"You want her?" I ask, opening one of the renderings I'm working on. "Feel free to have her for a night. Hell, you can have her for a week. A month."

"I may take you up on that."

"Be my guest," I tell him distractedly. "Any interesting clients this morning?"

“Ah, yes. You’ll like this one. This guy was promised by his company when they hired him that he’d be able to pick a woman last year. Well, that didn’t happen, so now he’s suing them. But get this, he still wants to keep the same job.” He chuckles and then mumbles something to someone in the background before returning to me. “You guys should make some sort of deal. He wants one, you don’t.”

I make some kind of grumbling noise, thinking about what my grandfather would have to say about that.

“So, you found an assistant?” he then asks. “That’s good.”

“Yes. I need to call him and have him come in for some training tomorrow while I’m away from the office.”

“All right, well, I have to get back to this. I’ll see you soon. Call me if you suddenly pull your head out of your ass.” I grunt in reply, and he chuckles as he hangs up.

Once I find the paper on my desk, I make the phone call to my new assistant and then get back to the rendering on my screen.

Chapter 6

Knowing that I'd probably be forced to leave the office if I tried to stay late again, I ended up leaving at a decent time, despite being frustrated about scrapping the same rendering I'd been working on again and knowing I needed to get it done.

But after Patrick dropped me in front of my building, I waited until he drove away and then walked to one of the bars nearby to spend my evening eating dinner alone.

I sat in a darkened booth toward the back of the bar, swallowing down a few strong drinks before my food arrived. Unfortunately, besides the slight buzz from the alcohol lightening the tight knots in my shoulders a fraction, I am no more enthused to be going home than I was earlier.

I listen for the sounds of the blonde intruder as I slide off my shoes, but just like the night before, there's only a heavy silence filling the air. It never seemed to be there before she arrived, or if it was, it never bothered me to notice it, but it's as

if now that I know someone is there, my mind tells me I should be hearing something.

I step out into the main living area to see Avery sitting on the couch with one of the books I left on the side table in her hands. I don't miss her quickly dropping it beside her or the way her eyebrows draw together and her mouth turns down at the sides for a brief second when she first sees me, but then it all pulls in the opposite direction to form a smile.

“Good evening,” she greets. “You missed dinner again.”

I don't bother answering and instead walk into the kitchen to pour myself a tall glass of water. I lean my hip against the counter while I contemplate the look on her face and the way her voice sounded slightly off, but then I decide that I shouldn't be giving it any thought and shove it to the back of my mind.

Lifting the jug, I think – not for the first time – how convenient it would be to have bottles of alcohol we could purchase and bring home to drink. I'd be pouring that instead of water right now.

The sudden sound of her voice right behind me asking me if there is anything I'd like her to do has my arm holding the water jug, jerking, and knocking the glass onto the floor. The piercing sound of the glass hitting the large white tiles echoes throughout the otherwise quiet apartment, followed by a small shriek from Avery behind me. Water sprays in every direction along with the shattered pieces.

“Shit.”

“I’m so sorry,” Avery breathes out and starts to walk closer to the mess with bare feet.

“Stop.” I hold my arm out, pushing her back so she doesn’t step on any of the glass and hurt herself. “You’ll cut your feet.”

She looks down as if just realizing that it is a possibility. But why would she think about it? Why would she think *anything*?

I crouch down to pick up the bigger pieces, hissing when one of the sharper ones pierces through the skin on my finger.

Avery still stands there watching with her hands twisted together in front of her while I throw the gathered pieces into the trash. Next, I get my broom, sweep all of the glass mixed with the water into a pile, and scoop it up with the dustpan.

Once I’ve cleaned and dried the area as much as I can, I lift my hand to squeeze the muscles in my neck that have been giving me trouble ever since I found out I’d be forced to pick a woman. Avery’s gasp has my eyes swinging to her just as she pulls my hand away from my neck.

“You’re bleeding,” she exclaims, examining my hand. “I’ll run it under some water and make sure there is no glass in it.”

“It’s fine.” I pull my hand back, intending to go shower and deal with it afterward, but she quickly takes hold of it again.

“I should clean it for you and get it covered.”

I attempt to free my hand again. “I told you it’s fine.”

“Will you stop resisting and let me look after you?!”

We both freeze, our eyes locked, hers appearing frustrated before transforming to shock and mine in a state of uncertain curiosity below my lowered brows. Did she really just raise her voice at me and demand I do something? Is that normal for a woman? I wouldn't have thought so.

But then, barely a few short seconds later, the vexed appearance of her face turns into that blank smile again as if it never happened. "It's my responsibility," she adds softly.

I'm still apparently stunned by her outburst because I find myself no longer resisting as she pulls me along to her bathroom, and I say nothing as she presses me back to lean against the counter.

Bending down, she digs through her drawers until she finds a box of band-aids I had thrown in there a while back. I find myself watching her closely, possibly waiting for another show of personality – that she shouldn't have – to peek through that empty stare she's usually wearing, just like all the rest.

She retakes hold of my hand and places it under the running water, remaining quiet the entire time. Unfortunately, there is nothing but a vacant look on her face as she cleans the cut and begins drying it, causing an odd twinge of disappointment to pass through me.

Shaking myself from the weird stupor, I figure the alcohol must have had me imagining it. And then when my gaze drops from her blank eyes that show nothing is going on behind them, down to her full lips that aren't like all the ones I've

become accustomed to seeing my whole life, then further down to her breasts straining against her tiny tank-top, and I start wondering what it would really matter if I took her to bed, I add *that* momentary bout of insanity to the alcohol as well.

As the buzz I felt earlier begins to disappear, my previous irritation at the situation, along with anger at myself for allowing the sudden intrigue toward her, starts to seep in. I will not be ruled by my body, nor have my interest piqued after a mere few words are spoken by a female with no intellect. I tear my hand away just as she's about to wrap the band-aid on.

"I hav—" she begins, but I'm already walking out the door toward my own bathroom. It's just a tiny cut, for fuck's sake.

I stalk into my bathroom, locking the door behind me and tearing off my clothes. My erection bobs eagerly once it's free, but I ignore it completely, instead turning on the water in the shower.

It takes a few minutes to settle down, but my shoulders and the rest of my body finally start to relax as I stand with both hands pressed against the dark tile in front of me while the hot water runs down my neck and back. I take my time washing my body while forcing myself to think about the meetings I have tomorrow and nothing else.

Once I've dried myself, I dress and walk out into my bedroom. I'd love nothing more than to sit at my piano right now and close my eyes as my fingers brush over the keys,

losing myself in the music as I do after a particularly hard day, but I know I wouldn't find the solace I usually do. So, instead, I head into the room with my gym equipment and start lifting some weights.

Chapter 7

The waiter places a glass of water in front of me and my father before telling us he'll be back to take our drink orders when the other guests arrive. Our next client should be here any minute, so it won't be much of a wait.

My father, dressed in a light gray Brioni suit and looking rather intimidating for this meeting, which is nothing out of the ordinary, takes a sip and then leans back in his seat, his eyes seeming to assess me.

“Have you made any headway with the Anderson project?”

“Not yet,” I mumble after taking my own sip. “Nothing I come up with feels quite right.”

“How has it been with your new companion?” he asks then, changing the subject.

I adjust my watch, buying myself a few seconds to consider how I should answer. “I didn't realize people would be so interested in my affairs now.” He cocks a brow at me but

doesn't reply to my remark. "It's good. She's a good companion," I lie once again.

He regards me quietly, and I'm unsure whether or not he believes me. Where my grandfather freely shows you his displeasure, causing you to squirm under his glare while he chastises you, my father can remain quiet and unreadable, keeping you wondering what he's thinking, which can have you feeling equally uneasy.

I keep my face as steady as his, though, having learned the art from him. Although, I'm not sure that my face has anything to do with convincing him, but rather, my words. My grandfather was able to see through me quite easily yesterday.

If my father does suspect that I'm full of shit, he doesn't say anything. Instead, glancing to the side, the muscles in his jaw work back and forth while he unbuttons his suit jacket and then runs a hand down his violet tie.

Violet. Similar to Avery's eyes.

I picture them and how they looked last night in the kitchen after she told me to let her look after me. For a moment, I thought I saw something there. But it could have been that I *wanted* there to be something. Of course, all trace of intelligence was gone in the blink of an eye.

This morning, everything was back to normal. I had intended on sneaking out without seeing her, but I was led by my feet in the direction of the kitchen toward the scent of coffee, toasted bagels, and that *other* fragrance that's been lingering in my home ever since she arrived.

I had observed her as she handed me my breakfast and then took a seat, but she was nothing but an empty shell, a slave to her natural instinct to do as I ask and care for me and my needs.

“I’ve never told you about when it was my turn to pick a woman.” My father’s words pull me out of my thoughts, and I flick my eyes up from his tie. “I thought I knew exactly what I wanted, but I felt intimidated once I was there and the room was filled with different choices. I became extremely nervous and couldn’t make a decision, even though one had stood out to me. It felt longer than it had actually been, but your grandfather still said I was taking too long and ended up picking someone for me.” My eyebrows tilt up. I had no idea that that had happened. “I didn’t actually keep that one, though. I took her back the next day without him knowing and picked the one that grabbed my attention.”

I reach for my water, taking another sip for something to do. “I didn’t know that.”

He shakes his head. “There was no reason to tell you.” Then, leaning forward, his lips thin and his brows lower. “Did he choose your woman, Phoenix?”

His sudden question throws me off for a moment, but I realize now why he was telling me the story.

“No, he didn’t pick her.”

His chin slightly lifts as he leans back again, still regarding me, but instead of looking relieved, he almost appears disappointed. If he *had* chosen her and I was unhappy with the

selection, it would explain my strange behavior. It's clear he can tell that I haven't made use of her like that yet. And if he and my grandfather can tell so easily, can everyone else? Could this be an embarrassing story about my family that the press picks up? A man who doesn't have sex with his companion. Quite possibly.

Before he can say anything more, the host approaches our table, and trailing behind him is a man a few years younger than my father, with his hand wrapped around the waist of a female.

"Ken," my father says, getting to his feet and extending his hand. "Good to see you again."

"You too."

My father turns to me, so I pry my eyes off the woman, pushing to my feet as well. "This is my son, Phoenix."

"Nice to meet you," I answer, shaking his hand.

"Likewise. I hope you guys don't mind me bringing Steff. I'm planning on visiting some of my old favorite places while I'm in the city right after our meeting, and I wanted her company for it."

Company. I internally scoff. She's literally just a pretty body standing there, answering when spoken to and doing exactly what is asked of her.

"Not at all," my father replies. "Please, sit."

We all take our seats and then give our drink orders to the waiter who stops at our table. After he's left us, Ken places a

folder on the table between us and pulls out several photos and a couple of rough drawings for us to look at.

However, my eyes keep gravitating to the woman sitting across from me, observing how she sits with a small smile resting on her face and looking at nothing in particular. I can't help but think of Avery.

Would she sit the same way, without any understanding on her face?

The boisterous laughter from Ken and his placing his arm around her shoulders, brings my attention back to the conversation.

“Don't worry about that. We should be able to work within that time frame.” My father picks up one of the photos and hands it over to me. “What do you think?”

I study the building in the photo and then reach for the other ones on the table that are similar to the results he wants for this one. “Would you be willing to start from scratch?”

“I had wanted to keep the entire front section if possible.”

“It is possible. But if you want designs like these,” I wave the photos in my hand, “then it will be best to start from scratch.”

Ken nods, but then his eyes drift over to my father for his opinion. It's to be expected. I'm young, and he doesn't know me. But I know I'm right, and when my father agrees with me, I feel my chest expand with satisfaction. Now, whether or not I can actually come up with the design is another story.

The waiter comes and delivers our drinks and then asks for our food orders. I lift the glass of bourbon to my lips and take a sip while looking across from me again as Ken talks to the waiter. I can't help but keep comparing her to Avery and wondering what she would have been like if I had brought her here with me.

I don't know why I'm so curious about it. In fact, it pisses me off that there is still a part of Avery that intrigues me – those moments where she doesn't behave quite like I'd expect her to. I never know whether it's just my imagination or not, and that bothers me.

I watch *Steff* take a small drink of the Sprite Ken ordered for her and then place it gently on the table in front of her. I stare at the glass for a moment and then flick my eyes to the cut on my finger, thinking over the events of last night.

I'm not sure what compels me or pushes me to do it, but I lean forward and bring my elbows up, knocking my water onto the ground. The glass shatters on the floor, much like last night, and I feign being startled by the *accident* while keeping my eyes on the woman across from me.

But she doesn't let out a shriek, and her eyes don't widen. Much to my dismay, she keeps that partial smile on her face and turns to Ken, asking if he wants her to clean it up.

It's nothing like the look on Avery's face when she caused me to knock the glass to the ground, and I don't know what that means exactly.

It probably has something to do with the fact that I've been an asshole to her, and I haven't treated her the same way other men treat their women. She's probably scared of me.

But do they even feel scared? No, that can't be right.

"No, that's okay, sweetheart." Ken leans over and kisses her lips, giving her a lingering look that promises a night of pleasure ahead for him. "The waiter will do it. You just sit there lookin' pretty."

Internally shaking my head, I decide to keep my eyes off her and work at ignoring her presence for the rest of the meeting.



When I finally return home after dinner later in the evening, I come to a halt outside my penthouse door when the very faint sounds of what appears to be a hauntingly beautiful piano piece reach my ears from inside. It almost sounds familiar in a way, but I can't place where I've heard it before.

I stay rooted to the spot momentarily, straining my ear to listen to the melody until curiosity gets the best of me, and I barge through my front door and into the living room. The music was immediately replaced by the chaotic sounds of multiple keys being pressed at once as soon as I stepped inside, and now I watch as Avery wipes a rag across the keys and then wipes along the top and the sides.

"Were you playing my piano?" I ask, bewilderment lacing my voice.

Glancing up as if just noticing me, she shakes her head and offers that same smile as always. “No. I was cleaning off the dust.”

I raise a brow, suspicious and unconvinced by her answer. Women don’t play any instruments, and it definitely sounded like *something*, not just cleaning the keys like she said. But as far as I know, women also don’t lie. Besides, where would she have learned it?

Perhaps the stress of the last few days has me hearing things. I rub a hand over my face, trying to clear my mind.

“It’s late. Did you eat already again?” she asks.

“I did,” I answer, tugging at my tie. She’s in another pair of those tiny shorts that barely cover her ass but is wearing a t-shirt this time. Although it’s small like the rest of her clothes, it at least covers her breasts better than the dress and tank top did.

The expression that crosses her face after my reply could almost be described as disappointment, but then it’s gone, and she smiles. “Maybe tomorrow. Could I get you a glass of water? Or tea? I know you don’t drink coffee in the evenings.”

My natural inclination is to tell her no and that I don’t need anything from her, but I’m tired, and I figure it will be nice to come out of my shower to an already prepared drink. “Tea. Thanks,” I tell her as I head toward my room. “It’s in the cupboard ab—”

“I know where it is,” she replies, cutting me off. I cast a glance over my shoulder at her but she’s already walking quickly into the kitchen.

I can’t deny that she’s not quite what I had been expecting when I selected her, and she even seems different than the woman from our meeting today. I’m not sure what to think of that or how I feel about it.

When I come out of the shower, she has my tea sitting on the coffee table, and the TV turned to the business news channel. I almost feel a touch of appreciation for it.

Appearing beside me, Avery gestures to the couch and smiles that blank smile. “Take a seat. If you need anything else at all from me, I’ll be in my room.” She begins walking away but then suddenly pauses and turns around. “Oh. I did want to ask you if maybe I could come with you tomorrow?”

My brows furrow, and I turn to face her. “You want to come with me?”

Is it normal for women to ask such things?

“Yes.” Her hands clasp together in front of her as if she’s nervous, but she keeps her head up and voice steady. “There is not much I can do here, and I thought it would be nice to see where you work.”

I narrow my eyes at her, confusion beginning to form in my mind. *I* can’t imagine being stuck inside here day after day. I’d be going out of my mind with boredom. But it’s completely

normal for women to be at home throughout the day, and the fact that she asked me—

“That way, I could provide whatever services you need from me there,” she then adds, and suddenly, it all makes sense. She’s not asking because she’s bored and *wants* to come. She’s simply asking so that she can please me and do whatever I ask of her there like she’s supposed to.

“No,” I answer before turning my back on her and taking a few steps toward the living room.

The thought of her lingering around, invading my office as well as my home, sets off the tension in my body, making my shoulders bunch. I don’t need that at all.

But then a thought has me stopping dead in my tracks in front of the couch. If she’s there with me tomorrow, my grandfather won’t come in and ask me questions. He and my father won’t be suspicious or disappointed. If I touch her arm or have her do something for me in front of him, he should be convinced that I’m not “wasting this privilege”.

After briefly closing my eyes and sucking a breath through my nose, I turn back around.

“Actually. I changed my mind.”

Chapter 8

I decided to take my own car this morning so that we could avoid being around other people as much as possible.

We're both silent along the drive, not that I'd expect a conversation from her, but I can't help noticing out of the corner of my eye, Avery looking out the window at everything we pass as if it's something exciting. It occurs to me that this would be the first time she's seen all of this, which is a weird concept for me. But I find it puzzling that she's noticing it at all.

After pulling into the underground parking garage, I find my designated spot and park. The main elevators are closer, but I opt for taking my private elevator toward the back of the garage, using the special card I was given. Avery continues looking around at everything along the walk and then watches the numbers change as we ascend.

When the doors open, she makes a beeline toward the windows, looking out at the city with wonder and then down at the street far below us. I study her for a moment, my brows

bunched together. I'm unsure if this is normal behavior, but I conclude it must be. She hasn't seen any of this in person before or been up this high. The building my apartment is in is half the height of this one.

My eyes drift slowly down her body as she stands there. Today, she has on the jeans she was apparently wearing when she arrived at my place the other day. They aren't too small like the rest, but they cling tightly to her form, which means they make her ass look voluptuous, which in turn has my sights being pulled to it often. They're paired with another tank top I got her, but this one isn't as small as the other ones she's worn.

Pulling my eyes away, I head to my desk and pick up the phone to page my new assistant, who I assume is here already. Thomas answers immediately. Out of everyone who came in for an interview, he was the only one to speak his mind and stand up to me.

“Are you caught up on the program?” I ask.

“Mostly, yep. The rest will come with using it more.”

“Good,” I answer, watching as Avery takes notice of the water feature wall and steps over to it. “Is my grandfather out there?”

“No, he's not. That guy is kind of scary, to be honest. He said I looked like a bum yesterday when I came in. I thought he was going to throw me out.” I grunt in response. He probably *did* look like a bum. “Do you want me to get him?”

“No. He will be out there any moment now, and as soon as you see him, I want you to press the white button on your phone base twice. Understand?”

“Uh, yeah?”

“Are you asking me or answering?”

“Yes, I understand,” he replies with more conviction.

I could just poke my head out the door to talk to him or check for myself, but I don't want to run into my grandfather yet. “Good.”

I hang up and move over to where Avery is standing, her hand trailing along the falling water. She turns to me, those violet eyes wide and bright. “How does—” she starts, but then cuts herself off. “This is pretty,” she ends up saying with an empty smile.

I tilt my head, eyes narrowing, the suspicion and confusion returning. “Were you going to ask how it works?” That is not something a woman would ask, let alone think about.

It always seems like there might just be a hint of a personality buried somewhere inside, but then she says or does something to erase those thoughts.

With that blank smile in place, she stares at me as if she doesn't know what I'm talking about. “I was going to ask, how does your day look? Is there anything I can do for you before you get busy?”

“No,” I tell her. Taking a step closer, my senses immediately fill with her alluring scent. I decide to ask another question to

see how she'll respond. "Were you playing my piano?" I watch her face closely. I don't know what I'm looking for exactly, but *something*.

She gives me nothing but that blank expression. "No."

The phone on my desk beeps twice, but instead of going and answering it, I move even closer to Avery and lift my hand to her jaw, my thumb brushing against her cheek. She's clearly not expecting my touch, just as I am not expecting my body's reaction to touching her in such a simple way.

Being this close to her, I feel flushed and hot all over, and my suit feels like it's too tight. The pounding of my heart against the walls of my chest increases significantly, like it's trying to escape.

Her pupils expand as her own chest rises and falls at a faster pace, and she ever so slightly leans into my touch. Her skin feels too soft to be real, and my thumb makes another stroke of her cheek without my permission.

I feel trapped in her mascara-colored gaze, and before I can make an attempt to sever the moment, she's lifting onto her toes and pressing her mouth to mine. My eyes instinctively close as I process the feel of her soft lips. I almost want to run my tongue over the shape of them.

With my heart rate skyrocketing and the sound of it filling my ears, I almost miss the knock on my door, the subsequent sound of it opening, and then the quiet hum of approval from my doorway.

I feel Avery begin to pull back, but I hold her in place, pressed against my lips with my hand that apparently found its way to her hip, making sure my grandfather sees what I want him to.

As soon as I hear the door click shut, I open my eyes to check that he's gone. When I confirm that he's no longer in the room, I push her back and then put plenty of space between us by walking back to my desk and taking a seat, mentally shaking off the events of the last couple of minutes.

I take a few deep breaths before briefly glancing up, catching Avery looking between me and the door and then back at me again. "You were deceiving him," she concludes.

I'm once again taken aback by her clever observation. But I'm learning that she doesn't always say what I'm expecting.

"I was," I reply, opening my laptop.

"Why? Why not just make use of me? Are you unhappy with me?"

When my sights land on her again, I notice the scrunched-up forehead and almost panicked look on her face. To be honest, I have no idea what happens to a woman who is returned, but perhaps *she* does, and that has her worried. I'm not planning on returning her, though. I'd just be forced to choose another in her place.

"Please, tell me what I can do to make you happy," she adds when I don't say anything.

“Just go sit over there and let me work,” I tell her, waving my hand carelessly toward the couch on the other side of the office and returning to my laptop as if nothing had just happened.

Out of my peripheral, I see her hesitate before she finally goes and sits stiffly, looking out the window from her perch. Finally, she appears to relax and reaches for one of the architecture magazines from the little table in front of her. Settling back onto the couch, she opens it and begins reading. Or rather, probably just looking at the pictures.

With her occupied, I feel my shoulders ease, and besides the occasional flashback of her lips touching mine, I’m able to somewhat concentrate on my work.

I glance at her here and there over the next few hours, watching as she trades one magazine for another, goes into the bathroom at one point, looks out the window again, and stacks the magazines according to color and size.

The sudden beeping of my desk phone pulls my attention from her again, and I lift the receiver.

“Your lunch is here. Should I bring it in?” Thomas asks.

“Yes.”

“‘Kay’.”

A moment later, there are two knocks on the door before Thomas opens it and enters. I’ve spoken to him several times throughout the day but haven’t seen him until now. Just as suspected, my grandfather was right in his assessment. The

only thing appropriate about him today is that his hair is combed back neatly.

He doesn't notice Avery at first as he moves further into the room, but his steps falter the second he does, and his eyes swing back for a double-take. Then he just stands there gawking at her like he's never seen a woman before. And maybe he hasn't.

“Thomas.”

“Hmm?” he hums distractedly without turning away from her. Avery looks back at him with no expression on her face.

“Thomas,” I snap, louder this time.

He startles and rushes over to my desk, looking back at her a couple more times before placing the food on my desk. “I didn't realize you had one already,” he says, rubbing a hand down the front of his wrinkly shirt over and over like it's an iron.

I grunt in response. “What are you doing?”

“I don't know.” He glances over his shoulder at her again, still rubbing at his shirt. “I just feel like I should be dressed better in her presence.”

“You should be dressed ‘better’ for this job,” I tell him.

He shrugs, still staring at Avery. “Not like I can afford it.”

“Thomas,” I say, my irritation growing when he doesn't face me.

“Hmm.”

“Keep looking at her, and you’ll be fired.”

That finally gets his attention, and he whips his face toward me again. “Right. Sorry. Anything else I can do for you?”

“No.” He nods and turns around, this time keeping his eyes off Avery as he walks toward the door. “Wait.” I reach into my pocket and pull out my wallet, sliding out one of my credit cards and tossing it onto the desk. “Go take your lunch and get yourself some office-appropriate clothes. Dress pants instead of jeans and some wrinkle-free dress shirts.”

Stepping closer to my desk again, he picks up the card, the side of his mouth tilting up. “You trust me with this?”

“I know where you live,” I say, leaning back.

His smile grows. “Not after this. I might use it to buy a new house for me and my dad that he can actually get around in or a car so I can leave this city.” At my unamused glare, he raises his hands. “Just kidding. Thanks, man. I’ll bring it back to you.”

He walks out the door, and as it so often does, my gaze gravitates to Avery. She seems to observe me for a moment before opening the pretty mouth that was just pressed to mine this morning.

“That was a kind thing you did, wasn’t it?” I don’t answer her and begin taking the food out of the bag. She’s quick to get up and rushes over, stopping my hand. “Let me make you a plate.”

“There are no plates. You eat straight from the container.”

Releasing my hand, she quietly says, “Oh.”

“This one is yours.” I hand her a container with a fork and then open my own, ready to dig in.

“Thank you.” Her soft voice reaches my ears before she turns around and walks back to the couch instead of sitting in the chair on the other side of my desk.

It’s on the tip of my tongue to tell her she can sit over here when my desk phone beeps. “What?” I ask after picking up the receiver.

“I was just on my way out, but someone named Edison is here to see you.”

Avery’s eyes stay on me as she opens her container of food. “Send him in.”

The door flies open a moment later. “I know, I know. I didn’t ca—” His words are cut short once he sees Avery sitting and eating, but unlike Thomas, who stared at her with his mouth open like a fish out of water, Edison turns back to me with a single brow raised. “You were so adamant about her being in your way, yet you brought her to work?”

I look at Avery, catching her studying her food before taking a small bite.

“I needed her,” I tell him as he takes a seat across from me. “She served a purpose.”

Understanding immediately, Edison nods his head. “You needed to put on a show for Gramps?” After my curt nod, he glances over his shoulder at her again. “And how’d that go?”

“I think he bought it. I haven’t spoken to him or my father since, which is a good sign.”

When Edison looks at me again, there’s a sparkle in his eyes that a little part of me doesn’t like. “She’s quite pretty. I don’t know what your problem is.” I shrug in response. “So, were you serious the other day?”

I don’t need him to clarify what he’s talking about. The slight tilt of his lips and elevated sound of his voice are enough to tell me he’s asking if taking Avery off my hands for a night is still on the table. I ignore the odd twinge I get at the thought of it and answer, “Yes.”

“Tonight?”

I keep my focus on my food, chewing slowly before answering. “I need her for that gala tomorrow night and will need to take her for a dress during the day. Perhaps next week will be better.”

“I can take her right now and bring her back in the morning. I’m done for the day and don’t mind,” he says eagerly.

My eyes lift and slide to the side of him, where I see Avery has now put her fork down and is no longer eating but staring at the magazines on the table. I look back to Edison.

“Okay. Sure.”

Chapter 9

I feel the heat radiating off my scalp as I run my fingers through my hair, glancing at the clock for the fifth time within an hour. Why the fuck I'm feeling hot and agitated is anyone's guess. But the fact that I haven't been able to concentrate much on anything and definitely haven't gotten as much work done as I had planned is probably a good reason. Not to mention, Anderson's project is *still* not done.

Coming to a decision, I pick up my desk phone and press the page button.

"I'm leaving," I mutter once Thomas picks up.

"Um, you have a phone conference in half an hour. Do you want me to change it?"

"Yes." I put the papers scattered on my desk into a pile and slam my laptop closed. "See if they can do Monday."

"Yes, sir," he replies quickly. "And if they can't?"

"Figure something out." I hang up, grab my keys and cell phone, and head toward my elevator.

It's a slow trip down to the underground parking, and I find myself standing in the middle with my arms crossed, watching the numbers get smaller. My muscles are tense, and I can't even be sure why.

Once I'm settled into the sleek black leather seat of my Porsche, I smooth my hands over the steering wheel in front of me and start the engine before shifting into reverse. With my tires screeching, I pull out of my parking spot and speed up the ramp leading to the street.

I drive aimlessly for a while with no destination in mind, letting spontaneous turns guide me. But I know exactly what I'm doing when I find myself in a familiar neighborhood.

Coming to a halt in front of the building, I push my door open and burst through the apartment complex's entrance, heading straight for the elevator. A minute later, I find myself pounding on Edison's door, but I don't even wait a second before I use my special code to open it and walk through.

As I step further into his apartment, the lack of sounds and conversation fills me with trepidation. After swinging my gaze to the left, my steps stutter to a stop after finally seeing them both, my blood boiling in my veins at the sight.

“Phoenix? What are you doing here?”

My eyes finally tear away from Avery, sitting on the kitchen counter with her top pulled up, breasts on full display, round eyes staring at me, over to Edison, who's leaning against the opposite counter with his arms crossed.

“What the fuck is going on?” I bark out.

“What do you mean?” Edison asks, pushing off the counter and standing straight, looking at me like I’m the crazy one here, and I am. “I was curious, so I told her to pull her top up and show me.”

I stalk over to Avery and yank her tank top down before grabbing her arm and pulling her onto her feet. Hot blood whooshes through my veins, and I don’t even know why. I meet Edison’s gaze, and although he now looks slightly confused, he doesn’t appear surprised.

“I’m taking her home,” I huff, pulling her toward the front door.

“What about my night with her?”

My hand tightens on her arm. “I changed my mind.”

“Fucker,” he replies from behind me, but there’s no anger in his voice, more like a hint of humor. I’ll send him something as an apology later.

I don’t release her arm until we’re in the elevator, and then I stand on the other side of her in the small space, keeping my eyes firmly off of her and plastered to the door. As soon as it opens, I step out, taking hurried steps to my car. I don’t need to check if she’s following me. I know she’ll be trailing behind like a good companion.

I get into the driver’s side, waiting until she’s gotten in and her scent – that drives me fucking crazy – has filled the interior before shifting the car into drive and speeding off.

Neither of us says a word on the journey home. I don't even know what to say to explain my actions anyway. Shit, she probably wouldn't even understand what I'm talking about if I *did* try to tell her something.

Casting a sidelong glance her way, I notice her hands clasped together in her lap and her face turned to look out the window, so I can't see her expression. I face the road again with a loud exhale and try to ignore her the rest of the drive.

After parking in the underground garage, I get out immediately. I'm wound tight and don't want to stay still. I hear her steps moving quickly behind me, trying to keep up with my long strides, but I don't slow down at all.

Inside my penthouse, I head into my kitchen to pour myself a large glass of water and watch Avery walk quietly into her bedroom. I'm surprised she didn't stand there asking if I wanted her to do anything.

Without drinking any of the water, I slam the glass back down onto the countertop, apparently trying to break yet another one.

I feel no less out of control now than I did before I decided to go and storm Edison's place. Pacing back and forth, I make brief glances toward her door in the hallway, clenching and unclenching my fists until finally, I stalk across the room and enter her bedroom, finding her sitting on the bed with her back against the headboard.

The face of someone who's scared of my reaction and worried about what I might think stares back at me, and it

angers me more.

It's fake.

A deceit.

She doesn't *feel* anything.

And I don't know why I'm in here.

My chest continues to rise and fall in rapid succession as I rake my eyes over her body. It suddenly occurs to me that I've felt like this before, but on a much smaller scale when someone else has gotten something that *I* wanted.

I'm fucking jealous.

And why? Because my best friend got to see her like that before I did? Because he could have had sex with her before I did? I don't even want her. It makes me furious at myself for feeling that way and angry at her for making me feel it.

Moving close to her bed, I grab her ankle and drag her to the edge. Her startled squeal is the only thing louder than my heavy breathing, but she doesn't ask what I'm doing. Instead, she pushes up onto her elbows and looks up at me through her lashes. I remain standing over her, looming like a glowering lion, peering down at a little mouse.

"Did he touch you?" My voice comes out low and harsh.

Her head shakes ever so slightly. "No."

"Did you touch him?"

"No."

A measure of relief tampers down my fuming but does little to quell my wild thoughts.

My eyes drop lower to find that her chest is also moving faster before drifting back up to those unique eyes that look a deeper shade of blue right now. Her pupils are enlarged as well.

“Were you playing my piano?” I press again, expecting the same answer as the last couple of times I’ve asked.

A pink tongue pokes out to brush along her lips, wetting them. “No.”

We’re locked in a stare-off for a few seconds, neither of us making any moves, until still holding my gaze, she lifts her arms and then pulls her top up and over her head, revealing her round breasts. The ones that have been teasing me for days now.

My eyes drop again, and I scowl while swallowing thickly, my shoulders tense. I didn’t get to take them in when I arrived at Edison’s because I was in too much of a haze. But looking at them now, I feel like I’m feverish. My whole body is hot and buzzing. It feels alive, and my cock is so hard it feels uncomfortable in its confinement.

My eyes remain glued to them. They look so fucking soft and delectable. I want to touch and squeeze them. I want to put them in my mouth and bite them. My mouth salivates at the thought.

As if being pulled by an invisible cord and having lost all sense and all control of my body, I place a knee on the bed beside her hip and lower my head to her chest, sucking a nipple into my mouth. My groan and her gasp float into the air together.

The taste of her skin, the softness under my lips, it's all so overwhelming. My head is a swirling mess of euphoria.

This is what I've been denying myself.

In the back of my mind, I know I have my reasons, although I can't think of what they possibly could have been at this moment in time. All I know is I can't stop myself.

I take hold of one soft breast in my hand while tasting no, *devouring* the other, and fully pressing my body onto hers. She can probably feel the thumping of my heart against her stomach.

Small fingers thread through my hair, and the slight tug on the strands before pulling my head closer blows a harsh exhale through my nose. I can barely hear the little noises she's making over the sound of blood flowing through my ears, but I *want* to hear them.

A groan rumbles from my chest again, and I sink my teeth into her flesh. When I pull back and see the marks left on her skin, a primal urge rushes through me, pushing me to do it again. Switching breasts, I bite down and then suck the soft swell under her nipple, examining my work again a second later.

I'm lost in my desire.

So fucking turned on.

I can't help but wonder if it's only the softer skin that can be marked like this, so I decide to test it. Trailing my lips up her chest, I find myself in the crook of her neck, her intoxicating scent even stronger here. I take in a deep breath and open my mouth, filling it with her flesh, then sink my teeth in once again while sucking.

Her whimpers reach my ears, and I feel the fingers still tangled in my hair tighten. But the second she breathes out my name, it's as if a bright light is suddenly shining in my eyes, waking me from this moment of crazed desire.

I pull back, staring at what I just did to her, and then slide my eyes to her face. When she notices my ceased actions, her eyes pop open, and she turns to me, our rapid breaths mingling together. Taking stock of the moment, I feel her breast in my hand, and my groin is pressed into her thigh like I was grinding against her.

"Phoenix," she whispers again.

I shove myself off her so fast I almost stumble and then continue backing away, with that scowl I so frequently wear around her returning.

What the fuck did she do to me?

I leave her lying on the bed and rush to my bathroom, slamming the door behind me. Gripping the vanity, I look at the man in the mirror. Wild eyes stare back at me. My hair is a

ruffled mess from her fingers, and my lips are a bright red from abusing her body.

With almost vibrating hands, I undo my pants and release my cock, squeezing the base hard before sliding my hand to the tip and squeezing it equally as tight. I start moving at a fast pace with a punishing grip, needing the release so badly while simultaneously being pissed about my lack of control. I jerk faster, my other hand white-knuckling the edge of the counter in front of me.

I hear my whispered name from her lips and imagine her body marked by my mouth, causing my cock to thicken beneath my grip. My skin flushes with a sheen of sweat, and my balls draw tight. I feel it coming on, starting at the base of my spine and then spreading to the rest of my body in a tidal wave of pleasure.

My eyes slam shut while noises pass through my throat, and my cock pulses and pushes out thick ropes of cum. *So fucking good.*

I slow my movements but don't stop until the sensation is too much and my body shudders from over-stimulation. *Fuck.*

Eyes still closed, I hang my head until my breathing evens out. Then, without looking at myself in the mirror, I finally strip out of the rest of my clothes, clean up the mess I made, and step into the shower. I suddenly feel exhausted, and all I want to do is sleep.

Chapter 10

My steps are quiet as I pad barefoot from my bedroom. The large windows let the early morning sun blanket my apartment with warm splendor. I've woken feeling refreshed and settled.

I'm not fooled into thinking this calmness will last. I'm sure as soon as I see Avery or allow myself to dwell on the events of last night, even for the briefest moment, all of those jumbled feelings will return.

The fact that I haven't eaten since lunchtime yesterday has my stomach grumbling with emptiness, so I head straight for the kitchen. Avery is noticeably absent from her usual spot, but after a quick glance at the clock, I realize it's because it's so early. I'm not usually up at this time, but since I passed out shortly after my shower at a ridiculously early hour, I've now woken well before my alarm.

Walking into the pantry, I check to see if there are any bagels still stored in the bread bin I keep in here, but unfortunately come up empty.

It doesn't escape my notice while looking that all of the packages, boxes, and cans have been sorted according to size and shape. I haven't actually been in here since Avery arrived, so whoever rearranged my closet the day they brought her must have come in here and done this that same day as well. Strange. Perhaps it makes it simpler for her to pick things out.

Shaking my head, I walk out of there and decide on eggs, bacon, and toast, making sure to cook extra for her. As I sit eating and drinking my coffee in silence, I tell myself that I like the emptiness and that this is what I'm used to, but somehow, it manages to feel odd.

After finishing up, I pour myself another coffee and walk over to my piano, running my hand over the smooth surface before taking a seat on the bench.

Placing my hands on the keys, I begin to play. A mixture of notes fills the space around me, a melody with no name. I try to play the same chords that I thought I heard through the door, the song that was vaguely familiar to me, but I can't get it quite right, so I switch to something else.

Avery walks out a little while later, hair wild, sleepy eyes, and tiny clothes. My eyes slowly drift down her body as I continue to play, and I can't help flashes of last night crossing through my mind. The tensing of my insides begins as expected, and it affects my playing, making it sound more choppy.

With tentative steps, she moves closer. "You're awake early," she says softly but loud enough to hear over the music.

I give a short nod. “I made some eggs and bacon. There’s a plate for you on the counter.”

After glancing over her shoulder toward the kitchen, her gaze returns to me, a crease between her brows. “I’m sorry I wasn’t up earlier to prepare something for you.”

“No need to apologize,” I tell her, placing my gaze on my hands instead of her.

Of course, I can still see her in my peripheral, and I notice her attention drop to my fingers, watching them glide across the keys.

It would probably be a perfect moment to address what happened last night and maybe explain my lapse in control. But when I turn to her again, and she looks up with a blank stare, clasping her hands in front of her like she’s waiting for instructions, I’m reminded that I don’t need to make any excuses or offer apologies.

It’s what she’s here for, whether I like it or not.

“Go eat your breakfast and get dressed to go out,” I say instead. “We need to shop for a dress for tonight.”



An hour later, we’re stepping up to the waiting car. Avery bends in front of me to climb in, almost revealing her panties under the sundress she has on before she sits and slides across the seat. If it weren’t for the fact that I bought her clothing, I

would think she's been wearing these things to try and tempt me.

Once Patrick gets in, he pulls out into traffic. He's older, probably in his sixties, and has a woman of his own, but I still catch him glancing through the rear-view mirror at Avery as he drives.

I figure it's possible that he could report something to my grandfather, so I shuffle a little closer to Avery, taking her hand in mine, and then lean in to kiss her cheek. She turns to me, her eyes now a mixture of the blues and purples you see in the sky at dusk, but I break eye contact immediately, catching Patrick quickly looking away from the mirror. Avery, too, looks toward the rear-view mirror before turning her attention to the window.

That settled feeling from when I first woke up has long since gone, replaced by the dull aching of my neck and shoulders from being tense. It only increases as the minutes tick by, bringing us closer to this evening where we won't just have one man like Patrick watching us but a large room full of men.

We arrive at an upscale boutique much smaller than Sherron but still decently sized. I open the door and get out before holding my hand out for Avery to take, and then I lead her inside. A small man with a heavily wrinkled face approaches us, a friendly smile stretching his loose cheeks. He gives Avery a cursory glance before turning to me and asking what I'm shopping for.

“We need a formal dress for a gala this evening.”

He raises a white, bushy eyebrow. “This evening? The one at the Four Seasons?”

“That’s right.”

“In that case, you’ll want something from our exclusive selection. Follow me.” He leads us to the back corner of the store, where there are ridiculously elaborate dresses in various colors and styles, and then turns to me. “What would you like to see her in? Anything specific?”

Since telling him that *I don’t care* wouldn’t be appropriate, I glance around the area, my face stoic and unimpressed. “Leave us so I can look at the options.”

“Very well,” he answers with a nod. “By the way, my name is George,” he adds, then disappears to somewhere else in the store.

With him gone, I move to one of the closest racks and pick the first one I see. It’s long and emerald green, with one thick strap to go over one shoulder. Good enough. I pick a few different sizes since I’m not going to have her breasts bursting out and on display.

