



TOUCH  
OF  
HATE

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS

C. HALLMAN  
& J.L. BECK

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Cover design by Opulent Swag and Designs

Editing by Kelly Allenby

Proofreading by Jenny Sims

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**Betrayal cuts the deepest.**

I would know better than anyone.

They never suspected me to be the villain.

That didn't matter anymore, though, because I didn't just want  
revenge, I needed it.

Leaving my old life behind, I knew I could never return, but  
there was something... no, someone I had left behind.

*Scarlet.*

Kind. Innocent. Fragile.

She was a light in the darkness of my life.

Back then, she was always meant to be mine, even if having  
her meant breaking every single rule.

Now enemies or not, she would still be mine.

# CONTENTS

1. [Ren](#)
2. [Scarlet](#)
3. [Ren](#)
4. [Scarlet](#)
5. [Scarlet](#)
6. [Ren](#)
7. [Scarlet](#)
8. [Ren](#)
9. [Scarlet](#)
10. [Scarlet](#)
11. [Scarlet](#)
12. [Ren](#)
13. [Scarlet](#)
14. [Ren](#)
15. [Scarlet](#)
16. [Ren](#)
17. [Scarlet](#)
18. [Ren](#)
19. [Scarlet](#)
20. [Scarlet](#)
21. [Ren](#)
22. [Scarlet](#)
23. [Ren](#)
24. [Scarlet](#)
25. [Ren](#)
26. [Scarlet](#)
27. [Ren](#)
28. [Ren](#)
29. [Scarlet](#)
30. [Scarlet](#)

[About the Authors](#)

[Also by the Authors](#)



## REN

“*W*hat the fuck were you thinking?” I yell at the computer screen while pacing the living room. “Attacking Aspen was not a part of the plan.”

River doesn't care that I'm upset and want to wring his neck.

He never does.

Which is half the problem. He's always doing something dangerous or violent, and he never sticks to the fucking plan.

“I don't know why you are getting your panties in a bunch. You shouldn't care about her or the rest of the Rossi family, for that matter. They're not your family; Luna and I are. No one else matters.”

“Just because they're not my family doesn't mean we need to kill them.”

“It also doesn't mean we shouldn't. They're weighing you down, distracting you from what really matters.” River shrugs before leaning back in his chair. Lifting his arms, he leisurely folds them behind his head. “Come on, Ren, you knew this was coming. I've been telling you for years.”

“You have been telling me for years that we have to get away from them and get revenge on Safe Haven; you said nothing about casualties.”

I stop pacing and flop down on the couch across from my laptop. River's black hair is longer on the top, and some strands cover half of his forehead and one eye. He's tall and

skinny, but his shoulders are wide, and his hands appear rough, the knuckles beaten and bruised like he's spent hours fighting someone.

"Casualties are unavoidable in a war. Plus, we need to keep everyone busy, so no one looks into what you are doing with your little girlfriend." The snideness in his voice makes my insides clench.

All my defenses go up. I don't like anyone knowing how I feel about Scarlet, not even River.

*Least of all River.*

"I'm not doing anything."

"No?" He smirks, but his smile is villainous. "So you're not sneaking around at night while your precious Scarlet's visiting Corium with her family, watching her every minute you can? Those stolen glances, when your gaze lingers too long. I'm sure I don't even have to mention the way you look at her when Quinton is in the room? Do you think he's blind?"

When I don't reply right away, he continues. "You should really be thanking me for taking the heat off your ass."

"Nobody is on my ass."

His grin widens. "Thanks to me."

"Whatever you say." I suppress an eye roll and get up from my seat. "I'm heading out."

"In the middle of the night? Gee, I wonder where you're going," he mocks. I ignore his dig and shut the laptop down without a goodbye.

Ever since Quinton moved in with Aspen, I've had the apartment to myself. It was also around that time when River started to visit Corium more frequently. I still haven't figured out how he gets in and out, but then again, sneaking around has always been one of his many talents.

I shut the door behind me, letting the dark silence of the hallway swallow me. Keeping my steps light, I walk down the hall and toward the elevators. The corridor is quiet, but that's expected, given the time.



Once inside, I press the S button and head to the surface. Everything here at Corium is state of the art, but even this brand-new, stainless-steel elevator takes twenty-five seconds to get me from deep inside the Alaskan ground to the surface.

As it turns out, twenty-five seconds can stretch into an eternity when you're chastising yourself. No one has to tell me what I'm doing is wrong.

I know it. Obviously, I've had every opportunity to stop this in its tracks. This being the connection I have with Scarlet.

I imagine drug addicts going through this cycle that's plagued me for months. Telling myself it's wrong and I need to quit cold turkey. No more clandestine meetings. No more secret glances and hidden smiles. One of us has to be strong. She has no intention of walking away, so it has to be me.

That attitude lasts a few days, maybe even a few weeks. I can push her out of my mind. I might even laugh at myself for ever thinking it's possible to be free of the pull she has on me.

*Then?* Something always happens to bring her rushing to the forefront once again. I'll walk in on a video call she's having with Q and hear her voice, her soft laughter. It will stir the familiar craving deep in my soul.

I'll remember the way she whispers my name. The dark thrill of her pleading for my touch. I'll savor those memories in a frantic attempt at staving off the hunger that begins to grow, to consume me, replaying them in my head while I jerk off. Doing anything I can to keep myself away from her.

Soon, memories aren't enough, and I need the real thing. She'll haunt my every waking thought until I'm sure I'll either die or go insane if I don't get a taste of her, her scent, her touch—anything, so long as the craving ceases.

My craving is at its peak by the time the elevator doors slide open with a quiet whoosh. It wouldn't seem so necessary to bask in the warmth of her nearness were she not present in the sprawling castle portion of the structure.

Having her here ratchets my need to unbearable heights. It doesn't matter how wrong I know this is as I cut down dark

halls I know like the back of my hand, always watchful for any sign of Xander Rossi's presence. Scarlet's father would cut our little meeting short, no doubt. He'd cut off my balls and dangle them in front of my face before shoving them down my throat.

All is clear when I reach what I know are the rooms the Rossi family takes when they visit. Scarlet is in there, checking the time and plotting her escape. It's late enough that Xander and Ella might be asleep—well, Ella might be. Xander is most likely working the way he nearly always is. You don't run an empire as vast as his without putting in plenty of hours.

Either way, it's unlikely he'd notice his daughter sneaking out, which is what we're counting on.

I watch, hidden in a recessed doorway a few rooms down from where Scarlet will emerge. My heart's beating way too fast, and my palms are damp with sweat, which I rub dry on my jeans. River would laugh himself sick if he had the slightest idea what anticipation does to my body as I count the seconds until she appears. My greatest weakness. My obsession.

The click of the latch might be lost if there was any other noise in the silent hall—now, it might as well be the crack of a gunshot. My breath catches in my throat as a door swings open just enough for a petite body to slip through.

The fist clenching my heart loosens at the sight of her, replaced by an explosion of pure heat. What is it about her that sets me off and makes me want to forget everything I know in favor of losing myself in her firm, luscious body?

She peers around, her gaze sliding over me without recognition, thanks to the deep shadows, before she begins creeping down the hall toward the stairwell where we're supposed to meet.

This is wrong, but then I've always known it. Following her, watching her. For years I've done it, though the motive has changed.

Back in the day, I protected the girl who was almost as much of a sister to me as Luna. She's stubborn, determined to

have her way even if it means defying her parents, leaving her open to potential threats.

After all, she has a powerful father with countless enemies lying in the wake of his business dealings. Not to mention, she's incredibly trusting.

I've learned to keep my tread light, to embrace the shadows so she won't notice my presence. It's become second nature.

Until less than a year ago...

That changed the night Xander invited the Grimaldi family to dinner. The memory presses against my temples, playing right before my eyes.

*"Where is Scarlet?"*

*Q frowns at my whispered question, cutting a glance toward his father and tonight's guest of honor. Lorenzo Grimaldi might be low-level compared to the Rossi wealth and influence, but he does control a major shipping port on the coast through which he runs tens of millions of dollars of merchandise every year. Extremely valuable merchandise of the narcotic variety.*

*In other words, it benefits Xander to keep him close. It's easier to make him think he's a part of the family. Indispensable.*

*This isn't the first such meal shared with a business connection. As always, we're all on our best behavior. A silent, respectful testament to Xander Rossi's hold over his family. There's no speaking out of turn, no joking or screwing around. No teasing our sisters for lack of anything else to do.*

*My sister picks at her grilled salmon while wearing a pleasant expression.*

*It's the empty chair beside her that has my insides tightening a bit more with every passing moment.*

*This is her home. Scarlet is entirely at liberty to go where she pleases.*

*Just not now, though. We're all expected to be at the table.*

*She knows that. That's what has me listening for the sound of her footfalls. We all know better than to wander off or be late.*

*My eye falls upon a second empty chair—it sits between Grimaldi and his wife. He's bending Xander's ear on some matter of business, murmuring and gesturing with his silverware, while she and Ella chat about place settings or some inane bullshit like that.*

*Neither of them pays attention to the absence of their son, eighteen-year-old Enzo. He looks like a fucking ferret with his thin face and pointy features. His beady eyes are always moving in a secretive sort of way that leaves red flags waving like mad in my head.*

*Even if I hadn't already heard stories of him bragging about taking over his father's business and his penchant for spreading merchandise among his lowlife friends, I'd be on my guard around him. He's the kind of guy who'll smile in your face as he's slipping your most priceless heirloom in his pocket while fondling your sister with his other hand.*

*My chest tightens at the thought. I can't make the image materialize in my head—it's that disgusting—but I don't need to see it to know it's possible.*

*Scarlet would never take this long to get back to the table if it wasn't for someone holding her up.*

*"I'll look for her," I offer, already pushing my chair away from the table while folding my napkin.*

*It wouldn't do for Xander's son to leave during the discussion of important matters, but I can take my discreet leave without raising any eyebrows.*

*Once I'm out of the dining room, I force myself to take a slow, steady breath. I've already convinced myself the bastard has forced himself on top of her, and the extreme reaction my body experiences is one I need to tamp down. My clenched fists swing at my sides, and my heart thumps against my ribs.*

*If I grind my teeth any harder, I'll need a trip to the dentist.*

*This is Scarlet. Yes, the very grown-up dress she wore tonight had me doing a double take; I can admit that to myself. Neither of her parents would allow her to walk around looking like a slut, and she doesn't, but she certainly looks older than her fifteen years.*

*At some point, when I wasn't paying attention, she developed a woman's body. Fuller, curvier, showcased to perfection in a light summer dress that's both sweet and sexy—sexy because of its sweetness, I now understand.*

*I'm a pervert even thinking this way, but facts are facts. She's grown up. Now comes a new phase of her life, one which I'm sure she believes she's ready for, though I doubt she has the first idea of what it will entail.*

*For instance, she'd never think twice about getting up to use the bathroom in her own family's home. It wouldn't occur to her that a piece of shit like Enzo Grimaldi would follow her in hopes of getting her alone.*

*I'll fucking kill him if he's touched a hair on her head.*

*"We'd better get back to the dining room."*

*I hear her before I see her. The tightness in her voice has the effect of setting a match to a fuse. A fuse connected to a powder keg. The powder keg being me.*

*My pace quickens, shoes slapping against the marble floor in a furious rhythm. Were I not this close to losing my shit, I might take pains to walk quietly and sneak up on them. It would hardly be the first time I've crept up on Scarlet over the years while watching over her stubborn ass. She's so sure she's in control of herself and that nothing can touch her.*

*She's a Rossi through and through.*

*Normally, that would leave me fighting back a proud grin.*

*Not now. I'm too busy seeing red.*

*The powder room door is open, and the room is empty.*

*"Please, leave me alone." It's coming from the library, one door down, and it's tighter and higher in pitch than before. "I mean it. We have to get back to the dining room."*

*“Why? So we can die of boredom?” he asks just as I enter. “I find the view before me to be much better.”*

*My stomach turns at the sight of Scarlet trapped on a leather sofa, her fair skin flushed, her blue eyes so large they appear to come out of her face.*

*He’s leaning over her with his much larger body trapping her, holding her in place with an arm on either side of her head. When she attempts to slip under one of those arms, he merely leans in closer, lowering his head to sniff her neck while she recoils, whimpering in fear and misery.*

*I’m no stranger to rage.*

*It’s a normal state of being for me, something I must guard myself against. It’s important that I vent it from time to time when the stakes are low so that I control it before it can control me.*

*The occasional fight, a hard workout, that sort of thing.*

*There’s no controlling this.*

*I don’t think my feet touch the floor as I fly across the room.*

*“What the hell is going on?” I demand, placing a hand on his shoulder and pulling him back. All things considered, I’m proud of myself. If I had my way, I’d tear his fucking arm off and beat him to death with it.*

*How dare he? Who the fuck does he think he is?*

*I know who he is—the son of an important family associate.*

*Which is the only reason his arm remains attached to his shoulder. Why I stop at merely pulling him away from her instead of taking the marble bust from its nearby stand and slamming it into his head.*

*“What’s your problem?” he questions, his beady eyes narrowing while he straightens out his rumpled suit jacket. “The fuck?”*

*“She wasn’t enjoying herself.”*

*Damn, I am impressed with my self-control. I'm able to speak clearly and keep my hands to myself. I jam them into my pants pockets, clenched tight, craving the feel of his face under my knuckles.*

*"And she's expected back at the table," I add in a voice choked with impotent rage. I can't believe the way I crave this asshole's blood.*

*One single look at her, and I damn near come undone.*

*She's shaking, breathless with relief. I turn my attention away from her would-be rapist to look her over.*

*"You okay, Scar?"*

*"Jesus, lighten up," Enzo sneers with a chuckle. "I was playing around, and you're acting like I was fucking her."*

*"You watch your mouth," I hiss through my teeth, lunging for him before I realize what I'm doing.*

*"Ren." Scarlet's voice is a whisper. "Don't. He's not worth it."*

*She's right, he isn't, and I shouldn't. No matter how much I want to.*

*If I was smart, I'd stay away from him. I would. I'd back away, extend a hand to help her up, and walk her back to the dining room.*

*I might suggest she take a second to calm herself down before we get there. But I'd leave Enzo in my dust.*

*If only he didn't snicker. If only he didn't shake his head.*

*"Does she keep your balls in a jar?"*

*In a flash, I introduce him to the wall at his back, slamming him against it with enough force to rattle the books on the shelf.*

*"The fuck did you say?" I demand through clenched teeth, leaning in until our noses practically touch.*

*He doesn't seem to like having somebody in his face any more than Scarlet did. He cringes like a bitch, trying to turn*

*away.*

*Maybe he'll learn a lesson, though I doubt it. Pieces of shit like him never do.*

*"Ren..." Scarlet's soft voice keeps me centered, reaching through the haze of my rage. It touches me and eases the worst of the screaming in my head.*

*"You do not touch her. Ever. You don't even suggest the sort of shit you wanted to try. Understood?" He doesn't answer quickly enough, and I tighten my grip, slamming him against the wall once more. His head bangs against it, and I hope that's enough to knock some sense into him.*

*"Understood, asshole?"*

*"Yeah, yeah." His eyes dart around, wide and full of fear.*

*Sweat has begun to bead at his hairline. Normally, I would savor this, and I might very well replay his reaction in my head later on.*

*Now, there's little time. If Xander has to send someone after us, the outcome will not be pleasant. We'll both catch hell after dinner.*

*"Or it'll be your balls I keep in a jar." I smile, my teeth showing like a rabid dog, ready to attack.*

*I watch as he gulps, his throat working overtime to get over the ball-sized knot of fear clogging it. "Do you think I'm joking?"*

*"I get it."*

*"Now. Go back to the table and pretend none of this happened, or I'll pay you a visit sometime soon, and we'll finish working this out."*

*I pause a beat before letting him go. His haste to escape the room is gratifying, though not nearly as much as his blood on my knuckles would be.*

*I let out a long breath, shaking my hands out before turning back to Scarlet. She's frozen beside the sofa, trembling in that sexy little dress that skims her thighs and hints at the*



*full tits she developed when I wasn't paying attention. Why would I? She's a sister to me, a little kid. My protectiveness stems from brotherly affection and my natural inclination to protect the people I care about.*

*And when she was a kid, that was enough. Things were clean, simple.*

*Now? She's no longer a child.*

*And I am no longer unaware of that.*

*For her sake, I force a short laugh. "What? You think I'm gonna let some slimy piece of shit fuck around with you? You underestimate me."*

*"But you... I thought you were going to kill him."*

*Something inside me recoils in guilt at the hero worship shining in her eyes. I want to bask in that worship, I realize, which is the most unfortunate thing ever. "Come on. Let's get back before your dad sends out a search party."*

*Her dad. Xander Rossi. An insanely powerful and ruthless man.*

*I need to remember that. Now more than ever.*

*Because forgetting could mean being unable to fight the sudden, inexplicable urge to take her in my arms and claim her for myself.*

*Not only is she far too young, but she's entirely off-limits.*

*And entirely too tempting; everything about her calls out to me in a way nothing ever has before.*

*Fuck. I am in trouble.*

Ever since that night, when I've slipped away from Corium without Q's awareness in favor of watching her from afar, it hasn't been in the spirit of an older brother making sure his kid sister isn't taking risks.

From that moment on, my entire focus has been on making sure no one puts their hands on her. Not when she belongs to me.

It ought to be my fingerprints on her smooth skin, and my scent clinging to her clothes. I want it to be my voice in her ear as I tease pleasure from deep inside her, waking her up to the magic her body is capable of.

She's still so young and innocent despite her worldliness.

She deserves protection.

I see she's left nothing to chance, wearing a skirt that leaves most of her thighs on display as she cuts down the hall at a near jog. Is it eagerness to be with me that makes her move so swiftly? My already growing dick stiffens at the thought. The minx is determined to break down every last bit of my resolve.

One of us has to be strong.

Why does it have to be me when I'm so damn weak for her?

She reaches the stairs and begins climbing, her hand on the banister, her head swinging back and forth. She's watching for me with no idea she's the one being watched. It's a thrill I'll never be able to shake.

Watching like this without her knowing. The sense of control I feel as I creep silently up the stairs, well enough behind her that she doesn't hear the soft tread of my feet, is intoxicating. I can't pry my eyes from her legs, the promise of what's barely hidden beneath that skirt setting loose a deep, burning desire I'm hopeless against.

*This is wrong. We should not do this.*

But I'll be damned if anything in the world could stop me from touching her now. Dark and dangerous need overtakes common sense as I close the distance between us, every heartbeat carrying me one step closer to her.

I need my fix, and I'm going to get it.



# SCARLET

My loving and somewhat understanding father would flip the hell out if he knew I wandered the halls of Corium alone at night. Though I'm only here for a short visit, eventually, I'll be a student like my brother, Ren, and Aspen.

Xander Rossi is much more than a protective father, but I'm also much more than his daughter. The need to break free of the ivory tower I feel trapped in consumes me. Which is why I find myself wandering the halls late at night, looking for mischief. *Kidding* unless a dark-haired, blue-eyed man, four years older than me, is considered mischief.

I suppose, in many ways, Ren is that and then some.

If my father or Quinton ever discovered what was going on between us, hell would rain down.

Technically, he's forbidden.

The thing you long for, even when you know you can't have it. Every day he reminds me why we can't do this, yet we somehow find our way back to each other for another stolen moment and forbidden kiss.

I know we have the rest of our lives ahead of us, but I'm getting tired of sneaking around, of being a secret kept in the dark. I'm tired of hiding what I feel for him, even if it's painfully obvious to others. I don't want to be his queen in the shadows. I want us to be real, official. I want Ren to be mine.

I round the corner of the stairwell and continue walking. Ren told me to meet him at the top, and I don't want to be late.

Darkness glitters all around me, but where most would be afraid of it, I'm not. There's something about the dark, something I can't put into words. It's both beautiful and dangerous because you never know what is lurking in its depths. I pause for a moment when I hear what I think are footsteps. The mere thought of being caught wandering around sends a shiver down my spine.

*What's my excuse?*

The footsteps grow closer, and I lean into the wall of the dark stairwell, hoping whoever it is will walk right past me without noticing. I hold my breath, waiting. The footsteps are right behind me now.

My heart lurches in my chest. The heavy thud is all I can hear, and then a hand wraps around my waist, pulling from behind. A scream builds in my throat, and I'm a millisecond away from releasing it when a hand clamps over my mouth, the rough finger pads of the mystery person press gently but firmly into my cheeks. Thoughts swirling, I think of how my father and Quinton were right.

How stupid I am for walking around in the dark, all alone. I struggle in the person's grasp, and icy fear and dread coat my insides. Panicking, I throw back an elbow and make contact with a stupidly hard wall of muscle.

A grunt escapes my assailant, and he releases me. I whirl around, my fists clenched tight, thinking of the defense moves my father taught me, only to find Ren standing there in all his glory. A deviant little smirk on his full lips.

"Are you kidding me?" I growl while trying to get my racing heart under control. I could kill him. I hope my face is conveying the rage I'm feeling right now.

"Sorry, Scar. I didn't mean to frighten you."

I roll my eyes and swat at his chest with my hand. "Yeah, 'cause that apology seems genuine."

"Okay, how about this." He blinks, his long lashes fanning against his cheeks. "I'm incredibly sorry for scaring you so badly you almost peed your pants." The teasing grin on his

lips makes it hard for me to stay mad at him and all I can do is shake my head.

He leans in, brushing a few strands of hair away from my face. The scent of his usual cologne hits me then, cinnamon and sandalwood. Alluring but calming.

I inhale deeply and press my face against his chest. The heavy thud of his heartbeat meets my ears. Briefly, I wonder if he likes what he just did?

Sneaking up on me? Terrifying me to death? But I don't ask him, having other things I'd like to talk to him about first. Things regarding us.

"You know, we really should talk," I start, wishing I could see more than just the dark contours of his face.

We've been here many times before, and maybe I'm just a glutton for punishment, or maybe I'm hoping that, just once, he'll agree with me and change his mind. I'm not really sure, but I push forward, nevertheless.

Like a light switch being turned on, his mood changes. "You know this can't happen, Scarlet. It's hard enough without you making it worse. I wish you could let it go." I ignore the irritation in his voice; my own anger toward him, and his endless need to protect me, overrides my thoughts.

"Why not?" I demand. "You keep giving me excuses, but that's all they are. I know you want this as much as I do, Ren." I'm on the verge of begging because I want this. I want him. I can't tell you how many nights I've laid awake envisioning giving myself to him. Call it a fantasy, call it twisted or fucked up, I don't know, but he's all I want.

Needing to feel connected to him, I wrap an arm around his neck and slice my fingers through his thick hair. Our eyes collide in the darkness, and even though I can't see it, I know there is apprehension there.

There always is because, in his eyes, I am his but only in secret.

"Excuses?" He sighs, shaking his head. "You think your brother killing me if he ever found out is just an excuse?"

Because that's what he would do. Literally."

A part of me wants to laugh, while a part of me knows what he's saying is true. "Please. He would never kill you. You're his best friend. Besides, I wouldn't let Quinton hurt you." Yes, Quinton would burn the whole place to the ground with rage, and my father would be pissed, but nothing would be as bad as them finding out we have been sneaking around all along. Telling them first would be the smartest thing. Eventually, everyone would come to terms with our choice, and we'd be together. In a perfect world. Right?

A groan rumbles inside his chest, and I know what that sound means. He's standing on the knife's edge battling between what he thinks is wrong and what is really right. I couldn't lie to myself if I wanted to. The gruff sound ignites a fire deep in my belly that only he can extinguish.

I need his touch. I need his lips on mine.

"Ren." I cup his cheek, drawing him closer, and he groans again. "You know I want you. I always have. I always will. Doesn't that mean anything? How much we both want this?"

"Scarlet, please..." He says my name like a man praying to God for the first time. Yet even with desperation in his voice, he lowers his head an inch at a time. His control snaps, and the heat between us sizzles, a spark becoming a flame the moment his lips touch mine. Engulfed in his touch, I let him press his body against mine, the friction sending zaps of pleasure straight to my core. I've waited for this very second for what seems like a lifetime.

Holding me in place with his body, he runs a hand down my bare thigh. I'm wearing a skirt and a Corium University sweater I stole from Quinton. I ditched my panties tonight, hoping that maybe we would be able to take things a little further, and it would appear I made a good choice. Frantic with need and desire that match my own, he hitches my leg up over his hip. I sink my fingers into his hair, running my nails down his neck and shoulders, begging him with nothing more than my body to never let me go.

His kiss is all-consuming, fire and gasoline igniting something deep inside me that I never knew existed. Slowly, he moves his hand beneath my skirt. There is no apprehension in his touch, though it's gentler than I anticipated.

I'm panting with need, kissing him back with the same fever. With my legs already spread, I wait for him to touch my center, for him to discover how turned on I am and how badly I want this moment to happen.

Closer, his fingers are so close I can feel the heat of his touch searing through me. When he finally ghosts against my bare mound, I think I might die. Fuck. My heart is beating so fast, and I'm only slightly embarrassed about how wet I am.

It's then a gasp rings out through the mostly quiet stairwell, and both Ren and I look at the same time in horror as another student peers at us around the corner. Slivers of light shine through a small window, and I can see a part of the girl's face. Oh god. We've been caught, and someone is going to tell my father or, even worse, my brother. I can't help but gasp, placing a hand over my mouth a moment later to stop myself from doing anything else stupid.

All I can do is stare at the girl, afraid of what might happen next. Ren turns away from me, his body like a shield.

Rage ripples out of him, and I can only hope he'll find a way to keep this girl quiet until we can figure out what the hell we're going to do.

"Run along," he orders, his voice menacing.

It's icy, and I'd be more than running if it was directed at me. I'd probably be peeing my pants. Then, as if she was never there, she disappears. The sound of her receding footsteps almost makes me sigh with relief.

Turning around, the man who burned with fire for me is gone. In his place stands the cold, statuesque person everyone else knows him to be.

"I think you should go back to your room." His dismissive attitude irritates me to no end.



“I think we should finish what we started,” I coo, reaching for him.

Like lightning, he moves, taking my wrist into his hand while pulling it away. I tremble, afraid he’s going to tell me he’s done, that he doesn’t want anything else to do with me, but he doesn’t.

“Go back to your room where I know you’ll be safe for the night.” He takes my hand and brings it to his lips, placing a gentle kiss there. Butterflies take flight in my chest, and I forget all about the negative things I was thinking. Lifting his mouth from my hand, he continues, “I have to make sure our little peeping Tom doesn’t decide to tell anyone things she knows nothing about.”

I nod and let him lower my hand to my side. That’s what’s most important right now. If Quinton gets word of what we were doing, Ren might be right. I may not be able to talk my brother down.

And it won’t just be Ren’s funeral.

It’ll be mine as well.



## REN

“*I* can’t do this.”

*There, I said it.* It’s weighed on me for weeks, ever since the attack on Aspen. I knew then it wouldn’t be enough, already aware of River’s full plan. There would be nothing more than a brief reprieve before he called upon me to take the next step.

He presses himself back in the chair, throwing his hands into the air in a gesture of hopelessness—but not surprise.

“I knew it. I knew you’d lose your balls.”

“Watch it,” I growl.

“I’m only speaking facts.” Rubbing his temples like he’s trying to ward off a headache, he groans angrily. Like he’s the one being put through hell.

“All I’m saying is, we need to rethink this. Evaluate the plan.”

“Is that the sort of bullshit they teach at Corium?” he taunts. “Fancy doubletalk?”

It isn’t easy to swallow back my irritation.

*He’s only trying to get a rise out of you.*

Somehow, even knowing that is not enough. “It’s the truth. When we laid out our plans, things were different.”

“Oh, were they?” He leans closer to his laptop, his face filling my screen while his sarcastic voice echoes through the

room. Now his ire is clearer than ever, lit up by the glow from the light in my apartment.

His eyes appear black. Empty. Like a shark's the moment it smells blood.

"Not to mention how risky this is," I continue, deliberately avoiding the bait he's dangling in front of me. "We barely got away with the attack on Aspen. Quinton is looking over his shoulder with every step he takes."

"He's not nearly as worried about himself as he is about his wife," River counters. "He thinks it makes him heroic or some shit. So high up on his horse, he couldn't imagine anyone ever trying to take a swipe at him."

Anger ripples through me. "You don't know him."

His raised eyebrow leaves me bracing myself. "Oh? I don't? Right. I couldn't possibly understand your deep, special relationship because he's so important to you. More important than blood?"

It's not a question, but it feels like it.

"Stop twisting this around," I warn, my heart pumping harder and blood beginning to roar in my ears. It's always this way. I start out so strong and confident. I'm sure I can get through a call with him without losing control of my temper. But it never fails.

Like magic, here I am, clenching my fists out of sight of the camera. Clenching them so tight, it hurts.

He heaves a sigh, shaking his head as if he's disappointed in me. "This is war. How many times do I need to remind you of that?"

I should know better than to think he'll understand. He never does. I concluded long ago that River is missing some key component that makes a person human. That certain something that separates us from animals.

In some ways, I envy his ability to look at the world in black and white. There are no shades of gray for him. No

degrees of right or wrong. You're either for him, or you're against him. There is no in-between.

There are times when I know life would be easier if I could shut down my feelings. My allegiance. This is one of those times.

"Tell me something," he murmurs before I'm able to come up with a response. "When did you lose sight of what's most important?"

"I haven't," I snap.

I hate when he's like this. Sitting back, watching my life, passing judgment on things he could never understand. It's one thing to watch but another to experience. He hasn't shared what Q and I have shared over the years. The friendship, the trust. He's only ever been an observer.

No wonder it's so easy for him to sentence Q to death.

Especially when he won't be the one performing the execution.

"Fine." He sits up straighter, shrugging.

"What's fine?" I have a sinking feeling...panic rising in my throat.

"I took care of Aspen. I suppose I'll have to take care of your precious Q this time."

I suck a sharp breath into my lungs. "No."

*Big mistake.*

His eyes narrow, and I know I stepped straight into his trap.

"Wow. You really love him, huh? When's the wedding? Is bigamy allowed at Corium? I suppose so since every other crime is, minus death."

"Enough." I'm two seconds from slamming the laptop shut, but I can't give in to the impulse. I can't let him come here to do the job himself. Casualties will be far worse if I allow that.

“Now I know this is truly for the best,” he muses, shaking his head. “It’s one thing to get revenge, but it’s another to pull you back from the edge and remind you of what matters. You’ve lost focus.”

*Have I?* Or is he looking for a fight?

Stroking his chin, he adds, “Maybe I need to pay you a visit after taking care of our Q problem. We can talk face-to-face about your loyalty. Get you back on track to where your focus needs to be.”

“There’s no need for any of that.” I tighten my jaw, molars grinding. “I’ll get it done.”

“Oh?” He feigns surprise. “What changed your mind? The fear that I might actually do it myself?”

This time, I follow through on the impulse to close the laptop and end the call. It’s better to do that before I say something I can’t take back.

River is dangerous, but unlike most, his bark is nothing compared to his bite. When he puts his mind to something, if he’s determined enough, he’ll destroy anything in his wake. That’s definitely one thing I admire about him.

It’s better to control him and keep him in line than let him take control.

My body is heavy as I rise from the couch. There’s no decision that needs to be made. This has to happen, and I need to be the one to do it. I don’t trust River when it comes to Q. Let him taunt all he wants, but I’ve known him long enough to understand where his attitude stems from. It’s jealousy, plain and simple. He resents the presence of anyone in my life who isn’t Luna or himself.

Let him pretend all he wants that this is strictly according to plan, that Q is a casualty of war. He can’t convince me otherwise. I know it’s personal for him.

Which is why he can’t be the one to do it. This needs to look like an accident. It’s too likely River will lose his cool, and things will get out of hand. We don’t need a blood bath. A bad fall is one thing, but I get the feeling there’d be questions

if Q ended up with his face kicked in until it was unrecognizable.

It's better this way.

That's what I tell myself as I march resolutely to the door and open it slowly, quietly, listening for any voices or footsteps signaling I'm not alone.

One good thing about the fallout from Aspen's attack, aside from the spotlight no longer being on Scarlet and me, is that most everyone chooses to stay in their apartments now in case the attacker decides to strike again.

There's not much that will keep Q from a workout, though; he's a creature of habit.

He ought to be wrapping up any time now and will take the stairs down to his apartment rather than use the elevator. It's a part of his cooldown process.

My heart is heavy though my feet are light, carrying me soundlessly down the hall. The silence brings to mind a graveyard. I'm sure that's my guilty conscience plaguing me. Q trusts me above anyone in his life, and this is how I'm repaying him.

*He isn't family. He isn't blood.*

And as River loves to remind me, this is war. That's what gets me to the stairwell closest to the gym, where I press myself into a corner, fading into the shadows. I have to do this. There's no other way. No matter how I wish otherwise.

My heart's pounding hard enough that I wonder if Q will hear it before he reaches me. A deep breath helps center me—until the door one floor up swings open, followed by the sound of footsteps on the stairs.

*This is it. Remember what matters. Remember where this all started.*

In my mind's eye, I see myself pushing him down the stairs from behind, then following him down and finishing the job while he's dazed. A single slam against the concrete stairs should be enough to smash his skull like an egg.

A buzzing noise fills my head, growing louder with every step he descends. Holding my breath, I watch as he rounds the landing above me, unaware he isn't alone, jogging down the stairs while looking at his phone. He slides it into his pocket as he rounds this landing, not ten feet from where I'm waiting.

This is it.

No going back now.

Once his back is turned, I lunge before I lose my nerve, both hands against his shoulders.

I can barely bite back a frustrated cry as I push.

I'm a traitor. He trusted me, and now he's falling, tumbling down the unforgiving stairs. I can't see much of him in the dim light, but I don't need to. I hear him, and that's more than enough to turn my stomach and make me curse the day River ever suggested we get revenge.

He comes to a stop at the next landing and lies still for a few breathless moments that seem to stretch on forever.

Did I get lucky for once? Did the fall kill him?

*Of course it didn't.*

A muffled groan fills the stairwell not a second later, and my stomach plummets. I know what I have to do, but I can't.

I have to look into the face of my best friend before smashing his skull.

*Why won't my feet move?*

I grip the railing, steeling myself, teeth gritted against the agony burning my insides like acid. My jaw fucking aches from the tension. River's voice rings out in my head.

*Move, dammit. Finish this.*

I do move—not in Q's direction, however. I take the stairs up to the next floor and head straight for the elevator, my heart pounding hard enough to make me sick by the time I jam my finger against the button.

What if he saw me?



What if someone finds out?

Why didn't I have the balls to finish the job?

I can't answer the third question, and it doesn't matter as much as the first two, anyway. Soon everyone will know the truth. The faster I get out of here, the less likely I'll be caught.

I'm not taking that chance.

A minute later, I'm pulling a suitcase from my closet and throwing it on the bed before grabbing items: clothes, my toothbrush, my laptop.

Thoughts run rampant. It shouldn't take long for someone to find him. Q is strong; he most likely got up and hobbled his way back to his room. I'm not sure if he saw me, but that doesn't matter. I'll be far away from here by the time anyone starts putting the pieces together.

With that in mind, I pull out my phone to request a helicopter. It isn't unusual for me to come and go at random times, meaning there shouldn't be a question of why I'm flying out with a bag in hand. This time, there will be no return flight.

I have no idea where I'll go. I only know I can't stay here. The traitor who'll soon have a price on his head. The would-be murderer.

Why, of all times, does Scarlet's face now appear before me? A stupid question—I tried to kill her brother, which would make two siblings she's lost. Besides Q, who else would I think about now? Leaving Corium is as good as admitting my guilt, which means not only cutting all ties with Q but with his family. His sister.

The invisible knife in my gut sinks deeper.

Then it turns, sending burning pain radiating outward.

It's enough to slow my packing as I consider what it will do to her when she finds out what I attempted. She's more than a temptation put on earth to plague me. She's young and stubborn enough to ignore anything she doesn't feel like believing.

Such as the absolute futility of caring about me. It's a waste of time. Yet she insists on doing so anyway, when she isn't driving me out of my skull with the need to touch, taste... claim. Every kiss and caress was a mistake. At the time, I imagined the greatest danger was being discovered by her brother, who'd waste no time killing me. Now, I know I made her care more for me with every forbidden encounter.

I could have stopped things in their tracks before we went too far. At least, that's what I have to tell myself. Memory has a way of softening things, of making me believe all of this could've gone differently. That I could've been strong. Refused her. Pretended she didn't exist.

Reality was another story.

*"Where's Scarlet?"*

*This time around, it's Xander who notices his daughter's absence from the dinner table. She's been gone for nearly ten minutes, which I know since I've checked the time more than once when she didn't come straight back.*

*She would have to go and do this, wouldn't she? It's bad enough I'm already overly aware of her. Ever since that night with the Grimaldi family, there's been no getting her out of my head. She's a temptation I can't shake.*

*A danger I should know better than to entertain, even when I'm alone, even when she is miles away, and there's no possibility of us running into each other.*

*Even then, I shouldn't think about her as much as I do or the way that I do. Because now, it's become a habit, and the line between fantasy and reality blurs further all the time.*

*Now, when she leaves the dinner table with no explanation, I'm far too aware of her. There was a time—not so long ago—when I wouldn't give it a moment's thought, too busy eating and busting Q's balls, something Luna and Scarlet love to tag team on.*

*Instead, every ounce of my awareness is trained on her. I take a bite of beef, but it might as well be sawdust. Where did she go? Why hasn't she come back?*

*I meet Xander's inquisitive gaze, shrugging.*

*"I can take a look and make sure she's okay."*

*He nods, satisfied, before returning to his conversation with my father. A quick glance around the table confirms no one thinks anything strange is going on. Why would they? I haven't done anything wrong. Yet.*

*I hate the presence of that word ringing out in my head as I excuse myself from the table and begin my hunt.*

*Nothing inappropriate has taken place between us—yet.*

*Not in reality, at least.*

*In my imagination? That's an entirely different story. It's a miracle my dick isn't permanently chafed from the attention it gets every time Scarlet comes to mind.*

*What is it about her? What's changed? Ever since the night I caught Enzo Grimaldi screwing with her in the library, there's been no getting her out of my system. Not the child I always considered her, but the woman she's becoming. A woman I have no business going anywhere near, no matter how right it would feel in the moment to let go of my qualms.*

*She's not in the hall, the kitchen, or the powder room. I glance toward the sweeping staircase leading upstairs and consider searching for her up there but hold myself back. God forbid she's in her bedroom, where I've already imagined ravishing her more than once.*

*Another minute of searching leads me to the terrace overlooking the garden. I find her there, leaning her folded arms against the railing, gazing out at a landscape painted by the first beams of a radiant full moon.*

*My mouth goes dry, my heart forgetting to beat.*

*She's beyond any fantasy. A vision in a blue dress the same shade as her eyes, shining blond locks hanging in thick waves that conceal her profile, adding to her mystery. I'd stand here admiring her all evening if it wasn't for the reality of our meal waiting for us.*

*“Hey,” I grunt, careful to keep my distance. “You’ve been missed. Better get back.”*

*She turns slowly, revealing a soft, knowing smile and a gleam of wickedness in her gaze. “It took you long enough.”*

*“Pardon?” I choke out. That’s not how this is supposed to go. She was not supposed to be waiting for me out here.*

*“To find me. I’ve been waiting for you,” she whispers.*

*It’s a struggle to remain blank-faced. “Why?”*

*Why is she doing this to me?*

*“I wanted a minute alone with you.” Turning slowly, she smooths her hands down the front of her dress and asks, “What do you think? I bought it with you in mind.”*

*What do I think? I think I’d love nothing more than to flip that knee-length skirt over her ass and rail her until she’s a sobbing, gushing mess on my cock. The girl hasn’t learned the danger of asking loaded questions.*

*“Why would you buy a dress with me in mind?”*

*She rolls her eyes before crossing the terrace, taking one measured step at a time, my dick twitching all the while.*

*“You’re going to pretend you don’t look at me the way you do?”*

*Folding my arms, I scoff. “I have no idea what you’re talking about.”*

*Her hair sparkles in the moonlight as she shakes her head.*

*“We both know that isn’t true. I caught the way you looked at me the last time we all had dinner together. And in the library. You almost ripped that guy’s head off to protect me.”*

*“I would’ve done the same thing if it was Luna in that position.”*

*“Not exactly the same thing.” She comes to a stop mere inches from me, leaving me helpless against the sweet, light scent of her floral perfume. “Come on. Do I have to spell it out?”*

*“You don’t have to do anything but come back to the dining room.”*

*“You know I like you,” she whispers, her cheeks blushing at the admission. “And I think you like me, too. Why are we pretending otherwise?”*

*“I like you as a person,” I reply, my voice strained. “That’s it. To me, you’re a little sister. You’re a kid.”*

*“I know you don’t mean that.”*

*“What makes you say that?” I force a smirk when, in reality, apprehension is beginning to trickle through my veins, turning my body cold.*

*She sees through me. I can’t have that. It’s the most dangerous aspect of a situation already fraught with enough tension to snap my sanity.*

*She’s beaming with trust and enough hope to break my heart when she speaks. “You think you’re being noble.”*

*I shouldn’t. I know I shouldn’t.*

*But damned if her innocence doesn’t strike me as hilarious. Here I am, fighting for my life, pretending my dick isn’t doing its damndest to convince me we’d both be much more comfortable if he was out and buried deep in her pussy. Pretending I haven’t entertained dangerous fantasies about being her first in every way.*

*In my head, I’ve taken her in every filthy, depraved way possible.*

*And she thinks I’m being noble.*

*Who could blame me for laughing?*

*Her delicate brows draw together. “What’s so funny?” she demands, even stomping her foot like the child she still is in so many ways.*

*It only makes me laugh harder.*

*“You,” I finally manage to gasp. Her cheeks darken, pain touching her eyes and making her mouth tick downward at the corners.*

*Guilt lances me, and immediately, I want to apologize. Hurting her is the last thing I want to do.*

*She deserves nothing less than complete happiness, safety, and security. The very thought of causing her pain leaves me with a burning ache in my chest.*

*It's better this way.*

*That's all that keeps me from letting an apology slip from my lips. Knowing it's better for her to hate me or at least resent my dismissiveness.*

*The sooner she abandons these pointless fantasies, the better for us both. Because I don't know how many of these encounters I can make it through before my thin grasp on self-control dissolves.*

*"You're a child," I continue, knowing it digs the knife in deeper but pushing through my guilt just the same. The guilt would be much worse if I gave in. If I forgot the many reasons this can't happen.*

*"Do I look like a child to you?" she whispers, tilting her head to the side.*

*Wrong question. Way wrong. It's almost enough to make me hate her for putting me through this. If I thought she had any real understanding of the fire she's so carelessly playing with, my insatiable craving might turn to resentment.*

*"You know what I'm saying," I continue in a low, smooth voice that completely belies the torment tearing me in half. "You're acting like a child. Only children think things will always go their way. They don't understand the reasons for the existence of rules and boundaries."*

*She has the nerve to scoff and toss her head, which has the unfortunate effect of sending a fresh wave of sweet scent my way. "All of a sudden, you care about rules and boundaries? That's new."*

*"Don't pretend to know anything about me," I warn, watching her shoulders lift defensively at my change in tone. "If anything, you should understand the importance of what I'm trying to tell you. You think I don't care about rules, but*

*here I am, trying to convince you how wrong this is. Give it a little thought, and you'll see what I mean."*

*"I'm not an idiot."*

*"Are you sure about that?"*

*"Stop." Rather than lash out the way she would if this was nothing more than a game of sibling teasing, her voice is soft. She shakes her head while a tiny smile curves her tempting, glossy lips.*

*"You don't have to try so hard."*

*That's what she thinks. I'm at the end of my endurance as it is. If I don't try hard, I get myself killed.*

*The thought sparks a new tactic. "Do you want me to die? Is that what you're saying?"*

*Her head snaps back the way I knew it would. "That's the last thing I want."*

*"Then it's best you stay away from me because that's exactly what's going to happen if anybody so much as suspects what you're playing at. You wouldn't be the one blamed for it—you get that, right? It would be my ass in a sling. My balls your father cuts off. Is that what you want?"*

*When her brow furrows, I'm as good as home free. Reality is finally trickling through that brain of hers. I might make it out of this alive.*

*Or so I think before she touches a hand to my chest, over my racing heart. So damn tender, sweet, and caring. Dangerously so, because the yearning to lean into her touch is enough to take my breath away.*

*"I get it. You want this as much as I do, but you're afraid."*

*Is she fucking serious?*

*Surprise almost takes my breath away. Is she determined to miss the point? "Scarlet, that's not—"*

*"I understand." There's an impish quality to her smile now. "It'll be our secret. I would never forgive myself if I got you into trouble, and I know you don't want me getting in*

*trouble, either. You have to know I'd be in just as much shit as you if Dad found out."*

*Somehow, I think I'd get the lion's share of Xander's wrath, followed by Quinton's. "I don't know about that."*

*"Don't worry." She laughs lightly, the sound like that of someone coming to full understanding after wandering in darkness. "I won't let anything happen to you; the way I know you'd never let anything happen to me."*

*"You're way off on this," I manage to grit out.*

*Why does she have to be this beautiful? Trusting and infuriating and sweet and as fresh as a ripe, juicy peach begging me to sink my teeth in. Even more so when she sways, leaning in closer, brushing her tits against my chest.*

*"Am I?" she whispers, the sound carrying understanding far beyond her years. "The bulge between us tells me something else." Her knowing eyes lower to my crotch, where, of course, the evidence of my desire is plain and clear.*

*Before I can come up with some stupid excuse, she pats my chest gently.*

*"Like I said. Our little secret."*

*"That's not how it is, Scar."*

*My heart sinks completely when she winks before finally taking mercy and turning away, her hips swaying enticingly as she strolls inside.*

*"Sure. Keep telling yourself that, Ren."*

*Leaving me barely able to stay on my feet, uncertain of what just happened.*

*I only know it was painful enough to keep my hands off her when I thought I was alone in this insane lust that's sprung up.*

*Now? My life has become more impossible to navigate than ever.*

*I did my best. I tried as hard as I could.*

*And I failed. Just as I failed River tonight.*



That failure reverberates in my head like a gong as I cut a quick, silent path through halls I'll never walk again. I failed in every way possible. Now, all that's left to do is live with my failure. Alone.