Turning back to Avery, I catch her staring up at a deep red satin dress with a split on each side, reaching mid-thigh. It’s definitely more vibrant than anything I already got her, so I can see why it would have caught her attention.

I’ve already picked this one, though.

Finally taking her eyes off the red dress, she meets my gaze and then glances down at the dresses in my hand. Her features

appear almost down-turned and unhappy with my selection, but after I blink, her sights are back on me, and there's nothing but a vacant look there.

I move in the direction of the changing room, but when I catch Avery looking back at the red dress again, I pause. "You want that one?" I don't know why I ask. Maybe I'm still searching for that sliver of personality I keep fooling myself into seeing.

"I will wear whatever you want," she answers and faces forward.

My lips purse as my brows lower, that irritation surging through me again. I don't know why it bothers me. I should have learned my lesson by now. Searching for something that doesn't exist is futile. I continue on to the dressing room, hanging the dresses inside and closing the door once she's entered the cubicle.

A few minutes later, she steps out with no emotion on her face as she turns once to show me. "Do you like it?" she asks, her voice monotone.

It's pretty enough, and the color looks good against her skin. It would be a completely acceptable dress for her to wear tonight.

And yet ...

"Wait here." I don't know why, but I decide to go and grab the red one in the size I think will fit best and then bring it back for her to try on. "Try this one as well."

Nodding, she goes back into the dressing room. The next time she comes out, she runs her hands down the fabric, feeling it for a moment before looking at me to see what I think. I trail my eyes over her body, lingering on the parts that cling a little tighter. It fits her perfectly, and I can't argue that it's not a better choice.

My eyes flick up to her face, and instead of the emotionless stare from before, she almost seems ... delighted. *That* right there is what keeps my mind running in circles. Not two seconds ago, she had no opinion, and now she likes this one, and I can't make sense of it.

I watch as she pulls her hair back and over one shoulder, and suddenly, opinion or no opinion, it doesn't matter because with her hair moved aside, there is a clear view of a purple bruise on the side of her neck. A mark caused by *me*. That same primal urge flairs to life inside of me as I remember the feel and taste of her skin.

"Go put your other clothes on," I rasp, turning away from her. "We'll take that one."

I can't help my body's reaction to hers, but I can help the way I react to that reaction.

The aged man finds us again as we head for the counter. "A beautiful choice. Now, do you have shoes for her to wear with it?"

I think back to the ones I picked out for her and realize none of them will be good enough to wear with the dress.

Come to think of it, the sizes of the ones I bought her could be just as wrong as the clothing. I glance down at her feet and see that she has on a pair of sandals that seem to fit okay. At least I know one pair fits her.

“I can show you a selection,” George adds, apparently figuring we don’t have any to go with it. “Take a seat right there, and I’ll be right back.” He motions to some chairs nearby and then walks off.

Avery perches on the edge of a seat, but I remain standing until he returns with four different boxes. After opening each one and revealing two black, one silver, and one red pair of heels, he sets them on the floor and tells me there are two other items he wants to bring out for me. I watch Avery for a moment as she looks between the pairs, maybe waiting to catch her lingering on one of them. She doesn’t.

Maneuvering her weight, she leans forward to take off her sandals, but I stop her with a touch to her shoulder.

“I’ll do it.”

After glancing up at me, her chin dips once in acknowledgment. I drop to my knees and lift a dainty foot into my lap, slowly undoing the strap of her sandal and sliding it off. My fingers graze against her soft, creamy skin as I go. I repeat the process on her other foot, then reach for one of the black heels and then the silver heel for the opposite foot.

I’ve never seen shoes like this before that I can recall. If someone’s woman was wearing them in my presence, I never cared enough to pay attention to them. But there is something

incredibly appealing about the way the foot curves to fit the shape of the shoe, the slim heel, and the delicate straps.

When I realize my fingers are lingering, I pull back and get to my feet.

“Stand up. Let me see.”

She pushes to her feet, and with the heels on, the top of her head reaches closer to my nose. She stands tall and steady on the five inches, so she’s probably worn heels before. Perhaps as part of training at the facility. I gesture for her to walk around the immediate area while my gaze sweeps over her, trying to picture her in the red dress and see which one will match better.

“Sir, I have this necklace I think will go beautifully.” George’s voice brings my focus back, and I realize I got lost in thought, staring at Avery’s legs. “I also brought this. It’s called lipstick. Some men like their women wearing it on their lips to these events. This red will match her dress.”

I stare down at the tube he’s holding, a brow raised in curiosity. I’ve seen colored lips before on other females, but never this color red. I imagine it would go rather well with her dress and blonde hair. In his other hand is a black velvet tray with a sparkling necklace. I don’t bother taking a closer look.

“We’ll take them,” I tell him.

“Very good, sir. And the shoes?”

I glance back at Avery, now standing there, waiting for instructions. “We’ll take them, too.”

“Yes, but which ones?”

“All of them.”

Chapter 11

I fiddle with my bow tie in the foyer mirror while waiting for Avery to come out of her bedroom. I sent her to get ready what feels like hours ago, but it probably hasn't been anywhere near that long. The car, however, is already downstairs waiting for us, and I'm getting impatient. I'm considering going and pounding on her door when she finally appears from around the corner.

My hands drop from their task as I watch her approach, my body heating up as I sweep my gaze over every dip and curve. Every step she takes has her legs peeking through the slits on either side.

Somehow, the dress looks even better on her now than it did in the store. I continue my trek up to the thin straps that wrap over her shoulders, to her curled hair, and then to her face. She has that deep red lipstick on, making her already full lips seem bigger, almost bee-stung. They draw me in, making me want a taste.

Everything about her makes me want a taste.

But that's just a physical reaction. My body is attracted to her body. That's normal. I won't be ruled by my body, though. Last night was a slip-up that won't be repeated.

Tonight, however, I have to try my best to behave as lust-driven as other men are with their women.

"What do you think?" she asks, looking at me through thick lashes.

With one final trail down and back up her body, I clear my throat. "You look beautiful. Come. There's one more thing needed."

I position her facing the mirror in front of me and then pull the black velvet box out of my pocket. Lifting the thin chain over her head, I unclasp the little latch.

"Lift your hair for me."

She does, and I pull the necklace closed around her neck, brushing my fingers against her skin at the same time, which causes it to break out in goosebumps. A weird type of satisfaction settles over me at the sight of it.

Our eyes connect in the mirror as I brush my fingers over her shoulders one more time before reaching around to her front and adjusting the resting position of the long vine pendant with little diamonds and rubies in the flowers.

For a moment, I take in the sight of us in the mirror, my larger frame dressed in a tuxedo standing behind her smaller, curvy body wrapped in red satin. Even I admit that we make a striking pair.

After a beat, she turns in front of me and slowly reaches up to adjust my bow tie. I watch as her tongue peeks out to wet her lips while her cool fingers graze my neck.

I could kiss her right now if I wanted.

Just dip my head, press my lips to hers, feel her tongue with mine, and see what she tastes like.

I already know what her breasts and neck taste like.

The memory has my cock starting to swell, and my eyes drop to her chest. There is only a small amount of them showing, but it's more than enough. With a speed as slow as honey, I drag my eyes back up to her face and arrive at those violet orbs staring back at me.

It's a potent moment, filled with charged air and hot breaths between us. Her head tilts back ever so slightly as if tempting me to lean down.

Tempting me to take her supple mouth.

The sudden chime of my phone has me straightening up, though, the electricity in the air fizzling away as I pull my phone from my pocket and silence the call from my grandfather.

“Come on. We need to go.”



There is a group of men with cameras outside the Four Seasons, taking photos of all the guests arriving. I wrap my

arm around Avery's waist and keep it there as we make our way into the building and then the large room.

More people than I anticipated fill the ballroom, but what's more surprising is the number of females that have been brought. They're all dressed in elaborately detailed outfits, and although Avery's is a little simpler, I'm grateful to George for leading us in the right direction for her dress.

This is the first time I've been to an event like this, a privilege only granted by my grandfather since being promoted. The other men here are all in various stages of power.

Looking around, I see a variation in how the women are being treated here. Some of the men are behaving like animals with their hands all over the female they're with, like they can't control themselves, while others have one trailing along behind them as they walk like they couldn't care less.

A few appear to be lost in a heated kiss while trying to remain hidden in the shadows but not caring enough to seek more privacy. I find my eyes lingering on those people a little longer, finding it harder to look away.

Scanning the large room, I try to locate my father or grandfather, but there are too many people to see them through the crowd. A server walks past us, so I grab a couple of canapes off the tray and hand one to Avery as we walk further into the room.

A familiar face steps into my line of sight and then moves in our direction when he notices me. "Phoenix, is that you?" one

of my grandfather's friends asks. A man who, if I recall correctly, likes the sound of his own voice. "It's been a few years since I've seen you."

"Benson, hello," I greet, shaking his hand and then flicking my eyes to the woman on his arm, whom I vaguely remember seeing before.

"I heard you got to pick one last week." He bobs his head toward Avery. "Congratulations. Your grandfather must be proud. Have you seen him here yet?" At the shake of my head, he continues, "You remember my Victoria?" He glances at her and then smiles. "Forty years ago this year, I picked her. Still one of the happiest days of my life." I can't help but compare the sappy look on his face to the blank smile on hers. "There are a few other men closer to your age who just picked or received theirs. They're around here somewhere, showing them off. You should introduce yourself."

"I may do that."

"Just watch out for those who either haven't gotten their woman yet or ones whose sons haven't. They tend to get bitter with jealousy." He turns his attention back to Avery. "She's dressed beautifully this evening. No doubt you're enjoying the sex," he says with an elbow to my ribs. "And it only seems to get better as time passes and you experiment a little. You'll know what I'm talking about. Mine loves it on her hands and knees. Oh, look, there's Jeffrey over there. Let's go see your grandfather. I haven't said hello yet."

He starts heading the way he indicated, and I consider moving in the opposite direction, but I do need to let my grandfather know I'm here, so I follow him to the group of men. One of them has his woman standing in front of him with her breasts out, and the other men are staring at them, nodding.

"I was going to go for three sizes bigger, but I settled for two. So far, I really like them," he says to the group as we arrive. Then he reaches around her to fondle a breast. "Touch them. They've got a very natural feel to them."

Each of the men, including my grandfather, take turns touching her. I'm on the outskirts of the group, so I have the advantage of not necessarily being included in the conversation.

I turn Avery and myself away from them as if I didn't hear what the man said and then lean down to talk quietly in her ear. "Are you hungry?"

She glances up at me, her eyes slightly rounded. I can't decipher the look on her face, but I think she was watching the scene. "I am," she answers just as quietly.

I go to lead us away, but my grandfather finally notices us and approaches. "Phoenix, there you are. I was just talking about you earlier. Come, show them your pick."

I feel Avery's body stiffen beside me, but it could very well have been my hand tightening on her waist. Either way, I hesitate for a moment, figuring out how to play this. With several pairs of eyes watching expectantly, I finally push her forward.

“This is the one. Avery, say hello.”

She dips her chin and then turns her mouth into a smile.
“Hello.”

“Beautiful,” I hear one man say.

“Those are pretty eyes,” another adds.

“I bet you make good use of her,” a guy who has a nasal voice says. “If you’re interested in lending her out, I’d be more than happy to take her.”

Another man steps forward and tries to touch her, but I pull her back to stand by my side, returning my arm to its position around her waist.

“I don’t like to share.”

The group of men are silent as they stare back at me. You can still hear the loud sounds of the rest of the room, but it’s as if we’re in a bubble of quiet. My grandfather’s brows are lowered into a look of disapproval, but just as he’s about to say something, one of the men starts to laugh, followed by another, and soon enough, all are chuckling.

“That’s exactly what I was like when I first got mine,” the man who laughed first says.

“Me, too. For the first few days,” a couple of others echo.

“Not me,” Nasal Voice comments. “I got mine before my friends, so I shared her with them.”

They all start chatting amongst themselves, and with the focus off us, my grandfather takes a step closer, lifting a cigar

to his mouth and lighting it, his pinky ring glittering under the light.

“These events are good for business, good for making connections and forming friendships with other people in high places. You do a favor for them; they do one for you.” After sweeping his gaze around the room, his gray eyes land on me once more. “Make sure you do your best to make these connections. That group didn’t matter so much, but if the right person wants to fuck your woman, you should let them. Understand?” He swings his gaze to Avery and then back to me again. “There are some people I want to introduce you to after dinner. I’ll come find you.”

With that, he walks off into the crowd.

While thinking of my grandfather’s words and wondering why it makes me feel uneasy, I lead Avery to a table half hidden by an ice sculpture but still with a view of the stage they have set up.

When she goes to sit next to me, I pull her to sit in my lap instead. I’ve seen enough of the way the men behave here to know this would be considered normal. She startles at the abrupt movement but then shuffles her body to sit sideways with an arm draped around my neck.

The feel of her ass rubbing against my cock while getting comfortable has me placing a hand on her thigh to stop her movements. But the slit in her dress has her thigh completely exposed, so my hand lands on her bare skin.

Instead of moving it away, I begin brushing my fingers back and forth, feeling the smoothness under my fingertips, eliciting a full-body shiver from Avery.

Her soft skin is addicting, but what I'm enjoying more is the effect it has on her. A pink flush can be seen on her cheeks even in the dim area we're seated in, and I can see the rise and fall of her chest increasing along with the rapid flutters of the pulse in her neck and the fidgeting of her fingers resting on her other thigh.

She remains facing out into the crowd as I continue stroking her thigh, moving further between her legs with each circle.

I tilt my head, watching as she swallows thickly when I move my fingers closer to the area where pleasure is derived from, and then graze my fingers against her underwear. For some reason, I'm completely enraptured by her at this moment. Her eyes flutter as I run my knuckles harder against her center and then move to where I remember seeing the clit's location in the sex videos.

She tries to shift, but I hold her still with my other hand on her hip, pressing into her even harder, focusing one knuckle on her clit, rubbing back and forth. Her underwear feels damp and hot, making my cock further thicken in my pants. The hand she had resting on my shoulder takes a fist full of my tuxedo jacket while the other clenches on her thigh. I can tell she wants to close her eyes but continues staring ahead, watching people chat and mingle.

The slightest whimper escapes her lips before she bites down into her lower lip, perhaps to keep herself quiet. I keep rubbing faster, totally lost in the moment, obsessed with wanting to see her reactions. I push her panties aside and continue, my fingers surrounded by her heat as I rub.

Finally, her body tenses, and her eyes close, her chest heaving with short bursts of air.

“Phoenix,” she breathes out. Last night, the sound of my whispered name on her lips had me waking out of the moment, but this time, I’m dragged deeper under the spell and have to suppress a groan at the sound of it. I keep rubbing until she grabs hold of my forearm and whispers, “Stop. It’s too sensitive.”

She turns her face to look at me through hooded eyes, her breaths still coming out heavy between parted lips. I pull my hand out from beneath her dress while still holding her gaze and go to wipe it on a napkin from the table. But then I change my mind, instead bringing my fingers to my mouth for a taste.

Of all the parts of her I’ve tasted so far, this is the most intoxicating; my favorite. She watches my mouth as I suck on each finger. Not all of them got to feel her wetness, but the scent of her still clings to each one.

A throat clears from nearby, causing both of us to swing our attention to the side where we see my father standing. Avery shifts in my lap, but this time, I lift her to her feet instead of holding her still.

“Go to the women’s restroom and clean up.” I indicate the one close to our table and send her away before returning my attention to my father. I’m not sure how long he was standing there or what he might have seen.

“Father. I was looking for you earlier.” He pulls the chair out beside me and takes a seat, admiring the centerpiece before looking out into the crowd. “Did you hear from Ken?” I ask.

“I did. He should be emailing you next week and moving forward with the project. I told him to go through you from now on.”

I nod even though he’s not looking at me.

“You see the other men with their companions, son?”

I trail my eyes around the room, landing on various couples. One man opens his mouth as his woman places a small piece of cake into it.

Another has his woman in the area where you can sway and dance to the classical music being played. Her fingers are tangled in his hair, and he appears to be enjoying it.

A few tables away from us, a man sits with his eyes closed while the woman beside him appears to have her hand in his lap.

I don’t know what point he’s trying to make, so I remain silent and wait for him to continue.

“They are *taking* the pleasure, Phoenix, not giving it.” Finally, he turns to me, that indecipherable look on his face

that he wears so well. “What you just did. Don’t let it happen in public again.”

I look away from him, scanning over the people in front of us again. He’s right, of course. They are all on the receiving end of it, whereas my pleasure was derived from bringing Avery to orgasm. I didn’t realize it wasn’t *right*, though. I just went with what my body told me to do.

I tried to tell myself that it was for show, a way to *appear* like a man who just picked his woman and is having every fantasy fulfilled, but the truth is, the more other men try to touch her, the more *I* want to. There’s this *pull* there every time she looks at me. It aggravates me that I can’t seem to control my body and, what’s more, that I’m physically attracted to a woman with the intellect of a rock.

Avery returns, but this time, I let her take the seat on the other side of me.

My father leans forward to catch her attention. “What do you think of this place?” he asks her.

She looks between the two of us, seemingly not sure how to answer at first or possibly wondering why he’s addressing her. I don’t know why he would bother asking her, either. She’ll probably just smile and say it’s nice.

“There are a lot of people here,” she answers instead, to which my father raises a brow and slowly nods his head. “It’s really nice,” she then adds, with that smile I predicted.

“There *are* a lot of people,” he repeats. Then, after pushing to his feet, he holds his hand out for her. “Come, let’s go dance to the music.”

I’d say she looks nervous if I didn’t know any better. I’m about to protest, not liking the idea of him taking her away from me when she lifts her hand and places it in his. I watch as he leads her into the crowd, and then they’re out of sight.

I shift in my seat, letting out a heavy exhale. It’s not like she’s going to tell him we haven’t had sex, so I don’t know what’s bothering me.

Spotting my grandfather with a group of men who I know are very important, I decide to go introduce myself now while I don’t have Avery with me.

One thing that has crossed my mind a time or two but never settled there until now is the fact that I have not seen my grandfather with his woman, ever, and I have not seen my father’s woman – my mother – in years. I find it curious that they should be so invested in mine when they themselves aren’t using theirs as any form of status.

Chapter 12

Hanging up the phone, I settle back into my chair, rubbing a hand over my face. I'm fucking exhausted, and it's only lunchtime. The urge to be near Avery this week has been stronger than ever, so naturally, I've been doubling down on work and avoiding her as much as possible.

I had managed to score two new large jobs at the gala, so my grandfather was quite pleased and has been giving me space to work without questioning anything.

All week, I've tried to convince myself to stay late in the evenings, but somehow, I always ended up leaving at an earlier time. To make up for it, I've been forcing myself to hole up in my office as soon as I get home and then make sure she's asleep before I leave the room.

It hasn't stopped her from coming in there and trying to do things for me, asking if I need anything, showing me a glimpse of a personality one second and then nothing the next. It's a mind-fuck that I've stopped trying to make sense of. I have to be only projecting what I want to see.

She has also asked to accompany me to the office more than once, saying she could serve me better here. Of course, I said no.

The soft feel of her breasts and the heat between her legs, along with her sounds and the blissful look on her face as she came undone on my lap, has been playing on repeat every time I close my eyes. So, I've kept my eyes open and my mind busy, refusing to be consumed by my companion.

My phone vibrates against my chest, so I pull it out of my front pocket and accept the call as a welcome change to what I've been working on.

“Hello.”

“So I'm looking at these photos from last weekend, and I have to say, you put on a really good show,” Edison says through the receiver. “Almost too good.”

“What?” I think back to that night, and for a moment, I think he means what I did to Avery at the table. Dread fills my stomach at the thought.

“You with your arm around her and holding her close as you walk in. There's one with you looking down at her as well. You made it pretty believable that there's an attraction there and that you're using her as a companion should be used.”

There's a teasing lilt to his voice, and I try not to play into it, but I still end up defending my actions. “There were a lot of people around. I couldn't give anyone a reason to talk.”

“Oh, cut the crap, Phoenix. You came barging into my apartment to take her away when you thought I was going to have sex with her. Just admit that it’s not as bad having her around as you initially thought.”

“It’s worse,” I answer.

He chuckles. “God, you’re a stubborn ass. You’re lucky I’m not upset at you for going back on your word. Anyway, I actually had a different reason for calling.”

“And what might that be?” I ask, taking a sip of my coffee.

“The new cabinets I ordered are in, so they’ll be getting installed over the weekend. We’ll need to move the poker game to your place.”

Shit, I had completely forgotten about that coming up. Once a month, Edison makes me join in on poker night with a couple of guys we went to school with to “keep my social life active.”

We usually alternate between my place and his since they’re bigger and more central to everyone.

The thought of having them around while Avery is there doesn’t sit right with me, though.

“Can’t we just change weekends?”

“No, it’s the only one we’re all free. I’ll bring—” A loud cluster of sounds hits my ear, followed by some shuffling, and I pull my phone away to look at the screen before returning it to my ear. “Sorry, I just dropped my phone. I thought my dad walked into my office, and I jumped about a foot. I’m

supposed to be making some calls for him. But it was just Charles bringing me some papers. I need to get going, but yeah, I'll see ya then.”

He hangs up before I can say anything else, so I toss my phone onto the desk, exhaling a heavy breath. I guess I'll just have to make Avery stay in her bedroom.

Shuffling myself forward again, I close out of the emails on my screen and look for the file I need to work on next. My eyes flick to that little icon in the corner of the screen that has taunted me all week. Seconds pass with me staring at it before I finally give in and click on it. This time, when the prompt to log in comes up, I type in my details and hit enter. Next, I click on the live feed for the camera in the top corner of my living room. For a while now, I've been curious as to how she spends her days.

The video pops open, and I see her immediately, lying on my couch. I lean closer to the screen, watching as she tosses a pillow into the air above her and then catches it over and over. That's odd.

Finally, she stops, gets to her feet, and fixes the cushions to sit from largest to smallest. I squint my eyes at the screen. I thought it had been whoever brought her from the facility that day, but thinking about it now, they've been arranged that way every day. I was just too distracted to pay much attention to it.

Avery stands there, looking around the area, tapping her bare thighs like she's wondering what to do. I haven't gotten new

clothes for her yet, so she's still wearing those too-small shorts and tank top.

Deciding on something, she walks to the corner of the screen where it shows half of the kitchen and disappears from view. I stare at my laptop, waiting for her to return to see what she'll do next.

Walking back onto my screen a minute later, she holds a bag of potato chips in one hand while placing a chip into her mouth and then walks over to the shelf where I keep my poker set.

I watch as she takes the set out, then drops to her knees by the coffee table and pours the poker chips out. She then proceeds to make patterns with them, lining them up in order or making images and then rearranging them.

My eyes stay glued to the screen, somewhat riveted by her curious behavior. A couple of minutes later, she places the poker chips back into their respective rows in the case and then puts the case away. Obviously, she's done this before. She knew exactly what was inside the set.

She does that same glancing around the area thing she did earlier, and then her sights land on my piano. The already accelerated beating of my heart increases speed as I watch her slowly walk over to it and then take a seat on the bench. I suck in a breath, holding it in my lungs as I watch her lift a single hand and run a finger along the keys, back and forth. I release the air in a puff of disbelief when she actually lifts her other hand and begins playing.

From the movements of her fingers, I can tell it's a song and not just random notes.

She *was* playing my piano.

Pushing to my feet, I swipe my key and phone off the table and rush to my personal elevator. I need to get home and get to the bottom of this.

I've been driving all week to feel a sense of control over *something* in my life, so I head straight for my car in the parking garage.

The drive to my apartment building is as quick as my racing heart, and I'm surprised I didn't get pulled over and given a few speeding tickets along the way.

There's an urgent thrill pumping through my veins at the thought of catching her red-handed, confronting her, and finding out how she'll react.

After parking out on the street, instead of taking the extra time to park in the underground garage, I head straight inside to the elevator.

My instinct is to burst through the door and start demanding answers, but if she hears me coming, she could quickly stop and pretend to be cleaning it again. So instead, I use my key since it's quieter than the code, and open the door to my apartment as quietly as possible.

The music hits my ears immediately, and I find myself pausing just inside my door for a second. It's that same tune. The one I thought I heard last time. It seems so familiar in a

way, but I don't know where I've heard it before. The faint sounds of it have reached me in my dreams on occasion since that night. It seems to make its way into my very core, eliciting a strange feeling, which is odd considering it's just music.

Like a predator approaching prey, I slowly prowl toward the living room, keeping my steps light. She's not expecting me to be here, so there's no reason for her to be on alert. With her eyes still closed, she pours herself into the melody, and I creep further into the room. There is so much personality in her movements, unlike that empty shell she portrays most of the time.

I stand watching, mesmerized by the music, but also by what I'm seeing and how fucking beautiful she looks in this moment.

I wish I knew where I've heard that tune before. But more importantly, I want to know how the hell she knows how to play it.

A moment later, her eyes flutter open as she nears the end of the piece, and the second she sees me, they blow wide open, a small sound escaping her mouth. Her hands fly away from the keys as if she can pretend she wasn't doing anything, and then she scrambles to her feet, backing up a couple of steps like that space will make a difference. Her chest moves with quick breaths, and I track her tongue as it pokes out to wet her lips.

Tilting my head, I assess her closely. "Were you playing my piano?" Licking her lips again, she glances to the side and then

returns her sights to me, choosing to remain silent. “I asked you a question.”

My voice comes out low and calm, despite my heart racing, pumping what feels like electrified blood to every extremity. Even before she opens her mouth, I feel like I already know what her answer will be.

Chapter 13

Avery.

“I asked you a question.”

Phoenix stands a short distance from me, and even though I’ve seen him dressed in a suit almost daily, right now, with the dark charcoal covering his large frame, he looks more intimidating than ever.

Shifting on my feet, I try to keep my hands from fidgeting at my sides as he remains completely still, waiting for my answer.

“No.”

The slight tilt at the side of his mouth makes it seem like maybe he was expecting that answer, and I just walked into some kind of trap that I didn’t see. I want to pull my eyes away from him and avoid his gaze, but as so often happens, they stay drawn to his face. It’s so symmetrical that you could fold it in half and have everything line up perfectly. The

symmetry is extremely appealing to me in the same way it is when things are organized by color or size.

“Who are you?” he asks, with those beautiful gray eyes with a mixture of suspicion and confusion staring back at me.

They are the exact same shade of the stone surrounding the Koi pond that I used to frequent at the facility. Dark and light grays mixed together. I always felt safe and relaxed there, and despite having to hide what I am, for some reason, his eyes offered those similar feelings.

Not now, though.

Seconds pass before I finally decide to open my mouth. “I’m your companio—” His palm slaps down loudly on top of the piano, cutting me off and causing me to jump.

“Don’t make me ask again.”

Even in this situation, his voice, although masculine and commanding, is beautiful in tone. It doesn’t surprise me since it passes through lips formed from full softness. Ever since I was chosen, I’ve wanted to reach out and trace them, and the feel of them on my mouth and body has stayed with me ever since I took a chance and kissed him.

But none of that matters now. Not when he’s waiting impatiently for an answer I don’t want to give.

I’ve spent my time here pretending; spent most of my life pretending, and trying to act as if I don’t know anything, don’t feel anything, and have no thoughts. And I know since

arriving here I've slipped up a few times, but nothing as monumentally as bad as this.

Right now, I know the fear I'm unable to hide is written all over my face.

My only choice is to run now that I'm discovered.

I glance to the left, mapping out my escape route, and then back to his enticing yet hard face. I don't know where I'll go once I make it outside – being a female on your own will get you picked up immediately – but I'll have to worry about that once I've made it.

After sucking in a fortifying breath, I charge across the room, heading straight for the front door. My hope is that he's caught off guard, giving me enough time to escape.

My bare feet slap against the tiles as I make it across the room and into the foyer. I reach the front door and even manage to turn the handle a fraction before a strong arm bands across my stomach and lifts me up. I let out a squeal, kicking and flailing my body about.

“Where do you think you're going?” his deep voice murmurs close to my ear.

I continue struggling to get free but only manage to knock a small puff of air from his chest. It's no use. His grip is like iron, and he's much stronger than me. With one arm, he carries me back into the living room like it's no hard feat and then drops me onto the couch. I immediately make a move to get

up, but he's a step ahead of me, bringing his body down to hold me with his weight.

For a moment, our eyes remain locked on each other, with my chest heaving underneath his and his breaths coming out in short puffs, which, if I had to guess, I'd say is from excitement from catching me rather than from the strenuous activity.

Regardless, I'm completely trapped with the hardness of his body above me, contrasting the soft and plush couch behind me.

I've noticed many of his other possessions are also soft and plush: the rug under the coffee table, the beds, the throw pillows and blankets, and me. Perhaps that's why he chose me in the first place. I wasn't quite as skinny as the other women there.

"What are you?" he asks, flicking his eyes back and forth between mine.

I refuse to answer, sinking my teeth into my lower lip and catching him watching the movement as if he likes it.

We were taught to expect to have sex as often as a man wanted, that we are here to serve them and give them company and stress relief. I didn't mind the thought of that task if it meant keeping myself safe. However, Phoenix, for the most part, hasn't seemed to want anything from me, no matter how much I've tried to seduce him and no matter how aroused he appeared to be.

Even wearing the clothes that reveal my body never worked. It has kept me in a state of uncertainty. I was hoping to distract him with sex so that he'd become attached and too preoccupied and blinded to see that I was different, that I'm not normal.

Having these thoughts ... having any thoughts *at all* is not normal.

"I asked you a question. Answer me."

Despite the position I find myself in, my natural inclination is to want to go against what he tells me. The defiant voice inside my head whispers at me to resist. It's almost gotten me caught in the past, so I've fought it.

"Maybe I don't want to answer," I reply quietly.

His eyes narrow, that jaw of his covered with stubble clenching tight as I've seen it do so many times when he's concentrating or unhappy with something. The thinning of his lips tells me, in this case, he's not happy with what I said and that he's irritated with my non-answer.

But there's something else there as well, a *spark* in his eyes that says otherwise, like maybe he actually enjoys me talking back or not saying what he expects.

I think I would like to see that spark ignite and watch it burn.

"You're a WOUN, aren't you?" he asks finally.

I make another feeble attempt at escaping, managing to press my hands to his chest, but he easily takes hold of both of my

wrists with one hand and plants them above my head, a move that brings his face closer to mine.

“I won’t let you send me away,” I tell him.

When he raises a single brow at my statement, I turn my face away, trying to avoid the magnetic pull his eyes have. I’ve watched him closely since I arrived here, learned a lot about him, and I’ve found him to be interesting, different from the men at the facility.

I *like* him.

But he’s going to get rid of me. He’ll send me to that place where women like me go when we’re discovered, and then I’ll be no more.

“And how exactly are you going to stop me?”

“I don’t know,” I answer stubbornly. “But I’ll think of something.”

Warm fingers grip my jaw, forcing it back to face him so that he can peer down at me with that same curiosity in his narrowed gaze as if still trying to make sense of me.

“You do think, don’t you? You’re not like normal women.” His eyes scan over my face, studying me like an abnormal creature. And I guess I am.

Despite the heightened sounds of our breathing, the seconds tick by loudly from the clock on the wall, as if counting down my remaining minutes. I’ve wanted to take that clock down and hide it so many times when I’ve been stuck here with nothing to do but listen to it.

With most of my body restrained and time seeming to run out, I decide to do the only thing I can think of rather than answer him. I lift my head and press my lips to his.

Like the last time, the tiniest zap of electricity occurs at the contact, causing my insides to burn up and my cheeks to bloom with a heat I've only encountered with him. That indescribable way he made my body feel with his fingers that night at the gala starts playing through my mind again, and it has me feeling wet between my legs.

I feel his body go still above me, most likely not expecting this. A minute ago, I was trying to escape, and now, I'm kissing him.

Truth be told, I don't know what I'm doing. But if he's going to send me away, I'm going to take the feel of his mouth with me.

I poke my tongue out to try and force his mouth open as I've seen in the instructional videos, but the second I do, his free hand grips my throat, pushing me back down.

Steel gray eyes stare back at me, almost angry in appearance, but as I lick the taste of him off my lips without thought, those eyes darken – not in color, but with a darker intention in their depths.

Then, with a sound that almost resembles the growl of an animal, his mouth comes crashing back down, his lips opening and slanting over mine. Though I'm uncertain of what will come of this, I'm still eager to meet his tongue with mine, and the groan that rumbles from his chest only spurs me on.

He still has a grip on my throat; perhaps it's a way to feel like he's in control. I've noticed that about him. He likes to control his actions and words.

It makes me want to fight it, though.

This kiss is more passionate than anything we've done before. Deeper. It has pleasure flooding my body, traveling the length of me as his tongue tangles with mine. At the same time, I feel his erection pressing into me with shallow thrusts of his hips, like the night in my bedroom.

Maybe if I make this really good for him, he'll decide he wants to do it with me often.

Maybe he'll keep me after all.

I manage to free one of my hands from his loosened grip and bring it to the back of his head, threading it through the shorter hair there and holding him close. His grip on my neck tightens in response, a subtle attempt at holding the power over me, but I continue on, gently scraping his skull with my nails while he kisses me thoroughly. I feel like I might finally be breaking him down.

Chapter 14

Phoenix

Heated blood sizzles through my veins, making it feel like my body is on fire.

The defiant glint in her eye and stubborn tilt of her chin when she was standing there refusing to answer me almost had me ready to charge at her. But somehow, I had managed to hold myself together, keeping under control the mental stimulation that ratcheted my interest in her up a hundredfold.

But when she made the decision to try and get away from me, the intense need to control her and make her remember that she belongs to me took over, demanding me to put her in her place.

Her reaching up and kissing me with those soft, pouty lips only made me all the more determined to take charge of the situation.

My grip on her neck tightens with the feel of her nails trailing over the back of my head, and I kiss her deeper,

rougher.

My mind is still reeling with the realization that she's a WOUN, though she won't admit it. I should have picked up on it immediately, but instead, I was too frustrated with the situation I was forced into, and I put her sometimes-odd behavior down to my imagining things and my inexperience with women.

Now, it all makes sense.

I pull my mouth back, taking her bottom lip between my teeth with it before releasing and opening my eyes. This time, when she looks up at me, there is *lust* in her gaze, and while I don't know much about WOUNs, I can see that she is being affected by this, just like she was affected the night of the gala. My already hard cock thickens further at the memory of her hot and wet sex.

I want to see her come apart for me again.

But I also need to keep my wits about me.

"I want answers," I tell her, dropping my head and running my nose along the side of her face, sprouting a cluster of goosebumps that begin to spread down her body.

"I'll only answer you if you promise not to send me to that place."

Her non-compliance and refusal to simply answer a question she's presented with drives me crazy. While I can feel the pressure of my molars grinding together in frustration, there's

also a measure of excitement that it brings at having her challenge my authority.

“I will be doing whatever I wish with you, or have you forgotten how this works?”

Her confidence wavers at my reply, causing her brows to draw together and create a crease.

The truth is, I have no idea how I’m going to proceed from here. I’m required by law to turn in a WOUN. They are considered defective.

But right now, I want to understand how she works. I want to learn what extent she comprehends the world and her existence.

“Then you can do whatever you want with my body, but I’ll remain quiet and won’t answer your questions.”

Though the appeal of making use of her body is much more prominent now with the new light of this situation, her threat to remain quiet is something I don’t like.

While trailing my eyes down her face, my sights rest on my hand, still holding her neck. It looks so small inside my grip.

Perhaps I can test her resolve.

Perhaps I can see how willing she is to stay silent after I bring her pleasure.

Releasing her neck, I shift my body slightly to the side and begin tracing a finger slowly around her collarbone, then I continue down, making a circle around her protruding nipple.

She inhales a stuttered breath and the skin of her face and neck develops a pink tinge, a reaction that I find pleasing.

“Make use of your body, you say?”

I know this is probably playing with fire, throwing myself into a position of temptation only to show dominance over her.

I circle a few more times before going lower, splaying my hand out as it crosses over her stomach and teases the edge of her shorts. She’s radiating a heat that can be felt easily through her clothing.

Short puffs of air hit my cheek as her breathing increases. I turn my attention to her face, catching those almost-violet eyes watching me before she blinks them closed as if trying to avoid showing me any amount of enjoyment she may be feeling.

It pushes me to continue.

I slide my hand into her shorts and underwear, stifling a groan when I find her wet – even more so than that night. The tiniest whimper escapes her mouth when I begin making languid circles, going slower than the last time I played with her.

Knowing that she possibly has preferences and likes makes me want to know what they are. I’m finding a weird delight in trying to figure her out.

I’m just getting into what I feel is a good rhythm when I’m thrown completely off by the feel of her hand touching me. My fingers pause their movements, and my eyes fall shut at

the sensation, the air in my lungs expelled by a heavy exhale through my nose.

I never imagined the feel of someone else's hand on my cock could be so incredible. The pressure of her grip is different from mine, as is the angle at which she holds me.

I get lost in the moment, my focus switching solely to the feelings swarming through my groin, even releasing a groan I couldn't have held in if I tried.

But somewhere in the back of my mind, when her hand is making another pass over my erection, sense comes trickling back in, alerting me to the fact that this is not supposed to happen.

My eyes fly open, and I pull my hand abruptly from her underwear, taking hold of the hand touching me.

There's almost a glint in her eyes as she peers up at me as if she was pleased by my reaction and having the momentary power over me.

“You don't touch me unless I tell you that you can.”

“But what if I want to?”

I find it unusual hearing things like that from her, unusual and maddening. But even so, that flicker of enjoyment still hums through me.

“It doesn't matter.”

With pursed lips, I return her hand to its original place with the other one above her head, keeping her restrained once

again with only one of mine, and then use my free hand to take hold of the hem of her tank top and slide it up over her chest so that it's gathered above her breasts, exposing them to me. She makes a half-hearted attempt at freeing her hands, but she has no chance with me actually paying attention.

She watches, waiting to see what I'll do next. Her pupils almost swallow the color in her eyes – her soft lips parted as small pants pass through them.

I want to do *many* things to her.

Maintaining eye contact, I lower my mouth, just barely brushing my lips around her nipple, satisfied when her breath hitches. Next, I open my mouth and slip my tongue out, flicking over her hardened bud a few times before sucking it completely into my mouth.

The marks I previously left on her have faded, which has me eagerly wanting to leave more. Seeing her perfect skin discolored with something I've done to her gives me a sick sort of pleasure. I liked it even when I was making an effort to stay away from her.

She squirms under my hold, but it's not like she's trying to get away.

I suck at her skin and then lick it, returning my fingers to her underwear. They glide easily against her wetness, and once I locate her clit again, I start circling it, then switch to rubbing back and forth.

Muted noises fill the room, though she tries to hold them back, mewls and moans that are euphonic to my ears. I want to hear *more* from her.

My lips leave the soft mounds of her chest to brush over the skin of her stomach. I raptly make note of how she reacts to every touch of my fingers, every caress of my hand, and every kiss from my lips.

Is this how other men behave with their women? Remembering my father's words at the gala, I think not.

"Were you playing my piano?" I whisper against her body.

With her eyes still holding mine, she shakes her head back and forth.

I press harder, my fingers rapidly moving as I push myself up to look down at her again. "Are you a WOUN?"

She breathes heavily, looking like she's on edge. "You know what I am."

"I want to hear you say it."

I don't know why I'm so adamant about her voicing it out loud when I already know. Maybe it has more to do with her answering me when asked.

She clamps down on her lip again, keeping quiet. So I drop my head down to kiss her, forcing her to open up and release her lip.

A moan passes through her lips to my mouth, the sweet sound almost pushing me to undo my pants and take her like

my body is demanding. I can feel a coat of sweat forming along my brow line from holding myself back.

Avery shifts, her sounds and movements mimicking those of that night right before she orgasmed on my lap. Her eyes squeeze shut, and I can see she's almost there.

Somewhere through the crazed thoughts and feelings plaguing my mind, an idea pops into my head, one that will hopefully help me to take better hold of the sliver of control I'm barely holding onto.

I pull my hand out once again right before she falls apart and then wait for her to realize what's going on. Her eyes fly open and focus back on me, the lust slowly being replaced by frustration, making her cheeks redder than they were.

She opens her mouth as if to say something and then closes it again, sucking in a deep breath.

"Go ahead and ask," I say, a hint of amusement in my voice.

The stubborn part of her wants to ignore me. I can see it clearly in her eyes. But the other part must win, the part desperate for relief because she huffs out a breath and lifts that defiant chin at me. "Why did you stop?"

"Why won't you answer me?" I counter. When the obstinate little female remains silent, I lean down, run my nose along her cheek, and then whisper directly in her ear, "I will let you orgasm if you just tell me. Are you a WOUN?"

Her throat bobs with a thick swallow as I keep close and continue to inhale the intoxicating scent she has.

I feel the sigh from her chest before she finally answers. “Yes. Yes, I’m a WOUN, okay? Yes, I was playing your piano. I’m defective. Now you can send me away.”