The helicopter waits when I reach the surface and step out into the darkness. Cold air stings my face and turns my breath into a cloud. Has Q been found yet? How long will it take for him to figure out it was me?

If he doesn't put it together on his own, he surely will once it's clear I'm not returning. Once he attempts to contact me and gets nowhere. Years of experience have left me with an understanding of the way his mind works. The process of elimination will leave only one possible culprit.

It will hurt him, my betrayal. I can live with it in light of the bigger picture, not to mention the fact that I spared his life when I wasn't supposed to. He doesn't know that, but I can comfort myself with the knowledge. My next thought makes my heart clench in my chest.

*How is this going to hurt Scarlet?*

I don't need to ask myself that one. There she was, thinking I was some noble hero. If tonight's chain of events doesn't destroy the last of her illusions, I don't know what will.

No doubt, family loyalty will turn her against me, which is how it should be. I was never going to be the man she fooled herself into thinking I was.

Perhaps that will comfort me in the lonely times to come. Telling myself I only cut bonds that should never have been forged. That it's for the best if she hates me.

Anger with myself—with the world and all its unfairness—leaves me grunting as I buckle the seat restraints. I wouldn't be in this position if it wasn't for how ugly and cruel the world can be.

What I did—almost did—is nothing compared to what was done to me, to us. I didn't strike the first blow.

*None of this is my fault.*

Is that River's voice in my head, rationalizing my actions?  
Or my own?

Only once the helicopter lifts from the pad can I release a sigh, sinking against the seat while I watch Corium grow smaller. I feel no sentiment toward the school itself, I realize. It's the sense of closing the door on a chapter of my life that leaves me craning my neck to catch one last glimpse.

Something inside me flares white hot when I consider this. I'm turning my back on everyone, but there's one person I can't imagine turning away from. She's too much a part of what's left of my soul.

I won't give up on Scarlet. I'll have to watch from afar, but it isn't as if that's anything new. She just can't ever know.

I promised to protect her. After breaking every unspoken promise by nearly killing her brother, the least I can do is make good on my word this time.

As if I could stay away from her for the rest of my life.

*No matter what happens, Scar, I'm going to watch over you.*

*I'll keep you safe. Whatever it takes.*



# SCARLET

*S*omething is off.  
*Different.*

I can feel it in my stomach, churning, the tension tightening in my chest. My emotions have hopped on a never-ending roller coaster.

I stare at the five text messages I've sent to Ren over the past two days. There's not a single reply or even confirmation that he received the message. It's unlike him to go so long without messaging me back.

It's disheartening and pathetic. I drop my phone onto the vanity desk and close my eyes, letting out a deep breath.

*Everything will be okay.*

He's probably busy, or my father has him doing some intel work at Corium. I try to rationalize it all and push the negative thoughts to the back of my mind, but it's hard to ignore the elephant in the room.

A ping fills the air, and I grab my phone. It's him. It has to be.

Disappointment makes me sag back into the seat when I see my brother's name flash on the screen and not Ren's. I navigate to the text he sent, but before I can view it or reply, my phone rings.

*What the fuck?*

Of course, I hit the answer key because it's my brother.

A second later, his face fills the screen. I force my pink lips into an upward smile and try to appear happier than I'm really feeling.

My brother, on the other hand, makes no effort to appear happy and has a permanent scowl etched into his features. Except something is different this time. There's a fear in his dark eyes, something that I've only seen a few times. A fear reserved for Aspen, Adela—our deceased sister—our mother, and me.

“What’s wrong?” My voice cracks, releasing some of the tension from me.

“I... fuck, I don't know if I can do this.”

The way he looks away from the camera as he speaks tells me whatever is going on is huge. My brother isn't shy about anything, but this, this is the warning, the calm before the storm.

With trembling fingers, I pick up the phone and bring it closer.

“What’s going on? Are you okay? Did something happen?”

All I can think about is something bad happening to all the people I love and care about and not being able to help in any way.

“It's Ren.”

I can't even stop myself from gasping. I knew something was wrong.

“He's gone; he left Corium. No one knows where he is, and even worse, they think he's behind the attacks on Aspen, Delilah, and me.”

My heart beats heavy in my chest, the swoosh of blood filling my ears. It's the only sound I can hear as Quinton's words play back in my mind.

All I can do is sit here. I should've known by the pained expression on my brother's face that something was wrong.

I can't believe it. I can't wrap my head around it.

"If he reaches out to you at all, you need to tell Dad." I wince and attempt to cover the pain that lances through my body.

The idea of Ren being our enemy when he was always Quinton's best friend. I don't understand it. I am barely holding back tears, my heart cracking a little more every time it beats.

"Why would he do this? He's our family, your best friend. I don't understand." I am hurt and shocked for more than one reason. The biggest one, no one else knows about. No one but the man who disappeared after trying to hurt my brother and his wife.

"I don't either, but I knew I needed to tell you."

I force a ragged breath into my body, but it doesn't feel like it reaches my lungs. It doesn't even feel like I'm breathing. Before I can stop it, the tears glistening in my eyes break free and slide shamelessly down my cheeks. I'm crying for so many things right now, things I have to hold inside.

"Fuck, look. I knew I shouldn't have told you, but I didn't want to risk you being attacked next. I don't know what the hell is going on with Ren, but he's... he's not who we thought he was. He's unstable, and if he's willing to hurt Aspen and me, then I don't know for certain if anything would stop him from hurting you."

In my mind, I try to picture him as the enemy, as the grim wolf stalking us lambs like his next meal, but I can't. The Ren I knew, the man I had already fallen in love with and had always had a crush on, would never hurt the people he cared about. I didn't even realize my cries had intensified. A ragged sob rips from my throat, and I can barely see the cell phone screen anymore.

"Scar, please." The desperation in his voice kills me. "Please stop crying. I am on the verge of burning this entire fucking place down and searching every inch of this planet for him. He's my best friend, and the thought..."

“It wasn’t him, Q. There’s no way. You’re like a brother to him, and he knows how much you love Aspen. He wouldn’t do that to you, to us, to his family.”

Denial coats each word I speak with a sticky substance. Deep in the pit of my stomach, the first seeds of anger start to take root.

*How could he do this, and why?*

“I’ve been mewling over this for days, trying to figure out how to tell you because, deep down, I don’t want to believe it either.” He lets out a sigh, and the look of despair in his dark eyes confirms his response. I can see the heavy bags beneath, and I have no doubt that he has hardly slept in the past few days.

“Then don’t. We both know it’s not true. We just...we need to find him. I’m sure there is a reason for his disappearance.”

It wasn’t a coincidence that Ren disappeared right after these things happened. He was guilty as charged, and there was no way around it. The problem was I didn’t want to believe it. I didn’t want to believe the man I had given my heart to was a monster capable of hurting his own family. It wasn’t possible. He wouldn’t do this to me. He promised me forever. We were going to find a way to be together. He was going to wait for me.

“He’s gone, Scarlet.” Q shakes his head, pulling me back to the present, reminding me this isn’t a nightmare I’ll be able to wake up from. “He’s gone, and now I have to worry if he’s going to come for you or Mom next. Hell, maybe he’s going to show back up here at Corium and try to finish me off. I don’t know. I thought I knew him, and now I’m just so lost.”

“Stop, don’t say that.” My voice cracks as I scold him.

*How could he think that about him?*

The muscles in his jaw tighten. “I’m only speaking the truth. I want you to know I’m here for you. You can call me anytime you need to. Dad will be tightening up security.”

“Are you coming home?” It’s the only thing I can think to ask, especially with all the thoughts racing through my mind.

“I was considering it, to be there for Mom and you, but I think it’s better if I stay here. We’re heavily protected at Corium, and Ren is long gone by now.”

The reminder pierces my heart, the knife’s edge sinking deep inside the muscle. I don’t know if I can live without Ren.

I’m consumed by him, wrapped up in every detail of who we were meant to be, and now he’s gone. Now I’m lost, without a purpose or place, and he’s a ghost, slipping through time like he never existed at all.

I don’t trust myself to speak about him right now, or I might spill all our secrets. I can’t believe what my brother is telling me. Every thought I have is hinged on a memory, and I realize that maybe I didn’t know Ren at all.

“I’m sorry, Scar. I’m really sorry. I know Ren was like a brother to you as well.”

“It’s okay,” I lie, but it’s not okay. Nothing will ever be okay again.

“All right, well, I need to go, but I’ll call you later to make sure everything is good. If you need anything, call me, and if Ren tries to contact you... tell Dad.”

I swallow around the knot of emotion clogging my throat. I end the call without saying goodbye and rush to my bed, crashing against the sheets and burying my face into the pillow a moment before a scream of pain rips from my throat.

Physically, I’m fine, but emotionally, I’m ripped to pieces.

Memories play on repeat in my mind, and the pain grows worse. Each memory is a slash to my already broken heart.

He was my first kiss, the first man to touch and explore my body. The first man I ever truly trusted outside of my brother and father. There was never a moment when I was with him that I felt unsafe, and now Quinton is telling me he’s done things to make every single memory a lie.



He made me feel safe so many times; Ren couldn't do the things my brother said he did. In my mind, they have the wrong guy. There is no way the person they were talking about is the same person who held me together during my worst moments.

*I run as fast as my legs will carry me. I don't know where I'm going. All I know is that I can't stay in the house for another moment. Not when the loss of Adela hangs in the air like a thick black curtain forcing out every ray of light. It's suffocating.*

*Rushing through the garden, I nearly trip over my feet, my vision blurry with tears. She is gone. My big sister is gone, and there is nothing any of us can do to bring her back.*

*I barely make it through the first turn of the garden maze before sagging against the marble bench, a ragged sob ripping from my throat. I will never be able to look at life the same, not with Adela missing from it.*

*As I lie on the bench, my cheek against the cold stone, all I can think about is staying here forever. I can't actually do that, though; my parents will come searching for me, eventually. I'll be forced to return to the warmth of our home, but as long as I can, I will lie here, sobbing, willing someone to explain to me why it had to be her.*

*I'm not sure how long I stay here, but eventually, it starts to rain. The cold droplets don't have any effect on me.*

*Raindrops make it easier to hide your tears.*

*Somewhere off in the distance, I hear my name being called. I don't stir, move, or make a sound. All I do is lie here. I don't want to be rescued. I want to be as close to Adela as I can get, and that means being outside and braving the elements.*

*"Scarlet." A deep voice I recognize grows closer.*

*The voice makes my heart beat faster because I know right away who it belongs to. Ren appears around the corner a second later, his white shirt, wet with rain, sticking to his*

*perfectly sculpted body. Instantly, he takes me into his arms, the warmth of his body radiating the heat back into me.*

*“Jesus, you’re cold. How long have you been out here?”*

*“I don’t know,” I whisper. “Not long enough.”*

*In his arms, I’m safe, protected, and secure. I’m everything my sister will never be again, and that thought sends me careening over the edge all over again.*

*I’M NOT EMBARRASSED by Ren seeing me sob like a child. I don’t care what he thinks, not at the moment. Not even when I clutch his shirt and pull him closer, needing his warmth.*

*“Shh, I’m here, and I always will be,” Ren soothes while his huge hand rubs gentle circles against my back.*

*Ren is different. He always has been. He allows me to feel whatever it is I’m feeling without judgment. Without expecting me to be strong. He doesn’t ask me to hide it, doesn’t ask me to stop. He simply allows me to be me, free as a bird, and I can’t thank him enough for it.*

*“I miss her so much, and she hasn’t even been gone that long. How will I make it through the days going forward? How will I survive when a part of me feels like it died with her? My parents will expect us to pretend everything is okay, but it’s not, Ren. Nothing is okay.” The words spill out of me.*

*“You’ll make it through. I promise. I’ll be here for you every step of the way, and with every day that passes, the loss will get easier.” He pulls me up, and like a small child, I climb onto his lap, letting him cradle me while I sob uncontrollably into his chest. “In our world, death is just another event, a stepping stone, but I know as well as you do that your parents will never look at your sister’s death like it never happened. Unfortunately, weakness isn’t something we can afford to show. Right now, even as hard as it is, you have to stand strong.”*

*“I can’t. I’m not strong.”*

*“You’re one of the strongest people I know, Scar, and you’ll be able to find happiness again.”*

*I pull back, staring up at him. He is soaked to the bone, and just like me, he doesn’t seem bothered by it.*

*“What if I can’t?”*

*Gently, like he’s touching an injured animal, he cups my cheek. I can’t explain the feelings that rush through me because there are too many all at once.*

*“You will. I’ll be here to ensure you find happiness again. For as long as I live, you’ll be protected, secure, safe from the bad of the world, and you’ll be happy because I won’t let anyone take that joy from you.”*

That was the first time I realized I felt more for Ren than a silly teenage crush. I knew then how easy it would be to utterly and completely fall in love with him.

The memory pops like a bubble, and I’m pulled back to the present by an insistent knocking on my door. This nightmare is now my reality, and there is no escaping it. How could I believe something so ugly and dark about him when the memory of his promise constantly rang in my ear?

The door creaks as it opens, and my mother’s head pops inside. I can see the concern etched into her features. Features that make me feel like I’m looking in the mirror. She brushes a few strands of blond hair from her heart-shaped face. Older or not, she is still beautiful, oozing a youngness that sometimes makes me forget she is my mother and not a best friend.

“Is everything okay? I was knocking, and you didn’t answer, but I didn’t want to barge in.”

“Everything is fine,” I lie through my teeth.

He promised me forever, but I only got a few stolen moments and kisses in the shadows. *Was I really ever his?* I already know the answer. I look up at my mother, wishing I could tell her all the secrets I hold inside, but knowing how loyal she is to my father and the rift it might cause between them if I tell her, I choose to keep it to myself. It’s for the best, even if it means I’ll have to drown in my own sorrows.

“Your father told me about Ren. I know he was like a brother to you.”

I almost snort. *Brother*. Ren was nothing like a brother to me. He was so much more. “If you want me to stay with you, I can. I’ll just sit here and keep you company. You look sad, and I don’t want you to be alone.”

I love my mother, but I need to be alone.

I need to mourn the loss of something I never really had and the love of a man I’ll never be able to move on from.

“I’m okay, Mom. Whatever it was that happened, I’m sure it was a misunderstanding. He would never hurt his family or friends.”

My mother nods, but I can tell she doesn’t believe that statement. I force myself to believe it because there is no other option. Ren isn’t the villain. He isn’t. He can’t be, not when he’s played the knight in every memory and thought I’ve ever had about him.

“I want to believe that too, honey, but I don’t know if I can. The proof is right in front of us, and the odds are stacked against him. Unless he comes out of hiding and explains himself, we’ll never know.”

I frown because the alternative is crying, and if I start that again, I’ll never stop. No matter what they think, I know Ren. I know the softness and good that he shows only to me. I love him, and nothing anyone says will change that.

I’ll hold on to the promises he made me until the day he breaks them.

Ren was never a choice for me; he was always my end goal.



# SCARLET

I stand in front of the mirror and run a hand down the front of my red velvet sequin dress. It's beautiful with a sexy low neckline and crisscross straps across the back. It comes to rest against my thighs and fits as tight as a glove. I look gorgeous in it, and if we were anywhere else but at home with our friends and family, my father would never allow me to wear this.

Not with how eye-catching and short it is.

I peer at my reflection one last time. My hair is curled, the blond strands resting against my breasts. Tessa—my cousin and confidante—did my makeup, giving me smoky eyes.

I have every reason in the world to smile tonight, but I can't bring myself to do so. In just a few moments, I'll walk down the stairs to the birthday party my mother spent countless hours planning. Everyone will smile, converse, and enjoy themselves. Everything will be perfect except for the one missing piece. The one person who matters most to me.

"Don't be sad. If you start crying, it'll ruin your makeup, and then I'll have to kick your ass," Tessa harasses from the doorway.

I whirl around and force my lips into a small smile. "Watch out, big bad Tessa's on the loose."

Her expression becomes coy. "Have you seen the guns I'm carrying?"

She points at her biceps, and I can't help but laugh at her joke. Little does she know, every family member is armed in some way, or at least there is a weapon within reach.

In many ways, I long to be like Tessa—smart, funny, and creative. She's innocent and kind, and unbeknownst to her, she's also a part of one of the most sinister mafia families on the West Coast.

Uncle Ivan and Aunt Violet feel it is right to keep her hidden from the family business for as long as possible. I can't blame them for it, but then again, the day she finds out, I can only imagine her feeling complete betrayal at their deceit. I should have already told her the truth, but I can't bring myself to do it.

I know it's only a matter of time, but if she's not asking questions, there isn't a reason to explain things to her.

Worst of all, because she knows nothing about our world, she has no idea that Ren betrayed the entire family, and that betrayal has caused a huge rift between all of us. Maybe she feels it and hasn't said anything, or maybe she doesn't even care. I'm not sure, but she's one less person I can talk to about things, and that sucks.

I try not to think of Ren as I let Tessa guide me out into the grand foyer. She's wearing a gold dress with her dark hair tied up in a high ponytail. The smile of confidence she wears is contagious.

I look from her to my family, my father, standing beside my mother, his dark hair graying. Worry lines crease his forehead though he disguises them with a smile. My mother peers up at me with adoration, her blond hair intricately done, her blue eyes sparkling. Even when she's dressed up, the red chiffon dress clinging to her body, it's impossible to tell she is over the age of forty.

My brother, Quinton, is next in the line, followed by his wife, Aspen. Both of them give me dazzling smiles, though my brother's smile never reaches his eyes. He can't hide his betrayal and hurt from me. Not when it matches my own.

As my gaze moves down the line, the muscle in my chest seizes, and I forget to breathe.

He should be standing there, his devilish smirk in place and his icy gaze drinking me in, promising me bad things. He should be here, and he isn't.

With a shake of my head, I let the anger threatening to take hold of me evaporate into thin air. He's gone, and he's never coming back. I need to face that reality even if every single fiber of me refuses to believe it.

Next are Uncle Ivan and Aunt Violet, followed by Uncle Damon and Aunt Keira. They give me the same smile as everyone else. "Smile. It's your birthday, after all," Tessa whispers as she releases me. How can I smile when my life feels like it's crumbling in my hands?

"You look beautiful." My father dotes, and I wrap my arms around him. There is nothing like the hugs he gives.

"Your father is right; you're turning into a beautiful young woman," my mother adds, and I pull back and look at her, noticing the tears filling her eyes. Who knew Ella Rossi could be so emotional and sensitive being married to Xander Rossi.

I can only hope to have a love like my parents someday.

"No matter what birthday I'm celebrating, I can always return home to see my mother." I smile, trying to soothe the void at the loss of her children growing up and moving on with their lives will bring.

"Get over here and give your favorite uncle a hug," Uncle Damon interrupts, and I turn to find him giving me a playful smile.

Dark hair and eyes that mirror my father's. I swear, sometimes they could be twins. Aunt Keira gives me a hug as well.

Uncle Ivan opens his huge arms to me. He's the size of a bear, big and tall, his muscles bunching beneath his dress shirt.

"It's okay. I know you had to lie to Uncle Damon about him being your favorite uncle." He's grinning from ear to ear,



and I step into his warm embrace. He gives the best hugs.

“Hey, now, don’t be talking shit about me,” Uncle Damon chastises.

All I can do is shake my head. This family’s dynamic could never be duplicated. Ivan releases me, and immediately Violet wraps me up in her arms. She smells like lavender and sunshine. I suck a calming breath of her scent into my lungs, letting it stabilize me.

“Happy birthday, sweetie,” she whispers into the shell of my ear.

I pull away, giving her a sad smile. The only people missing from the party are Ren’s parents and sister. It wasn’t that they didn’t want to come, as my father told me, but he thought it would be better if they didn’t.

As a group, we make our way to the large dining room that overlooks the gardens. My father, Quinton, Damon, and Ivan speak to each other in hushed voices while Tessa and I grab a bottle of champagne.

I fill the flutes all the way to the top, and we clink glasses before taking a drink. Tessa sips her champagne, but I can’t bring myself to be that ladylike.

I need some type of alcohol to numb the pain in my chest.

Bringing the flute to my lips, I tip it back and swallow the entire glass in two gulps. The bubbly wine slides down my throat with ease, and I grab the bottle and pour another. I can feel Tessa’s judgmental gaze, but I don’t care. It’s my birthday, after all.

I decide to sip on the second glass as I take my usual seat at the table. The table is smaller today.

It’s only been a few months since he disappeared, but tensions between my father and Roman, Ren’s father, have grown.

Everyone points fingers, and I know it’s only a matter of time before something bad happens. I frown and look at the missing spots at the table. Nothing will ever be the same again.

Luna and I can barely text without some type of controversy. I know everyone thinks she's helping her brother or is in contact with him, but I'm not so sure. Ren loves his sister more than anything, but he wouldn't drag her into the mess he made. I mean, I guess I thought he loved me, too, and look at the murky waters he dragged me through. I shrug and take another gulp of the champagne, letting the bubbles relax my tightening gut.

We move from conversation to dinner, and I space out for the majority of it. I love my family, but I'm not in the right headspace to handle all of this.

I can only fake so much. Even I have my limit.

Dinner is a birthday favorite, butternut squash ravioli cooked in a cream sauce with fresh bread sticks. Months ago, I'd have licked the dish clean, but now I can barely manage to push the food around with my fork, taking a bite here and there to appease my mother's watchful eyes.

"If I'm forcing myself to eat this for you, then you better take a couple more bites of food." Quinton spears a piece of ravioli on his fork and shoves it into his mouth. He grimaces, and I shake my head, a giggle escaping my lips.

"How can my big bad brother be offended by butternut squash?"

"I'm not offended by it. I just think it tastes like ass."

"How do you know what ass tastes like?" I tilt my head and ask coyly.

Quinton smirks while Aspen's cheeks turn a shade pinker. "That's a conversation for another day, little sister."

I love the way my brother loves his wife, the way he turns to her a moment later and presses his lips to her forehead.

His adoration for her is unmistakable. He would burn down the entire world to keep her in his arms.

"I don't even want to know the details." Tessa gags across the table.

She doesn't have the slightest clue that ass-eating is the least of her worries with this family. I hope she never loses her innocent shine.

I force myself to take a couple more bites. The last thing I want is to make my parents or brother worry more about me.

Dinner passes smoothly, and a two-tier chocolate cake is brought out once the table is cleared. Chocolate and cake. Two of my favorite things on any normal day. But not today. I'm not sure what could possibly cheer me up, except maybe to go back in time and tell Ren not to do whatever he was doing.

Could I have convinced him to make a different choice?

I'm not so certain. Especially if I had no idea what his intent was. Ren was next-level secret. He only told you something when he wanted you to know it. Not sooner or later. When he was ready, he'd reveal himself. A lot like a predator watching his prey from afar, waiting for the perfect moment to strike.

My father lights the candles on the cake, and I stare at all sixteen, the flames flickering as a slight breeze blows through the space. All eyes are on me as they sing "Happy Birthday." There isn't any point in trying to hide my somber feelings. Everyone feels the same way I do. They're simply doing a better job at hiding it, which takes effort—effort that I do not have.

"Make a wish," Quinton exclaims, his expression grim.

He expects me to hold it together like him, but I can't. *Won't.*

I stare at the candle, the flame staring back at me. I have only one wish, and it'll never come true. I bite the inside of my cheek until I taste blood.

He's never coming back. I blow the candles out and force a smile. The beautiful cake is cut, and everyone digs in.

I take a couple of bites, the luscious buttercream frosting makes me salivate, and I'm tempted to eat more, but my churning stomach makes me halt. My father and Quinton disappear into my father's office.

I know they're discussing business. My brother will soon take over the Rossi empire, and technically, I have no right to be a part of the business, not that I want to, either.

Women, though respected and treated well, aren't to fiddle in the mafia dealings of the family. We're to be seen and not heard, but I've never been the type to stay quiet. I'm a Rossi, after all.

I shove from the table and start toward the office.

"Sweetheart, they're discussing business." My mother's sing-song voice fills my ears, but I ignore it.

Their voices are hushed when I reach the door, which is cracked open. I'm tempted to barge in but instead knock.

"Come in." My father's voice is businesslike, and he doesn't bother asking who it is, almost as if he suspected it would be me.

I shove the door open and walk inside. Neither he nor Q looks all that surprised by my appearance, confirming my thoughts.

"I don't like secrets." I cross my arms over my chest and glare at my brother, who wears an expression of guilt. I know whatever they're discussing has to do with Ren, and I already told Q if it pertains to him in any way, I want to know.

He was my friend too.

"Sit down," my father orders, and I take the seat beside my brother without so much as a breath. Sitting back in his chair, he stares at me, his expression blank. "I know you don't want to believe what's been said about Ren. No one does. Not his parents or sister, and even your mother and I are at a loss, being how close he was to all of us."

I've fought at length with Quinton about Ren. Even with all the evidence in front of me, I can't mentally make myself believe he was some evil man intent on killing any of us. That wasn't Ren.

"I'm going to assume you have more evidence?"

Quinton nods. “We tracked his phone further and discovered he was leaving Corium almost nightly. However, we don’t know where he was going. The signal must have been lost, or he was out of radius.”

I shrug. “So that doesn’t mean anything. Maybe he felt trapped there. I don’t know. We won’t know his reasoning until we can ask him.”

My father rubs at his temples. He knew I always tried to see the good in others, so I wasn’t sure why he was so intent on convincing me otherwise.

“We found something else. A notebook.” My father sighs. “We don’t know what the hell it’s for. The contents aren’t really clear, but it’s another clue that he was doing something.”

My heart rate picks up. “What were the contents?”

“Codes,” my brother answers.

“Codes? What kind of codes?” I can’t wrap my head around that. Why would he need codes? What were they for?

“That’s where the trail ends.” Frustration fills the air. “The codes don’t make any sense or correlate to anything we can understand. All we know is that they were of importance to him since he wrote them down. Aside from that, they’re just a bunch of letters scribbled on paper, but that doesn’t mean he’s innocent. He was doing something, but we don’t know yet *what* that something was.”

Is it bad that a part of me is joyful that they haven’t found any hard-core evidence of wrongdoing? I’m not sure I’d believe anything even if I saw it. In my eyes, Ren isn’t whatever picture of him they are painting.

The clock behind my father’s head shows nine p.m. There is still plenty of time to spend hanging out with my family, but I am pooped. Pretending was harder than I thought.

“I think I’m going to go lie down,” I announce.

My brother raises his brow at me, but I ignore his stare.

Dad frowns at me. “Are you sure? I know this news isn’t something you wanted to hear, especially on your birthday. It

is why we tried to keep it under wraps, but it doesn't have to mean the end of your evening. It doesn't have to ruin anything."

"I'm not fragile, Dad. What you just told me didn't ruin my night." I break the tension. "I'm just tired and really think I should get to bed early. Plus, my stomach isn't feeling all that well."

He nods, reaching for the glass of whiskey he must've poured before I came in. I stand, my legs a bit wobbly. Quinton also stands and follows me out of the room. Placing his hand on my shoulder, he stops me from escaping. I shrug off his hand, making his frown deepen. I don't like upsetting my brother, but I can't possibly pretend we're on the same side of things.

"I know you want to believe he's still a good guy, but I need you to understand the seriousness of this."

"I believe what I know, brother, and what I know is that Ren loved us. I won't stop believing that until there is proof to show that it was all a lie."

Quinton scoffs, his frown becoming pained, almost like I had slapped him.

"He tried to kill Aspen and me. He literally pushed me down a flight of stairs. Someone who loves you doesn't do that, Scarlet."

The anger inside me burns with the intensity of the sun. I love my brother, but this is a hill I will die on.

"And you have room to talk? I've heard about the things that happened between you and Aspen and how you treated her. I know you still think I'm a little girl, but I'm not. I'm getting older, and I hear more than you know. And sometimes, we hurt the people we love. I don't think Ren would hurt you without feeling a need to do so."

Shaking his head, he takes a step back, distrust filling his dark gaze. He thought I was against him. He didn't know the truth.

“If you can’t see the truth when it’s right in front of you, I don’t know what else to do.”

“Nothing,” I whisper, my already fragile heart crumbling in my hands.

I whirl around and rush to my bedroom before the tears can fall. I would not embarrass myself by crying in front of anyone.

Off in the distance, I’m aware of someone calling my name, but I don’t care. As soon as I slip inside my room, I lock the door and sag against it and let the tears slip free.

I’m tired, so tired.

Hugging my knees to my chest, I wonder if he will make good on his promise to always give me a new first on my birthday or if it is nothing more than a dream that will never come true. Ren isn’t dumb enough to show up here, least of all for me. I let my mind take me to a better place, to the night he made that promise. The night he gave me my first kiss.

*“I’ve never kissed anyone before,” I whisper, hoping he doesn’t hear me, though knowing he will. It’s a good thing it’s dark because I’d hate for him to be able to see the crimson coloring my cheek.*

*Cupping my cheek, he runs his thumb along my full bottom lip, a dark gleam of desire shining in his eyes.*

*“Good, you have no idea how satisfied it makes me to know that I’ll be your first in every single way.” He leans forward, his huge frame enveloping mine, and my heart jumps inside my chest. I can feel the heat of his body radiating against mine.*

*His hot breath fans against my lips. It’s minty, and I involuntarily pucker my lips, waiting for the inevitable. “I want all your firsts, Scarlet, and that terrifies me. It scares me because you have no idea of the darkness inside me, yet you crave every piece of me the way I desire you.*

*“I want you, and I always will,” I whisper, pushing up onto my tiptoes. I need his lips on mine like I need my next breath. Fisting his shirt in my hands, I pull him closer. No, I’ve*

*never kissed a man before, but I'm letting my body's reaction to him guide me.*

*Ren's smirk is downright devious. "See, I'm already corrupting you. My little angel, with a glow of goodness all around her." His thumb presses down, and I part my lips for him, letting it enter my mouth. I'm apprehensive as I look up at him through my lashes and suck the tip of his thumb inside.*

*This is Ren. He'll never hurt me or deceive me. I can trust him with my life, with my body. Flames of desire flicker in his eyes, a desire I don't understand but want to taste. I don't want him to think I'm a sheltered good girl, especially when I'm not. "I'm a Rossi; there's darkness inside me too." The words slip out of me, and before I realize it, I'm sucking his thumb deeper into my mouth.*

*"Fuck, you're going to break my resolve, and I'm already doing everything I can to stop myself from taking what isn't mine to take."*

*"It's not really taking if I'm giving it to you."*

*He pulls his thumb from my lips, and I let out a whimper that he swallows up as his lips come to slant down on mine without warning.*

*His long fingers snake against the nape of my neck and weave through my strawberry-blond strands. Holding me in place, he kisses me with a vengeance, with need. It's everything I thought it would be and nothing at all.*

*My scalp burns, and a sensual heat fills my core. The kiss deepens, and Ren consumes me. I run my hands along the hard planes of his body that press against my softness, mapping out every inch of him, imprinting it into my mind.*

*Parting my lips, I nip at him, wanting more. It's the mistake of the century since he chooses then to break the kiss. I let out a disapproving grunt, and as he pulls away, his intoxicating scent leaving me, I notice the heaving of his chest.*

*I'm sure if I could see his eyes, I'd see the animal lurking beneath the surface. The man he claims will corrupt me.*

*He takes a step back, and my heart sinks into my stomach.*



*“You’re making me want things I can’t have. You’re not mine, Scarlet, yet I want to make you mine in every way.”*

*“Then do it,” I plead, reaching for him.*

*Again, he shakes his head. “No, angel. I’m not sure if it’s even possible to have you, and if it is, I can’t have you... not yet. You’re too young.”*

*“I’m yours. I’ll always be yours.” I’m practically panting, ready to give myself over to him. My eyes shine, moisture forming in them, and I’m not sure if I want to cry from the overpowering need to be his or from the fear of being rejected. Either way, I don’t want to cry in front of him, so I blink back the tears as best I can.*

*One stray tear escapes, and Ren stares at it, watching as it slides down the apple of my cheek. He doesn’t even blink or seem to be affected by it. I don’t even try to hide crying now. What’s the point?*

*Leaning in, he wipes the tear from my cheek, his warm fingers against my cold tearstained skin, making me shiver. “Don’t cry, angel. You’re not mine. Not yet, but you will be someday. I’ll be the man to claim all your firsts. Every year on your birthday, until I can claim you fully, I’ll claim one of your firsts. You’ll be mine, eventually.”*

*“You promise?” I squeak.*

*He nods. “I promise, angel. Your firsts are mine. Save them for me because if I find out another man touched you or took something from you, I won’t hesitate to end his life.”*

*Any normal girl would gasp and attempt to run. The fear of being possessed in such a way would terrify them. It was the opposite for me.*

*I was terrified of being anything but his.*

*A ragged sob escapes me, and the memory becomes smoke between my fingers. I bring a trembling finger to my lips.*

*I can almost feel his lips on mine if I focus on the memory hard enough. But that’s all I have left of him.*

*Memories.*

Maybe my brother is right. How long will I look at the proof that is right in front of me and pretend it doesn't exist?

I don't know, but I put every last shred of hope I have in him, into praying that he will keep his promise to me so I can continue believing he didn't want to hurt us.



## REN

“Don’t do this, Ren,” River demands. I knew he wasn’t going to like this, but I just have to know. “What if she told her father? What if they have men waiting for you in the tunnels?”

“She didn’t tell anyone.” I keep my voice low. I might be the only one out here in the middle of the woods, with nothing but the wind and the trees to eavesdrop. But I know better than anyone how obsessed Xander Rossi is with keeping his family safe. There is still a possibility of him planting men around this area.

“You can’t know that for sure.”

He’s right. I can’t. Yet I’m certain enough to take the risk.

“I’ll call you back when I’m on my way home.” I hang up before he can try to convince me not to go through with this.

Stuffing my phone in my pocket, I kneel and swipe the dirt and dried leaves from the flat metal surface below. It takes me a few moments to find the latch in the dark. When I finally do, I turn it and lift the heavy metal door.

An automated light comes on, illuminating the ladder down the small tunnel below. From here, it looks endless, like it’s going through the center of the earth, but I know from experience it only seems that way.

Carefully, I climb down, closing the hatch behind me as I go.

A few minutes later, my boots land on the concrete ground of the mile-long escape tunnel.

Everyone knows that Xander Rossi has escape tunnels running below his compound, but only Xander, his wife, and his children know about these very specific tunnels leading straight to their private quarters.

Scarlet shouldn't have told me about them, but lucky for me, she did.

As I close the distance between us, the excitement of being able to touch her again has my heart racing in my chest. I'm used to keeping my distance and only watching her from afar. But the past few weeks have been different because this time, I didn't contact her at all. No texts, no calls.

I left her completely in the dark, and as a consequence, I'm left in the dark on how she feels about me now.

Does she hate me? Will she let me touch her?

Did she tell her family that I know about these tunnels?

The seed of doubt River planted in my mind takes root.  
*Fuck.*

My legs stop moving on their own, and my feet plant themselves on the concrete floor, only a few yards away from the tunnel leading up and into the Rossi mansion.

*"I'm yours. I'll always be yours."*

The memory of Scarlet's sweet voice rings in my head, calling me to her like a siren. I force my feet to keep moving, pushing forward until I make it to the tunnel going up. I climb the ladder to the door leading into the house.

Using my fingertips, I softly run them down the right edge of the door, feeling for the hidden pin pad. I give it a gentle push, and it flips open, revealing the number pad. I type in the ten-digit code before letting my thumb hover over the enter button.

*Here goes nothing.*

My pulse doubles, and all oxygen evaporates from my lungs. It only takes half a second for the small blinking light on the side of the door to turn green, but it feels like an eternity.

The door unlocks with a click, and I sigh in relief. They didn't change the code. That's a good sign, but I can never let my guard down. There is still a chance of armed guards waiting for me inside the house.

As quietly as I can, I push the door open and climb into the hallway. Just as carefully, I close the hidden pathway and turn in the direction of Scarlet's room. The hallway is as silent as it is dark, but I have walked these halls since I was a little boy and know every loose floorboard and cracked tile in this house, making it a breeze to be stealthy in here.

I creep my way up to her door, wrap my hand around the brass knob, and turn it slowly. The first thing I notice when I step into her room is the familiar unique scent filling the space.

Lilac and fresh linen. *Home.*

Basking in that scent, I suck in a deep breath and close the door behind me. Before I step deeper into the room, I turn the lock on the doorknob, locking us in.

I navigate the room silently, like a shadow, until I'm standing at the edge of the bed. Her silky blond hair fans out on the pillow like a golden halo. Her eyes are closed, her lashes fluttering slightly as her eyes move under her eyelids.

She must be dreaming. Her partly covered chest rises and falls evenly. With every breath she takes, the blanket slides off the swell of her breasts a little more.

Unable to help myself, I reach for the blanket. Digging my fingers into the soft fabric, I tug it down a few inches more.

I drink her in. She's wearing a nightgown, but the thin lace has slid down her shoulder, her rosy nipple peeking out from under the deep v-cut.

My mouth waters. I want to feel her tits in my mouth and suck on her hard nipple until she comes apart under my touch.

I want her to scream my name. I want it all... but that's not what I'm here for. I promised her another first, and it's going to be the last one I can give her for a while. With one harsh tug, I pull the rest of the blanket off her flawless body.

My dick stiffens against my zipper as I take her in like I'm a starving man, and she is my only solace. She stirs, but her eyes remain closed.

Her hands slide over the mattress beside her, probably trying to find her comforter. Before she realizes the blanket is out of reach, I climb onto the bed, covering her slender half-naked body with mine.

Her eyes fly open at the same moment my hand presses over her mouth. Body stiff, her hands sink deep into my shirt, grabbing fistfuls of the fabric.

Shock, fear, and confusion all pool in the depths of her pale blue eyes. Yet her body remains still under mine. She doesn't fight or try to push me off because underneath her shock lies recognition. In an instant, she knows who I am, and she knows I would never hurt her. Not physically, at least.

Her stiff body softens, and I lower myself farther, pressing her into the mattress with my weight. Those blue eyes of hers stay wide open, staring at me as if she's scared to blink.

"You didn't tell anyone?" I don't have to explain what I'm talking about. She knows I mean the tunnels. Giving me a shake of her head, she confirms what I thought. "Good girl. Now let me give you your birthday present."

I lift my hand from her mouth, and she immediately bombards me with questions. "Where were you, and what the hell happened? Why haven't you—" I place my hand over her mouth, stopping her from whisper-yelling at me.

"No talking," I order, which earns me an angry glare. "Quiet, or I'll tie you up and gag you." At my threat, Scarlet's eye sparkle with excitement.

A grin tugs at my lips. My little angel likes my dark side. I shouldn't be surprised. She is a Rossi, after all.

The power of this. Holding her life in my hands like I do with her warm, willing body at my command. It's almost dizzying, though that could be the result of all the blood leaving my brain in favor of my swelling dick.

My own dark needs refuse to stay silent, announcing their presence in the most emphatic way as I twitch and strain under a zipper that just might break by the time this is over.

I remind myself that tonight is about her. I didn't risk sneaking in here to take her in some clumsy, frenzied rush. That's not how this is going to be.

It's not what she deserves.

She deserves to dissolve in sheer pleasure and be carried away from conscious thought in favor of sensation. I'm going to be the man who introduces her to what she's only dreamed about before now.

She wants this. She knows what I did. What I tried to do. She must. Yet she's made no attempt at bucking me off her. In fact, her stiffened body has relaxed, melting against mine.

*My angel. My all.*

I hold a finger to my lips before pressing them to hers. If the scent of her bedroom is home, the taste of her lips is the warmth, comfort, and nourishment promised within.

Fuck, I had no idea how much I longed to kiss her. To share breath with her. I do what I can to savor the moment, to commit to memory every soft sigh and strained whimper.

She's like a small, flickering flame leaping to life all at once. All it took was a simple kiss to get her blazing. Her plump lips part with no encouragement, her tongue brushing mine, stirring a needy groan from both of us.

She arches off the bed, and I shudder at the pressing of her tight nipples against my chest. So willing and eager for me.

Her hands, once wedged against my chest, now slide up and over my shoulders before meeting at the back of my head. Fingers twist in my hair, sending sparks of electricity across



my scalp and down my spine, where they pool below my waist and leave my balls aching for release.

*This is about her.* It's too easy to lose sight of the goal when she insists on reminding me of the other fun we could have.

The simple truth, one which I'd share with her if we had the time, is this: I don't deserve to claim her fully. I always planned to when the time came, once she was old enough, but too much has transpired between the night I first saw her through new eyes and this night.

I don't want her to regret it. She means too much to me, her happiness more important than any desire I could ever have.

That doesn't mean I won't allow myself to indulge in her kiss another moment longer before pulling away, removing her hands from the back of my head in favor of pinning them against her pillow.