I hum against her cheek, pleased with her reply, and then drift lower to brush my lips along her neck. My hand finds its way back into her underwear, and this time I experiment with using my thumb to rub her clit, and find her opening with my other fingers. I push one in for now, testing her reaction as well as the feel of it. It’s so much warmer and wetter inside, and a stuttered breath falls from my lips when I imagine my cock inside of her instead of my fingers.

Stop. Stop thinking about it.

The more I move my finger in and out, the more she seems to respond, and it doesn’t take long for her to reach the edge and then fall over. Her body tenses, and the most beautiful sound comes out of her mouth, drawing me in and leading me to swallow it with a kiss.

She wriggles her still-restrained arms, and I finally let them go, feeling her hands land on my cheeks a moment later as she kisses me just as hard back.

I keep touching her as she rides out her orgasm, rubbing and thrusting until I feel she’s had enough. I then pull my fingers free, intending on tasting them, but when I separate from her mouth, my eyes trail over her swollen pink lips, and, following my instincts, I decide to wipe the finger that was just inside her over her lips instead.

I stare at the wetness on them for a moment, my nostrils flaring before finally dropping my mouth to hers and licking every bit of her taste off them. Once I've got it all, I do the same thing with my fingers.

Delicious.

Chapter 15

Avery.

“Did that feel good?”

My body still feels like it’s buzzing and somehow separated from myself, my mind a swirling mix of pleasure.

Even so, his words still manage to make it through the fog, and the question lingers in the air between us.

“Yes.”

It felt wonderful. I don’t know how he manages to do that to me or how he manages to make my insides feel like they’re going to burst through my skin.

This answer seems to please him, and even his usual hard slate eyes appear to soften as they scan my face.

As my breathing settles and awareness creeps in, I notice the feel of his erection pressed against me and the fact my hands are holding his cheeks. Instead of shoving them off like I’m

sure he would have in the past, there's a moment where it feels as if he leans into my touch.

I'm tempted to rub my thumbs over the short hair along his jaw, trail my hands lower, and slip them under the collar of his shirt, maybe even travel further south to give him the same type of pleasure he gave me. But I'm afraid to break this moment.

Right now, the possibility of him not getting rid of me seems like something attainable rather than the far-fetched notion I originally concluded. He has certainly done more with me since finding out the truth.

Then again, maybe that's *because* he's sending me away; get a little use out of me while he can.

My hands drop from his cheeks at the thought, and my face returns to the blank stare I've perfected over the years.

He sees the change in my demeanor and the look on my face, and it has the moment completely broken. The little crease between his brows returns at the same time, the soft edges of his eyes disappear.

His lips part, but whether or not he was going to say anything is unknown because the vibrating of his phone between us has him instantly pushing up from me and getting to his feet, checking to see who it is.

"Shit," he mumbles under his breath before silencing it, then he extends his hand down to help me up. "Come on."

I don't take it. I don't want to make any of this easier on him.

Annoyed, Phoenix huffs out a breath and takes hold of my hand, pulling me up with ease, and then yanks down my top to cover me up again. Then, without releasing my hand, he pulls me along to the bathroom and pushes me through the door.

“Get cleaned up and put some pants on. We need to go.”

I don't even get a chance to respond before the door is closing in my face. I want to slap my palm against it, but I'm unsure how he would react to that, so I hold back. With a sigh, I reach for the toilet paper to clean up, not because he told me to, but because it *is* uncomfortable walking around with the moisture between my legs.

A second later, the click of his door shutting catches my attention. I pause, holding the toilet paper in my hands and the breath in my lungs as I wait for any other sound. After it's quiet for a few seconds, I slowly and quietly turn the handle on the door and then peek my head out into the hallway. From what I can see, his bedroom door is definitely closed, and there is no sign of him anywhere else.

Very quickly, I tiptoe through the door and down the hallway, halting for the briefest second when I hear what sounds like a faint groan from down the hall. Then I rush forward toward the front door.

My heart feels like it's beating out of control and only accelerates when I actually make it through the door.

I'm really doing this.

If I take the elevator to where all of the cars are parked underneath the building, I could probably hide there until it's dark, then figure something out at that point. My stomach clenches at the thought of being out there alone and not knowing what will happen.

I guess if I'm discovered, I could act as if I don't know what's going on. It hasn't been thirty days, so we haven't been tattooed yet. They wouldn't be able to identify who I belong to.

But, if I'm returned to the same facility, they'll know who picked me, and he very well might have alerted them to everything. They could also be looking for me.

Shaking my head, I push forward and walk down the short hall. I can't worry about that now. At least this buys me a little bit of extra time. I reach the elevator and press the button.

Nothing happens.

I press it again and again, but still nothing. My stomach tightens, and my breath quickens. Moving to the doors, I try to pry them apart with my fingers, but they don't even budge a little. This time, I do slap at the door. Panic and frustration mask the sting on my palm.

"Why won't you open?" I mumble.

"Because I disabled it before I came inside," Phoenix's voice rumbles from behind me. I spin around, all hopes of my escape deflating at the sight of his imposing, arms-crossed figure and

unreadable, handsome face. “Seemed a bit ridiculous at the time, but apparently prudent. Where were you going?”

My shoulders drop an inch. I had no chance of escaping all along.

Defeated, I decide to answer him this time. “I don’t know.”

He nods slowly and produces some sort of card, which he holds over the black panel above the button I was pressing, causing it to light up.

As he lifts a hand to press the button, his eyes flicker to my legs, and the thinning of his lips is a clear indication that he is not pleased.

“I told you to change into pants.”

I cross my own arms, the headstrong part of me showing itself despite the situation I find myself in. “They’ll just have to take me as I am.”

With a sound of displeasure, he takes hold of my forearm, forcing my folded arms to separate, then steps into the elevator when the doors open, pulling me along with him.

The firm grip he has on my arm is replaced by his hand on my waist as we ride the elevator down in silence. I don’t know why he’s bothering to hold me now. I can’t get away from him in here or while we’re in front of anyone else.

We step out on the main level instead of underneath, and he leads us to his vehicle parked out front of the building. Then he stands close and hovers by the passenger door until I’m seated and buckled in like he’s still on guard.

My insides lurch as we take the first corner. I don't know exactly what happens at the place I'm going, but when one of the females like me at the facility that I had spoken to a few times in secret was discovered, she was sent away, and then when she came back, she was a different person. She was just like the rest and no longer "defective".

I've heard stories of some who haven't come back at all.

I feel his eyes on me every now and then, but I refuse to look at him. Instead, I watch the giant buildings that look like they reach into the clouds pass us by.

Unlike the other times we were in his car and rode in silence, a piano piece begins playing, and I turn to see him pressing some buttons until he's satisfied with the volume. I've heard him play this one himself, and I thought it was beautiful.

It's nearing its end as we pull into an underground parking area, and when I recognize it as the same one as where he works, I realize I haven't been paying attention to the direction we're going. My gaze swings over to him, a question clearly written in my eyes.

"I left my office in a hurry. I have unfinished business to attend to."

"Oh."

Whether or not that means he's taking me afterward or he'll have someone pick me up, I'm not sure.

He pushes out of his seat and rounds the car while I stay in place, unsure of what to expect next, and then opens my door

and extends his hand to me for the second time today. I gingerly take it because if I didn't, he would just force me out anyway.

With my hand clasped in his, he leads us up to his office with silence surrounding us. As soon as we step out of the elevator, though, he releases me and rushes toward his desk.

“Shit.”

He closes out of something on the screen, but not before I see what looks like his living room on there. My stomach pitches and my eyes widen. Was he watching me this whole time?

No, he couldn't have been. Otherwise, he'd have known what I was a lot sooner.

Regardless, he was watching me today, and I'm not sure how I feel about that.

One of his big hands glides through his hair as he stares down at his desk in thought, then he reaches for his desk phone but pauses, turning toward me.

“I need to get Thomas in here. Go sit down and keep quiet.” There is no *please* or pleasantness in his tone. It's just a demand to do what he says or else. He must see me leaning toward finding out what the *or else* is because he stands a little straighter. “Or would you like him to know what you are as well?”

That has me keeping quiet and obediently shuffling to the chair on the other side of his desk.

If he's not planning on telling Thomas, does that mean he's keeping it quiet for now?

With his gray eyes on me, he lifts the phone to his ear and presses a button.

I decide to take the opportunity to get into character and stare back at him blankly with a practiced half-smile. His head tilts slightly to the side as he watches me, like I've seen it do before, and his eyes narrow.

"Come see me in my office," he says bluntly, in that same commanding tone. "Yes, I'm here." He listens for another moment, and I watch as his jaw tics. "Just get in here."

He hangs up and takes a seat, still watching me closely. Perhaps he thinks I'll run if not closely guarded.

The door opens a second later, drawing Phoenix's attention, but I stay staring ahead at him, secretly studying him the same way I've done since I arrived at his apartment.

"You didn't tell me you were leaving," Thomas says, sounding flustered.

"I don't need to tell you my every move," Phoenix replies smoothly.

"No, you don't ... except your two o'clock appointment arrived, and I opened the door to an empty office. You made me look like an idiot."

His voice now has the sound of annoyance to it. If I hadn't been observing Phoenix for the past while, the hard look on his face would have me thinking he was going to snap back at

Thomas for talking to him in such a way. But I know he has some sort of affection for the young man that he secretly hides behind gruff answers and sharp looks.

“I had paged first, but when you didn’t answer, I came in to look,” Thomas adds. “Your grandfather barged in here as well shortly after, even though I tried to tell him you weren’t in here, and then stormed out and yelled at me for not knowing where you were.”

“My grandfather was in here?” Phoenix asks, ignoring the rest.

“Yeah, but just for a second.”

I see Phoenix shift, although my face looks blank, as if I don’t notice anything around me.

“Did he come over to my desk?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t see,” Thomas replies, the irritation now replaced with confusion.

Phoenix’s eyes flicker to me for the briefest second before returning to Thomas. “Did anyone else come in here?”

“Um, I’m not sure. I went to lunch a little after that.”

Phoenix nods, a little distracted. Whether it’s from finding out about me or not, I’m unsure. “I’m sorry I didn’t tell you,” he tells him.

I wonder if Thomas is thrown off, unsure how to take an apology from him. Phoenix doesn’t seem like the type of person to apologize often.

I hear the rustling of Thomas' clothes from nearby, but I don't turn my head that way.

“Apology accepted. So, you just went home to get your woman?” he asks.

“You can go now,” Phoenix replies, ignoring his question and glancing at me again.

“Wait, don't you want to know about your two o'clock?” Phoenix waves his hand for him to hurry up and continue. “I re-booked him for Tuesday. He said he would call to confirm that same day.”

Phoenix nods in acknowledgment, and when Thomas finally walks out, his eyes settle on me again.

Rising to his feet, he steps around his desk and then leans back against it, crossing his arms over his chest. You can see the outline of his muscles straining against the fabric as if maybe it's too small for him as well.

The sound of his voice has my eyes flicking back to his face. “If anybody saw my laptop, they would know.”

Meaning they would know what I am. My anxiety spikes at the realization, and my eyes drop to the desk. They could have seen me playing the piano. They could have seen me running. They could have seen me being pinned down. If there is sound on there, they could have heard us speaking.

But then the implication of his words hits me, and my gaze returns to his face. If he were planning on returning me right

now, then it wouldn't matter if they saw. It wouldn't matter that Thomas knew.

Is he planning on keeping me after all?

“It's quite disconcerting watching how easily your appearance can change, and you can fool people, including me,” he then adds, peering down at me.

I suck in a breath, holding his gaze. “When your life is reliant upon it, you do what is necessary.”

Something shifts in his gaze. I'm not sure what exactly, and I'm still not sure what his plans are with me, but I realize my life is in his hands. If he asks me questions and wants to know things about me and understand, I should probably answer.

Maybe that will help with his decision.

Chapter 16

Phoenix

I stare her down as I often do with others when figuring out what type of person they are. Unfortunately for me, she's not as easy to read as they are, which keeps my curiosity piqued.

I know she's practiced the art of keeping her feelings under control, but I don't think she's pretending right now as she boldly stares back at me, not averting her eyes. And she doesn't appear to cower under my usual glower.

It's fucking gratifying to me.

"How much do you know?" I track her teeth scraping along her lip in thought, and I realize the question is probably too broad, and she would have no frame of reference. "You know how to play the piano?" I ask instead, even though it's been fairly established that she can.

Her head dips once. "Yes."

"How?"

“I was taught,” she answers.

“Taught?” I ask. “They taught you at the facility?”

She shifts a little, and I track that as well, apparently fascinated with her every move and every word out of her mouth now.

“No.”

I didn’t think so, but it still leaves the question. “Who?”

Her lips press together, reluctant to answer. It’s not the same type of denying to reply to a simple question like earlier, though, so it doesn’t evoke that same type of frustration toward her.

She doesn’t want anything to happen to whoever it is.

“I won’t report them,” I offer.

Her eyes caress my face, searching for the truth. And now that I know there is intent behind her stare, I find it to be a different experience. I want to know what she thinks when she looks at me.

Whatever she sees must satisfy her because she finally opens her mouth to speak again. “When I first arrived, there was another ... *defect* like me. Older. She taught me to play, amongst other things, before she was selected.”

Another WOUN at the same facility? That suggests they are not quite as rare as I had originally assumed.

“How did she know? I mean, how did it come about that she taught you?”

“We can see it in others, whether it’s through accidental eye contact throughout the day or at night when we’re all supposed to be in bed. A normal woman wouldn’t notice me get up and sneak to the door. A defect would.”

I unfold my arms and grip the edge of the desk, thinking of this disturbing information I’ve been so eagerly ignorant of before now.

WOUN that sneak around in the facility at night.

WOUN that hide who they are.

WOUN like Avery: beautiful and willing to do whatever to remain hidden.

“Have you always known? Has anyone ever suspected?”

Her head twists to the side to look out one of the large windows.

“My father knew that I was different. But if he had turned me in, he wouldn’t have gotten anything except for a *job well done*.” She faces me once again, her features sure and determined. “He wanted the compensation that is provided by the facility once a female is given. So, he told me to keep my mouth shut and my face blank.”

A weird and foreign sensation stabs at my chest at her words. I’m not sure why. Barring my late teens, I never paid much attention to women, and I certainly haven’t wanted one. In fact, I’ve gone out of my way to ignore Avery and have made it unpleasant for both of us.

But now I'm face to face with her, an anomaly. Someone who should be sent off immediately, someone who *would* be sent off if she were discovered by anyone else, and yet that is not what I want to do. In fact, there's a flicker of protectiveness that increases with every little thing I learn about her.

“And what about your father's woman, your mother?”

Avery shrugs her shoulders. “I only remember her acting like every other woman. My father handled my upbringing as if I was normal until I was five and sent away.”

I try to think back to my own childhood, but it's spotty at best. And there are almost no memories from before I was five. That's when the sole responsibility for a male child falls entirely on the father.

“I listened to him and kept quiet,” she continues. “But the woman who taught me to play knew right away, so she helped me to behave more like the others. I learned everything else by observing and reading any books I could get my hands on, and I often listened to the men having conversations.”

“So, you've been aware of every little thing going on around you,” I state. “The people. The conversations.” I chew on the inside of my cheek, thinking of something completely unrelated but can now be explained. “You didn't like that green dress, did you?”

Her lips twist a fraction in distaste. “It only had one strap.”

One strap? My head tilts, and a brow arches. I would think maybe the color or style would be the reason, but not that.

“It wasn’t ... even,” she adds as an explanation.

Even? My eyes narrow in thought, more pieces falling into place.

“It was you, wasn’t it, sorting everything in my closet, arranging things smallest to largest in the pantry? The pillows.”

I stare down at her as I think back to the past couple of weeks, and more things start to make sense.

“I don’t know why I do that,” she admits, briefly chewing on her lip, then glances at the water trickling down the wall. “It just looks better that way. It’s more pleasing to look at.”

Pleasing to look at ...

My eyes inadvertently drop to her bare thighs. Her smooth, creamy, bare thighs that are supposed to be covered up right now, not extending from the tiniest of shorts for everyone else to see and fantasize over. For everyone else to picture their hands sliding over them before they reach the apex—

“I have some questions as well.” Avery’s voice has my eyes cutting to hers, which are on me again. “Why haven’t you had sex with me yet?”

My body freezes, going rigid at the candid question. I open my mouth, only to close in the next second, my eyebrows pulling together.

The surreality of the situation hits me at this moment: having this conversation with a woman and her asking me such a question.

Thankfully, the sound of my desk phone beeping saves me from answering. I lean back slightly to pick up the receiver and hold it to my ear. Thomas' hushed voice comes through the line.

"I think your dad is going to come in there."

"Why do you say that? And why are you whispering?"

"Because he paged me a moment ago about something and asked if you had returned, and now he's standing outside his office by Mike's desk with Mr. Peterson. I just thought I'd give you a warning in case you needed it."

I could tell him he's being ridiculous and it's not necessary to give me warnings every time one of them is coming to see me. But since he started working for me, there have been a few instances where I have specifically told him to let me know if possible, and as I look at Avery, I realize I'm grateful for it this time.

"Thanks," I tell him, pushing to stand up straight.

"No worries." There's a click, and then he's gone.

Quickly, I hang up and turn to Avery. "You need to get in the bathroom."

I watch as the innocent pout of her lips morphs into an angry line.

“Why are you always forcing me into bathrooms? Maybe I don—”

I cut her off by gripping her chin and leaning down close to her. “Get in the fucking bathroom, Avery.”

I can tell she wants to fight me on this, but she doesn’t. With her lips pressed together, she stands, eyeing me with an attitude I would never get from a normal woman, and then I follow her over to the bathroom. After turning to face me, she opens her mouth to say something, but I don’t allow it and close the door before she can even make a sound. A second later, I hear something hit the other side of the door, which gives me pause, but then I feel my lips tug at the corner. I’m getting a certain sort of amusement out of such a feisty response.

A knock sounds at the door before it swings open and my father walks in, an air of authority surrounding him. An equally important-looking gentleman follows behind him.

Schooling my features, I step away from the bathroom to greet them by the door.

“This is my son, Phoenix. Phoenix, this is Kyle Peterson. I’ve been working with him on the new concert hall.”

He takes my outstretched hand and shakes. “Nice to meet you.”

“Likewise. Have a seat.”

I gesture to the chairs at my desk and begin walking over to my own, adjusting the collar of my shirt as I go. Once I’ve

taken a seat, my eyes naturally drift to the closed bathroom door before returning to my father.

I don't know why I'm suddenly determined to keep her hidden. She was in a ballroom full of hundreds of men, and no one suspected a thing. She's made it this far in her life with no one but me finding out the truth. I could have had her sitting in my lap right now, and it wouldn't have been an odd thing to see. In fact, it would have been further proof for them.

Leaving her at home was also an option, but I didn't *want* to. Especially not when I had questions that I wanted answered.

I glance at my father, who lifts an ankle to the opposite knee and relaxes back into the chair. His face has his usual unreadable expression on it as he looks off to the side, but then he tilts his chin a little higher, and it almost looks as if he's *sniffing* the air.

Can he smell Avery?

Her scent is the *only* thing I can smell, but that's because my body was pressed so thoroughly against hers. My mouth was on her, and my fingers were inside her.

Shaking that thought away, I clear my throat. "So, what can I do for you?"

Chapter 17

Avery.

I keep quiet on the drive home, with my arms crossed as I stare out the passenger side window.

I stayed quiet in that tiny bathroom for almost an hour, sitting on the hard toilet seat and standing to stretch out from time to time. There wasn't much I could hear from in there – just the low murmuring and the occasional chuckle that didn't belong to Phoenix. The voices only became louder on their way out as they got closer to the door.

Within seconds of the click of his office door closing, the bathroom door was swinging open, and Phoenix was standing there.

“Are you ready to go?” he had asked.

That question after he shoved me in there and having nothing to do but sit for so long made me furious. I know he somewhat holds my life in his hands, but it didn't matter at that moment. I got up and stormed toward him, pushing past

his large frame in the doorway. His lips didn't curve into a smile, but it still somehow looked as if my actions amused him.

I'm sure he still doesn't quite know what to do with me.

"Were you ever able to pick your own food?" Phoenix finally asks when we arrive home, breaking the silence as he kicks off his shoes at the door.

I am still barefoot after my earlier attempt at escaping, so I continue on without stopping or saying a single word. Phoenix apparently isn't happy with that, though. Before I even make it across the foyer, he's gripping my arm and spinning me around to face him.

There's no amusement on his face now. Only that scowl I'm familiar with. But something happens as I look up at those mixed-gray eyes, waiting for him to get angry. His eyes soften the slightest bit, and the tension around his lips eases.

"I'm sorry you had to hide in the bathroom for so long. My grandfather and father ... they're astute." I work through my mind, trying to remember what that word means, but he must notice something on my face because he adds, "He might notice something different about you that others haven't."

"I've already met them – and danced with your father. I've already made it this far on my own," I answer stubbornly.

"I know you have, but do you really want to risk it?"

I turn away from him in a huff. I've been the one to look after myself, and now that he knows, he suddenly wants to

hide me away to keep me safe.

Keep me safe.

My gaze swings back to him. “Does that mean you’re not sending me away?”

“I ...” Creases form between his brows again, though I don’t know that they were ever truly gone. “I’m not sure.”

I study his face, trying to get a read on him, but he makes it hard.

A tickling sensation has me looking down in front of me to find his fingers playing with a section of my hair. Following my line of sight, his fingers freeze as if he wasn’t even aware he was doing it.

I look up again, and gray eyes clash with mine. He may say he’s not sure what he’s going to do with me, but his actions say otherwise.

Our gazes hold, and just like the night of the gala, it feels as if he might just lean down and kiss me.

And if I’m being honest, I want him to.

The space around us grows into something thick and electrified. His eyes drop to my lips, and I wait.

But he doesn’t kiss me.

After dropping my hair, he takes a step back. “Is there something specific you’d like to eat for dinner?”

The sudden change has my mind taking a second to catch up, but once it does and I realize he’s giving me a choice, the

opportunity to pick something that *I* want, my insides light up and flutter about, even with it being something as simple as dinner.

“I can pick anything I want?”

“Anything,” he replies.

I nibble on my bottom lip, contemplating all of my options. Maybe food I’ve seen but haven’t tasted.

“A hamburger always looked really good,” I finally answer.

“You’ve never eaten one before?” At the shake of my head, he adds, “We’ll change that then.”

He starts walking toward the kitchen, slipping out of his suit jacket and tugging off his tie with me trailing behind, then drapes them over the back of a chair. I watch as he pulls out various ingredients and then rolls up the sleeves of his button-down shirt, revealing a set of defined forearms.

“Is there anything I can do for you?”

I realize the question is the same as what I’d ask him in the past when he’d grumble out a no, and from the scowl forming on his face, I’d say he’s assuming the wrong thing.

“I meant as in helping with dinner,” I add.

“Go sit down.”

My back straightens at the blunt and bossy way he ordered me, but when he adds a “please,” I follow his direction and take a seat on the other side of the breakfast bar.

“How did you spend your days at the facility?” he asks while starting to mix the egg, breadcrumbs, and spices into the bowl with the beef. For some reason, I’m drawn to the way his forearms flex and move with the action.

“We’re mainly taught things that will please a man or skills we might need while living with one. Each day is structured. Every Monday morning was sewing lessons, followed by walking the perimeter of the lawns for daily exercise.” I’m not sure why, but it was my favorite when it rained. It made me feel alive somehow. I keep that tidbit to myself, though. “Then, in the afternoon, it was sex education and things men like done in bed.”

His hands pause for a moment, and the clock ticks loudly in the background as I wait for any other type of reaction from him.

I want him to react.

I don’t know why exactly, but maybe it’s because my main reason for being here is to please him, and he hasn’t let me.

When he proceeds with flattening the patties and gives me nothing else, I continue, “Tuesdays were another set of activities, and so on. Depending on which wing you were in determined what activities you did on which day. But it was the same each week.”

“Sounds very educational,” Phoenix says with a nod.

“It was boring.” Surprised, Phoenix’s eyes shoot up to mine, a curious look on his face. “For someone like *me*, it’s boring.

So when I was picked, besides being nervous, I was excited.”

Except I was then left to do nothing in this penthouse. I spent my days rearranging things to look better, reading, playing the piano, and looking through his stuff. I craved those moments when he'd come home and give me any sort of attention, even if it was with grumbling.

Several times, I asked to go to work with him simply for a change of scenery or his company. But besides that one time, he always said no.

It seems like he may be thinking about the very same thing as me because he turns away with a look that could pass as guilt, and focuses on the patties he's searing. Once he's satisfied with how they look, he turns off the burner and places the patties on a tray before sliding them into the oven.

“I didn't realize men cooked,” I observe as I watch him pull apart some lettuce to wash. “I mean, besides the chefs who came in to teach us. Where did you learn?”

He eyes me quickly before slicing into a tomato. “As soon as I was taller than the counter, my father taught me some simple recipes. But before I moved out, he made sure I could cook a large variety of meals. He even had his friend, who is a chef, teach me some things. There was no guarantee I'd have a woman at twenty-five, so he wanted me to be completely independent and self-sufficient.”

I guess I never really thought about that, but it makes total sense. Men don't always have a woman around to make their food.

“What is that piano piece you were playing?” he asks, changing the subject.

My mind flitters back to earlier today when I lost myself to the music and then opened my eyes to see him standing there, watching me.

“I don’t know what it’s called. But it’s something that is passed along to any WOUN.” I pause a moment before admitting, “I also taught it to a girl there.”

I’ve been wondering how she’s doing without me there.

Phoenix has a thoughtful look on his face as he finishes up but doesn’t say anything in response until after he steps over to the sink and washes his hands, then returns to the same spot.

“Play it for me.”

I stare at him. He’s *still* using that bossy tone that has me wanting to resist. If he’d simply *ask* me to do something rather than demand, I may be more eager to do as he asks.

“I realize you’re probably used to bossing everyone around, but asking is nicer.”

He crosses his arms over his chest, and his eyes do that thing where it looks like he’s smiling, but nothing has actually moved.

“Please, play it for me.”

It’s still not quite asking. Nevertheless, I push to my feet and walk over to his piano, hesitating a beat before seating myself

on the bench. I never thought I'd find myself playing for a man, and I suddenly feel nervous about it.

To make matters worse, instead of making himself comfortable on the couch, Phoenix takes a position by my side as if he wants to watch me play rather than just listen. It's a little distracting, so I lift my hands to the keys, then close my eyes, trying to ignore his close presence.

It doesn't take long to immerse myself in the melody once I've started. I pour myself into every note and every stroke of the keys. I love this piece and could play it in my sleep.

I would have loved to have been able to learn more songs than I did, but I could only sneak away to play through the night, and I was limited to what Valerie could teach me before she left.

Women aren't taught to play. Normal women don't have the mental capacity to learn.

Listening to the men play wasn't an option either. I can count on one hand how many times I saw one at the piano in my wing the whole time I was there. Had it not been for the WOUN making use of it, it would have sat there collecting dust.

I reach the final notes and finally open my eyes again. Phoenix is still standing next to me, watching my hands. But his gaze is far away as if lost in thought. Finally, his eyes shift to my face, refocusing.

“I had convinced myself that I was seeing things that weren’t there. That you weren’t really showing me glimpses of a personality,” he says out of the blue. “What were you planning on doing?”

“What do you mean?”

He walks to the nearby window, looking out at the city lights – a beautiful sight that left me in awe the first few times I saw it.

“Were you just going to pretend for the rest of your life?”

I shrug, even though he’s not looking at me. “Yes. There was no other option.”

Nodding, he starts toward the kitchen again.

“Let’s eat.”

Chapter 18

Phoenix

I wake with the sun streaming into my eyes and the smell of coffee drifting into my nose. Hurrying to get up, I pull a shirt over my head and make my way down the hall to the kitchen, where I find Avery buttering a bagel. She has those short shorts on again, and I have to quickly avert my eyes when she turns to look my way.

I make a mental note to get her more clothes soon, perhaps even have her pick them out.

“Here you go,” she says, passing a plate to me. “Let me just get you a coffee.”

My lips purse. “You don’t need to do this.”

“I know.” She shrugs. “I don’t mind.”

She gathers her own breakfast, and then we both take a seat along the breakfast bar. We’ve done this many times over the past few weeks, but this morning is different with the knowledge of who she is.

Yesterday, she was nothing more than a companion I was forced to pick.

Well, that's not entirely true. I've been fascinated with her from the beginning.

She has occupied my mind daily, whether it was being curious about her behavior or simply wondering what she was doing while I wasn't here.

I glance at her while she takes her first bite, and I'm reminded of her first mouthful of the burger I made her last night. Her eyes had drifted shut as a soft sound traveled through her throat. I had watched her until she swallowed, then quickly started eating my own when her eyes flickered back open. Her face was lit up as she devoured the rest, much quicker than I expected for someone her size. She claimed to have loved it, which pleased me.

"Do you have to go to work today?" she asks before taking another bite of her breakfast.

I blink, coming back to the moment. "No. Although I should still try to work on a project I've been having trouble with."

Avery nods her head. "Do you like it – what you do?"

I regard her over the rim of my mug. "I do. I knew I'd be joining the family business at a young age, so there was never any other choice for me. I didn't have to worry about figuring out what I wanted to do when I grew up."

Swallowing, she lowers the bagel and then idly pushes it around her plate. "I wouldn't know what any of that is like."

I suppose she wouldn't, would she?

“What interests you?”

Pausing her movements, she looks up, thoughtful for a moment. “I like music. Drawing. And writing.”

“Writing?”

“Yes,” she answers wistfully. “We were taught to read, but it was never necessary to have us write anything. I ... I took some paper and pen from your office to practice.” She stares at me head-on as if daring me to react to it or get mad.

I give her no such reaction and face forward. “That’s fine.”

A few minutes of silent company pass as we eat, but as soon as Avery is done, she swivels on her stool so that she’s facing me again.

“You know what it was like for me at the facility. What was it like for *you* growing up?”

I chew slowly, thinking of what I do remember from my childhood.

“It was typical, I guess. School. Family social events. Learning the company.”

A huff sounds from where she’s sitting, and I angle my head to look at her.

“That doesn’t tell me much. Were you able to just leave your home and walk around by yourself? Did you spend time with friends? Did you—” Her hand waves around in front of her as she thinks of something else, “—ride a bike?”

My brows draw together, considering those things. “Bringing friends to my father’s home was discouraged most of the time, not that I had many. My grandfather always told me that other boys would want to be my friend because of who my family is, so I guess I was a little standoffish. Edison was in the same position, but he didn’t care as much about any of that and made friends with everyone, including me.”

“He’s the one you gave me to,” she acknowledges with a nod.

Shame crawls up the back of my neck at the thought of doing that, especially now knowing how she was well aware of everything happening at the time. That, along with jealousy at the idea of him with her, has me lifting a hand to squeeze at the uncomfortable sensation building in my neck.

I’m on the fence about whether or not I should be apologizing for it. Technically, I did nothing wrong to warrant an apology. Had she been chosen by someone else, it could have happened as well, only they probably wouldn’t have taken her back as I did. Or worse, she could have been discovered and sent off.

I grind down on my molars and take a sip of coffee, mumbling out a “Yes” in reply.

Then, to answer the rest of her question and change the subject, I add, “I didn’t go walking around the city by myself, but I did occasionally ride a bike at Edison’s house. My upbringing could be classed as stricter than other children.”

In fact, it isn't as dissimilar to hers as she may think. I was always expected to act respectfully around others, and much of my life was regimented.

The twist of her lips as she processes what I said has my eyes dropping to them and thinking about how they felt against mine. Lush and soft and pliant. My cock stirs at the memory, so I force myself to think of something else and face forward, picking up the last piece of my bagel.

“So, if you're not going to have sex with me, what are you going to do with me?”

Her question has my last bite of food halting its journey in my throat, causing me to choke. Of course, Avery rushes over to pat me on the back.

“I'm fine,” I manage to wheeze out between coughs.

“Are you sure?”

Another cough.

“Yes. I'm fine,” I reply, swallowing everything down and clearing my throat. After taking a sip of my coffee, I get to my feet and step around Avery to place my dishes in the dishwasher. “I'm going to work out for a bit.”

I hadn't planned on it, but it's a good enough excuse to be away from her and her probing questions for now. I leave her standing there and head to my room to change into sweatpants before heading into my home gym, completely ignoring her last question.

Her scent invades even this room, and I can't help but wonder if she's come looking around in here when I'm not home. It wouldn't surprise me, now knowing what I do.

After getting some cardio out of the way, I head for the free weights. Although running on the treadmill helped alleviate some of my restless energy, it hasn't stopped my mind from whirling with all the new information from the past twenty-four hours.

She's a fucking WOUN. And I have no idea what to do with her.

I must admit, being in the company of someone who can actually converse with me is nice. Her questions and answers are stimulating. *She* is stimulating.

It messes with my mind and my previous convictions about having a woman in my home.

I change to a heavier weight for the third time, needing to feel the burn.

But this time, when I face the mirrored wall, I catch Avery standing hidden near the doorway in the hall. Her head is barely visible, but she's definitely there, watching me.

With my gaze still on her, I continue lifting the weights, my muscles straining while sweat forms on my chest and back. I wonder yet again what she's thinking about in that gorgeous head of hers, what she sees when she looks at me.

Ignore her.

Turning back to my own reflection in the mirror, I pump the weights harder, pushing myself more than usual and counting backward. *Ten ... nine ... eight ... seven ...*

I drop the weights to the ground once the set is finished, my breaths coming out in short bursts, and my body slick with sweat. Each muscle throbs with a good type of pain, and endorphins are already filling my bloodstream.

My eyes unintentionally drift to the doorway again, but I don't see her standing there anymore. Mixed feelings agitate my newly relaxed mind, and then I scoff at how ridiculous I'm being.

After a long drink of water, I move to the leg press, getting into position just as my phone starts ringing.

"Hello," I answer, putting it on speaker.

"Phoenix." My grandfather's voice comes through the line while I straighten my legs, then let the weight push them back. There's a pause, so I check the screen to make sure I'm still connected. "Did you finish Mark Anderson's rendering yet?"

Shit. He's been relatively quiet on the matter, but I knew he'd start asking about it soon enough.

"It's coming along. I was finishing up other projects first."

It's only half a lie. I was working on other ones, but I haven't been happy with how anything has turned out. Trying to design something while your mind is in disarray is no easy feat.

"And, anything else that needs dealing with?"

I extend my legs one more time before locking the weight into place and blowing out a breath. It's always business with him.

"I have a few things on the go, but I should be able to finish Anderson's design next week."

"Hmm," he hums through the line. "All right. Well, just make sure you get it done, and don't let me down. You know how important a client he is."

I drop my head back and close my eyes. "It will get done."

"Good. We'll talk next week."

He hangs up, but then my phone beeps with a text message. Leaning to the side, I read the message from Edison telling me what time he'll be over. Shit. I really should just cancel it.

Sucking in a deep breath, I get back into position and get started on the next set.

Chapter 19

Phoenix

Edison lays his cards out in front of him, revealing a straight flush. The men to my left and right, Mario and Leonard, each groan, throwing their cards onto the table with a huff.

“Fuck, I knew you were holding something good. I should have listened to my gut,” Leonard complains.

Mario mumbles something and then gets up to refill his glass of iced tea.

Edison eyes me from across the table, his smug grin growing as the seconds pass. Finally, I place my cards down face up and watch as his grin drops and mouth pops open. His eyes flick to my face, then back to the table, before returning to my face.

“You’re cheating.”

I cock a brow. “You dealt.”

I push to my feet and head into the kitchen where Mario is, with Edison's excuses as to how I managed to get a royal flush following me as I go.

Mario leans his hip against the counter, lifting a glass to his lips as he glances around the apartment. "So, where's this woman of yours? Edison has told us a bit about her, but I was hoping to see her for myself."

My grip on the fridge handle tightens, and my shoulders bunch into knots while my eyes scan the contents, looking for something to eat. The sudden urge to punch my best friend in the face for talking about her at all hits me, though he hasn't done anything wrong.

Men are interested in women. It's a fact.

Men *like* women and want to look at them.

They want their companionship and their bodies.

I've been the odd one. The defect among men, really.

But I can't say that I've never wanted her body. Or that I haven't been intrigued by her and wanted to be around her after finding out what she is.

"Oh, there we go." Mario's words and the lecherous tone in which he said them has me spinning around to see Avery walking past the guys sitting at the table and heading in my direction.

What the *fuck*?

A dull ache starts in my jaw from clenching it tight, while my blood pressure rises significantly.

I specifically told her to stay in her room tonight while the guys were here. I told her not to open her door and to wait until I came in to let her out. I know she wasn't happy about it. She was furious, in fact, as I led her to her bedroom and once again closed the door on her scowl.

But I didn't expect her to blatantly disregard my orders.

I had everything set up before the guys arrived so that we could start playing immediately without any delays, and I purposely had no food laid out for them so that we would finish sooner and there would be no lingering around.

Now, here she is, defying me and walking out here with that fucking blank half-smile.

But what's really causing the vein in my temple to throb and my muscles to pull tight is what she's wearing in front of the guys; the same tiny dress she was wearing that first night that leaves absolutely nothing to the imagination. There is no room for a bra underneath, so she's not wearing one of those, which you can tell. And her legs look like they go on for days, even though she's not tall by any means.

A spark of heat stirs in my chest where my heart bashes against my ribcage, but I'm unsure whether it's from anger or arousal. It quickly spreads to the rest of my body, though, including my cock, which I can feel getting thicker in my jeans, so I guess that gives me my answer.

“Fuck me, she *is* hot.”

My head snaps to Mario, and I want to *murder* him for even looking at her, let alone having thoughts about what he might like to do to her.

I’m pulled from my glaring when I feel liquid trickling over my skin, and I notice I’m crushing the carton of juice in my hand, causing the contents to spill out the top.

“Shit,” I hiss quietly and step back, placing the carton on the counter.

“Would you like me to do anything?” Avery asks sweetly from beside me now.

Fake.

My eyes meet hers, and I can see the glimmer there, the cheekiness buried in her stare, daring me to announce that I told her to stay in her room and ask what the hell she’s doing out here.

But she knows I can’t do that.

A normal woman wouldn’t have to be told anything twice and would have followed through with any instructions. If I reveal that she didn’t do as she was told, I’m not only putting her in danger but myself as well for keeping quiet about her.

I thought after last night, she would understand that I was just trying to keep her safe.

If she wants to play like this, though, I will.

My expression is bored as I tell her, “Clean up this mess.” I wave a hand at the juice on the ground and then wait for her to comply because as much as she likes pushing my buttons, I know she also doesn’t want to be sent off.

She nods and walks over to the sink for a cloth, but not before I see her eyes flash at me.

That’s right, beautiful, two can play this game.

“You can make us some snacks, too. Right, Phoenix?” Mario speaks up, dropping a hand on my shoulder and giving a good-natured squeeze. “You had nothing ready for us like you usually do.”

I want to say no. I’m annoyed at him for telling her to do something. And I want to tell her to go back to her room. But then my stomach grumbles, reminding me that I haven’t eaten dinner yet and I’m starving. Not to mention, I somewhat like the fact that I can tell her to do things, and she can’t say no in front of them, even though she may want to.

So, I nod in agreement. “Yeah, she doesn’t mind making me food. She likes doing anything I ask.”

Stepping over to me with the cloth, Avery eyes me with a forced smile. “Of course I do.” Then she’s dropping to her knees.

I’m still pissed at her, but I’m getting a weird pleasure out of seeing her cleaning up a mess *I* made, knowing it’s not because she’s an obedient companion but because she made a

choice to come out here and play with me, messing with my mind.

She changes positions, making it so that I get an eyeful of her ass while she's on her hands and knees, and my traitorous eyes don't seem to want to turn away from it.

“*Damn.*”

It takes me a moment to register Mario still standing beside me, watching the very same thing I am.

Within seconds, my hands are gripping her and pulling her up so fast that she almost stumbles over. I don't let her fall, though. I pull her close to me, surrounding myself with her scent and softness, and then I use the opportunity to remind Mario that she is, in fact, *mine* by leaning down and pressing a kiss to her lips.

She's stunned and a little disorientated at first when I pull back, but then her eyes focus on my lips, and she licks hers. I forget that we even have an audience for a moment, drawn to unique eyes and soft lips. That is until she forces an empty smile up at me.

“I didn't finish cleaning the floor. Would you like me to start some food instead?”

My eyes narrow. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her to return to her room, and we'll handle it from here. But I don't. She came out here and started this thing, and the part of me that feels the need to have her do what I say is bubbling to the surface.

“No, you can finish cleaning the juice first before it gets sticky.”

I gently push her down to her knees and ignore the fire in her eyes when she looks up at me.

Needing to get Mario’s eyes off her and keep my cool, I turn to him and ask, “How’s the business going?”

Unlike Edison and myself, Mario and Leonard don’t work for family. Mario started his own exporting company a couple of years ago. After a slow start, he finally started making some good money in the last nine months.

He looks away from Avery over to me as I intended, and I indicate for him to follow me back to the table. Thankfully, he does.

I try to pay attention to him as he starts telling me about his latest client, but I’m hyper-aware of the woman in my kitchen, and my mind is fixated on every little sound coming from there. I catch her movements every now and then from behind Edison’s head, but the kitchen island blocks most of her.

“I gotta say, it’s kind of weird seeing her here in your home,” Edison admits once the conversation dies down.

“Yeah, what’s it really like having a woman living with you?” Leonard asks. “I mean, besides the fucking whenever you like. She does everything for you, right? Food, laundry, cleaning? What’s it like sleeping next to her?”

A loud clattering noise comes from the kitchen, and I’m sure she’s listening to us, but the guys pay no attention to it. I give

a slight shrug, unsure of how to answer since every other time, it's been apparently obvious I wasn't truthful.

Although she *has* been doing my laundry despite me telling her not to, and besides last night when I cooked for her – which I enjoyed a great deal – she *has* been making me food, even when I've been avoiding her and staying out. And everything is always kept clean as well.

As far as the other things go ... well, I haven't been sleeping next to her or fucking her.

Just *thinking* about it.

"It's wonderful," I answer, then quickly add, "Whose turn to shuffle?"

"Don't hold back on us. I wouldn't mind knowing about the sex." That comes from Mario as he casts a quick glance over to her before picking up the cards to shuffle. "I've got a long wait before I'll find out for myself. Unless you're interested in loaning her out?"

Edison tilts his head and quirks a brow at me in amusement, waiting for my reply. But to his credit, he says nothing of the fact I so freely gave her over to him, only to go storming in and take her back again.

"I don't think I want to know what the sex is like when I have to wait to enjoy it," Leonard responds before I can.

"Phoenix isn't one to rub in that sort of thing anyway," Edison adds, with a wink to me the others don't see. After his comments on the phone yesterday, I'm not sure what he thinks

is going on between us. “Will you hurry up with those cards,” he then tells Mario.

Mario starts dealing out and turns to Edison. “How long do you have to wait for yours, you think?”

“Hopefully, only eight more months. But you can bet I won’t be kind enough to spare you the talk of how many times a day I’m having sex and how good it feels,” he replies with his trademark smirk.

There’s another sound from the kitchen, and then Avery walks over with a bowl of chips in one hand and a tray with veggies and dip in the other. Everyone watches as she places them on a clear part of the table.

“Those are nice, too,” Mario says, hitching his thumb in the direction of Avery’s chest.

I grind down on my molars, trying not to react by throwing him to the ground while simultaneously throwing a blanket over Avery. I’m generally not a violent person. I’ve never needed to be. But she brings out this side of me that can’t stand other people looking at her like she’s an object for their imagination.

My eyes snap to Edison then because as much as I hate thinking about it, he has seen Avery’s perfect chest, and I expect him to comment as much. But after a quick look my way, all he does is pick up his cards, reminding me why I like him.

Avery acts as if she heard nothing, her face remaining blank as she walks back to the kitchen to continue with whatever else she's making.

With a grumbling stomach, I reach over to grab a head of broccoli but then notice how she put all the different types together according to size and color. Through my irritation, something warm grows in my chest, knowing that that is a part of her personality. I can't say that I bothered to notice anything like that before when she prepared food for me.

Not two seconds later, Mario's hand destroys the patterns when he takes a handful of the veggies without even looking. It probably wouldn't mean anything to him even if he *had* seen it.

Edison leans forward on the table. "You know what I heard recently? They're really cracking down on WOUNs lately. Apparently, there has been an increased amount of them, and they're getting sneaky."

My hand freezes mid-air on its way to placing a card down, but I force it to continue on.

"Really?" Leonard asks.

Edison nods while stuffing a few carrots in his mouth. "I don't know how true it is, but it's what I heard."

"I'm pretty sure it *is* true," Mario joins in. "Someone my cousin works with picked a WOUN, and she kept it hidden for about a month before he found out, and she was sent away."

A bang sounds from the kitchen, and my eyes want to search her out, but considering the subject at hand, I feel it's best to ignore her.

“How are they cracking down on them?” Leonard asks, grabbing another handful of veggies and dropping a few on the table.

I chew slower and focus on Edison, not wanting to miss anything that he's saying since he's talking in a low voice as if someone is listening in.

“I don't know, some random sweep thing, whatever that is. I overheard some of the partners at the firm talking.”

“How are things at the firm anyway?” Mario asks Edison.

I'm grateful for the change in conversation, and my focus returns to Avery, although I still keep my eyes on the guys and the game.

Avery returns with some napkins, and I just know it's on purpose when she drops one into my lap, especially when she reaches down to pick it up, rubbing a hand across my crotch and over my cock a lot harder than need be. My body reacts to it. Of course, it does. So I wave her hand away and shove a chunk of cauliflower into my mouth, angrily chewing it.

Back and forth she comes after that with different items or to refill drinks, and each time, she'll find some reason to touch me, and somehow, more often than not, it's done in a sexual way.

This woman is successfully fucking with me and getting me worked up.

She heads back to the kitchen once again, and then comes back with a plate of cut meat and cheese, but this time, after placing it on the table, she runs a hand over my shoulders.

“You look tense. Would you like me to rub your shoulders?” Her voice is soft and sexy as she asks.

I turn my head, ready to tell her *no* while attempting to refrain from scowling, but then Mario pipes up next to us, circling his shoulders repeatedly. “I wouldn’t mind one—”

“Thanks,” I cut in, reaching up and keeping her fingers clamped down where they are. “That would be great.”

I lift my cards and try to ignore her hands running over my shoulders, pressing into my muscles and releasing some of the tension.

It feels good. Too fucking good.

We start placing our bets, and then she leans in really close, pretending to be working on a particularly tight spot, but really, it’s to whisper in my ear. “Should I massage your friend?”

With barely any words, she’s managed to make the recently loosened muscles tense up once again, along with making the pain in my jaw return. My nostrils flare.

“You guys need to leave,” I announce loudly.

They’re all suddenly quiet, looking at me confused.

“What?” Edison asks.

“I have a headache coming on. I’m going to bed.”

Mario smirks. “If you want to fuck her, you could have just said that. Or just go do it,” he adds, gesturing to the couch. “We don’t mind.”

I’m about to tell him to get the fuck out when Edison speaks up. “Nah, come on, guys. I actually feel like a drink. Let’s head to the bar.”

They all start getting to their feet, and I follow them to the door, offering Edison a grateful glance before saying goodbye and closing the door behind them.

That woman has driven me crazy long enough.

Chapter 20

Phoenix

After the click of the front door, I stalk slowly toward her, my chest heaving and heart pounding. The headstrong woman in my apartment stands straight as I approach, her chin tilting up ever so slightly as it so often does.

“You have been testing me all night.” My voice comes out more lethal and lower than I intended. But it doesn’t seem to faze her.

“And you’ve either been trying to hide me away in bathrooms or bedrooms or order me around.”

I come to a stop directly in front of her, my eyes narrowing. “You are my chosen woman, or have you forgotten that?”

Thick tension fills the air, and it seems to multiply as the small space between us slowly evaporates. The tip of her tongue pokes out to wet her bottom lip, and my eyes zero in on the movement. I swear I can feel the moisture on my own lips with how close I am.

I'm not sure who moves first, but in the next second, my hands reach up to grip her cheeks, while her hands take a fistful of my shirt, and then our mouths come together in a fierce and passionate kiss.

My greedy tongue plunges into her mouth, no longer holding back. Her taste immediately invades my senses, sending them into a frenzy of need. This kiss is not tame or elegant. It's needy and rough – a release of pent-up sexual tension. And she's no less eager than me, matching each stroke of her tongue with mine.

The force in which I'm ravaging her has us moving until her back hits the wall by her bedroom. I snatch her up while continuing the assault on her mouth and bring us into her room before placing her on her feet again.

Cool air hits my stomach a second later, right before warm hands land on my pecs. She must have undid the buttons of my shirt without me even noticing. That's how far gone I am.

There is still a small part of me screaming to feel some semblance of control, even if it's false; she has me completely captivated.

Still, I try to gain an upper hand in the situation by sliding one hand up to grip her throat and lightly squeeze while the other makes a trek down to grab a handful of her ass. She moans into my mouth, and if my dick wasn't already hard as steel, it would be from that sound alone.

Knowing that she actually wants this as much as I do, and not just because she's supposed to do it, is the biggest turn-on.

I keep kneading while letting her feel over my stomach and chest. I've craved this: her touch, her hands on me.

I've wanted to touch her ass since the very first time I saw her in those tiny shorts but never allowed myself the pleasure.

I've wanted to touch her *all over*, but I kept denying myself.

Not anymore, though. I know there will be no stopping this time.

My body is burning up, and my desire for her is skyrocketing.

Releasing her neck, I reach for the hem of her tiny dress and pull it up and over her head. Then, I take a second to rake my eyes over her body and appreciate her almost naked form, from the curves of her hips up to the swells of her breasts and then to her lust-drunk face. Her lips ... her lips are so fucking addicting. Especially since I now know they hold in her secrets but aren't afraid to talk back to me.

I lift my hand to run a thumb across her bottom lip and then drop it to a hardened nipple, rolling the bud between my fingers. Fast breaths tumble from her mouth, probably as fast as my own, along with a hum of enjoyment.

Seconds later, she's gripping the back of my head and bringing my mouth back to hers.

I return my free hand to her neck and continue tweaking her nipple with my other. When she makes an attempt to unbuckle my belt, I release her nipple to grip her wrists and stop her.

Not because I don't want my pants off, but rather for a show of dominance.

My lips almost tilt into a smirk against hers when she lets out a huff of annoyance. I take both her wrists and pin them behind her back in one of my hands while using the other to unbuckle my belt and undo my pants. They drop to the ground with a thud, and then we're both standing in only our underwear.

I pull back slightly and look down at her parted lips and glazed-over eyes.

“So fucking beautiful.”

She struggles against my hold on her, and after a moment of watching her frustration grow, I let her go. Instead of allowing her to touch me again, I push her to lie down on the bed behind her, then reach for the sides of her underwear to pull down along her smooth legs.

She watches me the whole time, her chest rising and falling in silent anticipation.

I waste no time and quickly tug my boxer-briefs off before coming down on top of her.

I'm desperate to feel her. Desperate to be inside her.

I lay feverish kisses over the skin of her neck and chest, marking her with my touch and biting into her flesh while she threads her fingers through my hair and tugs on the strands, whimpering and moaning, whispering my name.

Sliding my hand down past her soft stomach, I run my fingers over her wet center and then slide them inside. A groan rumbles through my chest at the feel of her heat surrounding my fingers, and once again, imagining it being my cock instead.

I pump only a handful of times, feeling her tighten around them before I can't take it anymore.

Crazed and consumed, I push her legs further apart and line myself up. There are no thoughts or words, only instinct as I plunge into her in one go.

The sound of her crying out has me freezing and regaining some of my mental faculties. I blink through the haze of lust while holding myself up on my elbows and looking down at her.

I'm still panting, my muscles straining and trembling, and I'm torn between enjoying the feel of absolute heaven that it is having my cock strangled inside her body and feeling like a complete asshole because I just tore through her barrier without thought, without care. I hurt her.

"Shit. I'm sorry." Her eyes are closed tight, a look of pain etched across her face. "I'm so sorry, Avery," I whisper and press small kisses over her face.

She takes a few deep breaths and then opens her eyes. There is a light sheen to them as if tears were starting to form. It has my chest feeling tight around my heavily beating heart.

"Are you okay?"

She gives a slight nod. “It just feels like you shoved a giant pipe inside me.” A small smile curves her lips, but I don’t return it. I’m too concerned with her well-being. “It’s okay,” she says softly. “You can move.”

“Are you sure?” I ask, though my body is desperate to do just that.

She nods again, smoothing her hands over my tense back and causing tingles along the way. “Yes. Please.”

I had felt as if I was ready to come when I first entered her. It had felt infinitely better than what I had imagined, and I finally knew why men loved it so much and why they talked about it often.

Though painful, the pause has actually helped with calming me down a fraction. So now, despite the incredible sensation of being wrapped up in her, I feel like I can hold off a little longer.

Withdrawing an inch, I watch her face intently and pause when I notice any discomfort. She urges me on, encouraging me to continue regardless. I suck in a stuttered breath as I slowly pump my hips, reveling in the feel of having my cock completely surrounded and using all of my strength not to start hammering into her.

Though I must admit, it feels incredible regardless of how slowly I’m going.

“Breathe,” I whisper when it looks like she isn’t.

After another short nod from her, I lean down to kiss her again. I can't seem to stay away from her lips now that I've allowed myself to enjoy them.

Avery begins to relax underneath me, spreading her legs wider, and she even starts tilting her hips with my every thrust. It has me increasing speed, the pleasure and need to come, rising once again.

A sliver of pain runs down my back as she starts to run her nails along my skin, digging deeper as she goes. The sensation is something I find I like a lot.

"Fuuckkk," I groan.

Sweat breaks out across my skin, and I know I won't be able to hold off much longer. The feel of her heat enclosed tightly around my cock is almost too much, too sensitive.

Avery's eyes are half-mast when I look down at her again, her panting coming out in bursts.

She's going to come. And so am I.

Her hands pause on my ass, digging in at the same time the pressure on my cock increases. "Keep going," she breathes.

I try to keep the same pace, but I'm losing control, and my rhythm has turned erratic.

The moan that spills from her lips as she clenches me tight and comes on my cock sends me over. I feel the tingling start in my groin, a warmth building from within, and then my cock is throbbing and pulsing, sending a rush of ecstasy through me. A feeling of pure bliss floods my body as I empty

everything inside her, my head buried in the crook of her neck and a groan rumbling from my throat.

Slowly, my hips cease rocking, and I lift up, finally opening my eyes once some of the intense feelings subside and my breathing has slowed.

Staring down at the beautiful woman beneath me, I murmur, “I didn’t mean to hurt you. I hope it wasn’t too bad.”

Violet eyes lock onto mine, and a tender smile appears on her face. “It hurt at first, but then the feeling changed, and after a while, it felt good.”

A measure of relief floods through me. I know she came. I felt every wave and muscle spasm around me. But that doesn’t mean there couldn’t be pain up until that moment.

“Good,” I reply, running a knuckle along her jaw and letting my eyes drift over her face.

Something warm and foreign tickles inside my chest as I look at her. Something almost overwhelming. I want to bundle her in my arms and never let her go.

It’s an odd feeling, and I have no idea what to do with it.

So, I do the only thing I can think of. I pull out of her, ignoring the full body shiver elicited by the sensation of it, and push up off the bed, leaving her lying there while I go into my bedroom and shut the door.

Chapter 21

Avery.

An assortment of sounds have been trickling through my closed door from the kitchen for about half an hour now. I was awake a while before they started, but still, I lay in my bed, not going out to face Phoenix while he prepares breakfast.

After he raced off and left me in my room last night, I actually thought he was coming back. But when several long minutes had passed with me waiting on my bed, it became clear that he wasn't.

It wasn't anything unusual in that we were taught to expect anything from a man during and after sex. We were told that some men like to cuddle afterward, some fall asleep within seconds, and others like to leave right away.

It's just that when Phoenix did that, it felt weird. His face had looked so tender and caring one second and then closed off and hard in the next. I don't know if it's because of me

being a WOUN or not, but I felt alone afterward, much like I did most nights at the facility.

It was an amazing experience, better than I imagined it to be. Yes, it hurt at first, and I can feel a slight ache between my legs this morning, but I wasn't lying when I said it changed to feeling good after a while. Watching Phoenix's face as he finally let go and pumped into me was an experience in itself as well.

There is a part of me, though, that wonders if maybe now that he's had me completely, he'll send me away.

With a sigh, I push myself out of the bed and decide to head out to the kitchen, stopping in the bathroom along the way. I just need to stop this avoidance and get over it. It's not his fault I'm not normal.

A normal woman wouldn't have thought twice about it. She wouldn't have thought at all. It must be nice not to have feelings and such.

I approach slowly, feeling the sunshine from the windows warm my skin as I watch him scoop up something from the pan. It has nothing to do with the fact that he's shirtless, and I can remember in detail what it felt like to have him lose control on top of me last night or the fact that I can see the faint lines I left from my nails. His muscles bunch and flex, and I can't help but admire how his body matches his face in how perfectly proportionate it is to the rest of him.

He looks up as I get close but quickly looks away, his jaw clenching. "I made you some breakfast. Go sit down."

My brows furrow at the command, but I don't put up a fight this time and go sit on the other side of the counter at the breakfast bar. He places a plate in front of me and then goes to get himself a coffee.

"I'm sorry I didn't get up earlier and make you something."

I know a lot has changed, and I'm not entirely sure of my role here anymore, but I still feel like I should be doing some of the things a companion is supposed to.

He still doesn't look at me when he responds, "I've told you I don't need you to do that."

I nod and absently poke at my egg, taking a small bite. It's delicious. He's a good cook, that's for sure.

Phoenix finally takes a seat in his usual spot, two stools down, and starts eating while checking his phone. It's funny that even though I can see his jaw muscle popping in and out as if he's clenching it, his body seems relaxed and calm.

"I was thinking we could go—"

"I didn't like it when you left last night," I blurt, cutting him off. I didn't mean to. I really wasn't going to mention anything about it, but now that I have, I sit straighter and roll with it.

"What?" he asks, his gaze finally landing on me and staying put.

"It felt like you just used me."

A single perfect eyebrow lifts on his face. "Is that not what you're supposed to be for?" His words are like a slap in the

face, and irrational anger and hurt mix together in my stomach. “If I recall correctly, you told me yourself to use your body however I liked.”

He’s not wrong about any of it.

The thing is, if he didn’t know what I was, I wouldn’t have thought anything of his behavior. But the fact that he knows I’m different and have feelings and thoughts, well, it just hits a little different.

I face forward again, trying to ignore the sting. “What were you going to say before?”

“Ah.” I see him shift in his seat out of the corner of my eye. “I was thinking we could go and get you some more clothing. Some things that ... fit. I figure you could pick them.”

Pushing away from the counter, I slip off my chair. “Okay, I’ll go get ready now.”

That oh-so-familiar frown begins to form on his face again. “You need to eat your breakfast.”

I toss a furtive glance over my shoulder at the plate, intending to tell him something like, “*I’ll eat it tomorrow,*” just like he did to me in the past, but at the last second, I actually *see* what’s on my plate, or rather, the way it’s laid out.

My heart skips a beat as I stare at it.

Color ... size ... shape. He made it into a pattern for me.

I turn back to him, but he’s no longer looking at me. He’s poking at his own food. Wordlessly, I sit back on my stool,

taking an extra second before I pick up my fork and start eating. I'm not sure if it was an apology or simply something to show he noticed, but whatever it was, there was some unspoken intention there.



He drives us to a place that, by the looks of the building, is much larger than the one we got the dress from. After parking, he scans our surroundings before turning to me.

“I’ll walk you around, and if there is something that you like, you can squeeze my hand or stare at it. Okay?”

“Okay.”

That was probably the most he’s spoken to me since breakfast, not that he’s a big talker to begin with.

“You need to be careful,” he adds. “No talking to me like you have been.”

I immediately transform my face to the blank smile he doesn’t appear to like and say through the fake expression, “I know how to behave. I’ve been doing it a long time.”

With pursed lips, he pushes the door open and walks around to open mine, reaching down to take hold of my hand. He doesn’t let go of it, even after we’ve entered the store.

I’m overwhelmed by the size of the inside, and the amount of options to choose from. There are more clothes than I’ve seen in my entire life.

We head left first, which takes us to an area where there are rows and rows of different tops. There appear to be whole sections dedicated to a certain style – long sleeves, ones with prints on them, and other areas for tank tops and soon.

I can see why Phoenix most likely would have come in here, grabbed the first items he saw, and then left.

With a neutral face, I look around, but underneath, I'm filled with wonder and even a little excitement. There are a few other men here with their women, walking the aisles and looking around, but I can tell they're normal, so I don't pay them any mind.

He leads me slowly down a row of tops hanging on racks, turning around to look at me every so often to see if something stands out to me. When I see one I think I might like, I squeeze his hand and we come to a stop. I stare at the top in question until he picks it up and holds it to my chest.

“You like this one?” he quietly murmurs.

“Yes,” I reply with that vacant smile, adding, “You could really just pick out whatever you want me to wear.”

“No.” He checks the size and then hangs the top over his arm before we continue on.

A few times, I catch his gaze lingering on certain items as if he might like them. So, one of the times he does it, I indicate to him that I want it without him knowing I saw him looking at it, and then watch his face closely as he picks it up and holds it

against me, running his eyes over it a little longer than the other ones.

I like that he wants to see me in certain items. As much as I am different, I've still been raised as a normal woman, and pleasing a man has still been ingrained in me to a certain extent.

“Pretty,” I tell him with a vacant smile.

The appreciative look on his face fades with that one word.

It's funny how he's so adamant about making sure I pretend to be normal when we're out in public and yet still behaves like he doesn't like it.

We continue on, moving from section to section, and after a while, despite what he said earlier about not picking anything for me, he does start pointing out items that he thinks I might like. I know he's been paying attention and observing because the items he points out are in the colors I've mainly been selecting. He's also made sure they're symmetrical or at least had the pattern cover the entire front side and not just a portion of it.

My appreciation for him grows, slowly pushing away the lingering negative feelings about his abrupt departure last night.

We make it to the dress section, and even though he said I could pick anything, he doesn't respond when I squeeze his hand to indicate a particular dress. I squeeze harder, but still, he pays no attention. When I realize he's ignoring me on

purpose, perhaps because the dress is short and tight, I squeeze as hard as possible to try and stop him. He acts as if I'm doing nothing to him, and I'm probably not. His hands are much larger than mine, and it very likely feels like nothing more than a hand massage.

He finally glances over his shoulder at me but then simply looks away again, continuing to drag me along.

I swear his eyes were almost sparkling when he looked back as if he enjoys controlling me and getting a rise out of me. I silently huff and let my hand go limp in his. I didn't even really want the dress, but he didn't know that.

In the next row, he stops and picks up a cute violet dress with white polka-dots and a ruffled bodice that turns into a flowing skirt that would end just above my knees.

"It matches your eyes," he muses, looking from the dress to me. My lips remain in a closed-mouth smile, and I stare ahead at nothing, not acknowledging him. "Do you like it?" he then asks quietly, holding it up to me in question.

I still don't answer him.

The thing is, I *do* like it. A lot. But I'm feeling petty, and if he can ignore me, then I can, too.

Apparently, having had enough of my silence, Phoenix grips my chin and then slightly turns it as he leans down to talk softly in my ear in the guise of laying affection on me. "You want that tiny piece of fabric, Avery? Fine. But there is no fucking way you are leaving the apartment in it and letting any

other man drool over you. I will be the *only* man who's privileged to watch you prance around in it. Understood?"

My mouth dries over the fierce and commanding way he spoke, even in the softest of voices. That, along with his manly scent so close to me and the way his skin brushes against mine, almost has me acting foolishly and getting myself caught. I fill my lungs with air and release it slowly, turning my head as much as I can still within his grip.

"Yes," I whisper back.

Pulling back, he nods once and then lays the dress over the growing pile of clothes stacked over his arm and continues on.

Chapter 22

Phoenix

I lean back in my chair with a frustrated sigh, glaring at the rendering on the screen. No matter what I do, I still can't get the damn thing to look right.

Avery chooses that moment to stroll into my office, holding a mug of tea and wearing that fucking scrap of fabric we bought today, and I turn my glare onto her.

Her blonde hair floats down her back, tickling the curve of her ass, and her sexy as fuck bare legs lead down to feet fitted into strappy heels.

“What are you doing?” I snap.

She doesn't pay me any mind as she walks around my desk and places the tea in front of me, bending slightly so the short dress rides up even further. My eyes strain to stay on her face instead of drifting down to her ass like they want to. I know she's wearing that outfit on purpose, trying to get a reaction out of me. And that just pisses me off more.

She came into my life and changed up everything, causing me to be consumed with feelings that confuse me and don't know how to handle. I've never felt anything like them before, nor do I even know what they are.

Yes, I want her body, but it's more than that. She amuses me and infuriates me all in the same breath. She intrigues me and drives me crazy, and I want more of it.

That's why I left her so suddenly last night. I am not an affectionate man, yet she had me wanting to cuddle her. I had tossed and turned all night feeling bad about it, only for her to add to the pile of guilt when she said she felt used this morning. That's exactly what I tried to convince myself I had done – used her for sex only.

“Do you want me to do anything?” Running her eyes over my desk, she then stops on the screen of my laptop.

“No. Just go back in your room or something.”

Shooting me an annoyed glance over her shoulder, she returns her attention to the rendering. “Is this what you're always working on?”

“One of the things.”

“Hmm,” she hums, still staring at it.

Why the fuck is she looking at it like that?

I push her to the side with the back of my hand and roll my chair forward. “I need to get back to work. Go change out of that dress.”

A sigh passes through her lips, and then she's walking back out of my office and in the direction of her room, with my eyes following her every move. It's not that I actually wanted her gone. It was quite the opposite, in fact. All I want now is to be around her.

For fuck's sake, what is wrong with me? I didn't even *want* a woman.

It's my turn to sigh this time as I stare at the image on my laptop once again. I bet even she hated this abomination.

My eyes shoot back to the doorway when not even five seconds go by, and I see Avery passing by in the direction of the living room, still wearing the same thing.

My nostrils flare, and my heart pumps harder while my fingers twitch. It's not just the dress that's getting me riled up. Her complete disregard of my orders does it every time.

A minute later, a piano melody floats its way into my office. It's not the one I've heard her play a few times now, but it's no less beautiful. It's something from the sheet music I have out there.

I sit staring at the doorway, but it takes only thirty seconds more before my feet start leading me in that direction, like an invisible force that pulls me to her constantly.

She starts withdrawing her fingers from the keys when I move around the piano and approach her from behind, but I stop her movements, bending to grab each wrist and place them back where they were.

“Keep playing.”

Sucking in her breath, she starts again. But I don't lift my fingers from her skin. Slowly, I trail them up her arms and then brush them over the exposed skin of her shoulders and neck. That familiar buzz starts thrumming through my veins, heating me from the inside.

“Did you wear this for me, Avery?”

Goosebumps spread across her skin, and I feel her breath hitch, a reaction to me that gives me great pleasure.

When she doesn't say anything in response, I lean in closer to her ear. “Answer me.”

“Yes,” she whispers back, still staring at the sheet music before her.

My cock swells, and I hum, running the back of my knuckles over her shoulders once more, then up the delicate skin of her neck and along her jaw. She fumbles and plays the wrong note but doesn't stop.

I close my eyes and continue allowing my hands to roam her body, forcing myself to hold back from tearing her clothes off – up and down her arms, along her shoulders, and down her back. I can't stop touching her, just like today.

She wasn't able to hide the extra light in her eyes whenever I held her hand or touched her back, so I kept doing it.

Sliding lower, I tug the hem of her dress up over her ass. It barely covered it, to begin with. Next, I reach around to the

front, dip my hands between her thighs, and push, widening them.

Another puff of air blows past her lips when I glide one of my hands along until it's pressed into her heat. She's not wearing any underwear and is already wet. My chest rumbles with a low groan.

Is this the way it always is?

Burying my face into the side of her neck, I inhale deeply, maneuvering my hands to stroke her a few times before pressing a finger inside. Her scent is so alluring, and I can't breathe in enough of it.

Avery's breathing gets louder, faster. She tries to pull her hands away from the keys again, but I don't let her.

"Keep playing, Avery," I murmur against her neck.

She exhales. "I like it when you say my name."

I pause momentarily. I hadn't realized it before, but it's true that I've rarely used her name. I probably used it as a way to keep a certain detachment from her. Not that it worked.

I continue on, lifting my other hand to cup one of her breasts as I pump my finger in and out slowly.

"Avery."

As soon as her name leaves my lips, I feel her clench tighter around me, showing me exactly what it does to her.

Dropping her head back to my shoulder, she closes her eyes but continues playing, though it's much more choppy than

before.

“I like your voice as well,” she adds.

Brushing my lips over her cheek, I relish the shiver she gives. “Is that right?”

I add a finger and then increase my speed, loving the whimper that leaves her mouth.

My father had indicated that taking our pleasure was the normal way of doing things, but I quite enjoy giving it to her. That’s not to say that I don’t plan on burying myself deep inside her as well. My painfully hard cock jerks at just the thought of it.

Lowering my other hand to her clit, I begin rubbing over it while my fingers continue moving in and out of her, faster and faster. I’ve learned what makes her moan and what seems to turn her on more.

She’s not even playing a song anymore. It’s become a chaotic mixture of random keys being pressed as she starts losing herself in the feelings.

“Avery,” I whisper before breathing her in and sucking on the skin of her neck.

Moaning, her hands drop from the keys to grip my forearms, but this time I let them. Her fingers dig in at the same time her muscles tense, and she comes, soaking my fingers and the rest of my hand.

Her face still shows remnants of her state of bliss when she turns to look at me, and it has my lips landing on hers in

another one of those desperate kisses I always seem to be craving from her. I slip my tongue in to meet hers, angling my head for better access. She tastes like all of my favorite delicacies combined.

Pulling back from her mouth, I finally withdraw my fingers, bringing them to my lips for a taste and licking them clean while Avery watches with hooded eyes. I can't decide which I like best. Her mouth or her cum.

I'll ponder that some other time because I'm not done with her yet. The more she stares at me like that, the greater the need to be inside her is.

"Stand up," I order.

With slow movements, she starts to get to her feet. I help her along by pushing her the rest of the way and forcing her to lean over the piano, causing her ass to stick out. I shove the bench seat out of my way and move directly behind her, smoothing a hand over her back.

"Move your legs apart," I tell her, my voice raspy and thick with desire.

I like it when she doesn't do as I say. It sparks something inside me that gets my blood pumping.

But I must say, watching as she obeys me and spreads her feet further apart, I realize that I fucking *love* when she does what I say.

Staring at her ass on display for me has me feeling wild and rapidly losing control. Taking a woman from behind had been

something that interested me back when I watched those videos. Now, I have the sweetest-looking ass attached to the most appealing and rare woman laid out in front of me.

I reach one hand out to dig my fingers into her flesh. Meanwhile, I work at my belt buckle with the other. My blood is sizzling, my heart pumping the heated liquid throughout my body, driving the need to be inside her.

With my pants and boxer-briefs out of the way, I lean my body over hers, pressing my palms flat to the piano on either side of her head, dragging my lips across her shoulders.

“Are you ready for me?”

When she nods her head against the smooth surface, I press a kiss to her shoulder and then line myself up.

An exhale is forced from my lips as I push inside. This is a different angle than last night, and with it brings different sensations. I have to focus all my attention on controlling my cock, which has already gotten thicker with one thrust inside her.

With a few deep breaths, I manage to calm myself, then start pumping my hips. I try to keep a slower pace at first, but it's not long before I'm gripping her shoulders to stop her body from sliding forward with every thrust and start going harder, deeper.

I breathe through gritted teeth, listening to her moans mixed with the sound of slapping skin.

She turns me into an unrestrained, feral man. The need to come inside her and claim her grows stronger with each thrust, though I know she's already technically mine.

“I want to have you up against the window sometime, looking out at the city as I sink inside you.”

Avery responds with a sound that drives me even more crazy, and I rut into her harder, her juices coating me and driving me savage. It only takes a few more thrusts, and she's coming on my cock with a moan.

As much as I love this position, I can't see those luscious lips and violet eyes staring back at me, which bothers me. Curling myself over her body, I reach up and grab a fistful of her hair, then angle her head to face me. *There you are.* She looks so damn sexy with her mussed-up hair and lust-filled eyes.

My lower back and groin start feeling light and heavy at the same time. Tingly. The pleasure is growing fast, and I can't hold it back. As my whole body flushes hot, I crash my mouth into her parted lips and groan while my cock pulses and empties into her.

Our kisses turn languid, mixed with heaving chests and fast breaths. My hips slow but don't stop pushing in and out until it becomes too sensitive to move.

Those same overwhelming feelings that bloom inside my chest and swallow up all the oxygen start to return, but this time, I force myself not to pull out and disappear. Instead, I run my fingers through her hair, trying to flatten some of the

strands that are in disarray, and then push myself to straighten up.

As I stand behind her, still buried deep inside, I slide my hands over the curves of her body, admiring them.

And it finally hits me what I've been missing from my designs lately.

Chapter 23

Phoenix

“*Passion and heart,*” my grandfather had said I needed when he promoted me. But he never mentioned my buildings needing *curves, intrigue, or uniqueness*. That came to me last night as I stared down at Avery splayed across the piano in front of me, the residual currents of pleasure still thrumming through my body.

She represents what I want with my buildings – the inspiration I had been missing.

I stare at the screen in front of me, quite pleased with the end result. I came here early this morning before Avery was even awake, eager to work on it. She’s going to be quite pissed at me when I get home. One side of my lip tilts up at the thought, and I click over to the live feed from the camera in my home.

She woke up about an hour ago and went into the kitchen, presumably to start making us breakfast like she usually would at that time, but once she saw the food I left for her in the

warmer, she went walking back down the hall off-screen, probably to check my bedroom. A minute later, she marched back into the kitchen with pursed lips and ate her food.

I don't see her on the screen right now, so she must be in her bedroom or something. I wonder what she's doing?

I'm still staring at the screen when there's a rapid knock at my door, and then it's bursting open. I quickly click out of the video feed as Thomas crosses the room with rushed steps.

"What the fuck, man?"

I turn my scowl onto him. "Excuse me?"

"I can't even ... I just ... I don't know why you'd do that," he sputters.

I lean back in my chair. "Do what?"

He huffs out a breath, an incredulous look on his face. "Umm, I don't know. Buy a new fucking apartment in a nice area and send movers to pack up mine and my dad's stuff, then move us out of that shit-hole we were in? All expenses paid."

"Oh, yes, that." I glance back at my laptop. "It's closer to work, so you don't have to worry about traffic and being late. And it actually has space to fit an ironing board." I sweep my eyes down to his wrinkly dress pants and back to the laptop. "Do you know how to use one?"

"Yes," he replies.

I exhale an annoyed sigh. "I guess it's too much to ask for anonymity with these companies. I should complain that they

didn't listen.”

“Well, I'm not an idiot. You're the only person that would do that type of thing. Anyway, when I demanded they tell me what was going on, they said they were sent by a Mr. C.”

“That could have been anyone, my grandfather, for example.”

He scoffs. “Please. That guy hates me.” Dropping into one of the chairs across from me, he props his elbows onto my desk. “My father cried when he saw the new place and watched as they unpacked everything. Do you have any idea what that did to me?” I shift uncomfortably, noting the glint in his eyes. “I don't know how to repay you.”

“I told you. It made sense from a business perspective.”

Thomas sits there shaking his head, looking at me in disbelief. “Well, thank you.” He lets out a heavy sigh. “Thank you.”

“You're welcome,” I tell him, reaching for the next file to work on. “Now, I need you to call and schedule a meeting with Mark Anderson. Since I'm finished with the design, we'll need to go over it.”

Thomas pushes to his feet and slaps a palm on my desk. “Whatever you need, sir. I'll do it right away.”

Sir: I'm only six years older than him, but he seems so young in comparison. I guess having the father and grandfather that I do, along with the responsibilities of the company, I grew up a lot quicker than most.

He hesitates right before turning around and drops his gaze to the ground. “You know, it’s funny. I’ve not once been late for work, and traffic has never been a concern for me.” His eyes lift, connecting with mine. “But my father’s wheelchair seems to fit through every doorway now, and the bathroom seems like it was designed for someone like him. I can’t thank you enough.”

“Guess you won’t need my credit card to buy a new house now.” I raise a brow at him.

He chuckles, rubbing at the back of his neck. “Yeah. I guess not.”

He walks out, leaving me staring at the door for a few seconds longer, a pleasant sort of feeling flooding my body. I’m glad I gave that kid a chance. I’m quite fond of his unabashed comments and genuineness.

I return my attention back to my desk. Now that I’ve finished that design, I’m eager to get working on these other projects.

But not before checking on Avery again.

Opening the live feed once again, I scan the screen until I find her sitting at my piano playing. I wish I had sound on this thing so I could hear what piece it is. I watch for several minutes before I finally pry my eyes away from the screen. I’ve had my fix, and now I need to get to work.

With the new-found motivation, I get a good start on two other projects I had lingering around. It’s surprising and

irritating how easily the ideas seem to be coming to me now.

Just as I'm closing my laptop for the day, a single knock precedes my office door opening. For fuck's sake. It's no wonder I get Thomas to give me warnings. Nobody bothers actually waiting for me to reply after they knock.

My grandfather's strides are purposeful as he moves across my office to take a seat opposite me. "I talked with Mark. He said you finally have a design to show him."

"That's right. I finished it up this morning."

He leans forward. "Let's see it, then."

Of course, he wants to check if it's acceptable before presenting it to such an important person. He trusted me enough to give me the job but not enough to not check my work first.

I reopen my laptop, making sure Avery isn't still on the screen, then pull up the rendering and turn it to face him.

The quiet amazement that crosses his face is hard to miss and slightly insulting, though it shouldn't surprise me. It has taken quite some time to finish this one and I did struggle along the way.

"This is remarkable," he says, tracing the design with his eyes before leaning back. "I knew getting you a woman right now would pay off." The funny thing is, he's both right and wrong in that statement because Avery was the inspiration, but if she were a normal woman, I don't think I would be feeling the same way. "Sex is good for you," he continues, glancing

back at the laptop. “I’m getting older and honestly can’t do as much as I used to, but this makes me feel better about handing over more and more to you and Allard.”

I’m taken aback by his admission. He’s always presented himself as nothing less than a formidable and strong man – both mentally and physically – in front of me. His words seem to paint him as a regular, aging man.

I study him under this new light, noting the harsh crevices on his face and the loosened skin surrounding his eyes. He suddenly looks old – aged within a few minutes.

But then, just as quickly as the mask slipped off his face, it returns. He straightens, pinning me with his hardened gaze. “We will set up a meeting of sorts for later this week with Anderson and a few others. I’ll be informing him that he’ll be dealing with you from now on. You’ll bring your woman with you.”

Unease immediately settles in the pit of my stomach as his words from the party float into my mind, making my hands clench into fists below my desk.

“If the right person wants to fuck your woman, you should let them.”

Not to mention, in a smaller group, she’ll be more under the spotlight, so to speak, than at the gala.

“I don’t see what bringing Avery will accomplish.”

“It’s important that our enemies are aware of our status and dominance, Phoenix, but make no mistake, it’s just as

important that our associates ... our friends, honor our stature as well. A woman represents your position in life at such a young age. They need to respect you and be reminded of who you are.” His words are pointed, almost as if he were reminding *me* of who I am. “Besides, you never know when she’ll come in handy.”

I can only imagine what he means by that.

“I already had Thomas set up a meeting. He wasn’t available until next week.”

“Bah.” He swishes his hand in the air in front of him, dismissing what I said. “Have him call back and *tell* him to meet you at the Bolstrom club for brunch on Thursday at eleven. I’ll phone the others.”

Rising to his feet, he tugs on the bottom of his suit jacket as he usually does and levels me with a stern look, the older and frailer version of him nowhere to be found.

“You know, if you’re displeased with her you can exchange.” His change in the subject has me pausing for a moment.

“She is acceptable,” I reply. “Besides, she’s been used plenty, and it’s been a few weeks.”

“And what does that matter?” he asks hotly. “Even if it was past the thirty days, you want to return her? You fucking return her. It’s not like she’s tattooed yet.”

“She’s not.”

As I say the words confirming it, something stirs within me. My mind has to be messed up if, instead of handing over this

woman who is actually classed as a defect, I find myself getting aroused at the thought of tying her to me permanently with a tattoo that we'll both share.

“If you want a different one, they can give you a new one immediately. You need to stop asking for things, Phoenix, and take it.” With that, he gets up and leaves.

I stay seated at my desk for a few extra minutes, thinking over what he said.

I'm sure my need for control and my *bossing people around*, as Avery put it, is all from him. Having power and using it to your advantage was something instilled from a young age. But sometimes, he goes beyond the normal, stepping on top of others to show that he's better and can have whatever he wants.

I used to want to be just like him, but as I stare at the door he just walked through, I realize I don't want that anymore. Not all of it, at least.

Flicking my gaze back to the screen, I make a move to open the live feed again but stop myself with my finger hovering over the button. Instead, I close it up and gather my stuff to head home. I know it's early, but I arrived here early.

Plus, that same invisible rope that's incessantly pulling at me, urging me to go home and see Avery is there, and instead of fighting it as I have been, I let it guide me, leading me by its grip around my neck.

Once I've entered my apartment, I kick off my shoes and start tugging at my tie as I walk through the foyer. I glance around the open space and spot her when she tilts her head against the glass window while looking out at the city, the afternoon sun's rays illuminating her blonde strands.

"Avery," I say from across the room after watching her for a minute.