"It's your birthday, and everyone knows the most important part of birthdays," I whisper, savoring the hazy desire in her eyes as they stare into mine. "Presents." I grin. "But you have to promise me you'll be a good, quiet girl."

"Promise," she breathes.

I admire the heaving of her chest, her hot breath hitting my face in quick bursts. She's gone stiff again, fear and anticipation battling it out to see who'll gain control. It's no contest. Once I work my way down her body, placing light kisses over her covered breasts before moving farther south, she's too wrapped up in desire to remember why she was ever afraid.

Too busy wanting more, her hunger revealing itself in the way she's already begun to writhe, the lacy nightgown sliding over her flesh as she does.

By the time I've reached the apex of her thighs, the thin garment has worked its way up to her hips. The moonlight streaming through the window on us allows me a teasing glimpse of the heaven promised just beneath the hem.

*Fuck, if only I'd lift it a little higher...*

Her hips lift when I do, like she's presenting herself to me. Begging without words to be tasted. I can hardly hold a conscious thought in my head as I lower it, my nose brushing against the pale pink satin of her panties.

*Fuck.* I take a mental picture of her to keep deep in the crevices of my mind for later. I can't hold back the feral growl of sheer desire unleashed at the scent of her arousal. Musky and sweet. It envelops me, almost robs me of the will to restrain myself for her sake.

In my mind's eye, I see myself tearing the satin to shreds an instant before burying my cock balls deep in what I know will be heavenly silk.

Instead, I bury my nose against her mound, the dampness already soaking into the fabric, leaving moisture on my lips. I lick it off, shuddering, before turning my tongue toward the outline of her seam, satin plastered against her swollen lips.

"Oh, my—" I turn my gaze upward in time to see her jam a fist against her open mouth, desperate to contain her intense reaction to the sweeping of my tongue. It's a delight, undoing her like this, almost as sweet as the taste of her juices. The flavor explodes across my tongue and twists my consciousness, leaving me panting and grunting like an animal. Sheer instinct leaves me needing to remove the barrier between my mouth and the treasure waiting to be plundered.

I'm barely restraining myself, the need to take from her a knot that continues to grow deep inside me.

A soft gasp cuts through the air the instant I hook my fingers inside the waistband. Glancing up, I find her watching me, holding her breath. A single kiss against her mound—soft, almost reverent—relaxes her, allowing me to remove her panties and spread her legs wide.

I could kneel here and stare down at her pussy all night. I could make a career of it. I'm salivating, licking my lips to stop myself from drooling as I revel in the masterpiece before

me. Pink pussy lips shaved smooth, almost pearlescent, thanks to the juices coating them and leaking onto the mattress.

Her tiny, pink clit peeks out, and I swear it pulses as I watch.

“If I didn’t know better,” I whisper as I lower my head again. “I’d think you made sure to shave for me tonight.”

She bites her bottom lip, cheeks going deep red, and I know I’m right. The knowledge stirs something deeper than desire in my chest. Something closer to pride. She was hoping I’d come tonight.

*She remembers my promise.*

That’s the last thought to go through my mind before I inch forward and lap at her seam again, this time coming into contact with bare skin.

The arching of her back is sudden, almost violent.

She’s already so close, her inexperienced body careening toward the finish line at the slightest touch. I pause, waiting for her to settle down before taking another lick. Then another. Teasing us both.

As much as I know it would be best to get out of here as quickly as possible, I need this to be good for her. I need her to look back on this without regret or disappointment.

Slowly, I slide my tongue deeper, delving between her lips. Her scent explodes around me, urging me to drive deeper, to thrust into her tightness and dig out every last drop.

I’m greedy for her, I’ve always been greedy, but this is a whole other level.

Instead of breaching the barrier of her virgin pussy, I allow my tongue to sweep along her entrance before I move on, parting her folds and finally sliding over the bundle of nerves that, by now, is the entirety of her existence.

Her high-pitched squeal is barely stifled by her fist, jammed tight against her mouth while her body undulates like waves on a stormy sea. All I can do is hold her hips down with an arm flung across them—or else I might end up with a

broken nose. To call her eager would be a pitiful understatement.

I work her slowly, gently, knowing it will only take the slightest friction to achieve the desired effect. Her fists twist the sheet under her now, pulling, nails scraping the fabric. She's the image of abandon, head rolling from side to side, mouth open, chest heaving, and her legs spread wide.

And it's all because of me. If there wasn't already a wet spot growing on the front of my jeans, there would be now.

I can still give her this. My Scarlet.

Her breathing picks up speed with the increased pressure from my tongue. My mouth and chin are coated with her juices now, every sweep against her sending nectar from her in a flood.

I coax more out of her, greedy for her orgasm. I want to feel her fall apart under me, thanks to my tongue. I will touch her the way no other man ever will. Nothing will compare to me. That's my mission.

"Ren..." she half sobs, frantic for release.

The sound goes straight to my dick and makes me groan in discomfort and frustration, but I push through. For her, all for her. She's so close.

She needs this. So do I. I can't be selfish with her. I never could be.

All at once, she goes stiff. Her thighs clamp around my head, squeezing until I can't hear anything beyond the rush of blood in my ears.

Then the tension breaks.

A high-pitched yelp escapes her parted lips before a fresh burst of wetness pours out of her. I continue sweeping my tongue over her twitching clit, drawing it out, refusing to stop even when she bats ineffectively at my shoulders.

*Oh no, I'm not stopping.*

Not until she's ready to pass out. My pride won't allow it.

Her hips jerk spasmodically, and I ride it out, holding on tight, lips clamped around her clit, sucking until she arches her back again, shaking violently from head to toe. My heart almost forgets to beat as I wait at that moment between torment and release.

She drops to the mattress when she reaches the finish line, her body limp and immobile. Pride rushes through me. Pride in myself, yes, but pride in her as well. For trusting me, for trusting this. For knowing I would never put her through anything I knew she couldn't withstand. She's always been stronger than she knows.

I need her to remember that.

Knowing she's too sensitive now, I choose instead to caress the insides of her thighs with my lips and tongue, committing her to memory before lifting my head and raising myself onto my knees. She hasn't moved except to breathe—great, rasping breaths. Her blond halo of hair is a mess, and a deep flush creeps up her face. The bed is in disarray due to her frantic writhing.

Nothing has ever been more beautiful or perfect.

I climb off the bed, careful not to disturb her as she comes down from her high. Once more, I take in the sight of her, indulging myself in her beauty before pulling the blanket over her once again.

“Ren...” she whispers, the sound soft, but she doesn't open her eyes.

She does, however, offer a lazy smile.

Reaching down, I run a hand over her hair, smoothing it away from her forehead before placing a kiss there. I close my eyes, inhaling her one more time. After this, I'll have no choice but to keep my distance.

*Just one more second.*

*One more kiss.*

*One more.*

Even though I know nothing will ever be enough.

With a strangled sigh, I force myself to straighten up.

“Happy birthday,” I whisper before backing away.

She doesn't reply, and even if everything tells me to stay here, the reminder of what must be done presses heavy on my shoulders.

*Soon we will be together. I promise.*



# SCARLET



TWO YEARS LATER

Life is not like a box of chocolates, or however that quote goes.

It's like a dumpster that's on fire, chasing you down the street, but the street is downhill, and you have no shoes on.

Okay, that's an exaggeration, but the past two years have been an endless roller coaster that I can't seem to get off.

Two years later, and everyone still believes Ren is the bad guy, that he's out for blood, hiding, waiting for the perfect moment to attack, but I still find it in my heart to believe he's a good guy.

I haven't seen him, at least *truly* seen him, or talked to him since the night of my sixteenth birthday. He broke his promise to me. He never showed on my seventeenth birthday, which was disappointing. I wanted to believe he still wanted me, but I had no way of knowing.

My heart craves him, even after all this time, and I'm holding on to the hope that he will find a way to see me so we can figure out a way to make our relationship work. It's stupid, but I can't let it go. I feel him here, but at a distance, and I can't live the rest of my life like this.

I've already waited long enough. I need to force his hand.

"What are you doing?" Tessa's playful voice enters my ears, and I find her eyes in the mirror.

Dammit. I was spacing out again.

That happens often—in class and during conversations. My mind is always somewhere it doesn't need to be. I'm thankful the year is ending. MIT isn't for me, and I need to break the news to Tessa, but I will save that for another night. Tonight we are going to the end-of-year bash.

The theme: costume party.

“Finishing up my makeup.” I smile back, adding some gold shimmer to my left eye. I can feel Tessa assessing my costume, her gaze lingering. It is a little on the short side and definitely tighter than it needs to be, but I'm a big girl.

“You're aware you're not really an angel, right?” I catch her grinning at me in the mirror.

“And you're aware you're not really a butterfly, right?” I retort, cocking my head.

Pursing her lips, she flaps her arms, imitating a butterfly. “Don't tell me what I can be.”

We both giggle, and I finish adding the final touches to my makeup. Looking in the mirror, I adjust my halo, which hangs a couple of inches above my head, secured with a headband.

I curled my hair earlier and am wearing a tight white dress with gold accents. I look innocent and sweet. I'm hoping that appeal will bring Ren out of hiding tonight. That is if he's been the one following me all along. It could've been one of my father's many bodyguards, but that isn't likely.

They are there to protect us, and in no way, shape, or form would one of them dare to cross the line. Loyalty is huge to my father; he'd not only kill them but refuse to offer their families protection.

Thinking of them makes me pause, but not for long. This is hardly the first party we've snuck out to this year, and there's never been a problem. It's easy, really. If you understand the men tasked with protecting you are also creatures of habit. They have a schedule they follow day in and day out.

I check the time on my phone before slipping it into a small gold clutch.

“T-minus three minutes,” I announce, which Tessa knows is code for getting her ass in gear. We only have a small window while the men switch shifts at ten sharp. It has to be the most boring job in the world, sitting in front of an apartment with nothing to do but wait for danger to present itself.

If they’re lucky, it never does, which means spending hours bored out of their mind. Then again, my father pays them well.

And there are worse ways for a man to earn a living.

With all the caution of a couple of spies on a mission, Tessa and I hover by the front door. I open it no more than a crack, peering out into the hall. As always, music comes from at least one or two of the other apartments on this floor, overlapping TV shows and movies, with muffled conversations.

The difference?

The absence of the man whose job it is to sit outside the door. They don’t always stay put—they walk the halls rather than stay in one place for hours on end. Sitting still would drive me mental, so I understand.

After one glimpse, I find the hall empty, so I wave Tessa on behind me. We slip out, darting to the nearest stairwell, giggling softly like we’ve just broken some unholy rule.

While I won’t miss much about my experience here at MIT, I will miss this. The fun we have together, sneaking around, laughing about nothing important.

It’s two floors down to the ground level, where a keypad is mounted to the wall beside the door leading to the parking lot. My father insisted I stay in the most secure building on campus, and I can’t pretend it isn’t reassuring to know we have to enter a code to go in or out. Even if that little fact makes it less likely that Ren will be able to make secret visits.

Though if he could so easily sneak in and out of my father’s compound without so much as stepping on a creaking

floorboard to give himself away, I'm sure learning a code isn't beyond his skills.

I'm grasping at straws. It's pretty pathetic.

The sense of freedom I feel stepping outside brings the same rush of relief it always does. I'm grateful for my father's insistence on my safety, but at times, it's hard to breathe with the sense of someone looking over my shoulder with every step I take.

Not somebody who I want to be looking after me, either.

As we walk away from the apartment building and cross the street, I scan the area around us. A matter of habit, yes—I'm still a Rossi, and I've heard too many stories over the years to ever completely let my guard down. Even if I wasn't a Rossi, I'm still a girl walking the streets at night.

That's dangerous enough, sadly.

Tessa gives voice to my initial impression of the other students wandering the sidewalks. "It's like Halloween with all these costumes."

Yes, and some people took the theme seriously. There's a guy walking around in a crazy outfit that I know has something to do with a sci-fi movie, but they've never been my cup of tea, so I can't put my finger on it.

"Predator," Tessa says before calling out to him. "Super detailed. Way to commit." She gives him a thumbs-up, which he returns.

For the most part, though, everybody seems to have used this as an opportunity to wear as little as possible. There's a lot of skin showing, at least when it comes to the girls.

"And you thought my dress was short?" I whisper to Tessa, whose eyes widen when three girls saunter our way dressed in ass-skimming, sheer nighties and fuzzy mule slippers.

"We almost look overdressed," she frets, chewing her lip once they walk past, earning honks from a passing car.

"Nah, we're fine. Look, there's a cowgirl and a baseball player," I point out, gesturing toward the house where the

party's being held, a block off-campus. People hang out on the lawn and the front porch, vaping and drinking from plastic cups as purple and red lights flash from the windows.

"When you grow up, you don't have many chances to dress up like this," I muse, glancing over my shoulder.

Is it because I expect to see Ren's dark jacket, or because I want to?

It doesn't matter because he's nowhere to be found.

"We slipped them. Don't worry about it." She's so touchingly innocent, thinking I'm worried about escaping the security guards.

"I'm sure you're right."

*Ren. Your angel is looking for you.*

I've lost count of how many times over the past two years I've replayed the sound of his voice in my head, the throb in it when he called me *angel*. His angel. If my costume isn't strong enough of a signal, I don't know what is.

Unless I'm completely losing my mind, making things up in my head. I guess that's possible, as much as I don't want it to be.

If you think about something long enough. If you believe in it, you might start to think it's true when really it's a delusion. If I didn't feel what I feel in my soul for Ren, I'd believe that thought, but I just can't.

"Happy end of the year!" A total stranger throws his arms around our necks and pulls us in for a sloppy hug once we enter the noisy three-story house. "We fucking did it!"

"Yeah, we did." I manage to escape before he grabs my boob, which his hand is pretty close to, and I pull Tessa along with me.

Some people will use any excuse to get handsy. There's only one person I want to get handsy with. Nobody else will do.

I know Tessa wants me to loosen up and start dating. There are only so many ways to shut the idea down without coming out and admitting the truth—I'll only ever want one man. The one man I'm never supposed to be with. She would never deliberately rat on me, but she might accidentally let it slip in front of the wrong people one day, and I can't have that.

So it's safer for her to think I'm, I don't know, uninterested.

We stop at the kitchen for beers from the keg before taking a tour of the rest of the party. It's filling up quickly, so it takes time to elbow our way through the crowd. Usually, kids come in from Boston and surrounding areas on the weekends to party here, but this is a one-off sort of event taking place in the middle of the week. Silly me thought that would make it less crowded. If anything, this is the most packed I've ever seen a house party. Everybody wants to let loose now that the last exams are finished.

Tessa recognizes a few people from one of her classes—I can't hear over the thudding bass blasting from speakers nearby—and gestures for me to follow as she cuts through the crowd to say hi.

It's not like I have anything better to do, so I trail behind her. Considering the amount of dancing, drinking, and dry humping going on around me, keeping track of her is no easy feat. The scent of so many different perfumes and heavy, cloying body sprays mix with perspiration and spilled alcohol in the air make me as dizzy as I'd be after several more beers.

The back of Tessa's head bobs up and down but almost disappears when a trio of girls dancing like nobody's watching just about knock me down.

“Sorry, babe,” one of the girls screams before straightening my halo. “You look hot!”

“Uh, thanks?” She's already forgotten me, arms thrown over her head as she bounces up and down to the heavy, throbbing beat that reverberates through the floor and up my legs.

It isn't that I feel above them in any way. I'm fun. I'm just not one of them.

We're entirely different species. I don't even know how to fit in.

I'm not actively avoiding making friends. But more like I don't have it in me to put myself out there. What's the point of putting in the effort of getting to know someone if they can walk away without a word?

Why open up and make myself vulnerable when I'm clearly not worth sticking around for?

At times like this, it's enough to take my breath away. When the thought of Ren makes me want to double over and clutch my stomach since I'd swear somebody kicked me while wearing a pair of steel-toed boots.

That's nothing compared to the very real ache spreading through my chest when I see one couple after another dancing, making out, and clinging to each other. Why can't I be one of them? Why can't my life have that?

Is something so wrong with me? Am I that unlovable?

My chin trembles, and tears threaten to blur my vision before I blink them away. It's all so unfair.

*I miss him so much.*

I've lost track of how many times I've asked myself what it would be like to have him with me. Sitting in class, going to a movie, hanging out at home. It doesn't have to be anything special. His presence is what would make me feel settled.

What I wouldn't give for his presence now. It's getting a little too crowded, and my chest is tighter every time somebody jostles me—which is, like, every three seconds. At this rate, I won't make it until midnight before my brain shuts down from lack of oxygen.

Where is Tessa? Shit, I lost sight of her, and there are so many moving bodies, enough that it feels like walls closing in on all sides. They're going to crush me—there's not so much as a gap to escape through.

*Breathe. In. Out.*

This has to stop. It's one thing for anxiety to creep in while I'm alone, where no one will see and no one can take advantage if I get woozy. Why don't I paint the word victim across my ass, passing out in the middle of a crowded college party?

*You're a Rossi, dammit. Get your shit together.*

If only it were that easy. If only I had my brother's strength. The strength Ren always swore I possessed.

Panic begins to bloom in my chest, and I look around, the dim lighting and endless crush of bodies making it tough to catch sight of Tessa. Where did she go? I call her name, but the damn music instantly swallows up the sound. It's pounding in my head, threatening to cleave my skull in two.

It's like living in a nightmare I can't wake up from. Everywhere I turn, there are more bodies, more people drinking, laughing, dancing, grinding, and making out. They loom over me like blank-faced ghouls, their faces all but obliterated in the darkness, in my confusion.

"Tessa..." I gasp, struggling to sip in enough air through my tight throat so I don't pass out and get trampled. "Ren..."

I need air. Fresh air. Now. Nothing in the world matters more than getting out of this house. Salvation is outside, and it's the only hope I can cling to as I throw elbows in an attempt to break out of the tight clutch of costumed bodies trapping me in place.

"Watch it!" a girl shouts close to my face when I hit her ribs. I'd apologize but fuck her. I'm dying. I need to get out of here.

Somebody shoves me hard from behind, and my panic turns to full terror. I barely manage to stay on my feet and avoid getting trampled the way my overworked brain is so sure will happen.

The only reason I don't drop to my knees is the very tall, very hard body I fall against. A body in a black T-shirt and jeans. It absorbs my weight without so much as flinching.



Not that there's any time to relax against the broad, firm chest since a pair of large hands close around my biceps and hold on tighter than necessary. Possessively tight. *Well, shit. Out of the frying pan and into the fire.*

My head snaps up, and I'm prepared to thank whoever this is in hopes they'll let me go, but the fact that I'm looking into an animal mask rather than a normal human face only adds to the sense of foreboding and fear. It takes a moment to identify that it's a wolf, complete with pointy ears and fake fur. The eyes are black, making it impossible to see the eyes of the person beneath.

"I have to go." I don't know if he hears me or not. I can't hear myself over the cacophony, no matter how much force I put into my screaming. I won't be able to speak in the morning, and I'm sure I'll be deaf for a while, too.

I've been to arena concerts with my brother that weren't this loud.

The stranger's grip tightens, and he begins moving through the crowd much easier than I did, pushing me before him like the blade in front of a snowplow, pushing me back in the direction I just came until he's wedged me into a dark corner of the room.

"What are you doing?" I shout, but the sound is swallowed up before it gets anywhere. He's going to do with me what he wants.

And nobody even notices. The bodies close in again as soon as we pass them. It's a heavy realization that nobody cares. Even Tessa didn't see us—I can't see around him and don't know where she is. Panic bubbles out of me.

I can't see her, which means she can't see me, either. This guy is way too big, blocking me from everybody else.

My insides are churning, my body's shaking, and I'm pretty sure this is what they call fight-or-flight, but it feels like a heart attack. My chest. It hurts so much. *Am I dying?*

"I can't..." I can't even breathe enough to tell this guy I can't breathe. I've never felt this sort of helplessness. The

weak little push I give him does nothing but leave him leaning in closer, pressing against me until there's no moving at all.

He's going to hurt me, and nobody will know. Nobody will hear me if I scream—if I could scream, which I can't because I can hardly get enough air into my lungs to stay conscious. His frame is all-consuming. Every self-defense tip I ever heard runs through my head all at once, but there's no use because I can't move, much less slam a foot against his instep or drive an elbow into his nose.

His fucking wolf nose.

"I... I..." In a last-ditch effort, the words come out in a tremble. "I'm scared."

There's no seeing his eyes due to the mask, not to mention the darkness around us. All I see are two black holes, unnerving me worse than ever.

*Did he even hear me?*

Suddenly, his hold loosens.

He's still got me pinned, but instead of gripping my arms like he wants to snap them, he's merely holding them still. His touch, dare I say, gentle.

Delusions, that's what I must be experiencing, making it up in my head because I need a grain of hope to cling to. His chest expands slowly in what seems to be a deep breath before he lets it out just as slowly.

Is he telling me to calm down? Demonstrating how to do it? It's so dark I can barely see him.

Something in me reaches out to that idea and grabs it. He wants to help me. He's trying to calm me down, just like Ren would.

I must be crazy. Why else does my chest loosen the instant that wild thought flashes brightly in my head? The mere thought of him is the pin that bursts the bubble, leaving me trembling as I begin to breathe deeper than before.

The brick wall in a wolf mask nods slowly, not saying a word—or maybe he is, for all I know. There's no hearing him

over the party. I can't even read his lips in that mask.

He could take advantage of me, but he hasn't. I understand now he was only trying to help me. He kept me from falling and pulled me aside to calm down. He's not trying to hurt me.

Every ounce of intelligence I possess wants me to pump the brakes. Just because he's not trying to flat-out rape me doesn't make him a prince. It doesn't even make him worth knowing.

But...

I'm so tired of being alone.

*Untouched.* It's been so long since I was touched, and his hands are trailing up and down my arms, and it feels so good. His masculine scent, cinnamon, and something else I can't quite make out, makes me want to press my nose to his shirt and breathe him in.