She doesn't acknowledge me as I approach, but as soon as I'm standing right beside her, she turns to me with that vacant look and half smile.

"Hello. Can I do anything for you?" she asks.

I squint my eyes at her. "Don't."

"Don't what?" she asks, blinking innocently, her features remaining in the exact same position.

I grip her chin, tilting it up to face me, and then take another step closer. She doesn't falter. I have to hand it to her. She can pull it off pretty well. *Too* well. And I don't like it one bit.

"Don't act like that."

"Like what?"

"Like you aren't the most intriguing woman I've ever met." I brush my thumb over her skin. "Like there aren't a million and one things going on behind these exquisite eyes of yours. And like these lips don't want to hurl insults at me right now."

She finally sighs, the facade cracking. "You left me alone again with nothing to do. And without saying goodbye."

“I needed to get some work done.”

She turns her head to the side, causing my hand to drop.
“You could have taken me.”

“You would have been a distraction.”

One of those irritated huffs that she does so well leaves her lips, and she starts walking away from me. “It’s nice to know that I’m simply a distraction for you.”

I reach out and grab her by the upper arm before she can get too far, and then pull her back in so that she lands against my chest with a thump.

“You’re a fucking distraction because all I would be thinking about is what *you* are thinking about. Wondering what’s going on in that mind of yours, whether or not you’re hungry, and watching the way your hair tumbles over your shoulder when you lean forward for the next magazine to read.” Lifting a handful of her hair, I let it sift through my fingers. “Yes. You’re a distraction. Now, go and get dressed in something with no sleeves. We have somewhere to be.”

Chapter 24

Phoenix

We pull up to a building, and I put the car in park just as tiny raindrops start decorating the windshield. Lifting my phone from my pocket, I double-check the address to make sure we're at the right place.

“Are you ... are getting rid of me now?” Avery asks from the passenger side.

I shift my gaze to Avery, my brows pulling together as I take in her rounded eyes and slightly panicked look, and then glance around the area, seeing it through her eyes.

There are no signs on the building, no indication of where we might be. For all she knows, this is where WOUNs like her are brought. And that's my fault. I didn't tell her where I was taking her, a sick little version of holding the power.

“No,” I reply, turning back to her. *In fact, quite the opposite.* “I don't need to remind you how to behave, do I?” At the look on her face, I add, “Alright. Let's go.”

With still no explanation as to what we're doing, I get out, walk around to her side of the car, and reach for her hand. She takes hold of it, seeming to relax within my grasp as I walk us into the building. The main door opens into a bright hallway with a couple of doors on either side, but it's the first door that I want.

We step into what looks like a waiting room of sorts, a desk sitting on the opposite side of the room with a man covered in tattoos and hair in a bun bent over, looking as if he's drawing something.

I peek down at Avery and catch her staring at the man as if she's never seen someone who looks like him before, and then she looks up at the walls lined with a mixture of drawings and paintings, her eyes curious.

I squeeze her hand, a quick reminder of what she's doing, though I'm sure if he were looking up at us, there would be nothing noteworthy about her stare. She quickly glances up at me, a brow raised in question, before facing forward again. I'm sure she's figured out where we are. Perhaps she's wondering *why* we are here.

The fact of the matter is, the second the idea was presented to me, it took root in my mind, and I knew I was going to make it happen. Sooner rather than later. The compulsion to possessively mark her as mine has me feeling electrified and the buzz won't cease until it's done.

But there's also a measure of guilt mixed in with that from the fact that I'm taking her choice away. I didn't ask her if this

is what she wants, a strange notion, I admit, asking a woman what she wants, but seeing as this is a unique situation with her having thoughts and feelings, I probably should have.

And yet, it doesn't stop me.

"We have an appointment," I state, walking closer to the desk.

The guy offers me a brief glance up from the desk and then returns to what he was doing. "I'm just finishing up with the design you wanted. Take a look."

Once we're close enough, he lifts his sketch pad and faces it toward us. I feel Avery's reaction. A barely noticeable tightening of her hand, and shift in her stance. I'm so finely attuned to her every movement that I even hear the slightest hitch in her breath, though I'm sure it wasn't even audible.

"It's perfect."

"Alright, well, follow me, and we'll get started. You can call me Drae," he says over his shoulder as he starts walking.

We follow behind him through another doorway into a smaller room with a special chair and equipment covering a little table with a stool next to it. There's another seat placed on the other side of it.

"Who's going first," Drae asks, rounding the chair to sit on the stool by the table.

With a soft tug, I urge Avery further into the room. "She is."

She takes small steps, smaller than usual. Probably still wondering why. Why, of all things, am I doing this instead of what I'm supposed to do?

I can't answer that.

"You're a little younger than my usual clients. You get her early?"

"I did," I reply, taking a seat in the regular chair.

"Nice. She can sit up here. I just need access to her arms. You said you want it on both forearms, is that right?"

Another squeeze on my hand from Avery. Maybe a thank you this time. I know it means more pain, but I also know she would have hated having it on only one arm.

"Yes."

"Can't say I've seen that too often," he says while setting up and putting on gloves. "Or at all. I'm going to put some numbing cream on first, and we'll have to wait a few minutes for it to take effect."

Finally turning his attention to Avery for the first time, his eyes linger a little too long on her face for my liking, and then they run down her body, blatantly checking her out before actually focusing on her forearms. Then he pats the special chair for her to sit on.

My jaw clenches.

It's *normal*, I try to tell myself. Men like looking.

Even so, when she starts to get onto the chair, I pull her to sit on my lap instead and place her arms out on the seat between us. Drae eyes me momentarily.

I'm not sure if *this* is normal, but I don't care at the moment, and I ignore him as I thread my fingers through Avery's, holding her arms down with her inner forearms face up.

He slathers on the cream and then excuses himself, leaving us in the room alone. Avery angles her head to look at me over her shoulder.

"I didn't think you'd want to do this. Not with me."

"It appears you were wrong."

"And what if I didn't want this?" she asks, tilting her chin ever so slightly.

My grip on her tightens. Maybe that is exactly why I didn't tell her, so she *couldn't* say no before we arrived. And now that we're here, she can't either. "You keep forgetting that you are my chosen woman."

"I haven't forgotten." Facing forward again, she wiggles her fingers, which are still gripped tightly between mine. "I love what you chose."

"It seemed fitting."

Unable to stop myself, I lean in a little closer, grazing my nose along her neck and jaw, pulling one of my favorite reactions from her: a shiver followed by goosebumps.

"Will this hurt much with the cream?"

“Probably,” I answer. “But I’ll be holding you.”

“Okay,” she whispers in reply.

Drae comes back into the room, and after a short while, he gets started.

I would never have thought, even a few weeks ago, that I’d be in a position like this. Desperate to have a female tied to me. Had she not been a WOUN, I dare say I *wouldn’t* be in this position.

But here I am, holding Avery close, breathing her in while the buzz of the needle sounds throughout the small space. My dick begins to stir at the sight of the ink marking her skin.

She doesn’t flinch or squirm the entire time, though I’m certain she can feel me hard beneath her. And the same blank expression remains on her face as she stares straight ahead, though I think she’s studying the art that covers the wall.

Once her arms are finished and he has covered them with wrap, it’s my turn. He offers the numbing cream as I roll up my sleeves, but I tell him just to go ahead and do it.

While he gets started on mine, I scan over the finished product on Avery’s arms, quite pleased with how it turned out – a treble clef followed by the first several notes of the song I caught her playing before they look like they’re blowing away on a breeze. I will have the same thing on my forearms as well.

We are free to choose whatever we wish to be tattooed, but it must be the same image for both of us and in the same place.

It's the way we claim them as ours, permanently.

Finally, he finishes up, giving us a list of aftercare instructions as we step back into the room we first entered, and I make sure to leave him a healthy tip for rearranging his schedule to fit us in.

The rain is heavier when we walk out the door and I pull Avery to run to my car.

We stumble inside, drenched clothes and dripping hair, but I don't pay any attention to that when her soft and lighthearted giggle reaches my ears. I've seen quite a few emotions on her face recently, but the genuine smile lighting up her face right now is my favorite by far.

Warmth fills my chest again, crowding out the air that once occupied the space and making it harder to breathe. She makes my heart feel odd ... happy.

I'm staring at her, but she pays me no attention as she pulls at the bottom of her shirt and uses it to carefully dry off the plastic covering her arms. "These aren't supposed to get wet."

"The plastic covering protects it," I force through a tight throat.

"Oh."

Avery finally turns her attention to me, her violet eyes still lit up as if the rain has brought her to life, brought her joy. The longer she stares at me, though, taking in my serious expression, her face begins to lose the humor and turn more curious.

I didn't mean to take away her smile. I want it back. But I'm not sure how to make that happen again.

"What?" she asks as a water droplet trickles down her cheek until it reaches her lip.

I don't answer. Instead, I reach up and slide my fingers into her wet hair, gripping hard before bringing her mouth to mine.

My kiss is intense. I take her lips, my tongue delving in like I can't get enough. There's no leading into it or starting out softly. That's not me; I've recently found out. I kiss her like a starving man. Like she's replenishing the air in my lungs. Like it's the first and the last kiss, all rolled into one. Like, I just can't get enough.

Then, I pull back just as abruptly.

Her breaths are coming out fast, lips still parted and wet, eyes closed. I wait until her mind has caught up and her eyes open. With her hair still fisted in one hand, I bring my other up to run my thumb over her bottom lip.

"You're staying in my bed tonight."

Her eyes light with fire and lust, but it's mixed with the familiar touch of defiance creeping in at being told what to do.

"And if I don't want to?"

Even if the side of her mouth wasn't slightly curved as if fighting a smile, I would know it was what she wanted.

I angle her head, bringing her mouth a little closer to mine so my lips lightly brush over hers. "You'd still be staying in my

bed.”

Chapter 25

Avery.

My insides are swishing about with nerves and anticipation as we drive toward a place called the Bolstrom Club where we're meeting Phoenix's grandfather and a couple of other men. I know I can handle it. I've been faking it most of my life. But Phoenix hasn't, and it's the wondering how he's going to behave that's causing my belly to swirl.

Plus, I'm not sure whether or not I'll be used as entertainment for the other men that will be there. I know that to keep up the ruse, it will be necessary to do whatever I have to to behave like a normal woman, even if I don't want to. I can't see Phoenix being happy about it with the possessive way he often acts.

He's had me sleep next to him in his bed ever since the night we got tattooed. Every morning, I wake curled up next to him with an arm draped over me. It never ceases to cause a tingling in my chest that has me wanting to snuggle in closer.

“Make sure you do as I say exactly,” he repeats from beside me, drawing my attention.

“Yes,” I answer, even though I know this already.

“Don’t look around at anything and don’t react,” he continues. “Just don’t make eye contact.”

I turn to him, annoyed and ready to respond, but when I notice his tight grip on the steering wheel, I clamp my mouth shut. His whole body is rigid and tense. I’d say he’s nervous, but that doesn’t quite fit his personality. Anxious, maybe. Hyper-focused.

“I won’t,” I answer instead, laying my palm on his thigh.

He turns those beautiful gray eyes my way, giving a single nod before facing the road once again.

A few minutes later, we’re pulling up outside a luxurious-looking black building. A man in some kind of uniform stands by the curb, and two others are beside the door leading inside. Unfortunately, I don’t get a good look at everything before we step out, and then it’s time to behave as I should.

I do, however, notice out of the corner of my eye that the man from the curb drives off in Phoenix’s car. It is strange why Phoenix doesn’t seem to be bothered by it, though, and I wonder how we’ll be getting home. I guess we’ll worry about that later.

Phoenix wraps an arm around my waist, the warmth radiating off him, comforting me. His presence alone is a comfort, even when we’re just at home.

He had me wear one of the cute, newer dresses I picked out, which doesn't show as much skin as the others, and then paired it with wedge sandals. The plastic coverings from our tattoos are gone, and my arms are healing nicely.

I could have cried when I saw the design he picked. It was more than just beautiful. It *meant* something to me. And the fact that he was willing to have me tattooed despite knowing what I am ... well, that meant something to me as well.

The implication of what having us tattooed meant didn't escape me, and I was quite alright with it, despite my words to him in the room.

"Carsen," Phoenix says to the men at the door when we approach, and then we're ushered inside.

The dim lighting in here would normally offer me more of a chance to take in my surroundings. However, the men here seem to be curious about who has just arrived and even more so about me, which means I can't risk letting my gaze shift. So, I keep staring ahead, expressionless, as their eyes follow us.

We're led through what appears to be the main seating area, then up some stairs and over to some armchairs surrounding a table. The area overlooks the space we just walked through below, and four men occupy some of the chairs, deep in conversation with Phoenix's grandfather, Jeffrey Carsen.

"Ah, there he is," Mr. Carsen announces. All eyes turn to us as we step around the filled chairs to the two vacant ones. "This is my grandson, Phoenix." He uses a hand to indicate to

each of the men. “Mark Anderson and his friend, Jonah Michaels. And you met Nate Worthorpe at the gala.”

Phoenix greets them with a dip of his chin and then sits in one of the chairs while I remain standing, waiting to be told what to do.

“So this one is yours, huh?” Mr. Michaels asks, shifting forward in his seat and looking between me and Phoenix. “My son hasn’t even been given his yet, but here you are with one you got to choose.” There’s something in his voice that doesn’t sound very friendly despite the smile on his face. “How about you let me take a closer look.”

My insides tense, but I keep the outside of my body relaxed and unaffected.

Phoenix’s hand shoots out immediately stopping me from moving forward. “I did not bring her here for your enjoyment.”

“Oh?” Jonah replies, looking unimpressed and slowly leaning back into his chair.

“Phoenix,” Mr. Carsen warns through gritted teeth.

Phoenix tugs my hand, pulling me to my knees between his legs. “I brought her for mine. I’m a little tense right now. You can have her after.”

I can’t tell if Jonah is pleased by it, but it seems to slightly appease his grandfather, and I even hear a “*good*” from him.

With a quick glance at me kneeling between his legs, he gives a short nod for me to begin and then turns to Mr.

Anderson.

“You got the design I sent, I presume?”

“I did. I must say, I was a little apprehensive when Jeffrey told me he was having you work on this one.”

They continue their discussion as I begin rubbing over Phoenix’s thighs first, applying a decent amount of pressure and massaging his thick and tight muscles.

The other men are behind me and can’t see my face, so I’m able to study his perfectly straight nose, the beautiful shape of his lips, and the dusting of dark hair along his sharp jaw as much as I want. It’s too dim to see the color of his eyes, but they aren’t looking at me.

Next, I unbutton his suit jacket so I can move over his abs and up his chest, gently massaging as I go. Then, it’s back down to his thighs and, finally, over his crotch. I make a few passes, a thrill buzzing through me at the feel of him hardening under my touch.

He doesn’t take his eyes off whoever is speaking, but I know his focus is on my hands and what I’m doing to him.

I work my way back to his thighs, rubbing them in slow circles, then over his long, hard length again, stroking him over his pants and then back up his stomach.

My touch is sensual and unhurried. And while I can feel the effects I’m having on his body, no one else can tell just how much it’s affecting me and how wet my panties are getting.

Despite having others here to witness this act, it's sexy and erotic.

I keep repeating the process, changing my path each time. I can see the increased rising and falling of his chest, but still, he remains calmly talking with the men as if he isn't thoroughly aroused.

I've mostly been ignoring their conversation, immersing myself in my task and thoroughly enjoying it, the way a normal woman would. But some of their words have still reached my ears.

"...rather impressed with it..."

"...handing over all of the upcoming jobs..."

"...strong family line will continue..."

"...very proud..."

There have been a few negative things spoken by Jonah as well, but when I hear the next words spoken by one of the other men, my hands almost falter on their journey. I peek up at Phoenix's face again, and this time, he's looking directly at me.

I wait for his answer, wondering how he's going to respond.

"No, she hasn't," he answers.

I press harder into his thighs. I don't think he knows what that is. That, or he's okay with me doing it in front of them. It was part of my lessons, so I'm completely versed in what to do.

“If you’re feeling tense, it’s a sure way for a quick release. Have her show you a preview. You’ll be thanking me.”

Phoenix glances at whoever is speaking behind me and back to my face, possibly considering whether the man will have me perform it on himself if Phoenix were to refuse.

“Go ahead,” he tells me.

I breathe in deeply and hold his gaze as my fingers crawl up to his belt and then begin sliding the leather through the loops. After prying it open completely, I move to the button of his pants and undo it. The muscle in his jaw clenches tight as I slide the zipper down slowly, his eyes dark and focused on me.

The others begin conversing somewhere in the background, and whether or not they’re watching, I’m unsure, but I try to block them out.

I slip my hands into the waistband of his boxer-briefs and tug them lower until he’s freed. Thick and hard and veiny.

There’s no prolonging it. Hovering forward, I lick from the bottom all the way up to the tip, hearing a harsh exhale pour from his lips. Gripping the base, I lick from above the top of my hand to the tip once more and then enclose it in my mouth, swirling my tongue around the end.

It’s an interesting combination of soft and smooth skin covering a rock-hard length underneath. The scent, I find to be a heady and unique mixture.

Phoenix shifts in his chair, unable to hide how much pleasure this is giving him. I push him deeper, almost gagging

when he reaches the back of my throat, but I follow my training and relax, breathing through my nose.

With hollowed cheeks, I suck him hard, bobbing my head up and down. He thickens even further in my mouth as if he wasn't big enough. His loud and ragged breathing makes me feel powerful. It's the same feeling anytime I know he's losing control.

I close my eyes, shutting out everything else and enjoying the act.

Lifting my lips all the way to just the tip, I run my tongue over his slit and then around the top. I feel his fingers slide into my hair before they grip tight and push my head back down his cock again. I can't help the quiet moan that vibrates through my throat.

Not even a second later, though, he's pulling me all the way off.

I stare up at him, my hair still fisted in his hand, lips parted and wet, panting heavily.

"That's enough," he rasps, releasing my hair. The rough breathing and hooded eyes show just how close he was to coming.

I nod once and pull his boxer-briefs back over his straining cock, then zip him up, though it's a tight fit. It looks incredibly painful to be that hard and have to bury it behind your pants.

"What did I tell you?" the man who brought it up in the first place asks. "Nothing like it, is there?" There's a collective

murmuring from the others agreeing with him.

Phoenix pries his eyes away from me and glances behind me at the man for the first time since I started. “Indeed, there isn’t.”

“Well, I wouldn’t mind—”

The loud chime of a cell phone cuts off whatever he was starting to say, and I realize it’s Phoenix’s phone when he reaches into his pocket to answer it.

“Hello?”

“You know I’m in a meeting right now.”

“What’s wrong?”

A sigh.

“Alright. I’ll head back now.”

He hangs up and faces the men. “I’m sorry, there is an issue that I must address.”

“What’s going on?” his grandfather demands.

Phoenix pulls me to my feet before standing up himself and refastening his belt. “Don’t worry. I’ll take care of it. You’ve taught me well.” Then, turning to the others, he adds, “Gentlemen, it was a pleasure. Mark, call me tomorrow, and we can further discuss those plans.”

“I’ll do that—”

Mark is barely finished answering before Phoenix is tugging me along, and we’re heading back down the stairs and along the floor the way we came. He pulls me out the front door of

the building and into the sunshine. I have to squint to adjust to the light, but he doesn't stop until we're standing by the curb.

After Phoenix hands something to the man in a uniform and he's walked away, I lean into him to cover the fact that I'm talking to him. "How are we going to get back? That man took your car."

He looks down at me, brows pinched like he doesn't know what I'm talking about. Then his eyes make a sweep over my lips, lingering there for a moment before looking ahead again. I guess he's not going to bother answering me at all.

The sound of a car pulling up beside us catches my attention a minute later, and I see that it's Phoenix's car and the man who took it originally is driving it. Strange.

Without facing me, Phoenix tugs on my hand. "Let's go."

Chapter 26

Phoenix

I pull into my parking spot under Carsen Architecture, pushing my door open the second I've turned the car off, then round the hood to open Avery's door. I pull her along with urgent and hurried steps to the elevator.

Her eyes are wide and curious, wondering what might have happened and why we had to leave. I didn't talk to her along the drive. I *couldn't*. I just kept seeing those luscious lips of hers wrapped tight around my cock, sucking me.

I hadn't known exactly what a blow-job was when they asked me about it at the club, but I remembered it being in one of the videos I had gotten rid of before watching it when I was younger, so I knew it was something sexual.

Never did I expect it to feel like *that*. So incredible, like an accumulation of pleasure was being sucked right out of me.

Once we arrive in my office, Avery steps out ahead of me. "I hope it's nothing serious. I can go wait in the bathroom if

you'd like?"

This woman. So amenable sometimes, yet completely stubborn and difficult the rest of the time.

She continues walking toward the bathroom, but I stop her by gripping her around the throat and pulling her back so that she hits my front, her back to my chest.

Leaning down, I fill my lungs with a breath of her intoxicating scent, then murmur close to her ear. "You're not going anywhere."

She expels a gust of air, and I feel her swallow against my hand. "I thought you had something you needed to deal with right away?"

"I do." Using my hold on her neck, I push her down until she's on her knees and then step around until I'm in front of her. "Put me in your mouth again."

"What?"

She looks up at me, startled and confused, but there's also a touch of lust there, leftover from the club. She liked what she did to me as much as I did.

I start undoing my belt. "You need to finish what you started."

I've barely been holding myself together since she first touched me in that club. I've felt crazed and desperate for her, desperate for release, but there was no way that I wanted to lose control in front of the others. I didn't even want them to

witness what they did, but if I hadn't had her touch me, then she would have had to touch them.

Fuck that.

Desire replaces the confused expression on her face, and she reaches up to unzip me, licking her lips. I'm hot and buzzing all over, almost vibrating with need. I've been unbearably hard for over an hour now, and she's driving me crazy.

Despite the pounding in my chest, I softly caress her jaw and cheek while she looks up at me with those violet eyes and lowers my slacks and boxer-briefs.

Avery doesn't waste any time. She leans forward, breaking our eye contact, and wraps her lips around me, swirling her tongue around the tip.

"Fuck," I curse, my eyes almost rolling back.

She fits more and more of me in until I hit the back of her throat, forcing out another low groan.

I move my hand up from her jaw and into her hair, gathering it together to keep it out of the way. My hips start pumping, pushing my cock in and out of her mouth. I watch, enraptured, as her lips slide along my shaft, igniting a burning inferno inside me.

"You were keeping this talent from me?" I rasp through harsh breaths, and I'm gifted with another swirl of her tongue.

She then reaches up to grip my thighs, and I catch sight of the tattoos on both of her arms. All I can think is *mine, mine, mine*, as I thrust.

My beautiful woman.

Avery hums and the vibration against me sends euphoric bliss throughout my body. This won't take long. Nate was right about that.

Stuttered breaths, accompanied by grunts, pass through my throat.

“You're a good fucking girl, Avery,” I breathe out, almost deliriously. “So good. So mine.”

The sensations continue to build in my groin, growing stronger with every pump of my hips. Avery adds her hands to the mix, gripping the base of my cock with one, starting to slide it in unison with her mouth, and using the other to cup my balls, pushing me right to the edge.

But it's when she looks up at me when I'm as far in as I can go that I lose it.

I grip her hair tighter, holding her still while I pulse and spill down her throat with a guttural groan. My body floods with endorphins, taking away the stress from earlier and leaving me lightheaded.

But it only seems to scratch the surface of my needs right now. I'm still feeling restless and out of control, even after coming.

I withdraw from her mouth, release her hair, and grip under her arms to bring her to her feet. She's barely sucked in a breath before my mouth is crashing down on hers in a needy kiss. The tongue that was swirling around my cock a minute

ago is now tangling with my own. I can taste myself on her, but it's not the taste I'm craving right now.

“My turn,” I murmur against her lips.

Pulling back, I run my hand over her hair, smoothing out some of the mess I made of it. Her eyes almost swallow me whole with how wide and beautiful they look right now, waiting to see what I'll do next. I press another kiss to her lips and then guide her backward until her back hits the water flowing down the wall.

She squeals as the liquid starts running over her body, soaking her clothes and hair. “What are you doing?” she gasps.

I don't answer. Instead, I drop to my knees in front of her, landing in a pool of water collecting on the floor. I lift the hem of her dress, feeling almost feral in my desire. I've loved licking her taste off my fingers, but this time, I want it straight from the source.

“Phoenix?” she questions.

I briefly wonder whether this would be classed as normal behavior, seeing as it would technically benefit *her* the most and bring *her* pleasure, though I could argue who would enjoy it more.

Whether or not it's considered right, I don't really care.

I'm going to have my taste and enjoy the fuck out of it. I bury my nose in her panties, inhaling deeply. A gravelly sound rumbles from my chest, and I release the hem of her dress to rip her underwear off.

“Hold your dress up,” I order.

With the wet fabric out of the way, I push her legs further apart, then return my face to the apex between her thighs. The moment my tongue touches her, I turn wild. Licking, exploring, flicking her clit. I can't get enough.

Her slender hands release her dress to thread through my hair and tug at the strands instead. Mewls and whimpers pour from her mouth as I continue my greedy assault.

My face is soaked not only from her juices but the water trailing over her, and every thrash of her body sends more water spraying out around us. I don't give a shit.

Her pelvis tilts, pressing into me further and rubbing unashamedly, desperate for me as I am her.

I'm still hard from earlier, never really softening after the release in her mouth, and my pants are still open, so I grab hold of my cock and slowly stroke while I bring my other hand up to find her opening. She gasps and then moans as I push two fingers inside and then focus my tongue on her clit. After only a few seconds, I can feel her walls tightening around me, and it sends me into overdrive.

Pushing my fingers in and out, I press my tongue harder and stroke myself faster until I can hear those telltale sounds she makes when she's coming.

“Phoenix. Phoenix,” she chants as her cum coats my fingers and spills out onto my tongue, mixing with the water. I lap up everything I can.

But it's still not enough.

Pushing to my feet, I grip under her thighs and hoist her further up the wall, forcing her legs around my waist. Her breathing is still ragged, and she's barely come down from her orgasm when I push inside her again.

Her arms come around my neck, and she presses her lips to mine in a searing kiss, swirling her tongue with mine and nipping at my bottom lip. I let her have her way for a moment before reaching up and gripping her chin, forcing her face back so I can look at her.

"Do you see what you do to me?" I emphasize it with a hard thrust, her mouth forming an O and her eyes fluttering closed at the sensation before opening once more.

"I like what I do to you," she breathes out with a tilt of her lips.

I fuck her harder for it and tighten my grip on her chin. With every hard thrust of my hips, water splashes around us.

I never wanted this, never wanted to want her. And now here I am, fucking obsessed with this woman.

Leaning forward, I first capture her lips in a kiss, losing myself in the way hers feel against mine, then I move to her jaw and down to her neck, where I love to leave marks on the soft flesh. Her panting is heavy and fast in my ear, indicating she's close again.

Pulling back, I cup her cheeks so I can watch as she comes undone around me. After a handful of thrusts, her mouth drops

open and her muscles tighten. Her eyes want to close, but I want them on me.

“Keep your eyes open,” I whisper.

The fact that she obeys me stirs the fire burning inside my body.

Staring right at me with those unique orbs, she comes, and I come right along with her with gritted teeth and a groan resembling a growl. Pleasure consumes me as I fill her up, everything tensing before my muscles turn lax, finally feeling sated.

My hands slowly lower, drifting down her body until they’re resting against her thighs, still wrapped around me. I drop my forehead to her shoulder, catching my breath while the water runs over my head and cools me down.

We’re both completely soaked, and water has spread in every direction on the ground.

My head feels light, my body torn apart, but I also feel stable and completely whole. She twists me up and jumbles up everything I thought was my reality.

It’s like when you’re looking through a kaleidoscope, and all you have to do is turn it, merely a fraction, but the image is completely different.

Finally pulling out, I lower her to the ground and then reach to pull up my drenched pants and boxer-briefs, the feel of Avery’s eyes on me while she remains where she is.

“Shouldn’t you deal with whatever was wrong earlier?”

“I did,” I reply, straightening out her dress and grazing my knuckle against her cheek.

Walking back to my desk, I remove my wet suit jacket and drape it over the back of my chair, then remove my socks and shoes and push them to the side.

She follows me over, leaving her underwear on the ground, and I can see my cum dripping down the inside of her thigh as she approaches. Satisfaction washes over me at the sight of it.

“What do you mean?”

“There was no problem, at least not with work. I had Thomas call me with a fake emergency.” After taking a seat and seeing her brows pressed together, still trying to understand, I grab her hand and pull her closer to me, adding, “There was no way I was going to let them touch you, or you touch them. So I arranged with Thomas to call after a sufficient amount of time had passed to discuss business.”

Her eyes bounce between mine, the wheels turning as she thinks – something that has me completely riveted – and when it finally sinks in, her face transforms into a pout.

“You could have told me. I thought I would have to please them.”

My eyes darken at the thought of her pleasing another man, and I reach up to grip her chin, bringing it a little closer. “You are *my* woman, and you do what I say, not them.”

“No,” she stubbornly replies, knocking my hand from her chin, causing the side of my mouth to twitch at her tenacity. “I

do what *I* want to do.”

Stepping between my legs, she lifts her hands to my cheeks. They feel cool to the touch but soft and comforting.

“And I *wanted* to touch you,” she murmurs.

My chest tightens, those same overwhelming feelings rushing through me as I look at her. I don’t know what to do with it or what it means. I just know I feel attached to her in a way I never expected.

The fact that she’s a WOUN only adds to the bizarreness of this situation because I know that if she weren’t, we wouldn’t be here right now – with her cradling my face and looking at me with so much emotion and personality swimming in those eyes.

“What would have happened if he didn’t call in time?” she asks after a beat.

I dismiss that thought immediately, not wanting to think of any other outcome.

“I would have figured something out.”

Seeming to accept that response, she bobs her head with a small nod.

As I watch her glance off to the side in thought, I notice a slight shiver travel through her body, and goosebumps trail the length of her arms. This time, it’s not because of a reaction to something I’ve done. She’s cold from the soaked clothing and air conditioning in here.

I lean over my desk to pick up the phone, causing her hands to drop from my face, and press the button to page Thomas. “You’re back,” he says through the line.

“Find us some towels.”

“Towels?” he questions, the sound of paper shuffling in the background. “What do you need towels for?”

“If you needed to know, I would have told you.”

He sighs. “Okay, well, I’m not sure where I’ll find any.”

“Check the gym on the eleventh floor,” I tell him, rubbing a hand up Avery’s arm. “Oh, and bring a mop as well.”

“Wait. There’s actually a gym h—” I hang up before he can finish the question and start rubbing both of her arms.

“Will your grandfather be displeased with you for leaving?” Avery asks.

“Probably. He’ll no doubt come to my office as soon as he’s back,” I answer, turning her arms so I can see the tattoos. “But I don’t give a shit.”

Chapter 27

Avery.

Two hours later, his grandfather still hasn't shown up to confront him, which I am grateful for. I'm now completely dry and warm, sitting in the sun on the couch with a pen and paper that Phoenix gave me while he's been busy at his desk, occasionally glancing my way.

I've been taking advantage of his attention mostly being on his laptop. I can't seem to stop looking at him, watching when the crevice between his brows gets deeper when he's concentrating, tracing his perfectly cut jawline and lips, and then how his face appears to relax when something is going right for him on the screen. His dark hair is dry now and has been combed through with his fingers. And mine.

He's a very handsome man, and I can't even credit it all to the symmetry of his face.

I'm not sure which version of him I like better. The one right now who is calm and serious and bosses me around, causing

me to retaliate by pressing his buttons, or the wild and out-of-control man who is passionate and has sex with me against a wall covered in water.

I don't think Thomas knew what to make of the scene when he turned up with the towels and a mop earlier. He glanced from me in Phoenix's lap to Phoenix – both of us soaking wet – and then to the messy ground and back at us again. He placed the towels down on the desk and said, "I'm just going to leave these here." Then he started mopping the floor, pushing my underwear to the side using the mop, and left without another word.

I turn my attention to the paper in my hand and the not-so-neat words written on it. I was initially practicing my words by writing simple sentences about my day. Then I switched to drawing, and since I was looking at Phoenix so much, I decided to draw him. I think I did a pretty good job.

I also have the sheet of paper that Phoenix filled out before he picked me so that if someone enters his office, I can place it on top, and it will simply look as if I'm studying it to serve him better.

That proves to be a good decision when, not even two minutes later, there's a knock before the door opens, and Phoenix's father, Allard, is walking in. I quickly put the sheet on top seconds before he glances at me, his gaze lingering for a second before swinging to Phoenix.

I'm not sure what to think of him. He kept talking to me on the dance floor the night of the gala. His eyes, two shades a

darker gray than Phoenix's, would watch me closely after every question he'd ask. I tried to keep my answers as simple as possible with a vacant look on my face, but it still seemed as if he were suspicious of me being a WOUN.

Allard sits in one of the chairs opposite Phoenix and lifts his ankle to rest on the knee of his other leg.

"How did the meeting go?"

"It went as well as expected," Phoenix answers, moving away from his laptop and shuffling some folders on his desk. "I'll be handling all of Anderson's projects from now on."

My being seated behind Allard allows me the opportunity to watch their interaction freely, though I can only see the expression on Phoenix's face and not Allard's.

"That's great, son." I see him tap the side of his chair. "And the problem?"

"The problem?" I see the moment when the realization hits Phoenix. "He called you."

My eyes swing to the back of Allard's head. "He did. He told me you refused to share your woman at the beginning, and then you said there was a problem and had to leave."

I can see the irritation on Phoenix's face growing. I've been the recipient of it many times.

"I did not refuse. I simply said that he could have her after I was done. If it were up to me, I would have left her home since we were there for business."

His father lets out a frustrated sigh. “It’s more so common with men of our stature, the sharing thing, that is. It’s seen as a favor and sign of respect between men. But it’s only done when they haven’t had a child yet, which is why your woman is important right now. It’s the normal way of things, so it could be seen as disrespect when you refuse them like that.”

“I disagree. They should respect me as a businessman because of who I am, and if I want to use my woman first, seeing as she was *my* privilege, not theirs, then I will. It should only further solidify my status and determination since I will not be pressured by some old fool who is desperate to be pleased by her.”

It’s silent for a moment as Allard shakes his head. I can only imagine what type of thoughts must be circulating through either of their minds right now. I can’t say I love being talked about like I’m nothing more than an object, but it’s nothing new, and in this case, it’s even necessary for Phoenix to do it.

“Not everyone will see it that way,” Allard responds. “Your grandfather included. You know he cares a great deal about this family’s image.”

Phoenix’s eyes drop to his desk at those words. “I understand that.”

“And the problem you rushed out for?”

I watch as Phoenix lifts his gaze, and his eyes connect with mine for the briefest moment, causing my body to tense from my spot on the couch. I don’t think he meant to look at me, and hopefully, his father doesn’t read anything into it.

He waves his hand dismissively. “It was nothing. Just a panicked client of mine overreacting.”

Allard turns his head to the side, almost side-eyeing in my direction.

“And how are things with Avery?”

I shift my gaze to the sheets clenched in my hand. I don’t know why I’m more nervous now than I was at the club with several men there. Maybe it’s the way he looks at me like he’s trying to see past my carefully placed mask.

Maybe he knows or is, at the very least, suspicious of me.

“She’s proving to be quite a useful companion,” Phoenix answers casually.

“Good. Good. And there is nothing out of the ordinary with her? Nothing you haven’t mentioned?”

I peek up at Phoenix to watch his reaction but still keep my head lowered. His brows pinch together in a good imitation of a confused person.

“What do you mean out of the ordinary? She does whatever I want, whenever I want it.”

“Nothing. Never mind.” Allard pushes to his feet, and I quickly flick my eyes to the sheet in front of me again, a pleasant half-smile pasted on my face. “Your grandfather will probably pay a visit to you this afternoon. He had a couple of other meetings today. Perhaps you can convince him that your reasoning is valid.”

I don't look up again until Allard walks out of the office and closes the door behind him. Then, although it has been a stressful couple of minutes, I rise to my feet and cross my arms.

"I do whatever you want, whenever you want it?" I ask, a brow raised in question.

His eyes glitter with what I feel is amusement. "You know I had to say that. Now, come here."

"No." I tilt my chin, standing my ground.

"*Avery.*"

My body shivers at how my name sounds, rolling off his tongue with such a sensual baritone. I'm torn between going over to him because I actually want to be close to him and simply resisting because he told me to do it.

I take a single step, unable to hold myself back. And then, when I see the spark of enjoyment flash across his face, it leads me the rest of the way.

The second I'm within arms reach, he's pulling me to him, connecting our mouths in a passionate kiss, spearing his fingers into my hair and tilting his head. He brushes his tongue against mine before sucking on it and nibbling on my lip.

"Do you think he suspects me?" I ask after pulling back, my concerns from a few minutes ago resurfacing.

Phoenix trails those gray eyes over my face as if taking in every detail. "I don't think so. Maybe just keeping an eye out for me."

I nod against his hold on my hair. If he's not worried about it, then I feel somewhat better.



A short while later, I'm still perched on Phoenix's lap while he's working on his laptop. I tried to get up, but he held on tighter and kissed my shoulder. So, I picked up a pen and started drawing again, happily settling back.

The desk phone beeps, and Phoenix shifts to answer it while I finish up the abstract image in front of me.

“Yes?”

“I'll be right in.”

He hangs up with a sigh and nudges me to stand. “My grandfather wants to see me in his office. Wait here. I'll be right back.”

“Okay.”

I watch as he walks to the door, anxiety starting to swim in my stomach. I don't want him to get into trouble. I know he's risking a lot because of me.

Right before he opens the door, he angles his head over his shoulder to catch my gaze. “Don't worry. It will be alright.”

He must have heard the concern in my voice, and I appreciate the reassurance from him.

“Okay,” I repeat, smiling at him for real this time, and then I watch as his eyes drop to my lips. After a lingering look, he walks out of the office and closes the door.

I wander over to the large windows to look out at the city, tapping my hands on my thighs as I go. We’re up so high that glancing down at the street below has my stomach feeling queasy. It’s amazing that Phoenix designs buildings like this.

I lift my hand to trace along the top of the cityscape with my finger on the glass, hearing the door open again a moment later. “That was quick. Did you miss me?” I smirk as I continue my tracing. “I was thinking. It would be nice if you had a piano in here for me to play. Then I would never get bored.”

“Umm. What?”

My body goes stone-still at the sound of someone else’s voice who is *not* Phoenix, and my heart jumps right into my throat so that the air gets trapped in my lungs. Slowly dropping my hand from the window, I close my eyes, quickly inhaling a breath past the constriction before altering the expression on my face and turning around.

Thomas stands there, his mouth parted, folder in one hand and a note in the other. A look of disbelief remains on his face as he stares at me for what feels like hours but is mere seconds.

I try to keep my eyes blank and expression neutral, but I’m sure he can see how rigid my body has gone and the panic that has my heart beating out of control. Even if he’s had no other

contact with women, he would know a normal one wouldn't say any of the things I just did.

“What did you just say?” he asks as if I'll repeat it.

I remain silent, tilting my head as if I don't understand why he's asking.

“Actually, I know what you said. I don't know why I asked.”

When I still don't say anything, he glances over his shoulder at the open door, then turns around and takes a step closer to me.

“You're a ... you're a WOUN, aren't you?” he asks in a hushed voice.

Instead of answering, I ring my hands together behind my back and ask, “Can I help you with anything?”

My tone is sweet and steady, but I can see he's not buying it. I watch as he pulls his bottom lip in and chews on it, contemplating.

We're in the same sort of stand-off as when Phoenix caught me, facing each other, several feet apart, with me not answering.

Only, I'm far more terrified this time than I was with Phoenix. Despite the constant avoidance, there was always something that made me feel safe around him, and maybe deep down I never truly believed he'd turn me in.

It's different with Thomas. While I don't believe he's a bad person, I don't know him at all and haven't spent any extended

periods of time with him. Plus, I'm not his woman.

Besides that, if anyone finds out that Phoenix knew and didn't turn me in, he will be punished for it as well.

"You thought you were talking to him, so he must know," Thomas says, breaking the silence and nodding to himself. It's as if he heard my thoughts.

Panic reaches up from my stomach and wraps around my throat, forcing my feet forward.

"Please don't tell them he knew," I beg, stopping right in front of him. "You can say you found out but that he had no idea. *Please.*"

Chapter 28

Phoenix

I step out of my grandfather's office with a promise to make sure Anderson's projects go as smoothly as possible, along with a sigh of frustration. He's too stubborn to see things from my point of view, and no doubt he'll press the same matter again sometime soon.

I am grateful, however, that he thinks I'm just 'throwing around my new-found power' rather than acting abnormally or trying to hide something. My father is the one that concerns me. I can never tell what he's thinking with his closed-off expressions. But I didn't want to let Avery know that.

I'll just have to devise a reason for not bringing her along with me to meetings. I'm sure Jonah will most likely kick up a fuss about it.

He had complained some more to my grandfather after I left, but I suspect his problems are jealousy-induced rather than anything else. And I don't really give a shit about him.

Thomas isn't at his desk when I approach, and my brows furrow until I remember he was going to go to one of the lower levels for a folder. But then I see that the door to my office – that I had definitely left closed – is now open as well.

My strides suddenly pick up, along with my heart rate, and I charge through the open door.

As soon as I step in and see the looks on their faces, my muscles tighten considerably, and a strange sense of dread washes over me – fear of losing her.

He knows.

I look to Avery, wondering how this could have happened. Her close proximity to Thomas is unsettling, but it's the sheer worry on her face that has a surge of protectiveness over her rushing through me, and I know that I will do whatever is necessary to keep her safe.

First, I need to assess the situation.

“What's going on?” I ask.

Lifting his hand, Thomas scratches at his neck. “Um. What's the punishment for not reporting a WOUN?” he asks, looking at the ground and avoiding eye contact with me.

Fuck. I release a slow breath, trying to control my words and actions.

“I'm not sure. Imprisonment, maybe.”

Thomas nods, absorbing what I said while he continues staring at the apparently interesting section of the floor.

The gentle flow of water trickling down the wall is a trick, giving an illusion of calmness in the room when it is anything but.

Finally, his golden-brown eyes land on me. “You’ve been the only person to truly give me a chance. You’ve done so much for me and never take credit for it; never ask for anything in return.” Straightening his shoulders, he adds, “Fuck it. I’m not going to say anything.”

I nudge the door to my office closed and return my attention to him, the knots in my stomach slowly starting to untangle.

“This isn’t something to be taken lightly, Thomas,” I point out.

“I know. I’ve made my decision.”

Crossing my arms, I stare him down, checking for any sign of deceit or uncertainty. “I need you to be sure.”

“As I said, I made my decision.”

“Then you better make sure you keep your mouth shut. No accidental slip-ups.”

“The way I see it,” he says, looking back and forth between me and Avery. “I didn’t see or hear anything to mention.”

I dip my chin at him. “I appreciate it.”

He turns and starts walking out but then stops a few feet from the door. “But seriously, how the fuck did this happen? Like, did you know when you got her?”

“Thomas,” I warn.

“Right, sorry.” He lifts his hands, palms face out. “Didn’t see anything.”

As soon as he’s gone, I jab my fingers into my hair and make my way to Avery.

“Fuck.”

Wrapping an arm around her waist, I pull her tight against me, letting her body calm me. She hasn’t said a word since I entered the room and still looks slightly terrified.

“I’m sorry,” she whispers. “I thought he was you. He didn’t knock, so I assumed, and I didn’t look before I started speaking. I’m sorry.”

I tilt her chin up to face me. “He knew I wasn’t in here, so there was no reason to knock. Just be aware of that now.”

She nods, her eyes drifting close. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay. Look at me.” I gently jerk her chin, and those big, beautiful eyes stare up at me. “I believe Thomas when he says he won’t mention it. It’ll be okay.”

“It just hit me how much you’re risking for me. I don’t know why now, all of a sudden.”

“It’ll be alright.” I lean down and kiss her lips, my body relaxing at the feel of her in my arms. “But I think maybe after the events of today, you should stay away from here for a while.”

For once, she doesn’t argue with me and simply nods in agreement.

Stepping inside my apartment, I watch as Avery slides off her sandals and starts walking across the foyer without a word. She still hasn't returned to her usual self, and I don't like it one bit.

Following behind at a distance, I try to think of something to take her mind off of things, perhaps ease some of the tension. I want to see her happy. I want that gorgeous smile of hers to return and have her feistiness back.

Yes, it was a close call today, but I trust Thomas to keep his word.

Twenty minutes later, I find Avery at the piano playing my favorite piece, the one with no name. Coming up behind her, I rest my palms on her shoulders and watch as her fingers glide across the keys while she finishes the final notes. Her movements are fluid and graceful, and it has me mesmerized every time.

"Come with me," I tell her after she's played the final note.

Rising to her feet, she turns to face me, tilting her chin. She blinks, and I'm relieved to find that shimmer of defiance that had dimmed over the last hour looking back at me.

"What for?"

Without warning, I scoop her up and throw her over my shoulder, and the sound of her squeal fills the air.

"What are you doing?" she shrieks.

Avery grips tight around my waist from her position upside-down, and lets out another little squeal when I begin moving.

I ignore the question, knowing it will only rile her up further, and walk across the room and down the hallway toward my bedroom, then finally into my bathroom. The whole time, Avery demands to know what I'm doing and where I'm taking her.

Bringing her upright, I slide her down my body until she's steady on her feet. I can see from the fire lit in her eyes that she's about to chastise me somehow. But then her gaze catches on the area around us, and she remains silent, choosing to look around instead.

“You did this for me?”

I gesture to the bath after a single nod. “Get in while it's still hot.”

Wordlessly, she begins undressing, and I don't hold back from watching every second of it. It's a far cry from mere weeks ago when I'd force myself to avert my eyes whenever I saw a sliver of her skin and enjoyed it.

She's sexy and voluptuous. A dream I didn't know I had.

Right before stepping in, she glances at me over her shoulder, noticing I haven't moved an inch from where I put her down.

“Are you not joining me?”

“Do you want me to?”

Walking back over to me, her hands lift to play with the top button of my shirt before she pops it through the hole.

“Yes.”

She moves to the next one and the one after. I let her continue with each one until my whole shirt is unbuttoned and sliding off my shoulders. My belt is next, but once she has it opened, she steps backward toward the bath, leaving me to take my pants off.

With my eyes fixed on hers, I undo the button, slide down the zipper, and let them drop to the floor. Then, slowly, I walk toward her. She only drops her eyes to my erection once before returning to my face, but I don't miss the lust that flashes in her violet eyes.

I step into the hot water and settle at one end, indicating for her to sit in front of me, leaning her back against my chest. The bubbles move this way and that with the disturbed water, but once we're both settled, they crowd in, clinging to our skin.

Avery watches a couple of the candles lining the counter, gently caressing my thigh under the water.

“I've never had a bath before. It's always only been showers.”

“Really?”

It's another reminder of the world we live in. One where she grew up hidden, not only behind walls but also hidden behind a fake exterior. She lived a strictly structured life based around learning to please a man, while I grew up with my father,

grandfather, and other relatives, along with the prospect of working for my family.

What would happen if WOUNs were to be set free?

What would happen if they lived a life just like a man?

I admit that it's something I simply cannot fathom because I don't have enough experience with other women, let alone other WOUNs.

I reach for the washcloth and dip it into the water.

“How many others like you were at the facility that you know of?”

“I only knew the ones in my wing. When I left, there were three others, all younger than me. Two others were picked before I was, and another one was found out, then changed.”

My hand freezes on its path down her arm. Shit. That's a lot more than I imagined, and that was only in her wing. I'm sure there would be more in the other sections and in other facilities.

Just how many are out there living secretly?

I continue rubbing the cloth over her, cleaning where I can reach, and then I urge her to sit forward so I can do her back. Gathering her hair in my hand, I lift it up and wash her back, moving in slow, circular movements.

Avery shifts her body, trying to look at me over her shoulder. “Why didn't you have sex with me in the beginning when that's what I was for? Why did you resist all that time?”

I glance up from her back and trace my eyes over her full lips. “At first, it was because I didn’t want the type of woman I expected you to be.” Still washing her back, I add, “But then it was because I knew it would be like this once I finally gave in. Once I stopped fighting it.”

She idly runs her finger over the edge of the tub, still looking at me. “Like what?”

“You’ve taken over my thoughts, Avery. Every waking moment is spent thinking about you. You have the power to control my actions, and you can easily alter my moods.” I lift my gaze from her lips to her eyes, gripping her hair tighter. “I’m obsessed.”

Her breath hitches as her mouth parts on an inhale. “I just assumed you didn’t really want me.”

“I didn’t *want* to want you. But I’ve been intrigued by you from the very beginning,” I admit.

The expression on her face turns thoughtful, her head tilting to the side as her eyes drop to my chest. The candles around us cause a soft glow to kiss her skin and accentuate her exquisite features.

Twisting a little further, she places her hand where her eyes are resting. “I have these feelings. They gather in this spot here.” She presses lightly on my chest. “And they only grow when you’re around.”

I release her hair, gliding my hand down her arm until it fully encloses hers.

“And does it sometimes feel like all the air in your lungs is gone?”

“Yes.” Twisting around fully, she moves until she’s straddling me, both her hands now pressed against my chest. “Do I make you feel that way?”

“You make me feel a lot of things.”

Digging my fingers into her flesh, I push her down to grind along my cock. You would think, after already coming twice today, that I wouldn’t be as easily turned on by her. But that doesn’t appear to be the case.

A visible shiver passes through her body as she begins rubbing herself on my hard length, the water around us sloshing over the edge as she picks up momentum.

Her reactions to me are addicting.

Maybe because I never expected her to have any reaction at all. Now, I watch for them, observe when and how she does things, and then keep that information stored away.

Leaning forward, I draw a nipple into my mouth, sucking before using my teeth to bite down on it.

A soft moan, followed by her fingers digging into my shoulders; she likes it.

I do it again, lavishing her other with just as much attention, and then trail my lips up until I’m in the crook of her neck, then I suck.

“Phoenix,” she whimpers.

My name murmured from her lips is like my favorite treat. I want to hear it screamed and whispered, moaned, and even muttered in anger. I want to hear it again and again.

I leave her neck, pressing open-mouthed kisses all the way up until I land on her mouth, kissing her deeply.

Feather-light touches tickle my chest where her hands are still placed. Then I feel her fingers tighten around my nipples, and she squeezes.

A grunt passes through my mouth and into hers.

She pulls back, her eyes lit with desire and looking pleased that she found another thing I like. With her eyes locked on me, she squeezes my nipples again. My cock jerks, hard and desperate to be inside her.

I'm ready to devour her and take her again, but just as I lift my hands to grip her cheeks, her head arches back.

“Do you trust me?” she whispers. One of my eyebrows rises in question, curious as to why she's asking. “Do you trust me to make you feel good? Will you give me the control?”

Though my blood sizzles and a thrill shoots through me at her words, I can't imagine not having control and taking charge. I try to kiss her again, but this time, she pushes at my chest.

“Just trust me.”

That damn pleading look does me in. I can't deny her when she's looking at me like that.

It takes effort, but I relax back, letting her push me to recline against the tub again, a pleased smile curving her lips. I rest my hands on her thighs, and I have to stop myself from pushing her back and forth over me.

Her touch is sensual as she glides her hands over my chest first and then to other parts of my body. Impatience grows with every pass of her hands on me while I simultaneously enjoy every second of it.

Finally, gripping me in her hand, she lifts and then positions me at her opening. A heavy breath passes through her lips as she slides down, and I grit my teeth at the sensation.

Once fully seated, she rocks her hips back and forth, her hands placed on my chest for stability. I dig into the flesh of her thighs, trying hard not to take over. It's not that she's not doing a fucking fantastic job, and I'm not on a fast track to pure ecstasy, but that compulsion in me to take charge is ever present.

She rocks faster, leaning in to kiss me and nibble at my lips. I groan into her mouth, my restraint almost slipping.

This woman has such a hold on me. And she's a WOUN of all people.

Avery begins lifting at the same time she swivels her hips, and I about lose it.

“Fuck, that feels good.”

She smiles, giving me a look that tells me she already knew it would but is pleased nonetheless. Then she moves faster,

harder.

Pleasure floods my groin, tingles spreading out from the area. Her nails press into the skin of my chest, and her muscles tighten around me at the same time.

With her head thrown back, moaning loudly, she comes.

That has the very thin string that was holding me back snapping. The second she comes down from her high, I thrust hard up into her, taking hold of her breasts and squeezing them. The vision of her bouncing on my cock will remain in the forefront of my mind for a long time. Reaching up, I press on her shoulders, pushing them down at the same time I rut into her, trying to get deeper.

One of Avery's hands disappears behind her, and in the next second, I feel her probing me in an area I didn't think could feel good. She does nothing more than press the area, but it somehow intensifies all the feelings building.

Each thrust has the pressure of her finger increasing, and since I was already on the verge of coming, it only takes a few more pumps before the combined sensations overwhelm me, and I release inside her with a loud groan vibrating through my throat.

Dropping my head back, I suck in deep breaths, trying to come down from the extreme orgasm I just had. *Shit*. I feel Avery's head drop to my shoulder, but I'm too exhausted to wrap my arms around her.

“We made a mess with the water again,” she mumbles, amusement in her voice.

A grunt is all I manage to get out in response.

At least I know she is successfully distracted from the events from today.

Chapter 29

Avery.

“Are you really not going to tell me where we’re going?”

This isn’t the first time, nor do I think it’ll be the last time Phoenix decides to keep his mouth shut when I want to know what we’re doing. I think he gets enjoyment out of leaving me in the dark. No doubt some sort of power trip for him.

I huff out a breath and cross my arms, turning to look out the window when all he does is glance at me with his eyes alight and the tiniest hint of a smirk on his beautiful lips. I don’t think other people would even be able to tell that he’s smiling.

I trust him with my life, so it’s not worrying about where we’re going. I just wanted to know.

He came home after work and saw me drawing the city skyline from my seat on the floor by the large windows. After kissing my cheek and taking a good look at my sketch, he walked off into his bedroom and then returned without his suit

jacket and tie. His dress shirt sleeves were rolled up, and clutched in his hand was a light cardigan for me.

Before holding his hand out and offering me the cardigan, all he said was, “Let’s go. You’ve been stuck inside for a couple of days.”

I was eager to get out of the penthouse, so of course, I grabbed the cardigan, took his hand, and let him lead me out with a genuine smile on my face.

But not without asking where we were going more than once.

Staring out the window, I don’t actually take anything in until we seem to be going up a hill, then I refocus, looking back the way we came and then forward again. I was too busy pouting to even pay attention to when we stopped being surrounded by buildings.

Leaning forward, I watch the scenery as we make our way up some sort of mountain. After a bit of winding, we come to a stop, and my eyes widen at the view I can see.

I almost don’t wait for Phoenix to open my door, and then I quickly push my way out when he does. Thankfully, apart from a few cars parked here, the area seems to be free of other people, though I’m surprised there aren’t hundreds of others taking in the same thing I am.

The sun hasn’t set yet, so the sky is painted in several different colors of orange, pink, purple, and blue as it slowly

reaches the horizon. Many of the buildings have their lights on already, causing it to look like a sea of twinkle lights.

“This is beautiful,” I murmur, staring out at the view with wonder.

I can see the whole world from up here.

“Come on.” Phoenix places an arm around my waist and guides me to walk up a pathway to an even higher view.

We pass by a few young men on the trail, each of their gazes lingering on me until we’re out of view, and then come to a stop at an empty area.

“This place is called Twin Peaks. I haven’t been here in a few years, but I used to come up here often.” Phoenix sits on the ground and pulls me to sit between his legs. “You once asked if I liked what I do. I always knew that I’d be working for my family, but it wasn’t until one time I was up here, looking out at the city, taking in the different styles and designs of the buildings, that I truly *wanted* to do it. I wanted to create something that people would marvel at. Something that would stand out.”

I snuggle into his embrace, my eyes dancing from building to building, trying to see them through his eyes.

“I peeked at what you were working on the last day I was at your office. I think whatever it is will be amazing.”

It was nothing like the one I saw in his home office. That one was still good, but it looked quite square and plain compared to the one I saw at his workplace.

I feel his chest rise and fall against my back with a heavy sigh.

“What are we going to do with you?” he quietly questions after a moment.

It doesn't sound like he's actually asking me, so I don't answer. Besides, I have no idea what to say.

This is the best type of life I could ever hope for. I was picked by a man who I enjoy being around more than anything. A man who makes me experience an array of feelings when I'm close to him and even when I'm not. A man who makes my heart beat faster at the mere sight of him. I don't need to act when I'm around him except for when we're in public. And he's determined to keep my secret safe, keep *me* safe.

It really is the best-case scenario.

But of course, there is still a part of me that wants more. It's a part that wonders what it'd be like to walk around on my own, or work somewhere like Phoenix.

What would it be like to have a real conversation with other men, or even casually with other WOUNs, not whispering behind closed doors?

What would it be like to have options in life?

But, that isn't the life I was born into.

Sighing, I pluck a blade of grass from the ground and twist it in my fingers, then tilt my head to look up at him, noting the serene look on his face. He doesn't seem stressed or concerned

about how this is going to work. Perhaps his question had a different meaning.

Whatever the case, even if I had options, I'd still choose him.

“Do you feel like acting some more tonight?” he asks, still looking out at the city.

“Why?”

Those gray eyes with a mixture of dark and light turn to me, running over my face.

“We can watch the sunset and then head back into the city. I'll take you to a bar where we can sit in privacy.”

My brows rise, lips curving into a smile. “Wow, you actually told me where we'd be going?”

“I can be generous sometimes.”

A soft chuckle leaves my lips, and I push against him playfully. “Well, you know I had planned on acting my whole life. What's a few hours?”

His eyes snag onto my lips, looking at them with an intensity I've come to know from him. Dipping down, he goes to kiss me, but the sound of footsteps on the path nearby has my face turning blank and my smile empty. He pauses the second he sees the change.

Once he clues in on the footsteps as well, he continues forward with his kiss, but it's much less passionate than I'm sure it was going to be.



“Besides the color of your clothing, is there a color you like best?” he asks, twirling a strand of my hair around his finger.

“A color?” I run my fingers back and forth on the table, thinking. “I like them all, but I think orange is the most appealing.” Tilting my head to look at him, I ask, “What about you?”

He remains staring at the piece of hair between his fingers. “Blue.”

We’re tucked away in a cozy booth in the dim part of the VIP section of this place Phoenix brought us to, now waiting for some food and drinks that he ordered for us a moment ago. He’s been asking me random questions, much like he has since the first day he found out I’m a WOUN.

A few other men are in here, sitting in their own booths, but they can’t see us from where they are. Still, I’ve been trying to keep my face blank and not appear as if I’m talking a lot.

“I was thinking,” I say softly after another quick glance around us. “Maybe I could come with you tomorrow?”

It’s been a week since I accompanied Phoenix to work. Surely, if Thomas had planned on reporting anything, he would have done it by now. I think Phoenix has been feeling guilty for leaving me at home all day, and that’s no doubt the reason for our trip up the mountain and then the stop here. It’s

kind of funny, considering he had no problem leaving me at home not all that long ago.

“I don’t think that’s a good idea.” He reaches for his water and takes a sip before resting his hand on my thigh. “I have a couple of meetings both at the office and out of it. I don’t want you present for either.”

Disappointment has my shoulders sagging. I understand. I do. But it still doesn’t change how my stomach drops a little lower, knowing I’ll be spending the day by myself in the penthouse again.

“I’ll get you some more sketch pads, some paints, whatever the fuck you want to keep you occupied at home,” Phoenix says just before the waiter brings our drinks to the table.

“Thank you,” I quietly murmur after he’s gone again, keeping my face neutral.

“And I’ll get another music book so you have more piano pieces to learn,” he continues on, his hand wandering up and down my leg.

My lips pull up into a small smile. I know he’s trying to make me happy, and I appreciate that.

Glancing up at him, I catch the way he’s watching me, intense as always, but it’s mixed with something soft and tender.

“What?” I question.

He shakes his head. “Nothing. Taste your drink.”

“And what if I don’t like it?” I lift my glass to my nose, trying to decipher the smell.

“Then I’ll kiss that mouth of yours, sucking the flavor from your tongue until the only thing you taste is me.”

The hand holding my glass halts just as the rim touches my lips. Heat swims through me, collecting as a blush on my cheeks and a pool of moisture between my legs.

I’ve never found it hard to be sexually aroused by him, but it seems to get even easier with every passing day, knowing exactly what he can do to me. All he has to do is look at me like he is now, and my body feels like melting into him.

With my eyes on him, I take a sip, swallowing down the interesting drink, then go back for another mouthful, holding it on my tongue and swishing it about before swallowing. It has a spice and bitterness to it that I’m not used to, but I like it.

“I don’t like it.”

A mere second later, his mouth is crashing onto mine with a gentle force, making good on his promise to take away every other taste until all that’s left is him. He swallows my moans, his soft tongue sweeping into my mouth as his rough stubble rubs against me.

I sometimes wonder if this is how other couples kiss.

Whether their kisses are as heady and consuming as ours always seem to be or if it’s a result of me being different.

I wonder whether they find it hard to stop once they’ve started.

Twisting slightly, I bring a hand up to rest on his chest. The rapid beat of his heart flutters against my palm, telling me how much I affect him as well.

Fingers graze up the side of my neck and then brush along my cheek until he's cupping it in his large hand, then he's angling my head, allowing himself better access. I let out a full-body shiver when his teeth sink into my lip, and I involuntarily try to press into him.

I'm on the verge of straddling him when he pulls back, the hint of a smile playing on his lips as he peers down at me.

I narrow my eyes in return. He likes to tease and torture me.

But he should know that it only has me wanting to do the same.

I mimic placing a hand on his thigh. Only I run mine all the way up so that it caresses the side of his hard bulge and then down again.

"*Avery*," he warns.

I repeat the motion, all while holding his gaze, pressing harder against him, then cupping him, just enough to tease but not enough to give him any relief.

A strained grunt slips through his lips as his eyes darken, but then he's gripping my wrist.

"You keep doing that, and I'm going to bend you over this table and fuck you until you come. Then I'll make you taste yourself while choking on my cock."

The image he painted has my heart rate increasing and my breath stuttering on its way in. Lifting my chin, I continue running my hand over him.

“I happen to like it when you lose control.”

He makes a noise that sounds like it scraped through his throat, then reaches up to wrap his long fingers around my neck. His mouth drops to mine next, but a clearing of a throat from the other side of me immediately halts his movements.

My blood runs cold, frozen much like it was when Thomas had caught me. *Oh no.*

Did he hear what I said a moment ago? Before that? Was he watching us?

“Phoenix, I didn’t realize you came to this place.”

The voice sounds familiar, but I can’t think of who it belongs to. I’m still sitting angled toward Phoenix with my back to whoever it is.

Releasing my neck, Phoenix straightens and picks up his glass, his face not revealing anything – a picture of calm.

“I’ve been coming here for a while now.”

“Ah, yes. No doubt another privilege received due to your grandfather, just like this ... woman.”

The way he pauses before saying “*woman*” has me thinking he most likely heard something. And I know where I’ve heard that voice now. He was one of the men from the meeting

Phoenix brought me to, Jonah, the unfriendly one who wanted a closer look at me.

“Anything I’ve gotten has been earned for myself,” Phoenix calmly replies, then lifts his drink to his lips, but I can hear the irritation growing in his voice.

I don’t turn around. A normal woman would continue what she was doing unless she was told to stop. My hand is still on Phoenix’s crotch, and despite it being out of view of Jonah, I still rub over it, only with a lighter touch and less enthusiasm than before.

“Of course. Well, anyway, I saw you and thought I would come say hello. Don’t forget, if you ever want to buy some waterfront property, you let me know.” The breath stalls in my lungs when I feel his hand land on my shoulder, and I watch as Phoenix’s face fills with barely contained rage. “It’s a pity I didn’t get to have you choke on *my* cock. Catch you later, Phoenix.”

And with that sentence lingering in the air, he’s gone. It’s obvious he heard what Phoenix said, but whether or not he heard or saw more is unknown.

I look to Phoenix for reassurance, my eyes round and filled with concern, but he offers none. With flared nostrils, he reaches for my hand, holding it tight within his grasp as if Jonah could take me away from him.

“Let’s go. I’ll have them pack our food to take home.”

“Okay,” I reply quietly. “Do you think he heard me?”

I spent *years* hiding what I was in front of the men at the facility, but lately, I've been taking risks, getting too comfortable with Phoenix, and becoming lax. I need to be more careful, especially if I want to be able to leave the penthouse again.

His jaw muscle pops, and it's clear he's clenching his teeth together. "I'm not sure."

My stomach remains in knots that are hard to unravel as we drive home. They only begin to loosen as we sit eating dinner together.

But it's not until after the third orgasm, I think, that they finally come undone.

Phoenix was a little more savage than usual, with each thrust being harder, each grip tighter, and each kiss deeper. I'm not sure whether it was from the possibility of Jonah hearing both of us or the fact that he touched me and said what he did. Perhaps it was a mixture of both.

Either way, as I lay wrapped up in Phoenix's arms in bed, our breaths still coming out in short bursts and limbs glistening with sweat, I feel safe.

But deep down, there's a lingering feeling that this isn't over yet.

Chapter 30

Phoenix

With the smallest swivel of my wrist, I check my watch for the third time in the last half an hour, trying not to tap my fingers on the desk. This meeting has run a little longer than anticipated, and I'm eager to be done.

Ken finally finishes talking and gets to his feet. "Well, I better let you go. I wanted to fit in an afternoon nap with Steff before dinner. I'm looking forward to seeing the museum when it's complete."

I'm on my feet in the next second, ready to shake his hand and bid him farewell. "Yes. We'll speak again soon."

The second he's out the door, I'm clicking on the app to try and see Avery. I scan the screen, but she's still not visible. My eyebrows dip together. It's been several hours now of not seeing her.

The fact that I've been watching her daily for the past couple of weeks could be considered a little obsessive by some, but

I'm just as fascinated by her now as I was when I first found out what she was. I quite enjoy seeing her wandering around and figuring out what she will do next.

Besides that, seeing her has been like a reassurance that she's still safe in our home. With Thomas finding out, the interaction with Jonah, and the odd comments from my father, I was feeling highly strung, like there was a threat at every corner.

Those feelings have lessened over the last few days, with everything being business as usual.

The last time I saw her today was just after I arrived here this morning. After a quick look at the camera, I had gone into my grandfather's office to discuss a client, and now I haven't seen her since.

I know she was angry and upset when I left for work. I didn't let her come with me today after she's been inside for so long, and she let me know about it.

Disappointed, I click out of the app and over to my emails. It's possible she's still annoyed with me and is purposely staying out of view. Or perhaps I just keep missing her on screen.

Usually, I'd watch her sit and play the piano or practice poker by herself – something I started teaching her about a week ago.

Or sometimes, she'd position herself in the sun while drawing something from her view out the window. Her

drawing skills are fast improving, and if she were a man, she'd be able to sell her work easily. That thought has my lips pursing. She'll never be able to experience something as simple as selling her drawings due to being a female. A reminder of the unfair world we live in.

Lifting my desk phone, I page through to Thomas. "What do I have this afternoon?"

"Ah, you were supposed to have a meeting with your father, but something came up for him, and he rescheduled. He's been out of the office all day."

"Okay, so nothing else?"

"You also have a phone meeting with Harry Picton."

"Reschedule it," I tell him, slipping into my suit jacket.

"Alright. Are you leaving?"

I get to my feet, holding the phone between my shoulder and cheek as I close my laptop and gather my things.

"Yes. I won't be back in today."

There's a scuffling sound on the other end, and then he hangs up on me. A moment later, his recently groomed head is poking through my office door.

"Are you going home to see Avery?"

Since finding out about her, he has made a few comments to me, asking when she'll be in next and what she does at home. I'm sure it's his usual harmless questioning, but I can't help the tension it evokes in me each time.

“What the fuck does it matter to you?” I snap.

“I was just wondering. I’m curious how it works since she’s, you know.” At my glare, he lifts a hand and starts backing out of the doorway. “I’ll reschedule the phone call.” Then, right before he closes the door again, he calls, “But then I’m leaving as well.”

I grab my stuff with a shake of my head and make my way down to the parking garage. If she’s been purposely hiding from me, I’ll have to think of a way to punish her. I’d say by getting her down on her knees, but I’m sure she enjoys that.

As soon as I’m home, I walk into the living room expecting to see her by the window drawing, but there’s nothing but sunlight occupying the space on the floor, along with a handful of pencils and a half-finished sketch. I study it for a moment, my admiration growing and my chest puffing up with pride as I trace my eyes over her drawing of the view from our building. She’s so fucking talented.

“Avery,” I call out, tugging off my tie and suit jacket and draping it over the back of the couch.

I head into the kitchen, downing a glass of juice while waiting for her to make an appearance. But silence is the only thing I get in return, and a small amount of unease prickles at me.

Walking down the hall, I glance into her old room as I pass it. It’s almost empty now, with nothing in it but a set of drawers and a neatly made bed. It seems like so long ago now

that I made her stay in there, trying to keep a distance from what she was supposed to be to me.

I can't say how I would have behaved if I'd known who and what she was back then, but I think I was always attracted to the tiny slivers of personality that she would let slip. She's had my attention from the very first moment, when I was walking past her in that row of women and she locked eyes with me. I thought I was seeing things at the time, but I know better now.

"Avery," I repeat as I walk into my bedroom, my heart rate slowly picking up speed when there is still no reply, and I don't find her in the bathroom.

Her silk robe sits bunched up on the counter, and yesterday's clothes are by the tub where I peeled them off her. That in itself is alarming, considering she never leaves clothes lying around, even when I've told her she doesn't have to be the one to clean them up.

Next, I walk into the closet, my eyes flicking around the room, but she's not there either.

"Fucking answer me."

A foreboding feeling starts settling into my stomach, causing it to tighten as I walk out of there and start searching each room with urgency but come up empty. Where the fuck is she?

My heart has switched from beating at an increased tempo to a heavy pounding that can be heard in my ears as I step back into the living room. My gaze swings around the room, trying

to catch onto something, anything that I didn't see before that could indicate where in the fuck she is.

“*Avery!*” I yell, though I'm sure she's not here.

I do another thorough sweep of each room, tearing the covers off the bed as if she could be hiding under it but finding only her lacy underwear, then running my hands through the clothes hanging in the closet as if she could be behind them, knocking some of them off the hangers as I go. Pillows end up on the floor, and any items that could have been hiding her end up askew or sideways.

Sinking down onto the couch, I drop my head in my hands and pull harshly on my hair while my elbows press into my knees, breaths coming out fast and heavy through a clenched jaw.

My mind races and whirls with thoughts of what's happened to her, where she's ended up, and what could be happening to her.

Would she have left the apartment by herself? I wouldn't put it entirely past her, especially with how frustrated she was this morning.

But fuck, she wouldn't be stupid enough to get off on the main floor, and the parking garage is the only other option if she actually left on her own. I doubt she'd go down there just to hang out.

Who the fuck could have taken her?

Even as I think it, I know the answer is pretty obvious. Apart from some random person breaking into my home, the only other people who would have the authority to do something like this are the ones who deal with all WOUN.

It could have been that sweep thing Edison mentioned. Did they come in and find her drawing?

You would think they would have called me first and asked some questions, but I've never dealt with them before, nor do I know anyone who has, so maybe that's not their MO.

Or did someone report her? They could have come in and taken her away because of that.

Either way, I think she would end up in the same place.

There's only one person who for sure knows what she is ...

My feet are taking me to the elevator before I've even finished that thought. Anger and worry make a potent mix inside my body, causing irrational thoughts to swim through my mind.

Once I'm downstairs, I make a last-minute decision to search the parking garage, looking between cars and in dark corners. I know she's not fucking here, but I keep looking anyway until every inch has been scoured.

Minutes later, I'm pounding against his door with a force that sends pain through my fist.

"Phoenix? What are you doing here?" Thomas asks when he swings the door open, his brows lifting and eyes widening when he sees my expression.

I step closer, gripping his shirt in my fists. “Did you fucking tell someone? I swear I will end you if you did.”

“What?” he asks, his face scrunching up as he raises his hands to my wrists. “What are you talking about?”

“*Avery*,” I bellow. “Did you tell someone about her? Did you get her taken away?”

Something crosses his face, and he glances to the left of him before facing me again.

“No, but you’re telling the whole fucking neighborhood with your yelling. Get in here and keep your voice down.”

He yanks himself back out of my grasp and indicates for me to step inside. A presence off to the side of the entryway has my gaze swinging that way, and I catch Thomas’s father sitting in his wheelchair by the TV, looking back and forth between us, curiosity in his eyes.

“You’re lucky he’s half deaf,” Thomas throws over his shoulder as he leads me into the dining room. I’ve been in here before when I decided to buy it, but it was empty then and devoid of life. “You may be my boss, but I don’t need you worrying my father with your outburst. So, what’s going on?” he asks, leaning against the dining room table and crossing his arms.

“*Avery*’s gone,” I grit out, pacing back and forth, my body still filled with anxious energy.

“Gone?” The genuine confusion and then surprise on his face has me leaning toward the conclusion that it wasn’t him.

“You think she was reported and taken away?”

“Yes.”

Lifting a hand, I grip my neck. I should have taken her with me today like she wanted. She would have been *safe* with me. I’ve never felt this worried, this unsettled and agitated.

“Wait a second. You thought I went ahead and reported her after I told you I wouldn’t?” He levels me with a pointed glare, offended and hurt.

“I’m sorry. You were the only one who knew for sure about her.”

“Well, I forgive you, but only because I’ve never seen you so out of sorts.”

His gaze sweeps down my frame much like I’ve done with him in the past, his lips pulling to one side in concern.

My eyes snag on a mirror off to the side, and I can see what he’s talking about. My hair is a mess, and part of my shirt is untucked. It’s not a lot, but I’m sure if I were ever photographed like this, the press would have *a lot* to say about it, as well as my grandfather and father.

But what’s most noteworthy about my appearance is the slightly unhinged look on my face. I suck in a deep breath through my nose, trying to compose myself. I’m not one to have freakouts and lose my cool. *She’s* done this to me.

It’s all because they took her. They *took* Avery.

I need to find her before it's too late. I'm not even sure what they do to the WOUN, but Avery once mentioned that one was found out at the facility and then changed.

Do they alter their brains?

How long do they keep them there?

How long does it take to assess them?

"I need to find her," I tell him, straightening myself out and tucking my shirt back in.

"How? I mean, do you even know where those places are?"

"No, but I might know someone who does."

Chapter 31

Phoenix

Pressing replay, I watch once again as Avery appears from the hallway at the top of the screen, the same gorgeous smile on her face that sucks the air out of my lungs and grips my attention until it's the only thing I see.

It's only there for a second before it's replaced by an infinitesimal moment of looking stunned and then to a gaze so empty and lifeless that it causes my heart to hurt. She freezes in place, staring at whoever is in the foyer out of sight, and then she's stepping toward them and disappearing.

Did she think it was me arriving home at first?

It only occurred to me to check the camera feed from this morning when I was on my way home from Thomas's. I've replayed it several times now. Each time is more painful than the last.

"Well, look who it is," Edison remarks as soon as he answers the phone. "I don't even remember the last time *you* called

me.”

I ignore his comment, sitting perched on the edge of my home office desk. “That sweep thing you mentioned. Can you tell me anything else about it?”

“What?”

“Do you know what they’re called or where I could find them?”

I have no doubt my grandfather would know, but he would be far more suspicious and ask questions, only adding to the stress of the situation and making it worse. And in the end, he’d be less likely to give me the information I need.

It’s silent for a moment before I hear a door close through the line and then the sound of his chair squeaking. “What the fuck, Phoenix? You’ve practically been MIA since you got your woman, and now you call asking about a sweep?”

Pinching the bridge of my nose, I suck in a deep breath. “I just need to know.”

“I don’t know, man. I only ever heard them saying it was happening more, not who they are or anything.”

Fuck. My eyes close, and my hopes of finding her diminish rapidly. I’m probably too late as it is. What if she’s already been changed? What if something happened and she didn’t make it? A heavy weight settles over me at the thought. I click on the video again, pausing it when I can still see her smiling face.

No. I can't accept that. I have to believe that there is time for me to work something out, whether it be emptying my bank account or breaking in there myself.

"What is this about?" Edison asks, his tone concerned.

I could probably tell him the truth, and he wouldn't say anything. He's never let me down before and has always had my back. But I don't want to put him in that position, force him to keep my secrets, and possibly get into trouble for it. As it is, I may still face the consequences for keeping her when I knew what she was.

I've instructed Thomas to play stupid and deny any knowledge of it if asked. He's simply my assistant with no important family connections. Edison, on the other hand ...

"Nothing," I lie, swallowing thickly and pushing to my feet. "I was going to see if I could set up a meeting with them about designing one of their locations. I thought it would be a good business move."

"Oh." He chuckles lightly. "For fuck's sake, it's always about your career with you. Poor Avery must get neglected a lot, although I think your total aversion to her has changed along the way." A fucking ache begins in my chest at the mention of her name, and I ball my free hand into a fist. "Anyway, if they've done a sweep of your building before, I'm sure they probably have their name somewhere."

Shit. I didn't even think of that.

"Look, I've got to go. I'll call you later, okay?"

“Wait,” he says just as I’m about to hang up. “How about we meet up at O’Malleys for a drink tonight? Catch up a bit. It’s been a while.”

The mention of O’Malleys has my mind swinging to Jonah, and my teeth grind together. If it wasn’t the sweep, then I have a strong suspicion that he would have been the one to report her.

“I’ll get back to you on that,” I reply, walking out to the living room window and looking out at the city. “There are a few things I need to do.”

I hang up, then dial the number to the front desk.

“Mr. Carsen,” Jay, one of the newer and younger employees, answers the phone. “What can I do for you, sir?”

I lean my forehead against the cool glass of the window. “Was there a sweep of this building done today, looking for WOUNs?”

“Uh, um,” he stutters. “I’m not sure if I’m supposed to talk about those things at all.”

I squeeze my eyes shut. “I just need a yes or no answer, Jay. Or do I need to speak to your boss?”

“No,” he quickly blurts. “There were no sweeps. Not here. There hasn’t been any for a while.”

I fill my lungs with air and slowly release. If there were no sweeps, that means she was definitely reported.

“Do you have a name or address for them?” I ask, opening my eyes again to stare down at the street far below.

“No. I know for sure they don’t keep that information here. Maybe in security, but I’m not sure.”

Security won’t give me that information. They take the privacy of those who live here or anyone employed here very seriously, and that would absolutely include these people even if they aren’t directly employed.

“Thanks.” I hang up before he can reply and immediately dial Thomas.

“Are you able to access client’s numbers from home?”

“Yeah, I have my phone linked to the office program. What do you need?”

I run a hand through my hair, leaning my back against the glass. “I need you to set up a meeting with Jonah Michaels for this afternoon. As soon as possible.”

“Okay? Does he have something to do with it?”

“I think so. If his number isn’t in the database, get it from Mark Anderson.”

“Alright. I’ll text you the details soon.”

After ending the call, I tuck my phone into my pocket and glance around my quiet apartment. It’s a mess right now compared to how Avery has kept it. Things are strewn about, partly from when I was looking for her and partly from when I lost control, letting my panic and distress take over.

I take a step, intending to pick up the pillows at least, and place them the way she likes, but I pause when I feel something under my foot. Looking down, I notice the half-finished sketch I'm stepping on and quickly pick it up from under me.

That ache in my chest intensifies as I stare at it and slowly move toward the couch, dropping down onto it with a wired and unsettled feeling zipping through my body.

Will she ever be able to draw like this again?

Will I ever see her again?

Not long ago, I couldn't stand the thought of having a woman. Now I'm completely besotted with Avery and feel absolutely psychotic at the thought of not having her here with me.

My phone chimes with a text from Thomas, and I whip it out of my pocket immediately.

Thomas: I called his office. He apparently left for the weekend already and turned his phone off.

Fuck!

I reach for the glass on the table in front of me and hurl it across the room, listening to it shatter against the wall. Next, I flip the table over, making the items on top of it as well as the storage shelf below go scattering.

I suck in angry breaths through my nose, watching as a piece of paper lands by my foot. I snatch it up, ready to crumple it in

my fist and have it join the glass, but then I see what it is and freeze.

Avery hasn't just been drawing the city. She's also sketched pictures of flowers and other objects, as well as portraits of me and herself. This one is of her forearm and hand, with the tattoo I had designed for us replicated perfectly on it.

I trace my finger over it, remembering how I felt watching the ink mark her, watching it tie her to me.

My woman.

I push to my feet and walk over to the piano, taking a seat on the bench and placing my phone and her drawing next to the sheet music. I haven't been able to get this piece perfect yet, but it hasn't stopped me from trying to play it, and right now, I need it to soothe the chaos in my mind and also help me think of what to do next.

Lifting my hands, I play the first several notes, the ones tattooed on both of our arms, but then my phone chimes again, and I lean forward to read the screen while it's lit up.

Thomas: His assistant just told me that Jonah will be going for drinks with a few potential business associates tonight. I'm not sure if you want to try and catch him then.

I pick my phone up, and quickly type out a reply.

Me: Where?

Thomas: O'Malley's.

I exhale a breath and sit a little straighter. It looks like I'll be having a drink with Edison after all.

"Are you sure everything's okay?" Edison asks again. "You just ... I don't know, seem on edge or something."

I return my eyes to him after scanning the VIP area once again.

On edge is an understatement.

On edge is a raindrop compared to the ocean, a paper cut compared to a deep wound.

When the woman you've become obsessed with, who has caused you to develop new and all-consuming feelings for, is taken from you, you're a little more than *on edge*.