His warmth, his strength, his solid body...

I didn't know until now just how deep my need runs. The need for connection. For somebody to give a damn again.

I want Ren. I need him. I'm falling apart without him. I can't even make it through a party without longing for him, without my broken heart crying out for him every time I see a couple together.

I might need him, but it's clear he doesn't need me. He never did if he could turn around and essentially abandon me.

I'm going to have to start getting over him eventually. I should've started before now, truth be told. I look up at the masked stranger before me, and all I can think is how much I crave something other than loneliness.



# REN

*M*y Scarlet.  
*Mine.*

Walking around a fucking college party wearing practically nothing.

What does she think is going to happen? She should know what always happens to girls who play with fire—they get burned.

Something close to rage ripples through me.

Nobody gets to see her this way. *Only me.*

*Mine.* The word blares inside my skull.

Months of following her, watching from afar, checking out her apartment when the guards Xander assigned are tailing her to and from class, is nothing compared to the thrill of holding her against me. *Finally.*

After all this time, she's back in my arms where she belongs.

So much time has been wasted. Wanting, longing, and existing at the periphery of her life has left me hanging on the edge—never secure enough to back away, never quite so insane with need to fall over into the abyss of madness in the absence of her. I've kept myself sane for two years by catching little bits of her whenever possible.

The scent of her pillow. A pair of underwear swiped from her dresser.

The sight of her walking across campus while I watch from a distance. The pleasure of hearing her light tinkling laughter when she's with Tessa, but that's it. Otherwise, when she's alone, there is no laughter. And no other friends that I'm aware of.

No men, either. That's for the best, for many reasons.

I wouldn't want to have to kill some dumb bastard for having the audacity to come anywhere near her when she belongs to me and always will.

She knows she's mine, too.

Why else would she have saved herself for me all this time? Two years since that night in her bedroom, and she's gone without the touch of a man ever since. You know why? Because no other man will ever compare to what I've given her, so why bother trying.

*Scarlet. My angel.*

Clearly, she needs to be reminded of what happens when she lets her guard down. She was stumbling through the crowd, lost, like a fragile rose about to be crushed in an unforgiving fist.

I had no choice but to react. To save her from herself, which at the time meant saving her from the situation she put herself in. Years of yearning for the feel of her skin, her petite body, left me helpless against the impulse to take hold of her.

And the desire that exploded in me when I did. It was indescribable.

Here she is. So close to me, with nowhere to go. She'd have better luck breaking through a brick wall than pushing her way past me.

I'm not losing her now. Not when she feels so fucking good pressed against my chest, nestled into the spot where she belongs, her blond halo reaching my chest. Fuck me, she smells so good—even with this stupid mask on, I can smell her perfume, her shampoo, her skin.

Lavender. Clean. Calming.

It's not enough. I know how good she smells elsewhere. The scent has been imprinted on my mind for two years, and nothing has ever come close to the effect it has on me. The way it makes the constant noise in my head go silent. It's the only thing that does.

I suppose that's what I'm needy for now. More than release from the agony of being unable to touch, kiss, and taste.

She's my peace. My solace. I've gone too long without her.

I lean in, pressing her into the corner, my hands on her arms. I'm crowding her, pushing her past her limits. I know this, but I can't help myself. It's like I have no control; my only goal is to satisfy the need inside me.

It's selfish and fucked up, but I've waited so long for her. It's all that's kept me going in those moments of agony.

I'm a split second from grinding my aching dick against her warm body. From giving in to two years of pent-up need when a whisper of a noise meets my ears.

"I...I... I'm...scared."

I barely hear it over the insanely loud music threatening to burst my eardrums. Reading her lips is all that solidifies the soft sound into something real.

*She's scared.* I'm scaring her. It's the last thing I want, especially after being away for so long.

Still, what kind of man does that make me? To know that I'm turned on, even while she is afraid. That, had I not heard her speak, I would've pushed forward? My grip loosens before I make the conscious decision to do it.

How did I not see the terror on her face? The way she's trembling, too. Her short, shallow breaths. Did I frighten her this badly? Much more of this, and she'll hyperventilate.

The impulse to tear off the mask and show her she has nothing to fear is almost as tempting as the idea of fucking her here and now. Nobody would even notice; they're too busy drinking and partying to pay attention to a couple in the

corner. Hell, I doubt we'd be the only people engaged in such an activity.

No, dammit. That's not what she deserves. I'm not going to take her this way, no matter how my body aches for her. I need my fix. I need her.

But not this way.

Instead of burying myself in her pussy the way every fiber of my being demands, I take a deep breath that fills my lungs to capacity.

*Understand me. Breathe. I'm not going to hurt you.*

I doubt she'd hear if I spoke the words out loud, but I don't dare take that chance. I can't let her know it's me. Who's to say she doesn't hate me after the years I was forced to stay out of her life?

I take another slow, deliberate breath in hopes of getting through to her. This time she follows suit. Her body begins to relax—I didn't understand how tense she was until she started to loosen up. She was ready to fight or run. A scared little rabbit in the grip of a wolf. A lost angel in need of protection, solace, and comfort.

I'm glad I found her when I did. I'm who she needs.

One breath at a time, she softens. She's beginning to trust me. I won't ravage her the way a wolf would. She's in no danger with me. It's the rest of the world she needs protection from.

Her eyes, still beautiful and shining in the dim light, move over my mask. Eyes burning with something I've seen from her before.

I think she's completely aware of whose arms she's in.

I have broken my back the past two years to avoid discovery, only for her to find me out now. It shouldn't be such a surprise. I always knew our connection was strong. That it wouldn't fade even in the face of time.

Why would it? She's all I'll ever want, all I've wanted, even when I knew she was the one woman in the world, I



couldn't and shouldn't have.

Because I can't shake her. I'd have better luck forgetting my right arm than I would have forgetting her. There's something between us which time and distance and every law known to man cannot break.

She is mine. She knows it.

Only the thought of her knowing the truth keeps me from lashing out when she places a hand against my chest. If I so much as imagined her touching a man other than me, there's no saying what I'd do. I've been certain no man has got close to her, even in my time away.

*No.* She knows it's me. She feels it, even if she doesn't understand where the feeling comes from. I have to believe that. When her hand slides up my chest, and over my shoulder, she knows she's touching me. The man who's made it his life's goal to protect her no matter what it takes.

The thumping of the music reverberating through my body is nothing compared to the pounding of my heart. I'm hungry, so fucking hungry for her. The slightest touch is nearly enough to break every last bit of my resolve. My body tenses, anticipating more. Demanding it.

Without words, I show her how I need her.

Pressing against her, nearly crushing her in my desperation to be close. To touch all of her, feel all of her on me. She gasps, the sound lost to that of a drunken party. I feel it in the way her chest expands, shoving her tits against me. Tits that already look good enough to eat in that dress on display like she's offering them up.

Offering them to me. No one else. Only to me.

If I were truly a wolf, I'd be licking my chops and threatening to blow her house down.

As it is, I have to settle for running a hand down her arm, over her hip. She doesn't so much as flinch, much less push me away. No, she leans into it, tilting her hips forward. Inviting. Her lips part, and my god, I want to kiss her. To share

breath, taste her, and hear the soft sighs lost inside my mouth when I invade hers with my tongue.

It's torture, but I wait for the impulse to pass before allowing my hand to slip lower over what there is of the rest of the short dress. In no time, I'm touching bare thigh, soft and supple.

The memories this brings back. They sweep over me, and suddenly, there's no party. No idiot college kids bumping into me from behind. No floor sticky from spilled drinks. It all goes away until there's only the two of us. In her bedroom. It's her birthday again, and I'm the one opening a gift.

Discovering her, exploring.

Trying to ignore the painful erection threatening to bust my zipper. That much hasn't changed.

Neither has the softness of her skin. The firmness of her thigh. The way she leaps to life at my touch. She must know it's me.

Who else could set her on fire with the slightest caress?

She arches her back, her mouth falling open when my greedy fingers work their way between her legs. While she doesn't part them easily, she doesn't clench them shut, either.

She's too busy hanging onto me, an arm around my neck. I'm her life raft on a stormy sea, stormy thanks to the way my touch takes the strength out of her legs. She needs me if she wants to stay on her feet. *She needs me.*

I feel like a king the instant before I cup her mound. Desire threatens to consume me, but I fight my way through the dizzying waves of heat, ignoring their sizzle in favor of making her burn.

Fuck. She's already halfway there, moisture beginning to seep into her panties, the flesh beneath them hot and plump.

She slumps a little, her body all but melting into the wall, legs parting farther to leave room for my entire hand to cover her center. The heel of my palm lines up with her mound, and I press in, rubbing in small circles. Her chest rises and falls so

rapidly that I'm positive she is panting. Her nails sink deep into the flesh at my neck.

I relish the sensation, one that rides the thin edge between pain and pleasure. If I have my way, she'll break the skin by the time this is over. I'll consider this a failure if blood isn't running down my back by the time I slip out of her life again.

But not really. I never will entirely.

Fuck, I need more. This isn't enough.

Leaning down, I touch the side of my face to her temple. I wish we were skin-to-skin, but at least now I can inhale her light, floral perfume. There's a hint of vanilla beneath the lavender, and all it does is stir the mental image of devouring her. Not only her pussy, but all of her.

If it meant absorbing her sweetness and carrying it with me always, that's exactly what I would do. I need her that badly. She's that necessary in my life.

The sounds she makes, audible now that her mouth is close to my ear, could drive a man to his knees. She's purring like a kitten.

"Oh... oh god," she moans, making me increase the pressure over her clit. It's nowhere near what either of us truly wants, but it's good enough for now, enough to make her bear down on me and grind that pretty little pussy against my hand.

*Take it. Take what you need.*

There's so much I want to give her, almost as much as I long for what I know she'd give me. Her fingers in my hair. Her sweet, soft kisses. The way she moans my name—no one has ever said it the way she does, turning it into a prayer.

The best I can do is imagine it, replaying in my head the sound of her coming apart thanks to my tongue against what she's now grinding on me.

*Ren... Ren...* I close my eyes, giving myself over to the memory. The fantasy. She knows it's me, the only man who'll ever touch her this way. None of the useless pricks dancing

and drinking and fucking around could do this to her. They wouldn't know where to start.

Because they don't know her.

Not like I do.

“Please... don't stop...” she whimpers over the music, over the roar of blood in my ears.

My teeth grind, and I almost have to bite my tongue to keep from encouraging her. To stop myself from whispering her name and telling her how sweet she is, how fucking hot it is when she grinds her hips, shaking, clinging to me. She's seeking out her release as best she can.

How powerful this is. Undoing her. Making the angel's halo hang crooked—even the silly costume halo is askew now. Somehow that bit of imperfection only makes her more perfect. More mine.

This isn't enough. If I can't drive my tongue between her lips and lap up every last drop like it's the last thing I'll ever taste, I'll at least have her on my fingers. At least I'll leave this party carrying her on me.

She arches against me when I shove the panties to the side, practically peeling the sodden fabric away from her plump lips to allow my fingers to probe her slit. A shudder rolls through me—so wet, dripping, and all because of my touch. My command of her body.

There's something dangerous about this. *Illicit*. As illicit as the desire that's plagued me all these years. It's the danger that makes everything hotter.

More intense.

Like the intensity of Scarlet's reaction when I touch her bare skin. Her slick, sensitive folds. How I'd love to sink my fingers into her, drive them deep and fuck her while the party rages on.

With conscious effort, I shove the idea away before it takes root and takes us down a road she hasn't traveled yet. She's

still a virgin; she has to be. There hasn't been a man but me in her life.

Still, playing with her clit isn't enough. I have to give her something she's never experienced yet. When will I have this chance again?

Her tight gasp—almost a squeal—upon my circling her tight entrance fills my ears and leaves me biting back a groan. My cock will snap in two if this goes on much longer. If I can make her come again for me after so many nights spent jerking off to the memory of eating this juicy pussy, it might be worth it.

I don't care either way.

For her, there is nothing in the world but me. The dark, silent stranger who once scared her is now teasing her virgin hole, skimming the very outside before barely breaching to keep from hurting her with the violent thrust instinct demands. All thought, sight, smell, hearing, everything else in her consciousness has boiled down to the tip of my forefinger and what it makes her body do.

Soon, it's my entire finger, slowly working its way through her insanely tight channel while she gasps in time with every steady thrust.

What she'd feel like around my dick—precum drips from my tip at the thought, and I have to growl like the wolf I supposedly am.

It's too much. I don't know if I can get through this without—

“Ren, yes, please!”

She said my name. For half a second, I'm stunned.

Fuck, yes, she needs me to be good to her, to protect her. To be strong the way I've been all this time, keeping as far from her as I can even when I'm sure it will kill me. I would die for her. The least I can do is let her come without giving in to my basic instincts. I'm not a good man. I know it. She knows it. Everyone knows it, but I'd do anything to be good for her.

She's lost in her pleasure, writhing in the tight space between the wall and my chest. *Yes, angel. Let go. Come for me.* Her nipples become stiff peaks, and I can feel them through the thin material of her costume. Turned on is the understatement of the year. I'd say she's on fire.

My fingers are slick, and I can't help but wish the music would go silent, that everything would freeze around us so I could soak in the wet, sloppy sounds I know I'd hear along with her sighs. Moans. Silent to everyone but me—as they should be. They belong to me like every other part of her.

Closing my eyes, I inhale as deeply as I can, holding her in my arms while her nails drag across my back from shoulder to shoulder. She's as crazed as I am, the darkness in her bursting free in these final moments. I thrust my finger faster, my palm slapping against her clit with every thrust. The added pressure makes her even more frenzied.

“Fuck, Ren. I'm going to come,” she whines, straining against me.

All I can do is smile, working her faster, driving her higher and higher, knowing what the reward will be.

The world goes still as her body does. Everything stops. A shiver ripples through her, and her muscles flutter around my finger, squeezing me tightly.

*Mine.*

And she knows it. I have to believe she knows it now, quivering against me after giving me her orgasm while she coats my fingers with her honey in one spasm after another.

What I wouldn't give to have her on my dick, here and now. Always.

I raise my head and find her sagging against me, her breaths labored.

Her gaze is dreamy, her consciousness hazy in the wake of something so explosive. Those blue orbs meet mine through the mask and touch something deep inside me. The part only she can touch.

Yes. She knows deep in her soul.

That's enough for me, enough to make me take one final breath, one last indulgence in her before I have to leave her again. I straighten her dress, careful to leave her covered. No one gets to see her or enjoy her body. No one but me.

She opens her mouth when I back away, a haunted expression on her face, but anything she says or might say is lost to the party that's gone on all this time.

"I won't be far away," I tell her before turning my back.

I don't think she heard me, but it's a reassurance to myself. Xander should be thankful I'm keeping such a keen eye on her. Against every fiber of my being, I slip back into the darkness, leaving my angel until next time.





# SCARLET

“Do you want this, or should I take it?”

Tessa’s question barely registers in my mind. I turn away from the half-empty closet to find her standing in my bedroom doorway.

“What did you say?”

She frowns before holding up the small potted succulent that lived on the living room windowsill these past two semesters.

“Do you want this, or should I take it?”

The irony. I bought that little succulent on a whim one day, not long after we moved in. I identify with it. Succulents manage to find a way to survive even in the absence of light and water.

No one has denied me either of those things since I arrived here, but other things just as fundamental to my thriving have been missing for far too long.

So fundamental, so deeply missed, that I went ahead and made a mistake a few nights ago. I still blush with shame whenever I think about it, which means I’ve been blushing for three days straight.

“Why don’t you take it?” I offer, trying to inject a little sunshine into my voice. She’s already way too aware of my dark, brooding mood. No sense in giving her more reason to worry about me.

“You’re the one who’s kept it alive all year. I didn’t even know I was over watering it until you told me I was,” Tessa announces.

I give her a tiny smirk. “True, you’ll probably end up drowning it if I leave it up to you.”

Tessa shakes her head in disbelief. “Nobody ever said I had a green thumb. I figured succulents were supposed to be easy, right?”

With the clock ticking, I turn back to the task at hand: packing up my closet, which I left for last. We worked on the shared spaces together, and almost everything is currently in a box or a bag, ready to be carted off. A year’s worth of memories. Only the things we’ll need between now and tomorrow morning will be left out—our laptops, toiletries, that sort of thing.

There’s a little more than twelve hours until the car picks me up, which means I need to pull on my big girl panties and do what I’ve been putting off all this time. I wasn’t completely sure until the party, even though the idea has been floating around in my head for weeks.

Every passing minute adds another layer to my anxiety. I’m going to have to tell her soon. She deserves to know.

Ugh, and there she is, humming as she packs up the last of her personal items, blissfully unaware that this is the last day we’ll be college roommates.

It’s going to upset her. She’s going to want answers.

I can’t tell her everything—that much hasn’t changed. I have to tap dance around the truth, brushing gently against it without stirring up too many questions.

My closet forgotten, I sink to the bed, lowering my head and holding it in my hands. Blushing isn’t the only thing I’ve done pretty constantly since the party. I’ve also done more than my fair share of crying.

Sometimes, out of nowhere, my eyes will start leaking before I register the presence of tears welling up. It’s gotten

bad enough that I've had a mild headache for days.  
Dehydration, maybe?

Or the pain of so much turmoil building in my skull.

Tessa probably thinks it's hormonal, and I'll let her continue to believe that. It's better than the alternative, the confession I'd have to make out loud. She has no idea what happened in that corner—I don't think she even knew I wasn't with her. It's not her fault. There were too many people pressing in on all sides.

The slightest memory gets my heart racing again. There were so many people, and nobody was paying much attention to who they slammed into or what was happening outside their tight little bubble.

That's what made it possible for a guy in a wolf mask to finger me right there in the open.

If shame could crush a heart, mine would be nothing more than a bloody pulp by now. There's a literal pain in my chest when I recall my actions. It's like I wasn't even myself, forgetting everything I knew in favor of a quick thrill. Sure, nothing could have seemed more necessary in the moment when my whole body was on fire, and I was painfully wet and desperate to be touched.

*To be wanted.*

And he wanted me. I felt it—his erection grinding against my lower belly. His sharp, harsh breathing behind that mask. It made him seem even more like an animal, now that I think about it, the way the mask distorted the sound.

It was easy to get caught up in the moment.

Especially when I was so sure it was Ren behind the mask. Ren, whose breath rasped in my ear, whose body pinned me to the wall, whose finger penetrated me so skillfully. I would've bet my life on it.

The instant he backed away, reality came crashing down, and I've been trapped under the rubble ever since. Ren wouldn't have left me like that, without even a word. *Not my Ren.*

*What was I thinking?* I was trying to convince myself it was him. And of course, it wasn't. Ren was no more present with me at that party than he's been all year. I've been lost in the fantasy of him lurking around the periphery of my life. Telling myself he was moving things in the apartment when I'm sure it was Tessa, and I just wasn't aware of it.

I mean, right? Obviously. I need to be realistic. I've spent far too long only half present in my life, the rest of the time spent lost in some fantasy land. No wonder I've been so unhappy and dissatisfied. I'm always waiting for the big reveal, the moment when my suspicions of Ren's presence are confirmed.

When my painful, embarrassing need to be loved by him is fulfilled.

It's never going to happen. I realized that, and I allowed some random dude to finger me, to touch me.

Who wouldn't cry?

*So get off your ass and do what you've been avoiding.*

Enough turning my back on what I know I need to do. Isn't it always better to tear the Band-Aid off all at once, anyway? I force myself to stand and march out of the bedroom even though my legs are trembling. I'd rather scrub the toilet with my toothbrush than drop the bomb I'm holding. But here goes nothing.

"Hey," I say, entering the living room.

It looks so sad and empty now, the walls bare, boxes lined up along the wall beside the front door. Strange how my voice sounds different with fewer items scattered around to absorb it.

"Oh, good, I need your help." She's scratching her head, staring down at an open cardboard box. "How do you do the flap thingy? You know, where you put them just so, and it doesn't open back up? We're out of tape."

"You're hopeless," I tease, showing her the correct order to close the flaps, tucking the fourth flap under the first one I folded over so all four stay in place.

“I should have taken a video.” She sighs, shrugging. “But thanks.”

With as good a segue as any, I say, “So listen. There’s something I want to talk to you about.” I can barely get it out; every word is like pulling teeth.

“Finally.”

Not the reaction I was expecting. Nor was I expecting her to be standing with her hands on her hips, one of which is popped out to the side. Her body language speaks volumes. Apparently, she has something she’s been keeping in as well.

“I’ve been waiting for you to finally come around and fess up,” she explains. “It’s obvious something is on your mind.”

“It’s not easy to talk about,” I murmur, nudging the box with my toe, unable to look her in the eye.

“You know you can talk to me about anything, right? We’re cousins. You don’t have to be afraid to speak your mind. I don’t care what our parents think, and I’m not a narc. If it’s a secret you need me to keep, I can keep it.”

She has no idea the secrets that I’m keeping.

I incline my head in the direction of the couch. “Let’s sit and talk.”

She doesn’t follow me, not moving a muscle except to turn in my direction and follow my progress. “I don’t like this. I’ve got a bad feeling.” Her lips turn into a frown.

“I’m not dying or anything.” Though I have felt that way. “But it’s something you’re probably not going to like.”

Her expression becomes pained. “Have you secretly hated living with me all this time?”

“God, no!” Though I’m glad she got that idea out of the way. If she was already worrying about it, her brain would probably go straight there once I get this weight off my chest.

She sinks to the couch with a sigh. “Okay, so long as it’s not that. Sometimes when people are roommates, things

change between them. I didn't want that to be the issue for us."

I want to tell her if things change, it'll be because of me and not her, but I don't. That'll open another can of worms I'm not ready to deal with.

"No, that's not even close to what this is about. I've loved being your roommate. Honestly..." I take a breath, gathering myself for what I'm about to say. "You're probably the only thing I've really liked about the past year." "What?"

"I mean, I'm sure it's been easy to tell how unhappy I've been. I know you've seen it." I shrug my shoulders. "I... I just don't feel like I belong here."

It's not a lie. I haven't felt like I've belonged for a while.

"To be fair, though, you haven't given yourself much of a chance. I've practically had to drag you out of the apartment kicking and screaming to do anything besides go to class. We went to, what, five or six parties together?" She counts them out on her fingers. "It couldn't have been because of the guards either. You sneak past them easily when you feel like it."

"I know, and I'm sorry if you felt like you had to babysit me or whatever you want to call it. You deserve to have fun without worrying about me. But it's not just social stuff. It's everything. I don't like the classes. I don't like the distance from home. I don't like any of it, and I don't think MIT is for me in general."

*Whew.* I can feel the beads of sweat forming on my forehead. I didn't mean for it to pour out of me all at once, but I'm glad it did. The words hang in the air, louder and clearer than they might have sounded when the apartment was fully furnished.

Her face falls once she catches up and puts everything together. "You're not coming back, are you?"

There it is. The sadness in her voice makes me want to cry. I can already feel the tears welling up in my eyes. I blink them back. If I don't stop, I'm going to dry up like a dead leaf.

My voice cracks. “No. I’m not coming back.”

“Do your parents know?”

I shake my head. “Not yet. I’ll tell them once I’m home, and everything is settled. I only decided a day or two ago that it is definite, though I’ve been thinking about it for a while.”

She chews her lip, eyes watering and her chin quivering. I feel like a slug. I should have told her before this, dammit. Though that would’ve left awkwardness between us, which I guess I was trying to avoid. Not to mention all the questions.

I’m sure she has some now—I didn’t want to give her time to think up more of them. It would be exhausting trying to keep track of all the lies I would have to tell, and the last thing I want to do is add more heaps of shit onto the heap of shit I just dished out.

“So what are you going to do? Do you have any plans yet?”

“I’m not sure.”

When my eyes dart away, she grunts. “Are you going to go to work with your brother instead?”

For a moment, I forgot the lie we told her about that. Years ago, when Tessa figured out Corium’s website was fake, we told her Corium was a made-up college to get our parents off Quinton’s back. We told her he and Ren were starting their own business. I guess she assumes Q carried on that business.

“What makes you assume that?”

“Why not? It’s sort of a family thing, right?” The disdain in her voice is evident, but it has nothing to do with me and everything to do with her parents.

It’s not up to me to tell her the things my aunt and uncle are hiding from her. This would be so much easier if I could tell the whole truth, but I’ve never been able to do that. If anything, that’s another reason this was never going to work out.

For the last year, I’ve been unable to be myself, even more so since there’s always a wall of lies between us. It’s one thing

to spend an evening together, a weekend, a family vacation. Being together all the time, though? Having to watch what I say? No, this is better for everybody involved. I can't break her heart and split the family.

Even though I'm already hurting her. It would be so much worse if she ever found out what our family really does.

Tessa is sweet and so innocent. She would break apart at the seams if she discovered the truth behind her father's fortunes.

"I guess it's an option," I say, trying to make it sound like I'm still on the fence even though I'm not.

"I see."

"I'm sorry. I really am. I know this is last minute, but I'm sure..." I don't even have it in me to hand her some well-meaning but empty platitudes. The fact is, I'm not sure of anything. How can I be? I don't even know what I'll do tomorrow when I get home, so how could I predict what will happen in Tessa's future?

"Are you sure there isn't some other reason you're doing this? I can't shake the feeling you're hiding something. And yeah, like, I know it's your life to live, and you're entitled to keep things to yourself, but I can't help worrying, and you seem so sad. Is it really just because you're unhappy here? Because I'll tell you something," she adds before I have the chance to come up with a response. "Something my mom told me a long time ago. I know it sounds corny, but..."

"Out with it," I urge.

"Wherever you go, there you are."

Yeah, I'm pretty sure they came up with that one back in the seventies or something. "Okay..."

"What it means is: it doesn't matter where you are. You can't get away from yourself. The things you're feeling will still be inside you. You're just changing your surroundings. It's easy to think life will be different if we go someplace else. But you're still going to feel the same way in here." She



touches a hand to her chest. “I just want to make sure that’s not what you’re doing to yourself.”

Wow. Grim. Well-intentioned but fucking grim from where I’m sitting.

“I appreciate it,” I whisper, on the edge of tears yet again. If I could get my emotions in check, this might all go more smoothly. “It’s disgustingly complicated, to be honest with you. I don’t even know what I’m doing anymore. I only know this isn’t for me. Maybe I need to take a little time off in general. Figure myself out.”

“That makes sense.” Is she hoping I won’t leave after all?

“I’m sorry to leave you hanging like this.”

“Don’t even worry about that. I don’t want you hanging around here when you’re unhappy just to avoid inconveniencing me. What kind of person would that make me?”

She swipes her hand under her eyes before jumping to her feet. “Okay. Let’s get this finished up so we can go grab dinner.” Since we’ve already packed up the kitchen, it only makes sense to go out to eat on what is now going to be our final night as roommates.

That went better than I expected—these things usually do, I guess. I build them up in my head until they seem completely unmanageable, only to find out there wasn’t nearly so much to worry about. I should have known Tessa wouldn’t pry too deep. She isn’t that kind of person.

Still, I can’t bring myself to feel happy. I know damn well my troubles are my fault. Ren warned me a long time ago that it was useless to care about him. But I insisted, didn’t I? Look where that insistence got me: dragging my feet back to my room so I can pack the rest of my closet before hauling everything back to my parents’ house, where I know they’re going to be overjoyed that I finally broke down and decided to go to Corium, following in Quinton’s path.

I can’t even be happy about that. I’m numb inside. I might as well be dead at this rate. I don’t know if I’ll ever feel

anything again, and I'm not sure I want to, come to think of it. Not when feeling things only ends up getting me hurt.

I was so sure he would show up here. That he would never abandon me, not when he cares about me like he does. Or maybe he never cared about me at all. Maybe that's why he fought so hard for so long to get me to stop wanting him. He looked at his options and decided sparing my feelings was better than flat-out telling me he thought I was hideous.

*Then why did he take the risk of coming to you on your birthday?*

I hate questions like this because they bring me hope. I need to get rid of my hope. I need to get rid of him entirely until there's nothing left to remind me of who I thought he was. What I thought we'd have together.

It's ironic, then, the idea of going to Corium since there will be reminders of him everywhere I turn. That's where he tried to kill my brother—if he and my father are to be believed.

Maybe this is as good a time as any to start believing it, too. I might finally begin hardening my heart once and for all. So when I walk the halls where I was once so happy and full of hope, my heart racing as I sneaked around our home and Corium with the promise of a few minutes with him, I won't freeze up in misery. It won't be so difficult to look back on how naive I was. How foolish.

*Ren tried to kill Quinton.*

*Ren never cared about me.*

*If he had, he wouldn't have pushed my brother down the stairs.*

*Ren is not coming for me, now or ever.*

I have to keep telling myself these things. I have to get control of my life and my heart, or I'll end up constantly leaving myself open to mistakes like the one I made at the party. So mixed up, I had myself believing Ren... I can't even let myself think about it anymore. It's too shameful.

I lift my chin, blinking back the tears filling my eyes before reaching for a handful of items still hanging in the closet. No, I am not going to shed another tear over him.

I'm going to start living my life for me, which means admitting the past two semesters spent living as a so-called normal person outside my family's world has left me dissatisfied. There I was, figuring I wanted a normal life, but then again, what is normal? It's entirely relative.

And for the Rossi family, a normal life means following in the family's footsteps.

I am a Rossi, for better or worse.

I work fast, pushing everything else aside in favor of focusing on the task at hand. Though no matter how quickly I pack, Tessa's warning rings in the back of my head. I can't outrun it any more than I can outrun my pain.

*Wherever you go, there you are.*

Wherever I go, I'll still have to fight against the memories, knowing I'll never have him again.



# SCARLET

*I*t's almost funny. I've been home not even three days, and once again, there's a 'big talk' hanging over my head. Except this time, I'm not dreading an unhappy response, far from it.

If anything, I'm dreading having to put on a happy face. I know what's coming, and I know everyone will expect me to fall in line with their smiles and praise and such.

I've been faking happiness since I got home.

In other words, I'm exhausted. Body and soul.

Yet somehow, I manage to sound normal when I tap my knuckles on the doorframe of my father's study. He's at his desk, as always, deep in the process of typing furiously on his keyboard. I might think he was angry if I didn't know that's the way he types all the time.

"Dad? Do you have a minute?"

His head snaps up, his expression troubled. I'm used to seeing him this way, caught in the middle of a thought, his mind a million miles away. I can't begin to understand what it takes to run the sort of organization he does. I've heard it referred to as an empire—and while I don't know the ins and outs per se, both because I've tried to keep myself out of it and because sexism is alive and well—I know it must be enormous, considering the hours he puts in.

In our world, the line between business and the rest of life is blurred, even nonexistent. There is no separating the two.

It's a relief when, after a beat, his expression softens a little. "Of course, I have a minute for you. Five minutes, in fact."

He doesn't often try to be funny, so I have to show appreciation when he does. It's hard to remember how much I was looking forward to getting out on my own and starting a so-called normal life at MIT when I walk through the familiar room my father uses as his study. There's something to be said for the therapeutic comforts of home. Everything is exactly where it's supposed to be, where it's been all this time. Even when I wasn't here, the world kept turning without me.

He leans back in his chair, lifting an eyebrow when I take a seat with my hands folded in my lap. "Do me one favor," he murmurs before I begin. "Tell me you're not throwing your life away on some useless boy from Boston."

I'm so surprised, I blurt out a laugh. No, it wasn't a boy from Boston I was ready to throw my life away for. It was one much closer to home. "There is nothing regarding boys that you have to worry about, Dad."

"Good. Anything but that." He grimaces almost comically, and I giggle again. He's in a good mood, which always bodes well. His state of mind can sway the entire family—either you steer clear of him when he's good and pissed or you can breathe easier when he's happy.

I'm pretty sure he'll be damn near euphoric by the time I'm finished. He always is when he's proven right.

"I've made a decision."

He nods slowly. "You know I trust your judgment."

He's feeling especially generous. Maybe he's missed having me around the way Mom clearly did. I'm pretty sure she resents having to take time to use the bathroom since it means a few minutes she can't give me a hug or stroke my hair or ask for the hundredth time if I'm eating enough.

"I don't want to go back to MIT."

He sits up suddenly, now looking at me with a gaze that promises death and dismemberment. "What happened? Did

someone hurt you? Who do I have to kill?"

As touching as the idea is, I hold up my hands. "No violence needed."

"You aren't just saying that, are you? Don't get some foolish idea in your head that you need to protect someone from me."

Of all the times for my stupid, traitorous heart to throb painfully. I was trying to protect someone from him, wasn't I? Dad would never have been as hard on me as he would have on Ren if we'd ever been found out.

There I was, going against my father in favor of somebody who wasn't worth it. *That's right. Keep telling yourself that. Maybe you'll believe it eventually.* That's the thing. I need to believe it.

He runs a hand over his chest, smoothing his tie as he lets out a deep breath. "What brought on this change of heart?"

"It just isn't for me. I thought it would be, but I'm not happy there. I mean, at least I know, right?"

"Know what?" He's being gentle, gentler than usual, in fact. Probably because he knows where this is going. You don't get as far as he has in life without possessing strong instincts. Besides, he's my father. He's known me my entire life. Sure, he's been busy for most of it, but there's never been a question of his love.

He knows he's going to get his way, so he can afford to be gentle and patient.

"I know there isn't something else out there for me. I would've always wondered, I guess, if things would have been different had I not decided for myself rather than automatically doing what is expected of me."

"That's a very wise and mature way of looking at it." His eyes twinkle just the same. "Does this mean what I think it means?" Finally, he allows himself the ghost of a smile—tentative, hopeful. I guess I'm glad I can make him happy. One of us should be.

“If you think it means I want to go to Corium, then yes.”

He claps his hands together, the sound loud and sharp in the otherwise silent room. “You don’t know how relieved this makes me. As much as it pains me to know you were unhappy there, I can’t pretend having you at Corium won’t be a huge load off my mind.”

Of course, because it means he’ll be able to keep a closer eye on me than ever. Not only will Lucas Diavolo pay special attention to me simply out of loyalty to my father, but everyone will know I’m Q’s little sister. I’m a Rossi and, therefore, royalty. I probably won’t make a move without somebody knowing about it.

Right now, I don’t care. It’s something I’ll have to deal with later. I’m sure I’ll come to resent it, but I can’t feel anything right now. I’m still numb, almost shell-shocked. I wonder if I’ll ever feel anything again.

Considering all the good my feelings have done me so far, it might be better if I don’t. I’ve racked up plenty of sleepless nights and endless headaches after crying my eyes out. Hating myself for being so stupid and trusting and needy.

Dad is unaware, too busy practically glowing with gladness. “I’m very happy to hear this, and I know your mother will be as well. I assume you haven’t told her yet.”

Of course, because otherwise, he would know by now. Mom would never keep something like this from him, at least not for long. “You’re the first one I’ve spoken to. Well, besides Tessa.”

“I’m sure she’ll be sad to lose you.” That’s not what he really has on his mind, though. As usual, he’s thinking ten steps ahead, the way a man in his position has to. It’s a habit, even more so when it comes to his kids. He’s already making a list of tasks. He’ll want to call Lucas to make sure my room will be ready for me when I get there, that kind of thing.

And the best I can do right now is sit here and be glad one of us is happy.



“I’ll announce this at dinner,” he decides, which comes as no surprise. This is my news, but he’s going to treat it like his own. I don’t care. It’s not like I feel any emotional connection to the decision. I’m not going *toward* Corium. I’m going *away from* MIT and all the disappointment I experienced there. It’s not like I’m looking forward to this. There’s no hope in my heart, no gleam in my eye. Maybe things will get better, and my life will settle down into a comfortable, fulfilling track.

Somehow, I doubt it.

I leave him to his planning and self-congratulation in favor of wandering. Puttering. It seems like that’s all I’ve done since I got home: walking aimlessly from room to room like a ghost haunting the house. Going to the library and picking up a book before putting it back, uninterested. Examining some of the framed photos here and there.

Studying my sister’s smiling face, so dearly missed. What I wouldn’t give for a little advice from her right now. Out of everybody, she would have understood. She would’ve kept my secret; I know it in my heart. Yet another loss I still haven’t quite recovered from, and I don’t know if I ever will.

What’s the alternative to wandering? Lying in my room, staring at the ceiling, which of course, makes Mom mental. She’s already hovering now that I’m back, making up for lost time. If she so much as catches a hint of the idea that I’m depressed, she’ll plan a girls day—shopping, a trip to the salon, manicures. And while I would love her for it, it would only make me more miserable.

I can’t feel anything, and pretending I can only makes things worse. Like heaping more pain on myself when I don’t know how much longer I’ll be able to withstand what I’m already suffering.

Once I get to Corium, no longer under her watchful eye, I might be able to get my head on straight. Hopefully, I can push past the wall that seems to have sprung up around me, a hundred feet high and just as thick, separating me from the rest of the world. An invisible wall, of course. I can see everybody

else, and they can see me. But I can't feel them. I'm not actually present.

Tessa taps insistently at the back of my mind.

*Wherever you go, there you are.* Right. Here I am, telling myself things might get better when I'm at Corium, falling straight into the trap my cousin warned me about. That didn't take long, did it?

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"YOU FINALLY BROKE down and decided to follow in your big brother's footsteps, huh?" Quinton puffs his chest out. "I knew it was only a matter of time. You can't help wanting to emulate me."

"Enough." Aspen giggles with a playful shove before getting up and rounding the dining room table to give me a tight hug. It's just as fierce and loving as the rest of her.

"This is so exciting." Her eyes are shining when she pulls back. "I know Lucas will keep a special eye on you. You're going to fit in just great."

"I'm looking forward to getting settled in," I lie with an equally fake smile. For the briefest moment, no longer than the time it takes my heart to beat, something like concern passes across her face.

*She knows. Somehow, she knows.*

No, that's nothing more than a guilty conscience driving me out of my skull. There's no reason for her to know what's really going on inside my head. I have to stop psyching myself out, or I'll dissolve into paranoia.

Looking to Quinton's left, to the empty chair where Ren would've sat in better, happier times, I pretend not to be bothered by it.

Mom beams at her end of the table. "I can't pretend it doesn't make me happy, knowing you're someplace I can trust."

That's it. That's the comment that will break me. I've withstood everything so far. I'm faking a smile for Mom, my brother, and his wife, the same smile I plastered across my face when Dad made his big announcement.

But Mom's assumption of my safety is the straw about to break the camel's back. Because didn't Q almost die there? Aspen, too? Is there such a thing as safety anywhere?

My gaze drifts over the empty chair once again, making my heart clench. Three days. He's had three days to find me here, to sneak in like he did on my birthday. The sight of his customary chair drives home the disappointing fact that no matter what I try to tell myself, I'm nowhere near letting him go. Not if, in my heart of hearts, I hoped he'd sneak in to be with me again.

*He doesn't care. Why should you care about him?*

I pick at my food, nodding at Mom's suggestion of going shopping for new clothes. Why I need new clothes when I have plenty, I don't know. Just because I'm going to a different school doesn't mean I need a new wardrobe.

My awareness is miles away, pondering, picking at half-healed scabs. What if he's dead? He could be, for all any of us knows. There's no way of knowing who he got himself involved with or where he ended up. How he could've survived on his own.

Isn't it funny how when I think that, when I test the idea, it doesn't hurt as much as the alternative? What if he moved on? What if he forgot me? Yes, I would rather he be dead than know he forgot me. If that doesn't confirm how completely mental this entire thing has made me, I don't know what does.

Movement from the other side of the table catches my eye, and I have the displeasure of witnessing my brother tuck a strand of blond hair behind his wife's ear before he caresses her cheek.

It's nice that they're happy. I want them to be happy because I love them.

But do they have to be so happy around me? I hate myself for even thinking that—it's so childish, petty. It's not like I would ever say that out loud to them, but I'm still embarrassed that I'd even think it. I know all too well how they struggled before they could finally be together. They deserve all the good things they have now.

Something passes between them. A special sort of look, a tiny nod. I'm the only one who notices it, with my parents talking over us, discussing plans to get me ready for my new school.

Q clears his throat. When that doesn't work, he taps a fork on the side of his wineglass. "Sorry to interrupt," he says with a grin when our parents look at him with similar expressions of surprise. "But there's something we wanted to talk about tonight. Scar sort of stole our thunder."

And I know. All at once, it hits me before he even has to say it.

*There's no wine in Aspen's glass.*

He turns to her, and the love that radiates from him almost makes me embarrassed to witness it. Like they should be alone. Like nobody should break in on their special moment. Aspen glows as she meets his gaze, wearing a loving smile.

I'm going to be sick. It's like the universe is throwing everything but the kitchen sink at my head, doing the most to make sure my spirit crumbles.

"Do you want to be the one to say it?" he murmurs with a gentle smile.

She nods before casting a furtive, mischievous look around the table.

"We're having a baby."

Mom was merely happy before. Now, she lets out a shriek that I'm pretty sure will have every dog in a five-mile radius lifting its head, ears perked.

Dad, meanwhile, is half out of his chair, wearing a shocked expression. "You're sure? Everything's—"

“Everything is perfect,” Q confirms.

Though the doctor assured Aspen she’d be able to have children after her brutal attack and subsequent miscarriage, there was always an unspoken worry about whether things would really turn out okay. At least, I always worried.

But now, here they are. Radiantly overjoyed, surrounded by love and congratulations, and a very eager pair of soon-to-be grandparents just dying to spoil the baby rotten. I guess my back-to-school shopping will take a back seat to searching for nursery furniture.

I’m okay with that. Just as I’m thrilled for them—really, I am. They deserve this, something they’ve both wanted so much. Any child of theirs is lucky to be born into so much love.

But dammit. Why can’t it be me?

“Congratulations,” I murmur, and I’ll pretend the tears in my eyes are the result of happiness as I give my sister-in-law a hug just as fierce and loving as the one she gave me. “You’ll make an amazing mom.”

I’m merely saying what I know people normally say in situations like this. Like a robot. I don’t feel any of it.

But I’m not numb anymore. Oh no. I wish I was.

Because now? There’s no sadness.

There’s no room for it now that anger has taken its place, stirring to life inside me, threatening to show itself in my voice or on my face. I can’t wait until dinner is over, so I have an excuse to hide in my room where no one will see.

This will never be me. I’ll never be the one to announce I’m having a very wanted, very loved baby. I won’t gaze adoringly into the eyes of a man who cherishes me just as much.

My heart thumps painfully, loudly, the sound echoing in my head. It hurts. It all hurts so badly. How could he do this to me?

*How could I do it to myself?*

Wherever Ren is—alive or dead—I only hope he's suffering the way I am now. Faking a smile when all he wants is to cry. Faced with a living, breathing reminder of what he once imagined might be possible.

Knowing it can never be. Not ever.



# SCARLET



TWO MONTHS LATER

“*W*hy can’t I rewind the clock?” Mom strokes my hair, my head on her shoulder, as she gives me one of her patented bear hugs before loosening her grip a little so I can breathe. I’m amazed she hasn’t cracked any of my ribs yet. “It hardly seems like we’ve had any time together at all.”

I’m not a cruel person, so I won’t remind her that we’ve been together pretty much nonstop since I got home. When we weren’t shopping for my new school clothes, we hunted every furniture store and every baby section in every shop within driving distance. Aspen is barely six months pregnant now, and already, I can’t imagine them needing a single thing.

I can’t pretend I’m not grateful for the distraction, either. After a while, I was more obsessed than Mom, finally figuring out it was better to turn my attention and energy toward something positive. Anything, so long as there is a reason not to dwell on my misery. My loneliness.