I try to adjust my expression. "It was just a tough day."

"Ah." He nods, lifting his beer to his lips. "Gramps still giving you a hard time? Is that why you wanted the name and address of those guys? You trying to impress him?"

I take a healthy swallow of my Old Fashioned before I lie, "Yes."

"Honestly, I think he's already happy with you. You told me he handed over that Anderson guy's stuff, right? He's no small fish, and I doubt your grandpa would have done that if you didn't already impress him."

I nod absently, feeling bad for misleading Edison and not telling him what's going on. But it's for his own good. He

deserves to live the normal life with, eventually, a normal woman like he wants. That's just not the life for me.

I force myself to give him my focus for a while and actually pay attention when he tells me about his work and apartment renovations, only making quick, discreet looks around us every few minutes.

We end up finishing our drinks and ordering some more with still no sign of Jonah. The anxious energy swarming through me intensifies with every passing minute. I feel like I'm wasting time sitting here, but I have no other leads at this moment – no other places to check.

I'm almost ready to call it a night when into the VIP area walks Jonah and a few other men, loud and obnoxious. My grip on my glass tightens to a point where it might actually break. I watch as the other men take their seats, but he heads in the direction of the men's room. *Perfect.*

Excusing myself, I follow Jonah down the darkened hallway and through the door, then lean against the door with my arms crossed, waiting for him to come out of the stall.

It doesn't take long for him to emerge, but with the way my jaw is aching from the pressure of clenching it as I wait, it feels like it was far too long.

He looks at me with surprise in his beady eyes when he first notices my looming figure, but it quickly changes to indifference, and he casually washes his hands as if he doesn't have a care in the world.

As if he hasn't possibly destroyed Avery's unique and alluring personality.

As if he hasn't caused my heart to constrict so unbearably tight at the thought of not seeing that defiant glint in her eyes that I adore so much.

"You know, one way to see who a man really is is to watch how he reacts when circumstances don't especially go his way."

His weasel-like face appears puzzled as he dries his hands on one of the rolled-up towels. I have to tamp down the version of me who wants to escape and attack him, wiping that look off his face. We are businessmen, and it will do me no good to deal with this with violence. I wouldn't want to draw more attention when I may still be able to get her out quietly.

"Your son hasn't earned the right to choose a woman yet, so you throw tantrums and try to ruin others' lives."

Even as I say it, I know it's irrational to expect *anyone* to keep quiet about it. But he could have fucking ignored it and minded his own business.

"I'm not sure what you're referring to, but I don't have time for this," he mutters. "I have clients out there waiting for me."

He tries to pull the door open, but I press my palm to it, holding it closed.

"Who did you call, and where can I find them?"

His face gives the perfect impression of a confused person. "What are you talking about?"

I breathe in deeply through my nose, trying hard to remain calm, and repeat, “Tell me who the fuck you called and where I’ll be able to find them.”

“I think you need to go home and get that woman of yours to give you a blow-job. You’re obviously delusional.”

I reach up and grab his shirt, bringing him closer to me, ready to explode and lay him out. Consequences be damned. He doesn’t get to talk about her like that.

But then his words actually trickle in, repeating in my mind. *“I think you need to go home and get that woman of yours to give you a blow-job.”* I take in the look on his face and the way he reacted.

He doesn’t know she was taken away. If he were the one to report her, he would have boasted about it and no doubt told everyone within his vicinity how a Carsen picked a WOUN. He would have made sure I was held accountable for it as well.

“You didn’t call anyone,” I say, half as a statement and half as a question, still trying to accept that it wasn’t him.

He looks to the side, a flash of guilt on his face. I tighten my grip on his shirt, giving him a shake, and his eyes fly back to me, his hands lifting in capitulation.

“Alright, I may have phoned Anderson and told him to go with a different company, but I didn’t think he’d actually listen.”

I blink, and it takes a moment for what he said to register in my mind. I release his shirt with a shove, turning to walk out the door with Jonah's flustered words of apology following me.

I start making my way back to where Edison is sitting, but at the last minute, I make a detour over to the table where Jonah's potential clients are sitting.

"Gentlemen," I greet with a forced smile. "Did I see you here with Jonah Michaels?"

"You did," one of them answers jovially. "We're looking at some of his property along the waterfront."

The proud look on his face is genuine, and I'm almost sorry to take that away from him.

"That's good to hear," I reply seriously. "He must have gotten that rat infestation under control, which is good. Hopefully, it doesn't come back this time."

After watching their faces morph into a look of horror, I say goodbye and leave their table, my heart feeling heavy and my hopes of finding Avery before it's too late fading away.

Chapter 32

Phoenix

My head hangs heavy between my shoulders; my fingers curled tightly around the edge of the counter as I listen to my phone ring once again. It's my father, no doubt. He has called a few times, probably wondering why I'm not at the office.

I just couldn't bring myself to go in. It's Monday today, and she's been gone since Friday. I highly doubt that if I were to somehow find her now, that she'd be the same Avery – *my* Avery.

Everything feels incomplete without her, including my heart.

I've heard nothing from *them*, which I still find strange. No questions, no information. Not even to let me know that it has been done and she'll be returned to me on a specific date.

Will she even be returned to me?

Will I even want her here if she is?

She'll just be a reminder of what I lost. Someone who vaguely resembles her but doesn't have the same spark of life in her eyes.

I tried a number of things over the weekend.

I tried to get information from the security department of my building, but they refused to give anything away.

I tried calling the number for reporting a WOUN, but it was only an automated message service telling me to leave all the details of the report on there, and they would take care of the rest.

I thought about making something up and waiting until they arrived to question them. But it went into detail at the beginning of the message about what would happen should someone make a false claim. I'd be in prison before I could ask a thing, which would be of no help to either of us.

I even tried calling my grandfather in a desperate attempt to get any information I could, but he didn't answer his phone. It's probably for the best.

I never realized just how many unmarked and inaccessible buildings there are here in the city until I spent a few hours driving around, seeing if I could stumble upon the right place.

I have money, status, and power, and yet it seems to mean fuck all when it comes to matters to do with a WOUN.

Scrubbing a hand over my face and lingering on the longer, unkempt scruff on my jaw, I reject the call and open my fridge.

It's filled with food, but I barely notice any of it. Slamming it closed again, I turn around and lean my back against the door.

I've suffered through a range of emotions over the weekend, but right now I'm pissed. I'm fucking *pissed*. How dare they take her away from me. How dare they walk into the home of a Carsen and do whatever they like. How dare they change her without my consent. How fucking dare they do that to *any* of them.

WOUN are not a threat to our society. In fact, I can see them *enhancing* it.

My phone rings again, and I'm tempted to throw it across the room, but this time I grab it and answer, just to stop him from calling.

"What," I snap.

"You've been rejecting my calls," my father replies calmly.

I resume my grip on the edge of the counter. "What do you want?"

"Meet me at the corner of Mission and Appleton."

The line goes dead, but I remain holding the phone pressed to my ear. What the fuck? I thought he was going to ask where I was, and demand to know why I wasn't at the office.

But this ... this has my mind spinning. It tumbles and turns until all the pieces line up and then comes to a stop.

He did this, didn't he?

My own father.

It makes sense. The looks and comments. The fact he had something come up on Friday and left the office. Was he there when they took her? Is that why I've had no communication from them? Because he instructed them not to?

The thought makes my blood start to boil and my stomach lurch.

Why didn't I think of him as a possibility earlier? I guess I just didn't think he'd go ahead and do something like that without talking to me first.

I head straight for my front door. He never told me a time, but I can only assume he meant now. I'm not sure what he wants to discuss, but I need answers.

My phone rings again, but this time it's Thomas. He still went into the office to take calls and move my schedule around for me.

"Hello."

"Just wanted to let you know that Mark Anderson was fine to reschedule your meeting to Wednesday. It didn't seem like he was aware of any interaction between you and Jonah, so I guess that's good."

I press the button for the parking garage and lean against the elevator wall. "That's good, although I wouldn't give a fuck if he did know about it and had a problem with it."

Thomas chuckles before quieting down. "Any new info?"

My fingers tighten around my phone. "I'm on my way to question my father about it now."

“What? Do you think he has something to do with it? He hasn’t been in today either.”

“I’ll be confirming it when I see him.”

“I’ll come with you,” Thomas replies immediately.

“That’s not necessary.”

“I just mean I’ll come for the car ride. You can talk to him by yourself.”

I appreciate Thomas’s support and help in all of this, even if it seems like he’s more excited over the fact that he’s involved in something illegal.

Nevertheless, each day, I’m more grateful than the last that I decided to hire him.

“I need you to keep me updated on things at the office.”

“Alright,” he answers with a sigh. “Let me know how it goes.”

It doesn’t take long for me to get to the location my father gave me, but there is no sign of him when I arrive. I wait in my car, hands fisted around the steering wheel, closely watching every car that approaches or drives past and every person that walks by.

When half an hour passes, I finally step out of my car, feeling way too anxious to remain sitting any longer.

What if Avery is being brought to me? The changed version of her, at least. Shit. I run my fingers through my hair, taking a

few steps away from my car. What the fuck am I supposed to do with her?

Just then, a black van rolls up beside me, the front windows completely blacked out, and no windows in the back. It comes to a stop just as the back sliding door opens.

“Get in,” a voice from inside says.

It’s not my father’s voice, but seeing as this is where he told me to meet him, I’m guessing he’s behind this and is in there somewhere.

“You can tell my father to show his face if he wants to talk to me.”

“Your father isn’t here. Just get in and make this easy on yourself.”

I grind down on my molars, frustrated and angry. I’m in two minds about wanting to go to him and confront him, but also wanting to make him work to see me. After all, it’s no doubt too late to save the Avery I know, so there’s no longer a time crunch.

“He knows where to find me.”

I turn around to walk back to my car, but barely a second later, I’m stopped when some type of black cover is put over my head, and my hands are being restrained behind my back with zip-ties.

“What the fuck? Let me go,” I demand while struggling.

“I told you to make it easy. You didn’t listen.”

He walks me to the van and helps me inside before strapping me into a chair, and it's not until we start moving that I realize I'm sitting sideways.

No one speaks to me, and I don't bother saying anything to find out if someone is back here with me.

The longer we continue driving, the more random thoughts start popping into my head. Like maybe this isn't my father's doing after all, and maybe this is a type of ransom situation. But then I'm led back to the part where my father told me to meet him there.

After about an hour of driving, another thought suddenly occurs to me.

This isn't some ransom situation. I'm being sent to prison for keeping quiet about Avery. My father must have directed me to a location where it wouldn't be obvious that I was getting arrested so as not to taint the family name. There's no other reason I can think of that we would be traveling so far.

I guess it doesn't really matter. I couldn't see my life returning to the way it was before Avery, anyway.

Another half hour goes by, and the road gets increasingly bumpier and bumpier. I never paid much attention to where the prison was situated, but I guess far outside the city in some rural location makes sense.

Finally, we come to a stop. And I wait.

Voices can be heard coming from outside, but I can't quite make out what they're saying. The door opens, and I don't

struggle as they lead me out of the van. The fight in me left at the same time my hope did.

We walk a short distance over gravel and then into some sort of building.

I'm pushed to sit down with my arms still behind my back, and then the footsteps retreat, and I'm left in silence.

A few minutes pass before I hear a door open and close again. The zip-ties get cut from my wrists in the next moment, and the cover is removed from my head.

I stare directly into the eyes of my father standing before me.

I have no idea what this place is, but my previous conclusions about being taken to prison are scrapped. I'm back to my earlier thoughts of my father simply being responsible for Avery's disappearance.

I make a quick scan of the room around me. Besides the curtains on the window, there are no other items in here besides the chair I'm sitting on. If it were filled with furniture, it could be a living room with its nice but simple light fixtures, cove molding, hardwood flooring, and fireplace.

"What the fuck is going on?" I ask, my eyes returning to my father.

His appearance is altogether confusing and nothing like I've seen before. I can't remember ever seeing him without a suit on, but here he is with casual dress pants and a short-sleeve button-up shirt.

He very rarely shows any emotion on his face, leaving people guessing most of the time, but right now, what's completely puzzling is the concerned look on his face as he looks me over.

I haven't shaved or groomed my stubble in a few days. I'm still wearing suit pants, but I only have a dress shirt on with the sleeves rolled up and top buttons undone, no tie.

All the anger, stress, and worry from the last few days come rushing back at me, and I push to my feet, stepping toward him. He doesn't get to be concerned after what he did.

“I asked you a question. What. The. Fuck. Is going on?”

Chapter 33

Phoenix

“Calm down,” he replies, pressing a hand to my chest. “I didn’t realize.”

My whole body feels like it’s shaking with anger, adrenaline, and who the fuck knows what else, and he’s telling me to calm down?

“Didn’t realize *what?*“ I grit out. “That you were destroying Avery’s life? *My* life?”

The pressure from his hand on my chest increases as I try to press in closer again. But he remains composed, keeping me at arm’s length.

“I didn’t realize you carried the gene as well. I thought you were the one who reported Avery.”

My mind tries to play catch up as I stare at my father, confusion stirring through my head, not allowing it to grasp his meaning.

“Gene? And what do you mean you thought I reported her? I thought it was you.”

Shaking his head, the expression I’m so familiar with makes its appearance, and he steps away from me, walking over to the window where he looks out in thought.

“I don’t know who reported her. It could have been anyone who saw her.”

Blowing out a breath, I rub a hand down my face, frustrated that I’m no closer to finding her than I was before. Frustrated that I have nowhere to place this anger. Frustrated because I don’t know what’s going on.

“Why did you bring me to this place like some criminal? And what gene were you talking about?” I ask.

His hand lifts, smoothing over the top of his hair. “To answer that, I guess I should start at the beginning.”

Still irritated, I answer, “That might be an idea.”

His head bobs a few times, nodding to himself while still lost in a far-off gaze out the window.

“You’ve never seen your grandfather’s woman, my birth mother,” he starts. “And that’s because after I was born, he found out she was a WOUN and had her sent away. I’m not sure what happened to her, but he didn’t want her back.”

My brows dip together, and my eyes drift to the ground as that information settles into my mind. My grandfather picked a WOUN.

“What he didn’t know was that she passed on part of those WOUN genes to me; with it, a predisposition to feel certain things far more acutely than other men, even to think a little differently from other men. And the tendency to be attracted to women of an unusual nature.”

My gaze flies back to him, surprise causing my heart to pick up speed. He turns around to face me again, and despite that shocking revelation, I just know that he’s not even half done.

“I told you the story about him choosing my woman at first.” After my short nod, he continues, “The one he chose for me wasn’t a WOUN, but the one I went back for, your mother, *was*.”

I run my fingers roughly through my hair and find myself lowering back onto the chair. I saw it coming after his first comment, but it still managed to catch me off guard.

“The woman who gave birth to me was a WOUN?”

He leans back against the windowsill and watches me closely. “She is.”

“How did I not know any of this?” I wonder out loud. “You say I carry this gene as well? Why not tell me sooner?”

“We didn’t know you did, not until now. We also didn’t know what to expect from someone who had a WOUN mother as well as a father who was born from a WOUN. You were always a serious child and, for the most part, hard to read. We assumed it skipped you. Besides, this isn’t something that can be spoken about freely.”

Pushing away from the window, he walks over to the fireplace and runs a hand over the mantle above it, deep in thought.

I find it quite ironic that he should find *me* hard to read when I've always thought that of him. I'm the one that went my whole life knowing none of this. Not even a hint of it.

"I tried to figure it out without being too obvious after you picked Avery," he continues. "But the only thing I knew for sure was that you hadn't had sex with her – in the beginning, at least – and you almost seemed to be displeased with her. That had me curious but still unsure. My suspicions rose again the night of the gala when I saw what you were doing with her, but other than that, you seemed the same."

I think back to that night and how I had been so focused on getting a reaction out of Avery with my fingers. How deliriously pleased I had been when I had her come on them.

"You told me not to do that again."

"In public," he corrects. "I told you not to do it in public again. I didn't want anyone else to suspect anything if my suspicions turned out to be valid. I knew what Avery was as soon as I met her, but there was a chance it was only a coincidence that you picked her, like it was with your grandfather."

I lean forward, pressing my elbows to my thighs, and clasp my hands together, staring ahead, still processing everything he's telling me. My mother was a WOUN. *His* mother was a

WOUN. If he never turned his woman in, there's no reason to think he'd turn Avery in.

I look at him, *really* look at him, and try to reconcile this man standing across from me to the one I grew up with. It's hard, I must admit.

“Okay. So, what changed?” I finally ask. “Why bring me to this place the way you did?”

“As I said, I originally thought you were the one to report Avery. When I found out you knew what she was and that it couldn't have been you, I decided to bring you here. I told them just to get you into the van any way possible since I know you can be quite stubborn. It may have been a little extreme.”

I scoff. “You think?”

“I also told them to make sure you couldn't tell where they were going.”

Having me sit sideways with my head covered messed with my sense of direction, so I guess they succeeded in that.

“Why couldn't I know?”

He straightens up, facing me completely now. “You may be sympathetic toward Avery, but that doesn't mean you're sympathetic to all of them. I didn't want to risk you knowing the way here.”

To all of them? What the hell is he talking about?

“You’re speaking in riddles, Father. What is this place, and why bring me here at all?” I ask, confused and splaying my hands out to the side.

“Let me ask you something first.” He closes the distance between us, coming to a stop in front of me, his unreadable mask in place. “Do you think the way WOUN are treated ... what’s done to them is fair? That they need to be changed?”

Avery’s smile instantly comes to mind, along with the way she used to tilt her chin up and challenge me and how her eyes would light up when she looked at me. My chest hurts at the memory of it.

But then her face starts disappearing, blowing away with the wind like the musical notes on my arm.

My molars mash together, my lips pursing. None of that needed to be changed. None of them need to be changed.

“No,” I answer through clenched teeth.

At my reply, he blows out a breath of what appears to be relief. “Good. That’s good. I’ve made the right choice then.”

Just then, his phone starts ringing, and his previous demeanor changes to that of the same businessman I’ve known my whole life.

“Yes?” he says by way of answering it, holding a finger up to me as he walks down the hallway and into one of the rooms to talk in private.

I run both hands through my hair, my elbows still perched on my knees. I would never have imagined my day turning out

like this when I dragged myself out of bed this morning after another sleepless night.

And though I'm still left with many questions, and I still don't know who reported Avery, nor do I have her back, this does eliminate my father, and there is a sort of comfort in knowing he's on my side. I also now have an explanation as to why I feel the way I do about certain things.

I let my eyes drift shut with exhaustion, then weave in and out of memories of Avery and our time together as I wait for my father to return.

A few minutes later, my father walks back into the room with a pleased look on his face as he pockets his phone.

"Come," he says to me, motioning with his head. "I have some things to show you."

And because I'm more than curious to know what this place is and why I'm here, I get up and follow him to the front door. Right before opening it, he glances at me over his shoulder, his look serious.

"This will change a lot of things for you."

Chapter 34

Phoenix

He opens the door, and we walk out into the sunshine. Then, I freeze on the spot.

He's right, this will change things.

My gaze swings to my father, noting how he's watching closely for my reaction, and then I look back to the scene before me, glancing to the left and then the right.

Women. A number of them.

But that's not what has me so taken aback. It's the fact that there is a group of them walking together and laughing. Some of them are kneeling in a garden, pulling out some vegetables while animatedly chatting to each other, and two younger girls are running around playing while one is casually sitting on the steps of a nearby house, watching them.

There are no blank stares and empty gazes, mindlessly standing beside a man.

WOUN. All of them. And they look so free and happy.

Disbelief has me looking over the area again, checking to see if my eyes might be deceiving me.

But no. This is real.

Not only are there women here, but a few men here as well. Two of which are casually walking in the opposite direction of where we're standing, and one man is sitting beside one of the women in the garden, holding a basket for her while she adds things to it, a smile on his face. He briefly turns to me, dipping his chin in greeting before returning back to their conversation.

Astonished is one way to describe my face when I turn back to my father once again.

"This is a safe place for them," he says, answering my unspoken question.

Laughter pulls my attention back to the women, and my heart rate triples when I catch sight of a woman facing away from me, crouched in the garden, with golden blonde hair like Avery's.

The air stalls in my throat as I watch, willing her to turn around. When she finally does, my heart tumbles to an abrupt stop in my chest as disappointment floods through me. It's not her. It was too much to hope that she'd somehow been transported here and was completely fine.

"We try to save as many as we can and bring them here," my father continues, unaware of the plummet my heart just took.

“Unfortunately, we aren’t able to save all of them.”

The meaning behind his words doesn’t go unnoticed by me; he wasn’t able to save Avery.

My throat almost closes shut, the little tumble my heart took earlier feeling like nothing compared to this, like my body just fell from the tallest building in the city.

Thinking that all hope is lost is one thing, but having it confirmed is another.

I swallow past the boulder in my throat and keep walking beside him. If I don’t keep occupied, then I’ll be consumed by the feeling of my heart imploding.

“How do you save them?” I ask, my voice low. It’s hard to be enthusiastic about this place when Avery won’t get to experience it. “And who’s ‘we’?”

Lifting his arm, he gestures for me to walk with him. Several dirt roads lead off to different houses situated about the land, but this one seems to be a main road. A compound of sorts – that’s what this place is.

Would Avery have liked it here?

After a short distance, my father begins talking. “*We* are a group of men who have chosen to keep our women, despite what they are, and who spend our spare time trying to help other WOUN who have been found out.”

Despite the noble work he’s describing, I can’t help but selfishly wonder if he tried hard enough to help Avery.

“How do you help them?” I ask him instead.

He casually adjusts the watch on his wrist as he walks. “We have someone on the inside. Harold. He goes along on the retrievals, and then is involved in the processing. He risks his life to try and help those who fall under his responsibility by altering documents. Depending on who’s on the same shift, sometimes it’s just a matter of paying large sums of money for a name to disappear.”

“Is that how you knew Avery had been reported?” I ask, chewing on the inside of my cheek.

“Yes. He can see the names of the WOUNs, but only the higher-ups get to know *who* reported them.” He makes a turn to the right, continuing on down another one of the dirt roads, and I follow. “We have someone else who is going through the steps to be employed by them. Unfortunately, the application process is long and drawn out. It may take another six months.”

We come to a stop in front of one of the many modest houses here and he turns to me.

“I know this has been a lot to take in, and I know you’re someone who likes to be in control of a situation. You’re more like your grandfather in that regards.” When my brows crease together, he adds, “Just know this. All of this was kept from you to protect you, and those women.”

Right now, the control he spoke of feels so far out of my grasp that I don’t even feel like myself anymore.

But I do understand why he kept it from me.

“You said you decided to bring me here when you found out that I knew she was a WOUN and that I couldn’t have been the one who reported her. How did you find out?”

Before he’s able to answer me, the door to the house opens drawing both of our attention.

My eyes drift to the woman standing in the doorway, roving over her neutral face, taking in her features. And although I haven’t seen her in many years, I know she’s my father’s woman, my mother.

“Elliana,” my father greets her in a softened tone that I’m not used to. “Phoenix is finally here.”

There is only a moment’s pause before her lips start tilting upwards until they become a fully formed smile filled with radiant warmth, and she rushes forward, wrapping me in a hug.

I stand unmoving while she hugs me, not hating it and not pulling away, but not returning the gesture either. While foreign, her arms bring me a small form of comfort that I wouldn’t expect from a hug and definitely not from a woman.

Today has been *a lot* of new information and new revelations. Another turn in the kaleidoscope, changing up my previous preconceptions and leaving me feeling unsettled.

My mother pulls back, placing a palm on each cheek, and looks me over lovingly. I remain still, allowing her perusal until my eyes lift from hers and connect with yet another

woman over my mother's head, standing just inside the open door of the house.

When my father follows my line of sight and sees her, he clears his throat, holding out his hand to the woman. "Come here, Rayne." I'm finally released from my embrace, but she stays standing close as this Rayne woman walks over to my father. "Phoenix, this is Rayne ... your younger sister."

"Hello," she says to me, her gray eyes on me and black hair pulled back from her face.

My gaze shifts back and forth between her and my father as I stand speechless and unsure of what to say or how to respond. Her eyes are equally curious and moving over me, taking me in.

"Sister?" is all that manages to come out.

A slim hand slips into mine, giving a gentle squeeze. "Will you come into the house? We can talk more in there."

Looking down, I see the pleading look on my mother's face, soft and gentle, and find myself nodding.

I may have gotten used to Avery having a personality and talking to me, but it's still a surreal thing for me to have multiple women here who are similar in nature to her.

We all walk inside, and the first thing I notice, besides the simple design of this small house, is the piano in the corner of the living room. It's a Steinway, like mine, but a different model.

My mother must notice what my gaze has snagged onto because she steps over to it, pressing a hand to the side.

“I used to play that song to you when you were very young. You used to love it.”

An image of Avery sitting and playing my piano in her tiny shorts crosses my mind, causing another ripple of pain to pass through the beating organ in my chest.

I refocus my attention on her. “That song?”

She bobs her head toward my arms and my eyes drop to the tattoos inked on my skin. It prickles in the spot and then spreads as a wave of understanding and something unknown washes over me. *That* was the reason it sounded familiar.

Faded memories locked deep in my subconscious try to filter into the forefront of my mind, but they’re only snippets, jumbled clips, and snapshots. When I heard Avery playing it the first time, it must have shaken the lock to those memories, but I didn’t have the key to open it.

Now, I can vaguely remember laying my head in someone’s lap as they played it to me. My first thought would be to assume it was my father.

But it was her, my mother.

“Do you want something to drink?” I’m snapped out of my newest revelation, my eyes finally leaving my mother and the piano to land on my sister.

“No,” I tell her. My throat feels too tight to let anything pass through it.

My father places a hand on Rayne's shoulder. "Why don't you go wait outside for Harold and give us a few minutes to talk."

I stare at the interaction, still trying to place this softer version of my father with the man I grew up with. He wasn't cruel or mean, but he taught me to behave a certain way and to never act in any sort of inappropriate way that could reflect badly on our family. I can't help but wonder what it was like for *her* growing up.

Once she leaves the room, my father and mother settle into one of the couches, and though he indicates for me to take a seat, I remain standing. My body feels too charged to stay still.

After sucking in a deep breath, he begins, "This all started one night when you were around one. An old friend of mine had asked to meet me at the bar and said it was important. When I arrived, he had already been drinking a lot and it didn't take long for him to reveal to me that the woman he had picked was a WOUN and that she had been taken away from him. That friend was Ken."

"Ken? As in—"

"Yes," my father confirms. "Steff was originally a WOUN."

My gaze drops to the ground, my eyes absently tracing over the patterns on the area rug as I recall the first meeting we had together. Ken looked like he very much still adored her despite what had happened to her. Would I be the same if Avery is returned to me? Or would it feel like a stab to the heart every time I saw her?

At that same meeting, I had knocked a glass over, trying to test her reaction. I feel like a fucking asshole now.

“At the time, he was distraught and didn’t know what to do,” my father continues.

I lift my gaze back to him. “So, you both decided to build this place?”

He nods, draping an arm around my mother’s shoulders as if it’s the most natural thing.

“I admitted to him that Elliana was a WOUN as well, and then he came back to my place so we could talk more freely. It was risky, and we were taking a chance by telling anyone anything about it, but slowly, as time went by, we found more people in the same, or similar circumstances. One of which worked for them, Harold. That’s when we struck gold.”

I look at them sitting together. I’ll never know how I had no idea my father was part of such a dangerous endeavor. It’s amazing, really, how I’ve lived my life oblivious to all of this. Oblivious of all the WOUN until more recently.

“And my sister?” I ask after a moment.

“Shortly after you turned four, we found out that your mother was expecting again. This place was set up by that time, so we decided that she would have the baby here and that we’d keep the pregnancy quiet in case it was a girl.” Reaching down he takes hold of one of her hands and gives it a tender squeeze. “Elliana was already finding it hard to be around you and try not to interact too much. It was depressing for her, not

really being a part of your life, so the decision was made for her to stay and raise the baby here.”

Her eyes are shiny when I shift my gaze to her, and the emotions are so clear and abundant on her face that it’s almost overwhelming.

“I’m so sorry,” she tells me, regret heavy in her voice. “I didn’t want to leave you, but your father was doing such a good job at raising you as a normal boy. I didn’t want to ruin that.”

That isn’t actually the part that bothers me. What bothers me is that I feel like I’ve been living a lie. I was in my own little bubble, none-the-wiser about my father’s other life. I get it, though. I just wish I’d known sooner because things could have turned out differently for Avery.

“I understand that you both did what you had to do,” I answer her just as the front door opens and closes. “Maybe I would have done the same if I’d had the same chance to keep Avery safe.”

“Well, you do,” my father replies, pulling my eyes to him. “You do still have that chance.”

A small smile pulls at the side of his lips right before he looks past me, causing my heart to thunder in my chest before I even know what’s going on.

I spin around, watching in stunned silence as both Rayne and Avery walk into the house.

My lungs feel like they can't bring in enough air as I scan over her, soaking in the light golden blonde of her hair, her violet eyes that remind me of the purple sky at dusk, and the curves of her body that I could spend hours laying kisses on – all of which I feel like I've been starved of for far too long.

“Avery,” I choke out, sounding completely unlike myself.

The second she hears me, her eyes fly up to meet mine and her whole face transforms into a smile that is beyond breathtaking.

“Phoenix,” she breathes, then charges toward me.

Chapter 35

Avery.

I can't get to Phoenix fast enough, my feet thumping across the ground as quickly as they can take me until I jump up and crash into him, catching him by surprise and forcing a puff of air from his lips.

I wrap my arms and legs around him and press my face into his neck, feeling his arms come around me and pull me tighter. He smells like home and comfort.

I had to come to him as soon as I heard his voice. I didn't even get a chance to take in this new place I just arrived at. All I know is that I'm safe here, and I was told there are other WOUNs like me.

"I was so scared, Phoenix," I mumble against his neck, blinking back the mist gathering in my eyes. "I missed you so much."

Lifting his hand, he threads his fingers through my hair and uses the hold to pull my head back so that he can look at me.

The hair lining his cheeks and jaw has been left to grow, and his usually neatly done hair looks tousled.

“It felt like my chest had been torn in two, and the insides scooped out and ripped to shreds.” His mixed gray eyes roam over my face. “I thought I wouldn’t be seeing you again.”

I go to bury my face in his neck once more, wanting to feel close and have every part of me touching him, but he uses the grip on my hair to stop me.

His gaze is searching as it trails my face as if he’s looking for something, the answer to the question on his mind.

“Go wait for me in one of the bedrooms.”

I stare at him with disbelief, my mouth dropping open.

Did he seriously just tell me to wait for him in a bedroom after all I just went through?

Hurt and angry words sit on the tip of my tongue, and I’m about to spit them out at him and tell him that *he* can go wait in a bedroom, but then I see it – the sparkle in his eyes, the slightest hint of a smile on his lips. He wanted to get a reaction out of me.

But there was also something else, a moment of vulnerability and relief.

“It’s me,” I whisper, reassuring him. “I’m still me.”

Phoenix’s gaze turns tender as he releases a deep breath and drops his forehead to mine. “Are you okay? Did they do anything to you?”

“No.”

The front door opens and closes again, and Phoenix shifts a little to see who it is. I hear my new friend Harold greet the others in here, and I finally notice Phoenix’s father sitting across the room with another woman next to him, who I assume to be Phoenix’s mother.

My eyes widen in surprise. His mother is a WOUN?

I’ve been informed of his father’s involvement in my being released and what they do to help women like me, and I am extremely grateful to him. My suspicion of him knowing what I was turned out to be accurate. However, what he wanted to do with that information was completely wrong.

“Thank you,” I tell him when his eyes land on me, still finding it odd to be talking to men other than Phoenix.

Phoenix releases my hair and helps me slide down his body until I’m on my feet again, and his arm is around my shoulders. But as if he’s afraid I’ll disappear on him again, he tightens his grip on me and holds me closer.

“Harold phoned me earlier when you and I were talking, Phoenix.” Allard pushes to his feet and pulls the woman beside him along with him. “He informed me he could get Avery out today and was bringing her here. She was the one who said that you knew what she was and had kept it quiet.”

“It took a little longer this time,” Harold adds. “The person who reported her wanted proof that the procedure had been done and she was *fixed*, so I had to work something out.”

A shiver runs down my spine at the thought of someone being that determined to have me changed to a normal woman.

“Do you think it was Thomas?” I ask, glancing up at Phoenix.

He’s quick to shake his head. “No. He tried to help me figure out who did it and where I could find you.”

“He did, did he?” Allard asks, sounding impressed. “That’s good to know. The more people we have on our side, the better. Things won’t be changing any time soon, but maybe one day.”

I lean my head against Phoenix’s chest, thinking about the crazy possibility of change someday and what that would even look like. Phoenix rubs up and down my arm but pauses when his father and mother stop in front of us.

“Go, reconnect.” He tilts his head toward the hallway. “We’ll talk more later. Come on, Elliana.”

The woman who called herself Rayne, as well as Elliana, Phoenix’s mother, both offer me friendly smiles as they pass, which I return, even though my heart skips a beat and my first thought is to double-check my surroundings.

“I look forward to getting to know you,” Elliana says, and I suck in a sharp breath.

Being free to talk to each other openly in front of others or even do something as simple as smile at each other in front of these men is both unusual and exciting. *Exhilarating.*

I dip my chin at her and then turn to Phoenix once the door closes, wanting to ask him questions. But the words are stolen from my throat when his lips connect with mine in a hungry kiss. Okay, reconnect first and talk after.

His hands fly up to grip the sides of my face, and once he's angled it for better access, he plunges his tongue into my mouth.

Flutters instantly fill my insides, and the heat he always ignites gathers between my legs.

The kiss is raw desperation mixed together with need.

Fear and worry over what could have happened these past few days.

Relief and reassurance that we're back together.

I reach to take a handful of his shirt, eager to pull him closer, but he goes a step further by dropping an arm to wrap around my waist and lifting me.

With his arm banded around me, he takes us down the hall and into one of the rooms. The hungry demand of his lips doesn't cease until he's falling with me onto the bed, then he's trailing kisses up and down my neck, sucking and biting, threading his fingers into my hair.

"It feels like an eternity since I felt the softness of your skin," Phoenix breathes against my neck. Then, lifting his head, he looks down at me, brushing the back of his fingers against my cheek. "An eternity since I got to peer into your unique eyes. You're never leaving my fucking sight again."

I want to protest his statement simply to be contrary and have my own say on it, even if I don't want to leave him either. But instead of giving any remark on the matter, I lift my head and catch his bottom lip with my teeth, tugging it before licking it, my eyes locked on his the whole time.

A low groan vibrates from his chest, and he takes my throat in his hand, gently squeezing and holding his thumb over my pulse, which has picked up speed. I don't think I'll ever get sick of him doing that.

The smallest swivel of his hips has his hard cock grinding directly on my clit, drawing a soft moan from my throat that seems to be a stimulant for him, not that he needed one. He nips at my jaw, his hands everywhere.

“I need to fuck you hard first, then I'll take my time with your body.”

I chew on my bottom lip, watching as he quickly pushes off me only so he can tug at my pants and underwear until they're off, then slide my shirt up and over my head. His shirt and pants are next, and then he's coming back down on top of me.

I welcome the weight of him, wrapping my legs around him while running my hands over the hardened muscles of his arms and shoulders. It really does feel like it's been an eternity. I would assume it's because I'm a WOUN and feel things differently, but Phoenix feels this way, too.

Shifting his body, he lines himself up with my opening, but instead of thrusting inside, he holds still. The pressure from just the tip drives me crazy.

“Let me know now if you don’t think you can handle it.”

I use the hold my legs have on him to try and urge him forward as a way of answering him without words. Of course, his body doesn’t even move an inch.

“I can handle anything from you,” I murmur.

That seems to do the trick, and he pushes inside all the way, sending my body a few inches up the bed. My back arches at the sudden intrusion, and the pressure from him filling me up so thoroughly forces the air from my lungs with a cry.

He pulls out most of the way and then thrusts back in with more force than the first time, doing it again and again. I moan at the sensation, digging my fingers into his biceps. The veins running the length of his arms swell with the effort to hold his upper body up while propelling his hips forward at a punishing pace.

The grays of his eyes have joined together to make them darker in appearance as he stares down at me, almost like a man who is possessed. In all the times we’ve had sex, he’s never looked quite this intense. I can handle it, though. I was versed in all types of sexual appetites.

I match his thrusts, tilting my hips to meet each impale. Our racing breaths mix in the space between us until he lowers his lips to mine, capturing the moan that was about to break free. He ravishes my mouth, stroking my tongue with his.

“Fuck,” he rasps against my lips. “I will never get over the feel of you wrapped around my cock.”

Reaching up, he grips my hair in his fist and tilts my head so that he has better access to my neck. My eyes drift shut as he bites at the soft flesh, all the while still pounding into me. My body feels like a live wire, and he's sending currents of pleasure through it.

I scrape my nails down his back, sending a wave of goosebumps to the area, and he groans into the crook of my neck. A light layer of sweat has already developed, coating both our bodies. His and mine mixed together.

Suddenly, he's pulling out and flipping me onto my stomach, causing me to gasp in surprise. Taking hold of my hips, he lifts me until my ass is in the air, but my face is still lowered. I expect him to push back inside immediately, but I'm pleasantly surprised when I feel his hot breath there instead.

His tongue lands on my sensitive flesh, flicking my clit a few times before licking all the way up to my backside, where he spends a moment circling it. It's an interesting feeling, for sure.

After another few swipes, he shifts, and his tongue is replaced by his cock, eager to be inside me once more. With the same force as before, he thrusts back in. If it weren't for his hands holding my hips steady, I would have been propelled forward.

Gasps and grunts fill the air as he pummels into me from behind.

Minutes pass before he releases my hips, only so that he can lean forward and take a wrist in each hand, then spread them

out above my head, pinning them to the mattress. His hard, warm body curved over mine blankets me in warmth.

“Who do you belong to, Avery?” Phoenix murmurs in my ear, running his thumbs over the ink on my forearms.

My core clenches tight at the low rumble of his voice and his use of my name. I moan into the mattress, my eyes drifting shut. But they fly open on a gasp in the next second when his teeth sink into my earlobe, trying to get my attention.

“I asked you a question.” He thrusts harder.

I feel delirious, the rough sensations taking over my body in the best way.

Somehow, I manage to respond, “You. I’m yours.”

He hums his approval, his thrusts beginning to lose their rhythm as he loses whatever control he has.

Each drag against my inner walls has me climbing closer to the edge, only intensifying when his fingers move to my clit to rub over it. Pleasure-filled tingles spread throughout my body right before I crest, and then I’m tipping over the edge, falling into a state of pure bliss as I orgasm.

My body trembles as the waves of pleasure continue to crash over me, the noises coming out of my mouth sounding nothing like me.

Phoenix follows closely behind, his release sounding wild and untamed as he lets out a growl with his forehead pressed to my shoulder. His hips slow, but they don’t cease their

movements, continuing to grind into me from behind while he pulses and pours himself into me.

With each labored breath, his weight on top of me increases, causing my legs to give out until he's sandwiched me between him and the mattress. Our bodies are slick with sweat, and I can feel his heartbeat pressed into my back, racing as fast as mine.

Lifting onto his elbows, he brushes the damp hair away from the side of my face and presses a gentle kiss there. My eyes are still closed, the remnants of the powerful orgasm still fizzling away.

"I hope you didn't plan on leaving this bed because my cock is staying right where it is."

A small pump of his hips follows the statement like he's reminding me that he's still buried deep inside me. As if I needed the reminder that he's still thick and hard, and I'm very much full of him.

He remains that way as he begins tracing the tattoos on my arms, his top half slightly lifted off me while the bottom half is pressed into me. My breathing has steadied, but my limbs feel jelly-like.

"Tell me what happened when they took you."

My eyes flutter open, and I try to lift and angle my head to see his face. "Right now?"

"Yes." His gaze drifts over me, his fingers now trailing a path down my arms to my shoulder blades. "I told you this is

where I'm staying. I have plans to go slow with you next, but right now, I want to hear what happened.”

I return my cheek to the mattress and close my eyes once more, sucking in a deep breath while I recall the day they took me and everything that happened.

Chapter 36

Avery -3 Days Earlier

I shove the milk back into the fridge, my frustration at being stuck inside growing with each passing day. He didn't even listen to me this morning. He simply said *no*. Blowing out a breath, I clean up the kitchen, making loud noises and banging things around as I go, just because I can.

He can watch me if he wishes. It's the same thing every day.

With a sigh, I head to the bedroom to make the bed and gather the clothes to put into the laundry. Phoenix always tells me I don't need to do these things, but I need to keep busy the whole day so that it goes by quicker.

Plus, there is still a small part of me that likes doing those things for him. He chose me to be his normal companion, and since he didn't exactly get that, the least I could do, is tidy up.

Walking into the bathroom, I slip off my robe and place it next to the sink, leaving me in a tank top and shorts. Then I

pick up the clothes on the floor by the tub, my eyes lingering on the candles lining the side of it for a moment.

He gave me a massage last night and then ran a bath for us. His fingers had stroked and played with me for so long that I lost count of how many times I came with his name on my lips.

No matter what, he's always trying to please and entertain me when he's here. It's just the days when he's not around that I find lonely and almost unbearable.

The faint sound of the front door keypad lock being pressed reaches me just as I go to grab my robe, and my head swings toward the doorway. He's back. Either because he decided to take me with him after all, or he's staying home for the day.

My heart flutters excitedly in my chest, and I drop the clothes back on the floor. A smile takes over my face as I rush down the hallway toward the foyer, ready to jump into his arms.

But just as I round the corner, an unfamiliar voice speaks, causing my smile to drop instantly.

Three men wearing casual clothes stand just within the front door, each of them looking at something on a clipboard one of them is holding and pointing at. The one with the clipboard wears glasses and has on light brown pants and a white shirt. One of the others has a crooked nose and is wearing jeans and a shirt with weird patterns on it I don't like. And the other one has jeans on but has a suit jacket on as well.

Despite what they're wearing, there is something about their look that tells me they're important, and the clothes are a disguise of some sort.

A second later, all of them look up at me with serious expressions.

"Can I help you with something?" I ask, my tone neutral and face blank, though my insides are clashing together with worry.

"Miss Avery," one of them says. "You need to come with us."

The floor feels like it's sinking beneath me while the walls are caving in. My biggest fear is being realized; I've been found out, and they're going to either get rid of me or try and change me.

No, no, no, *no*.

My body is heavy as I step toward them, but I force it to move and keep my expression the same, not wanting to give any indication that I'm not normal voluntarily.

Maybe there is a chance I can fool them into believing it to be true, that I'm simply a normal woman. Surely there must be times when they've been wrong and returned the woman unharmed?

I don't ask questions. I don't behave concerned or worried. I swallow it all down and act, almost choking on the panic as I let them lead me downstairs to a black car with blacked-out windows.

No one says a thing until they're directing me to get into the back seat, and then two of the men sit on either side of me. I feel so small and out of place, so alone. It's hard not to fidget with my hands or start crying. But if there is any chance at all of getting out of this, I *need* to keep up the act.

Black glass blocks where the driver is sitting and the side windows, making it so that I can't see outside. So, I just stare at a white spec of dust on the glass, not moving my sights from it and barely breathing as we drive. Each turn we make has the dread in my stomach growing substantially until it almost forces its way up my throat.

Finally, we come to a stop. I'm not even sure how long we were driving for. When you're faced with the end of your life, as you know it, time seems to do funny things.

As I wait for my next orders, an image of Phoenix flashes before my eyes, and then I'm doused with another layer of fear and worry. What if they figure out he knew, and he gets into trouble for keeping me secret? What will happen to him?

The back door opens, and the man to my right gets out, then I'm being pushed to get out by the man on my left. I slide along the seat until I'm on my feet, making sure to keep a blank smile on my face.

"You're not fooling anyone. We know you're a defect," one of them mutters.

My stomach tumbles to the ground, but I refuse to give in. The smile stays in place, and I continue staring ahead.

I can't tell where we are without looking around, but there are tall buildings surrounding us, so we must still be in the city.

Both my arms are gripped, and then I'm pulled toward the door of the building we're standing in front of.

A sign that reads 'Emerald Trust Bank' is written above the door.

Phoenix had some books in the desk drawer in his office that I used to sneakily read throughout the day when he was at work before he found out about me. One of those books had information on banking and investments, so I'm somewhat familiar with what a bank is.

I have no idea why they would be bringing me to one, but as we get closer, I'm able to make out the smaller sentence written underneath.

'We Offer Unique Networking.'

WOUN.

They must be pretending to be a bank. But what happens if men actually come here to do their banking?

The answer to my question is provided the next moment when we walk through the doors. Everything is set up exactly as a normal bank would be, and there are, in fact, customers inside. They're not pretending to be a bank in here. They *are* a bank. Or at least this part of the building is.

We turn to the elevators off to the side and step inside once the door opens. Out of the corner of my eye, I notice the man

who doesn't have a grip on me wave a card over a black panel on the wall, causing a little compartment to open with a bunch of buttons on it.

That's all I'm able to see without it being obvious that I'm paying attention to it. When the elevator starts moving, it feels like we're going down instead of up, so where they're taking me must be hidden below the building.

Anxiety starts taking over. At this point, my body feels almost numb. I want to close my eyes and take a deep breath, but that would give too much away. So, I find a tiny dot on the door that is completely out of place to focus on and start counting in my head.

"I know I've said it before, but they should just sell these defects to the circus or something. Have some kind of freak show. I'm sure plenty of men would be lining up to pay to see em'."

That comes from the man on my left who wears the glasses. The man with the crooked nose on my right doesn't seem impressed and simply grunts in response. Being sold to a circus would probably be better than what's about to happen to me.

The elevator comes to a stop, and the door opens to reveal a long hallway lined with several doors. The grips they have on my arms tighten as if they think I'll try to run, and I'm pulled through the door. Have others before me tried to escape?

I think back to the woman I knew from the facility who was discovered and sent to be changed. Is this where she was

brought?

Coming to a stop in front of one of the doors, I suck in a silent deep breath, my practiced smile still in place while one of them enters something on the keypad.

I'm pushed through the door as soon as it opens, and then it shuts behind me.

My eyes briefly travel around the bright room until I spot the camera in the top corner. I quickly resume my blank stare and go sit in one of the two chairs in the opposite corner, keeping my eyes fixed ahead. There's absolutely nothing in here to look at anyway besides the camera and chairs. It's a small, square room with a white floor, white walls, and no windows.

Time goes by slowly. So slowly that my nerves start wreaking havoc on my mind. I was wrong about there only being two chairs and a camera in here. There is also a clock somewhere on the wall behind me, ticking loudly with each second. It reminds me of the one at Phoenix's place before he took it down for me.

Tick ... tick ...tick.

I want to get up and stretch. I want to bury my head in my hands and let my emotions out. I want to throw the clock to the ground so it will stop counting down the seconds until I am no more. I want to curl up into a ball.

But I don't do any of that. I have to believe that if I'm behaving normally the entire time, that someone will be fooled

enough to send me home. So, I sit and stare at the wall, waiting for something to happen.

As time goes by, many thoughts start popping into my head, like whether or not Phoenix realizes I'm gone yet. And if he is aware, does he care, or is he actually relieved? What if he was the one who reported me?

The second that thought pops up, I dismiss it. My heart knows that he wouldn't do that. I know he likes it when I challenge him and when I talk back. The way his eyes light up gives it away, whether he realizes it or not.

More time passes, maybe an hour, maybe three. I can't tell anymore. But my body is screaming at me to move around. I'm slowly losing the will to keep this up. I doubt it will have any effect on what they plan to do to me.

Just when I'm about to get up, the door to the room opens. My heart starts galloping inside my chest, and my breath gets stuck in my lungs. I only force myself to exhale when it starts to burn.

The man comes and sits on the other chair that's almost facing me. I can tell he's one of the men who came and got me. The one with the glasses who was carrying the clipboard and made the circus comment.

For a moment, I'm unsure whether I should turn to him or stay staring at the wall. Do I ask him a question or keep quiet?

I decide to remain the same way I am and wait.

“You’re quite stubborn, but you can stop with the act now. We already know.” I can see him gesture up toward the ceiling. “See that camera there? They like to watch and see how long it takes for you to break. It’s just fun for them. It doesn’t change anything for you.”

I can feel the burning behind my eyes from tears that want to form. They think this is fun and games? This is my *life*. I blink a few times and bite my tongue to stop me from reacting in any way. He leans into my space, staring at me while I remain unmoving.

“I could do this *all* day,” he tells me in a not-so-nice voice. A minute passes, and I see him do something with his watch while still looking at me. “Okay, listen to me carefully, Avery, because we only have a very short window. Do not react to anything I’m about to say. Don’t look at me. Just stay as you are. I’ve temporarily disabled the sound so they can’t hear me, but they can still see us.”

My heart skips a beat as I absorb what he just said. What is he telling me?

“My name is Harold. I’m working on a way to get you out of here the way you are. They know you’re a WOUN, and nothing you do will change that. I know you’re probably scared, but just know that you’re not alone. Like you, I have to act a certain way so they don’t suspect anything.”

The tears that I was determined to hold back earlier fill my eyes but don’t spill over. This time, they’re from an

overwhelming sense of relief. Is he really here to help me?
How is he going to get me out?

“Unfortunately, you’ll be in this room for a while longer. But once you’ve been moved, we’ll have a chance to talk more, okay? Blink twice if you understand.”

I blink twice, still shocked at what he said but feeling beyond relieved.

“It may take a few days, but you’ll be safe with me here. The sound is about to turn back on, but we’ll talk more later.”

Leaning back in his chair, he pulls a clipboard onto his lap, which I didn’t notice he had before, then clicks on a pen.

“Now, was anyone else aware that you were a WOUN?”

Since he said they already know and nothing I do matters, I turn to him, looking him straight in the eye. “No.”

Chapter 37

Phoenix

We step out onto the covered wooden deck outside the back door sometime later, finding my father sitting in one of the chairs looking out into the lush garden where my mother and sister are standing and talking by a pond.

He turns to us a moment later, his eyes focused on Avery when he tilts his head toward the other women. “Why don’t you go visit with them for a bit.”

She turns and looks up at me, a mixture of excitement and nerves forming the smile on her face right before she walks toward the stairs that lead to the grass and then over to the garden where they’re standing.

My eyes stay glued to her the entire time. Partly because I don’t want to lose sight of her so shortly after getting her back and partly because I just can’t help myself from raking my eyes over her body and remembering how it felt to be inside

her not long ago. Her hair is still a little wild from having my hands in it.

I don't recognize the clothes she's wearing, so they must have given them to her to wear at the place she was held. Hearing her story about what happened the day she was taken and how scared she was gave me the compulsion to storm into that place and make them all pay. But I know that would end badly for more than just Avery and myself. The only thing that made it marginally better was that she had Harold there with her.

"Come, sit," my father says, pulling my attention.

I walk over to the chair he indicated to and settle in. For a minute, we sit in silence, just watching the women as they converse. To say this whole situation is bizarre is an understatement. My life was normal a couple of months ago, with no women to speak of. I was happily working my way up in the company.

Now, here I am, watching three WOUNs interact just like men would, one of which I can't imagine my life without. And apparently, I have that same blood running through me.

Avery was pleasantly surprised to learn that piece of information.

"What now?" I ask.

I can see him turn to me from the corner of my eye. "That all depends on you. She would be happy here if you chose to

leave and go back to the city. You could pretend none of this exists.”

Avery glances around the area at that moment with a small smile brightening her features. Then she looks over her shoulder in our direction before returning to the conversation. I’m sure she would be happy here, roaming free and having friends to talk to. But being separated from her and forgetting this place exists is preposterous.

“I’m not leaving her here without me.”

“Then you could take her back to the city. But she may get fed up with being hidden away most of the time and having to pretend for the rest.”

That was already beginning to happen. I could see it in her eyes each day I would come home to her. The day Avery was taken, she had been frustrated when I didn’t allow her to go with me. It’s just like keeping a precious jewel locked away in a drawer and being the only one to open it and look at it before putting it back away.

I lean forward, resting my elbows on my knees and clasping my hands together while still watching Avery.

“What is the third option?”

“You do what I do. Live between both worlds.” I finally tear my eyes away from her to look at him. “It can be tough when you’re used to being free out here and become lax. Then suddenly, you’re back in the real world where you have to be careful. There is also a lot of driving involved.”

“She’s worth it,” I reply.

There is no distance I wouldn’t go for her, so the driving is a non-issue. As for living between the two worlds, I think we could make it work. We were already trying to be on guard anytime we weren’t at home. We would just have to double down on our efforts.

A smile that will probably take me some time to get used to lifts the corner of his mouth at my response. It almost makes him look younger, somehow. Or maybe I’m just looking at him in a different light.

Turning serious again, he glances back out at the women. “You need to be extra careful, though, since we still don’t know who reported her. They may be keeping a closer eye on her even though they’ve already been told it was a success and she’s been returned.”

I suck in a deep breath, nodding my head. I know this situation is not over. I’m not sure if it ever will be, and by choosing to keep her, I’m accepting this fate.

“What made you decide to keep her – my mother – after you found out what she was?” I ask. “Besides being attracted to her.”

His look becomes tender as he watches my mother, and then his hand lifts to rest on his chest, rubbing slowly back and forth.

“I felt it deep in here. I knew there would be an unbearable ache if I didn’t have her. And yet, it almost feels like it will

burst when she's around. In a good way, of course." After a pause of him getting lost in the thought, he adds, "Regular men with normal women don't get to experience this. But you no doubt have similar feelings."

My eyes land back on Avery. "I do."

I just lived through that ache of not having her around and fearing I would never have her back. It's something I wish never to experience again.

On the other hand, I don't ever want to live without the feelings evoked by staring at her right now.

A sigh escapes my father's lips.

"I'm not sure what to do about your sister," he comments, changing the subject. "Rayne has only ever interacted with the men here at the compound, but lately, she's been expressing interest and asking questions about what other men out there are like and what it's like in the city."

My eyes flicker to the woman with the long black hair, my sister – yet another one of the completely unexpected revelations from today that are slowly sinking in. I have no doubts that had she been raised at the facility, she would have already been chosen as a companion.

"I can't exactly take her there with me," he says, palming the side of his face. "And the only men who come here or know about this place are ones who have women already. We can't simply ask a regular man if he's sympathetic to WOUNs and

whether or not he'd like to have one. Sending her to a facility to be chosen is out of the question.”

I lean back in my chair and bring an ankle up to rest on my opposite knee.

“Then she has to remain here as she is. Bring her some books if she wants to learn more about life and men.”

My father's chuckle reaches my ears, and I turn to see him smiling at me again. It's almost disconcerting to see.

“It's not that simple, Phoenix,” he replies. “I can no more keep her trapped and unhappy here than I can keep a WOUN hidden away in the city.” He sighs again, watching as the women head our way. “A problem for another day.”

Avery reaches us first, her eyes alight and glowing, making my chest tighten as it often does around her.

“This is so amazing, Phoenix. I can't believe a place like this exists.”

Her eyes make a quick detour to my father as if she's still uncertain about talking freely in front of him. It's understandable. She's lived a life of hiding who she is besides when she's with me, and she's never experienced speaking in front of men like this.

“I'd like it if you could stay here for dinner. I can drive you both back to the city afterward since I'll be heading there anyway. I need to be at the office tomorrow.” My father looks between the both of us. “It will give you both a chance to meet

some of the others here. Of course, if you'd rather not, I can have someone take you back now."

Something about the expectant look on his face tells me he'd like it if I didn't refuse his offer. I can't help but wonder what it was like for him, always leaving part of his family behind, whether it was them when he was with me or the other way around. It must have been hard all of those years.

I glance up at Avery, whose smile seems to have gotten even wider as she comes and sits on the armrest beside me.

"Alright. We'll stay."

He appears pleased and gives a nod of acknowledgment before his attention turns to the other two when they join us.

Rayne moves to lean against the railing, choosing to remain standing, but my mother makes herself comfortable in the chair beside my father, and then she looks between me and Avery, a curious expression on her face.

"You know, if you two have a child, they will most likely carry the gene as well."

I stare back at her, unblinking. A kid? I wasn't even planning on having sex with Avery initially, so a child was never in my thoughts. But now? I must say, I don't find the thought to be unappealing. In fact, the idea of impregnating Avery stirs something primal inside me.

I shake the thought away. Now is not the time to bring a child into our lives, but maybe sometime in the future.

“He only just picked her, sweetheart,” my father tells her. “They need to have some time together alone.”

“They need to be informed of it regardless,” she counters, reminding me of how Avery sometimes responds to me. My father then, of course, straightens up and argues his point again – such a strange thing to experience.

I interject, putting an end to their conversation. “We will worry about the gene when we decide the time is right to have a child.” Then, after glancing up at Avery, my gaze returns to my mother. “There is something I’ve been curious about. What does the song mean?”

My mother’s big brown eyes drop to my arms, then Avery’s, scanning over the notes as she considers my question.

“There are no words to it. At least, not that I was ever taught. It’s more about the feeling the melody evokes. It was composed by a WOUN many, many years ago when she was at a facility.”

“It’s a story of passion,” Rayne speaks up from her spot off to the side. “Two people finding each other and escaping the life they live to be free.”

I glance at Rayne momentarily, noting the wistful look on her face before my eyes drift down to the tattoo inked on my forearm.

There were definitely feelings that had come to life in me the first time I had heard Avery playing it through the door,

though I didn't understand what they meant or why it had seemed so familiar to me.

“Shortly after she wrote it, she was discovered and taken away to be changed. Unfortunately, she didn't make it.”

A quietness settles over us as we take in the harsh reality of what could happen to any one of the women here, what could have easily happened to Avery. I take her hand in mine and hold it tight. She's okay. She's here.

Rayne pushes off the railings and steps closer to us. “Avery, I'm glad nothing bad ended up happening to you.” It's as if her mind went to the same place mine did. Taking a seat in one of the empty chairs, she then turns to me. “So, you do the same job as father?”

Before I can answer her, my father speaks up. “He is not taking you to the city, Rayne.” Pushing to his feet, he heads for the back door of the house and looks back at me. “Come on. Let's go and meet some of the others here.”

Chapter 38

Phoenix

It's an odd feeling being back at work as if nothing has changed.

As if the world I live in isn't an illusion created by those who don't want WOUNs to roam free.

As if my father is still the man I thought he was.

As if I didn't just spend four days losing my mind when I didn't have Avery with me.

But somehow, having answers to many questions that I didn't even really know I had has me feeling more at ease than I would have thought. It also helps to know that we aren't alone in all of this and that there is someone on the inside looking out for WOUNs.

Avery has been glowing ever since meeting the other women out there and has had a peaceful air about her. We stayed for a meal as promised last night, and then my father brought us back to the city.

“Glad we’re in agreement,” my grandfather says from across his desk, bringing my mind back to the meeting in his office. He looks especially cocky today. His aging self is buried away for the sake of his business image.

Mark lifts his mug filled with coffee from the desk and takes a long sip while turning his attention to me.

“I had an interesting conversation with Jonah the other day,” he states, looking more amused than anything else. “Seems you’ve made quite the impression on him.”

“Oh?” I remark, remaining unfazed.

I note my grandfather’s scowl turn toward me out of the corner of my eye, probably ready to lash out if it appears I’ve acted inappropriately. But then his phone rings, and he excuses himself to answer it and walks toward the window.

“He seems to think you had something to do with his latest deal falling through.” Mark’s brow rises in question as he waits for me to answer.

“That’s quite the influence he’s suggesting I have. Why would I have any interest in his business?”

A smirk pulls at his lips. “Listen, I don’t give a fuck what you did to him. He’s a small man with a small mind. Always scrambling to chase after the big guys.” After placing his mug back on the desk, he pulls his suit jacket from the back of his chair. “The only reason I keep him around is because I have certain proclivities that involve two women at once, and he gives me his woman to have sex with whenever I like.”

Mark winks at me and rises to his feet just as my grandfather ends his call and joins us again. I can't tell if I'm more surprised by his admission or the fact that he knew about my interaction with Jonah and couldn't care less. Either way, that's good information to have.

"What's this about Jonah and Phoenix?" my grandfather asks, flicking his gaze between us.

"Nothing important," Mark replies, gathering a few of his papers and laying his jacket over his arm. "Jonah is easily intimidated." Reaching across the desk, he shakes my grandfather's hand and then mine. "I'll call next week about my personal project."

I walk with him to the door, intending to return to my own office, but my grandfather calls to me right before I walk through, halting my steps. I pull the door shut after Mark leaves and take a couple of steps back toward his desk. He's probably still interested to hear about what happened with Jonah.

I blow out an inaudible sigh and cross my arms, waiting for his questions.

"I've been informed that Avery has been returned to you now."

I stare at him, blinking a few times as the words he just said run through my head, once, twice. How the fuck would he even know she was gone or that she was supposedly returned?

Unless ...

“I gave you a chance to do the right thing,” he says, sitting at his desk and clasping his hands together in front of him.

A whooshing sound fills my ears, and I feel the rush of anger start in my head, then it makes its way through my body until every muscle and every limb is completely tense. My folded arms drop, and I grip the back of the chair to keep myself grounded, my knuckles turning white with how tightly I’m clutching it.

“You knew.”

“I saw her playing the piano on your laptop when you stepped out and left it open one day,” he replies.

Pain shoots through the inside of my cheek when I sink my teeth into the flesh there. That was the day I found out what she was and went home to confront her, carelessly leaving my laptop open. Thomas had told me my grandfather went into my office, but when he didn’t confront me, I assumed he didn’t see it. I ruled him out as being a possibility in all of this because of it.

“I didn’t immediately call them because I wanted to give you the chance to find out for yourself if you didn’t know and take care of it yourself, quietly. I had hoped that forcing you to bring her to that meeting would encourage you to do it sooner rather than later if you were aware. But when we were there, I could tell that you did, in fact, know about her and that you hadn’t dealt with it, nor did it appear that you would. It was a test of sorts, and you failed. Fortunately, your work has been even better than it was before.”

I nod slowly, calm in appearance. Meanwhile, on the inside, I'm picturing wrapping my hands around his bony neck and choking him to death.

Sucking in a deep breath, I ask, "Why didn't you tell them I knew?"

"Don't be ridiculous." He waves a hand in dismissal. "I wouldn't report my own grandson, and I wouldn't allow them to do anything to you. I just needed her dealt with, and I'm happy to hear it was a success. Now, your focus will be even better. And our peers are none the wiser."

I hate that he's talking about Avery like she's not an intelligent, beautiful person who doesn't mean the fucking world to me. If it weren't for my father and the group of men working with him, she would have been forever changed, conformed to fit his standard of what is acceptable.

Casually, he turns toward his computer like he's returning to work and didn't just drop a bomb on me. I'm seething, barely able to hold myself back as I stare daggers through him.

I need to remain in control, though. If I act irrationally and do something stupid, I will likely lose my job and any connections I've made. My position allows me more freedom and possibilities, and I can use that to help my father. My actions would affect him as well.

I force my hands to release the chair and breathe deeply, trying to settle my turbulent insides. I have to consider what this means for us. We know who it was who reported her now. It's no longer some faceless mystery we have to look out for.

And he believes she has been changed. Technically, he did nothing wrong. In fact, he made sure nothing happened to me.

It doesn't take away the feelings of being blindsided by him, but it does help me feel slightly less murderous toward him. I turn without saying a word, walking to the door.

Just as I reach for the handle, he speaks again. "It was for your own good. You know that, right?"

Gritting my teeth, I don't even bother facing him again and dip my head once before stepping out and heading to my office. It's better if I let him believe I agree with him.

Once inside, I engage the newly installed lock to my office and then slump into the chair behind my desk.

"I'm back."

The bathroom door opens, and out walks Avery, dressed in a pink sundress, looking like a fucking ray of sunshine. The storm that was brewing inside me begins to settle, and my tense muscles slowly start releasing.

I still have her. She's fine.

Avery approaches me, her features turning concerned when she observes my furrowed brows and serious face.

"What's wrong?" she asks, stepping into the space between my legs.

I pull her to me, holding her close with my hands on her ass and letting her proximity soothe me.

"It was my grandfather. He's responsible for reporting you."

I feel her body go still in my arms. “Really?”

“He saw you on my laptop the same day I did.”

I’m still not quite sure why he didn’t immediately come to me and tell me what she was and demand I turn her in. A test, he had said. Perhaps because his woman had turned out to be a WOUN, and he wanted to know if I’d do the same as him.

“Well, I guess it’s good that we now know who it was.” She drags her nails down my back, but I can hardly feel it through my suit jacket. “You had thought it was your father at one point, so it shouldn’t be too surprising that it was your grandfather, right?”

I hum in response, looking up at her. “You seem awfully calm about this.”

A shrug lifts her shoulders. “I do feel calm.”

Exhaling, I lean back in my chair, my gaze still glued to her alluring eyes that look a little more lavender today.

“I guess it’s better to know one’s enemy rather than live in fear of the unknown. But I don’t feel calm.”

I feel worked up, like I need some sort of release.

An ever-present desire for her simmers below the surface, where I usually keep it in check. Otherwise, I’d be taking her multiple times a day. But ever since I got her back, I’ve been allowing it to seep to the surface more often, letting instinct take over no matter where we are.

I keep my eyes fixed on Avery as I shift my hands from her ass and run my fingers up along the skin of her thigh, dragging her dress up with them and then back down again. I repeat the process, going a little higher the next time.

The corners of her lips pull to the side right before she scrapes her teeth over the bottom one. She knows my intention before a word is even spoken.

Reaching for her hands, I tug until she's lowering herself to the ground. Immediately, her fingers are working on my belt, and soon, she has my pants undone and open.

"Do you want me to taste you?" she asks, a coy smile on her lips while she brushes her fingers close to my cock, but doesn't touch it.

That smile is replaced by a gasp when I thread my fingers through her hair and grip, pulling her head closer so that it's within reach of me.

"Put me in that warm mouth of yours."

Lust floods her features, her mouth parting and tempting me for a taste. Sometimes, she fights it simply because it's in her nature. Other times, she easily complies with my wishes. Either way, I know that she likes it when my orders are of a sexual nature. And I like finding out which reaction I'll get from her.

While still looking at me, she takes hold of the base of my cock, lifting it off my stomach and bringing it closer to her lips. Her pink tongue pokes out, licking up the backside of it

and making a quick swirl of the top before retreating again. A low sound rumbles from my chest.

Yes. This is exactly what I needed.

The next time her mouth opens, she takes the tip into it, wrapping those lips tightly around me, and then goes as deep as she can. Breath escapes my lungs, and euphoria is already spinning around in my head.

“You suck me so fucking good,” I mumble. “Look at you taking it all in.”

She hums her satisfaction at the praise and then goes harder, bobbing her head, suctioning her cheeks, swirling her tongue. She takes my balls into her free hand and gently tugs on them, causing tingles to spread from the area.

Pleasure floods my body, and my head drops back to face the ceiling, sucking a breath through my teeth. But I want to draw it out a little longer. I use the grip on her hair to slow her movements, but with the way her mouth is working me, going slower will not make a difference.

“Don’t make me come yet, Avery,” I order.

The ceiling transforms to darkness as my eyes drift close, and all the feelings in my cock increase. The defiant little woman has doubled her efforts instead of holding back.

I pull her off me abruptly with a gruff noise from my throat. “What did I tell you?”

She smiles, licking her lips where saliva has accumulated. “I didn’t hear you.”

In one swift move, I have her flat on her back on the desk, her startled yelp filling the office. I lean over her, teasing the pulse points on her neck before settling my hand around her throat.

Moving my mouth close to her ear, I nip at her lobe before murmuring in a low voice, “Do you hear me now?” After a quick nod of her head, I add, “I want you to come on my cock, coating it with your juices before I empty inside you. Understood?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Good.”

Sliding my hand down her body, I reach under her dress and pull her underwear to the side, stroking over her warm and wet center several times. I love that she gets this aroused from just having me in her mouth.

When I’ve gotten her worked up and squirming beneath me, I line myself up and push inside her, groaning at the sensation of it.

I continue working her clit while pumping my hips, determined to bring her to the same point as me. I need to fucking come, but she has to first. Her walls are already clenching me tight, so it seems she’s already right there with me. I just have to push her further.

Lifting her legs, I widen them, placing her feet on the edge of the desk to give myself more room. Then I thrust harder,

watching her body move up and down on my desk, and her chest rises and falls more rapidly.

“Are you ready to come for me?” I ask, returning my fingers to her clit.

Perspiration builds along my hairline and underneath my fully clothed body.

“Phoenix,” Avery whispers. “It feels so good.”

Suddenly, the phone beeps beside her head on the desk. I ignore Thomas’s page, continuing to work Avery to orgasm. But it beeps again and then again until I finally grab hold of it, bringing it to my ear.

“What?”

Avery’s eyes widen, surprised at the fact that I answered it while still very much inside her.

“What’s up with you? You looked pretty irate when you passed me.”

“I’m fine,” I rasp, not stopping my movements.

“Are you sure? Because you didn’t respond when I tried talking to you as you went by.”

A whimper escapes Avery’s lips, and I reach up to cover her mouth with my hand, pumping into her harder.

“Was there a reason you paged?” I ask, trying hard to keep the exertion and blissful feelings taking over from my voice.

I watch Avery’s eyes roll back as she starts to come, squeezing my cock in a vice-like grip while moaning into my

hand. I'm pissed I don't get to hear her.

There's a pause before Thomas speaks again, as if he just clued into what's going on.

"Uhh, Edison is here for lunch. Do you want me to tell him to give you a few minutes?"

"Yes. *Fuck.*"

I slam the phone down and bite into her shoulder as the sensations building inside me peak and then explode into an array of ecstasy. She's still coming when my cock bursts inside her. I groan through my release, my hips starting to slow while my cock finishes emptying.

The aftershocks of pleasure are still traveling through my system when my hand slips from her mouth, and I'm gifted with another small moan from her.

Pulling back, I look down at the beautiful woman beneath me who has completely messed up my life in a good way.

"Do you feel calm now?" she asks softly.

"Fuck calm. I feel euphoric."

A lazy chuckle leaves her lips. "Euphoric is good."

After a deep breath, I pull out, but instead of sending her to get cleaned up, I simply move her underwear back into place.

"I want you to feel my cum while Edison is here. You can clean yourself afterward."

Getting to her feet, she narrows her eyes at me, and I half expect her to ignore my request and head into the bathroom

anyway, but I'm pleasantly surprised when she adjusts her dress and hair, then moves around to one of the chairs on the other side of my desk.

This woman continues to surprise me and I wouldn't have it any other way.

"I'm ready."

Epilogue

Phoenix

I stand behind her, entranced by the way her fingers reach for each key, the melody pouring out smoothly as if she were one with the piano and the music itself.

Piano Concerto No.3 is no easy piece. In fact, it's one of the hardest. But you wouldn't know it listening to how easily she plays it now.

Reaching the end notes, she releases a breath, and her body slumps, her skin coated with perspiration from the energy used to create such a powerful piece.

Watching her play always causes a weird sensation in my heart, making it feel light and full at the same time. Watching her do *anything* does that. But it also causes an inexplicable need to be close to her and touch her.

I bend, tilting my head into the curve of her neck, craving a small taste. I lick first, the slight saltiness coating my tongue, before taking the flesh between my lips and sucking. Reaching

around, I splay my hands across her stomach while I kiss and soothe her neck.

“We need to leave. And I need to freshen up quickly,” she murmurs, leaning back into me just when I reach the curve of her thighs.

Sighing, I slowly remove my hands and straighten up, offering a hand to help her up. I know she’s right.

“Go. I’ll be waiting by the door.”

Using the grip on my hand, she pulls herself up, but instead of walking off right away, she tugs me lower so that she can lean in and take my bottom lip between her teeth, drawing it into her mouth. It drags a low, rumbly sound from my throat while sparks ignite inside me. A seductive smile is on her face when she pulls back abruptly and then turns around, making her way to the bathroom.

I could stop her and demand that she finish what she started, but unfortunately, there is a car waiting for us downstairs.

After watching her disappear, I shake my head and make my way to the foyer, adjusting my tux and bow-tie in the mirror, as well as my cock.

As always, my eyes gravitate to the large painting situated above it. It was one of the first large acrylic pieces she did after doing so many sketches. One that I didn’t want her to sell. She has painted and sold many since that one under a fake male name we created.

Most of her inspiration comes when she's out at the compound, but occasionally, she'll paint some here as well.

Playing the piano and painting are just two of her many talents. She seems to pick up on things quite easily, and I couldn't be more proud of her desire to try different activities.

"Okay. I'm ready," she announces, stepping into the foyer and taking my breath away.

My grip on Avery's hip tightens as we make our way further into the ballroom. No matter how many times we've come to these events, I still get agitated every time another man lays his eyes on her. Unfortunately, it's only gotten worse since those early days when I simply didn't like them doing it.

I remember having a problem with it even back when I still insisted that I didn't want or need her – how times have changed.

Leaning into me, Avery gives me her subtle reminder for me not to overreact. I glance down at her and force my grip to loosen.

Dressed in a long violet gown that matches her eyes, she's a sight to behold. Her hair is pulled into a low, twisted bun, and although I'd love to set it free and run my fingers through it, I've left it alone. No jewelry was necessary, leaving her neck completely bare, and my eyes catch on the marks I left on her skin earlier tonight, pure satisfaction making my chest expand.

It's mostly the same scene here – men dominating the space, with some of them accompanied by a female.

Avery's face is blank, that fucking empty half-smile I hate so much plastered to her lips. She has become so much better at pretending than she was before that sometimes, even I'm fooled, and I have to force her to do something just to get some sort of reaction out of her.

I know right now she's not simply staring at nothing, though. She's keeping an eye out for others like her. We've been doing our part alongside my father and the others, helping where we can right under the noses of those who work to keep things the way they are.

It's not often that we find any at events like this, but it has happened, and that's the only reason I continue to bring her along. We use any outing in the city as an opportunity to find other WOUNs, and if the chance arises, we make contact to find out if the man she's with knows about it.

Making our way through the crowd, I stop to say hello to a few of the usual before making it to my grandfather. He's standing with one of his friends, but they excuse themselves when we arrive.

“Phoenix, there you are. I have a few people to introduce you to.”

He doesn't even spare Avery a glance, which I'm grateful for. He was content with the paperwork he received and being told she was changed to 'normal' and hasn't bothered looking any deeper or checking for himself. So sure he is that he would never be deceived or lied to. I guess that works in my favor.

As long as I'm fucking her and doing my job, he seems to be happy.

"They're from up north and could be our chance to get our feet into Canada." After giving me one of his pointed looks, he adds, "Just don't screw anything up."

Only now do his eyes drift to Avery, but only for a moment, probably thinking of my biggest screw-up in *his* eyes – picking a WOUN and not having it rectified myself. Or perhaps it's the fact that I don't share her with anyone like he had wanted me to. At least he has stopped insisting on it.

"If you doubted my abilities, you wouldn't be introducing me," I respond coolly.

He grumbles something in reply and then indicates for me to follow. He knows I'm right. I've been exceeding his expectations, and for the most part, the clients he has handed over have been happy to work with me.

An hour later, several introductions have been made, and many glares have been given from me for their constant interest in Avery. We already have a few meetings arranged, so I excuse myself, pulling Avery behind me until we make it to an empty round table in a quieter area.

I'm feeling a little possessive right now after watching their eyes eat her up, plus I'd like to know if she's seen anyone who might be a potential. I'm also getting sick of her silence and want to see something more than a vacant stare from her.

I sit, tugging Avery to sit in my lap, but not perched sideways. No, I want her straddling me. That way, I can see her reactions right in front of my face. There are only restrooms behind me, so she's also in a good position to keep hidden.

The slits on either side of her dress make it so her thighs are exposed, but it doesn't cause her dress to bunch up at her waist. I immediately reach for the smooth skin, sliding my hands back and forth along the creamy surface.

Her hands land on my chest, sensually trailing a path up to my shoulders and neck. But her face is still blank as she looks somewhere past my face.

I shift her so that she's flush against my crotch, catching the quick intake of her breath when she feels me getting hard.

“Did you see any possibilities out there?”

Her lips part when I press her down harder onto me.

“No,” she whispers.

I lean forward, running my nose along the side of her cheek and inhaling.

“Edison is supposed to be here somewhere. We'll stay another hour or so, then I get to have you all to myself.”

When I pull back, I can see her pupils have dilated, and the telltale signs of lust have started to tint her cheeks pink, but she's still not looking at me, and that won't do. I take her chin between my thumb and forefinger, forcing her gaze to connect with mine.

“Do you feel how hard you make me?”

Talking to her and trying to get a reaction from her is always risky, but fortunately, we look similar to other couples who are in this area. To anyone watching, I’m simply enjoying the pleasure of having her rubbing against my cock.

There’s a glint in her eyes when she stares back at me, though – a devious intent to push me further than I had intended, with just *appearing* a certain way.

Avery lowers her hands from my shoulders, caressing my body as she goes lower and lower until she’s at the edge of my belt where she trails her finger back and forth before reaching for the buckle.

I release her chin, grabbing her wrists to stop her movements, my eyes narrowing.

“Avery,” I warn.

“Don’t you want me to feel how hard you are?” she murmurs, the smallest hint of a smile on her lips.

There was already heat traveling through my veins, but after seeing that look in her eyes, it starts reaching a boiling point, bubbling to the surface of my skin to make me feel hot all over. She likes to push my buttons as much as I do hers.

Leaning in, I press my mouth to hers, giving in to the pull of her full pink lips. My tongue peeks out to run along the seam of them until she opens up for me, and when she does, I angle my head, dipping it in to meet hers. The taste of peppermint fills my mouth, remnants of the mint she just consumed.

I swallow the moan that sneaks up from her throat while one of my hands lifts to cup her cheek. Her hips gyrate over my lap at the same time in slow, circular movements.

It would be easy to get carried away. Undo my pants and slip inside her under her dress. But I know I won't do that. My control has gotten a little better over the past few months.

I just want a little more ...

I part from her mouth, peppering her jaw with kisses, and release her other wrist, my hand returning to her thigh, rubbing back and forth.

“Phoenix,” she whispers.

“Hmm.”

I continue down her neck and back up before capturing her mouth one more time.

Avery whispers my name again, a little more urgent this time while my lips are still on her. She can't stop me from what I'm doing in case she's seen doing it. “I think I might have just seen one.”

It takes me a moment to get my mind to focus on what she said and not how my body is feeling with her heat pressed onto my cock, but the seriousness of the situation finally filters in. I shift a little, making a brief sweep of the area behind her to check if we're being watched while still leaning into her.

“Are you sure?” I ask quietly beside her ear, my cheek brushing against hers.

I run my hands up and down her arms to keep the appearance up, but my mind has moved from the direction it was heading in. There is a bigger picture than Avery and me.

“She just went into the restroom,” she murmurs, grazing her lips over my cheek. “The man she’s with is standing nearby. He keeps looking around.”

I lift her from my lap, straighten out her dress, and then stand myself. Pressing one more kiss to her lips, I turn and pull her in the direction of the restroom.

“You know what to do.”

Thank You!

Thank you, my dear reader, for taking the time to read one of my books. I truly appreciate you!

If you loved it, please consider leaving a rating and review. They help authors like me to be found!

A big, HUMUNGOUS thank you to all of my author and reader friends who have been sounding boards for me, as well as alpha and beta readers, listening to my ups and downs along the way. I love you!!!

More Books By The Author

[WRONGED](#) -Broken Souls Series

Remi:

All I wanted was to be away from the limelight, away from my parents. A perfect place where I could live a simple life.

A fresh start.

A small beach town.

That's what I thought I found, until the tortured ocean-colored eyes of the town outcast catch me off guard.

Everyone warns me to stay away from him. They tell me he's a monster.

His eyes tell another story, though, and I need to know what it is. It becomes almost an obsession.

Jacob:

A fresh start in a place where no one knows me...or so I thought. This place has become my own personal Hell. That is...until her.

She's the only one who doesn't look at me with contempt.

She tries to force her way into my life, but she's better off staying away.

She doesn't deserve this life sentence they've given me.

[WRECKED](#) -Broken Souls Series

Wrecked. It's how Jasmine Delaney found me.

The truth was, I'd been heading down a one-way street to destruction for a long time.

I raced - *illegally*. I drank - *excessively*. I slept with women - *indiscriminately*.

There was no escape in sight.

That is, until I met *her*. She made me feel whole again, nurturing my heart right along with my soul. But right when I had a reason to be a better man...I did what I always warned her about.

I wrecked it.

She should have stayed away.

***Orchids.* It's how Campbell Baxter crawled into my heart.**

The truth was, I'd been walking down a lonely path for far too long.

I loved - *passionately*. I gave - *freely*. I cared - *easily*.

There was no one worth the risk.

That is, until I met *him*. He lit my insides on fire, engulfing me in a love like I'd never felt before. But right when everything was in our favor and I'd found what I was looking for...he did what he warned me about.

He wrecked me.

I should have believed him.

[SEE YOU AGAIN](#)

Riley

While on a week's long trip in a small town for one of my best friend's bachelorette getaway, I did something I never do ... I had a one-night stand.

But I was left with more than just the amazing memories of the beautiful man I spent the night with.

With no numbers or last names exchanged, I can't exactly tell him about it either.

For all I know, he could live on the other side of the country.

Jasper

I spent an amazing night with a woman who made me feel things that I never did before. Months later, she's *still* on my mind.

But then I meet a woman who looks exactly like her, and she reminds me of her in so many ways.

Only it's not her.

Not only does she have a different name, but the biggest difference?

She's blind.

Oh, and she's pregnant.

Contact Me

Want to keep up to date with the latest and upcoming releases?
You can reach me on the following platforms:

Email: rin.sher.author@gmail.com

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