I never understood before, but this past summer has been more than enough to drive the point home: it’s possible to feel insanely lonely even when surrounded by people. Loving people, too.

“You know I’m a short flight away,” I remind her, kissing her cheek. “And if anybody has the okay to come and go at will, it’s you and Dad.”

“Don’t you worry, though,” she assures me with a knowing look. “I’ll make sure to remind your father that you’re a grown woman entitled to a life of her own.”

I can't help but snort a laugh, and soon she's doing the same. "Yeah, we'll see how that goes."

"Let's be fair. He gave you space at MIT." Sure, a space in which bodyguards prowled. I'm not trying to get into an argument, so I shrug it off.

"I'll miss you." She kisses my forehead, then steps back, fanning her hands in front of her face. "All right, no more of this. You have a big day ahead of you tomorrow, and you need your rest." Yes, I'm flying out first thing in the morning. Everything's packed and ready to go. All that's left for me to do is try to sleep.

Emphasis on the word try. Deep, restorative sleep has evaded me all summer. Every time I open my eyes, I expect—hope—to find a familiar dark figure standing at my bedside. And every time, I've been thoroughly disappointed.

So why can't I stop hoping?

Once I'm alone in my room, my back to the closed door, I can let myself relax. The tension in my neck and shoulders is a testament to the hard work of keeping myself in one piece and not giving away any hint of the dark cloud that still insists on following me wherever I go.

It's like nature has decided to reflect my internal darkness—the day was gray and gloomy, but night has brought on the promise of a storm. Beyond my window, the wind picks up speed, the gusts bending the trees. In the distance, lightning flickers, highlighting the big greenish-gray clouds with every flash.

With my luck, it will rain so hard that I won't be able to take off tomorrow. It isn't that I'm desperately looking forward to going to school, but I'm not sure I could take another day of pretending for the sake of my family.

With a sigh, I push away from the door, pulling my T-shirt over my head as I cross the room. A nightgown at the foot of the bed and the clothes I'll wear in the morning are among the only things I haven't packed away. The only thing Mom didn't

insist I bring along are the fancier outfits in my closet, which I doubt I'll ever have any need for, anyway.

This time tomorrow, I'll be unpacking in my new apartment. It still doesn't feel real, even though I've had months to wrap my head around the fact that I'll be going to Corium. I'm caught in limbo, waiting for the other shoe to drop. Waiting to wake up from a very long nightmare.

There is no waking up.

This is my reality.

Why can't I get it through my head?

I've barely finished getting changed for bed when there's a soft knock on the door. "I thought you said you wanted me to get some rest?" I sigh, turning as the door opens.

Only it isn't Mom poking her head into the room this time.

Aspen and Quinton have been staying here all summer while their house on the compound is being built. I can't really say I'm shocked to see her.

"Hey. I wanted to catch you before you went to sleep," Aspen murmurs, wearing a tentative smile.

She has been a part of the family for years now, but there are still times when it seems she's tiptoeing around, wanting to be sure she doesn't ruffle feathers. I guess all the time she spent as an outsider, the daughter of a rat, had a long-term effect on her.

"Come on in. Sorry—you know I love her, but I don't know if I can stand being asked one more time if I packed all my underwear."

She giggles knowingly. "Then I won't bother asking you myself."

"What's up? Are you feeling okay?" She certainly looks fantastic, better every day. Her skin glows, and her hair is thicker and shinier.

The bump she's sporting is adorable, and I catch her mindlessly running a hand over it every once in a while. I

don't even know if she notices she's doing it.

She does it now, gazing out the window at the approaching storm. "Can you feel the electricity in the air?" she asks, and I nod in agreement. Yes, the air has that feeling to it. Like something's going to explode.

"So what's up, really?" I finally have to ask, perching on the foot of the bed. She's not very good at faking casualness. "What's on your mind?"

Her shoulders rise and fall in a deep breath. "Because I know you're going to ask, I'll tell you right now; I haven't said anything to Q about this."

I grimace while bracing myself, a pit beginning to form in my stomach. "That's not a great lead-in, no offense."

"It's just I've noticed something ever since you first got home. I didn't want to say anything because I figured it wasn't my place."

And here I am, cringing inside, my guts twisting and my blood turning to ice. Didn't I tell myself it seemed like she knew something was wrong with me? That first dinner after I got home. Months have passed since that night, and she's never given me any indication since then. No lingering looks or quirked eyebrows. No late-night visits to my room for a heart-to-heart.

My luck has run out, it seems.

"Is there anything you need to get off your chest?"

She perches on the window seat, hands folded between her knees. Nervous but caring. I have to focus on the latter of the two.

She cares, and in this world, I've learned not people truly do. I need to appreciate caring when it comes my way.

"Do you think there should be something?"

Because, after all, I'm not sure if she knows anything. This could all be a shot in the dark, instinct compelling her to speak out. I can't give too much away before I know for sure whether she has the slightest clue.

“Speaking freely?” I nod in encouragement, though that’s the last thing I want. “All summer, it’s like you’ve been here, but you’re not here. There have been times when I’ve looked at you, and you’re far away. I wanted to say something but didn’t want to make you uncomfortable or paranoid.”

*I can’t tell her.*

*I need to tell somebody.*

*But she’s Q’s wife.*

*She already said she hasn’t mentioned this to him. I can trust her.*

*I thought I could trust Ren.*

“Can I take a stab at it?” she murmurs, chewing her lip. “Does it have to do with Ren?”

I draw a breath, panic flashing in my head the way lightning flashes outside the window. “I-I mean, that’s—” I stammer, my tongue thick and awkward, my brain unable to string enough words together to tell her she’s wrong.

“I get it,” she whispers, staring at me with obvious concern. “Like I said, this is between you and me. But honestly, I sensed a change in you from the beginning. After he vanished. You seemed far away then, too. I got a sense there was something a little deeper than brother-sister affection. And if I’m off-base,” she’s quick to add, “tell me so. And then I’ll slink off in embarrassment, and we never have to mention this again.”

It’s her honesty, refreshing and clear, that makes it possible for me to chuckle. “I wish I could tell you you’re wrong. But I’ve already lied for so long, and I’m tired of it. I’m tired of pretending. And I’m sorry if it makes me a bad person.”

“What, because you care the way you do? Can we take a second to remember who you’re talking to? Tell me one person who wanted to see Q liking me?”

“I did,” I remind her.

She pauses, and a glossy sheen pulls over her eyes. “That’s true. Quinton told me what you told him. You were the only

person who didn't give him a hard time. You encouraged him to go after me because you saw it made him happy."

"Do you think Quinton would say the same to me now?"

"Unfortunately, no, but that's only because of his own relationship with Ren. He wants you to be happy, but right now, his own pain wouldn't allow him to see that Ren might be the one who makes you happy."

I nod, knowing exactly what she means.

"Loving someone you shouldn't doesn't make you bad. Just the opposite. It means you see the good in people."

"But look what he did. I should hate him the way Q does."

Her brows draw together, lips pursed, and her head shakes ever so slightly from side to side. "Don't assume anything. I mean, would he ever admit it? Not at the threat of being drawn and quartered," she mutters with a wry grin. "He's still hurt by what happened. He's angry, but at the same time, he misses his friend. I see it sometimes. A look he gets on his face, or the way he trails off when he starts telling a story. I know it's because Ren was a part of that memory. Maybe that's why I can see it in you, too. You are a lot alike, you and your brother."

"Perish the thought," I quip, and we share a smile.

"It might also be because I understand how it feels when you're drawn to someone in your heart even though you know they're the last person in the world you should feel that way about. I know that feeling very well. And it seems like you can't get any control over your heart or your thoughts or anything. It's confusing and frustrating and painful."

"Yes." God, the relief. I can breathe again. It's like I've been wandering in the dark all this time, and Aspen brought light back to me. "I've loved Ren for so long, and no matter what anyone says, my heart still loves him."

Like I've been surrounded by people speaking a language I can't understand, and finally, someone speaks words I recognize. I've been disconnected for so long. Too long.

“You can’t choose who you love. And if you ever want to talk about it, I’m a phone call away. Day or night, any time. I’m serious,” she adds when I’m about to give her a polite smile. “I know what you’re going through—the situation might be different, but the feelings are the same. And I would’ve given anything to talk to somebody who cared. Please, don’t make me worry about you suffering alone, okay?”

When her chin trembles, I have no choice but to jump up and go to her. “Thank you,” I whisper before wrapping her in a hug. I don’t know who this is supposed to comfort more—me or the teary, hormonal girl I’m squeezing as tightly as I dare. “I wish we had this conversation sooner.”

“I didn’t want to upset you,” she reminds me as we untangle our arms. “But it seems like you’re in a dark place. I couldn’t let you leave without making sure you know there’s an ally here who gets it.”

Thunder rolls outside, sounding like it’s directly overhead. We both turn, eyes wide, when the windows rattle.

“Yikes. I’m going to duck under the covers and pretend storms don’t make me nervous,” Aspen murmurs, wincing. “Though I’m so stinking sleepy, I’ll probably pass out and miss the whole thing.”

Before she leaves the room, I touch a hand to her belly. “Take care of your mama,” I whisper. “Don’t tire her out too much.”

“Please.” She laughs as she crosses the room. “If I can handle your brother, I can handle anything.” For the sake of kindness, I bite back a snarky remark about him being the biggest baby I know, waving before she closes the door with a soft click.

I trust her. She won’t say a word. For the first time in forever, it feels like somebody “up there” is on my side, throwing me a bone in the form of my sister-in-law. Knowing I can call her if things get too dark makes me slightly less apprehensive about being alone and without a friend.

Wind howls outside the window, and the room lights up when lightning streaks across the sky. We hardly ever get thunderstorms here, but it's almost majestic when we do. I sink into the window seat, enjoying the perfect view of the backyard and the garden my father planted for my mother. Small lanterns line the edge of the garden, giving off barely enough light to see.

Every time the lightning flashes, my eyes scan the garden. No matter how many times I tell myself not to do it, not to even attempt to look for him because he's never really there, I do. I look everywhere, hoping that one day he'll appear out of thin air and explain to me what the hell happened. Even now, when it's clear the heavens are about to open, and we might need an ark to make it through what's about to fall, I can't help but look for him.

Because this is my last night at home. His last chance to find me here.

Another bolt of lightning flashes across the sky, and that's when my eyes catch something. With the flashing light, it's hard to tell if it's real or a figment of my imagination. Either way, my heart jumps in my chest.

*It could be him.*

That's the only thought that pops into my head. Another flash, and I see the same tall, dark figure hiding in the garden. He hasn't moved. He stares at me, watching me as I watch him. Every hair on my body stands on end.

He's covered from head to toe in black, making it impossible to be seen, that is unless he wants to be. Something inside me snaps, either my sanity or something else entirely, and I feel drawn to the mysterious person. My instincts tell me to stay put, but if it's Ren, and I didn't take the chance, I'd never forgive myself.

Plus, my father has guards posted all over the property. This isn't some random person trying to break in. Ren knows this place like the back of his hand. He's the only one who could sneak past the guards undetected.



Against my better judgment, I rush away from the window and slip my feet into a pair of slippers sitting beside the bed. I try to move quickly but quietly so as not to wake anyone. Fear zings through me once I reach the back patio doors and exit onto the lawn. Everything about this is a bad idea, but I won't be able to let it go until I check for myself.

My gaze sweeps the garden. I was sure he would be gone by the time I made it down here, but to my surprise, he isn't.

My heart beats heavy in my chest, and my breaths come out almost like pants. He doesn't move as I approach, his black form remaining eerily still.

"Ren?" I say his name, the foreignness of it making it come out like a squeak. I still haven't seen the man's face, but somehow, deep inside, I know it's him. He's tall and lean like a great pine standing in the forest.

The sky opens up, and the first raindrops fall, landing on my bare arms. A shiver ripples through me. I should've grabbed a sweater before I decided to rush outside. *Stupid me.*

I walk closer now and say his name once more.

"Ren? Is that you?" He doesn't move and that forces me to invade his space or risk never knowing if it's him or not.

A niggling at the back of my mind reminds me of all he has done. That he's technically the enemy, the villain.

He tried to kill my brother and numerous others.

What is stopping him from killing me?

He would never hurt me.

A lot of time has passed. He could be capable of anything now.

I look down at the ground and consider turning back.

It's the smart thing. The right thing. I should tell someone, but I doubt they'd believe me. No one has seen or heard from Ren; there hasn't even been a trace of evidence to determine where he is. Sure, I wanted to believe he followed me to MIT, but there was never any proof. Only my heartsick fantasies.

I look back up, prepared to order him to show me his face, when I find that I'm alone. No one is standing in front of me anymore, the mystery person disappearing into the night like a mist.

"Are you fucking kidding me?" I growl, anger festering in my gut.

I shake my head and even give myself a pinch to make sure I'm not sleeping. I stare at the spot I'm certain he was standing in a few seconds ago, but there's nothing there. No one, and no evidence there ever was.

*Fuck.* I'm losing my mind.

The rain comes down harder, the drops becoming pellets of rain. I turn to walk back to the house, reminding myself he's never coming back.

As I start back toward the house, a blur of black appears in front of me. A scream builds in my throat but never makes it out. The stranger's hand presses against my mouth, and I force myself to breathe through my nose. It's that smell that causes my eyes to open wide and wariness to ignite deep in my gut.

Warm and woody, like cinnamon and earth. That's what he smells like. I want to breathe him in and punch him in the face at the same time.

For a moment, our gazes collide, and I find myself being moved backward, only stopping once my back hits the rough bark of the tree. Lightning flashes across the sky the next moment, and I see him, really see him. Like a Greek god with his perfectly angled features, pronounced jawline, full lips, and high cheekbones, he appears to be chiseled from stone. He stares down at me, and I wonder how a man could possibly be any more gorgeous.

It's hard to make out in the lightning, but he somehow seems taller and broader, like he's added muscle since the last time I saw him. But the thing that stands out the most to me is his eyes.

They're identical pools of blue, but the darkness of them holds me; there isn't a single spark of light inside them. There

used to be a light inside him, even if it was small, but now there is nothing. It's almost like he's dead.

Fear sizzles through me like a bolt of lightning. I've never been afraid of Ren, but suddenly, I am. The man standing before me isn't the same man who left me, and I can feel it in the pit of my stomach.

His palm rests heavy over my mouth, and the rough pads of his fingers press against my cheeks. His body presses into mine, and for one brief second, I'm reminded of everything that could've been.

His body molds to my softness, and I want to lean into him.

I remember the last time I looked at his face, my sixteenth birthday. He was still him then, but I don't know the man he is now. This is Ren's body, Ren's smell, but he doesn't possess Ren's soul.

Like a boulder rushing down a hill, the reality of it all crashes into me, and I start to struggle, realizing he shouldn't be here. He shouldn't have his hands on me. This wasn't how our first meeting after all this time was supposed to go.

Wrenching myself free of his unforgiving grasp, I push forward, but my feet slip on the wet grass. I struggle for half a second, and then he's on me again.

"Shhh, relax. It's time to make you mine, angel," he whispers into the shell of my ear, and despite my struggles, I want to melt into him, but I just fucking can't.

I might've been his once. A long time ago before he abandoned me. Before he became this... other person.

One I hardly recognize.

One I can't trust.

One I need to get away from before it's too late.



# REN

*I*'ve waited for this moment.  
Imagined it.

Longed for it.

There have been times in my solitude when the promise of being with her again was the only thing that kept me going. If I'm being honest, Scarlet is the last trace of humanity left inside me. The one good, true thing left in my otherwise bleak, dark, empty existence.

Empty from the lack of her, of the warm glow of her love and adoration. The lack of her touch or even the sound of her voice.

And her smell, dear god, hits me all at once, rolling through me like the thunder now rolling overhead, so loud and strong, it causes the earth to shake beneath my boots.

Or that could be me.

It could be the force of finally placing my hands upon her while pressing my body to hers that has me feeling as though the earth itself shakes.

After so much waiting and wanting, sometimes barely existing from one second to the next, here she is. It had to be tonight. I couldn't wait another day. Not when she'll be leaving soon, away from me to the one place I can no longer venture. The one place I will never be able to follow her as I've been all this time. Here we are. Just as I imagined.

Except for one small, inconvenient point—she’s not playing along. She might want to melt against me—she came close—but she’s fighting it. Fighting her instinctive impulse to give herself to me once again.

She’s fighting me. It wasn’t supposed to be this way.

“Fucking stop,” I grunt close to her ear, though I doubt she hears me.

Not when she’s jerking her shoulders back and forth, trying her best to swing her fists, even though I’ve pinned her arms against her body, holding her in place. She may as well try to hit one of the trees surrounding us for all the good it does.

She draws as deep a breath as she can, the steel bands of my arms restricting her, and I realize almost too late what she’s going to do. My reflexes are as sharp as they ever were. Even so, I barely have time to clamp a hand over her mouth before she lets out a harrowing scream.

I’m grateful to the heavy rain now pelting us like bullets, big, fat, and heavy, and along with it, a clap of thunder that would have drowned her out anyway. There’s no way anyone inside can hear her—I could march a band through this garden, and there’s a chance no one would notice.

Mother Nature herself is on my side. The rain will wash away my footprints and the tracks from my tires. I couldn’t have chosen a better night, though there was no choice in the matter. It was now or never.

Everything is on our side, down to the neglected gate embedded in the garden wall. It’s covered in vines that have grown thick and healthy for years, camouflaging the gate until it blends into the vine-covered stone to either side. Somebody might have known it was there at one time, but it’s been forgotten for years, and the rusted lock was easy enough to pick.

Sometimes, I wonder if Xander is as on top of things as he wants everyone to believe. Sure, he can post guards all around the compound, and they can watch all they want. But when it’s

late at night, and their reflexes are a little slow—especially when I haven't shown so much as a hair on my ass, so they are bound to start questioning whether there's a chance I'll show up at all—it takes nothing to sneak up behind a man and knock him unconscious.

It's all going according to plan.

It confirms what I've always known: this is meant to be. She's meant to be with me and only me. Everything has come together to make this night possible.

She is the only fly in the ointment.

Apparently, she hasn't gotten the memo as she's still fighting; her bare feet slide over the wet grass as she struggles to get back to the patio, knocking me off balance. My boots make deep grooves in what's becoming dangerously slick mud, and it's all I can do to keep from screaming at her to stop before we both end up face-first in the muck.

Yet that's precisely where we end up when my balance gives way due to her frantic struggling. Even now, my instinct is to protect her, and I manage to twist to the right and avoid crushing her beneath my body, the two of us landing on our sides. She slides against me and almost gets loose for the briefest instant, but I tighten my grip and roll, pinning her beneath me.

Panic threatens to erase my confidence. Why is she acting this way? Have I been away too long? While it feels like an eternity, she can't have changed this much. The depth of her love for me can't have gone shallow. Not my Scarlet.

If she's angry with me for having seemingly abandoned her all this time, we can work that out. She'll understand once I have a chance to explain myself.

I just need that chance, and she's not giving it to me.

I've never been one to react well to being misunderstood.

Perhaps that's why I see red when she somehow manages to drive an elbow into my ribs. I have never had a reaction like this to her, but she's never driven me to this point, either. Refusing to give in though it's clear she wanted to at first.

She's so damn stubborn—that much hasn't changed.

And while her stubbornness has threatened to drive me insane in the past, that's nothing compared to this. Not when my entire fucking life is on the line. I haven't taken all these pains to go unseen for two years only to be discovered in the garden, covered in mud.

The possibility of discovery and knowing she would be the reason for it is what makes me pull away. The wind blows hard enough that the trees seem to bend, flower beds pummeled by sheets of rain coming down hard enough to knock the petals from the blooms.

The most beautiful bloom of all is now mud-covered, hair plastered to her skull and face. I take in her heart-shaped face. She's pale as a ghost, the color draining from her in what I know is extreme fear. I've seen that look on her face before; I just never thought I'd be the one to put it there.

How could she be so afraid of me? Doesn't she know better?

"I'm not going to hurt you," I try to tell her, but we may as well be in that dark corner all over again. I doubt she can hear me between the violent storm and her own fear ringing in her head.

Only this time, there's no calming her down, no demonstrating the deep breaths she needs to take. She's dead set on fighting me. Lightning streaks the sky, turning night to day, for one eerie second, and the almost feral look in her eyes makes me pity her and hate myself all at once.

Time is ticking by. I have to get her out of here. Sure, I've been lucky, but do I want to test that luck much longer?

The tension inside me expands. I was hoping I wouldn't have to do it this way. For a moment, I considered not bringing the syringe. Call me a romantic, but for some reason, I imagined her happily agreeing to run away with me. Only the memory of how impossible she can sometimes be was enough to make me bring the sedative along.

I hate to use it, but this isn't my fault.



None of it is. I've only ever done what I was compelled to do.

My fingers shake as I pull the syringe from my inside pocket and pop the cap off the needle with my thumb.

Lightning flashes again, and at the very last moment, she sees it. Recognizes what it is and what's about to happen. Though I can't hear her gasp, I see it in the way her mouth opens and feel it in the sharp intake of breath that lifts her chest.

In one smooth move, I shove it into her neck and press down on the plunger. She struggles against me, and I hold her in place, waiting for the effects of the drug to kick in. It didn't have to be this way. I only hope she doesn't hate me for it. When she's calmer, when we're away from here, and the shock of seeing me again wears off, I'll be able to talk to her. We'll get back to where we used to be.

We have to. What else is there, otherwise?

"Listen to me." I lower my head until our noses touch, trying to get through to her before she loses consciousness. "Everything is going to be okay. I'm going to take care of you. I'm not going to hurt you, ever, I swear. You're everything to me. You know that."

Her eyelids flutter, her body giving a few weak, ineffectual little jerks like she still wants to fight, even if it's a losing battle.

*I stayed away too long, didn't I? Have I lost her?*

It may as well be an eternity before she goes limp, her head lolling to the side and muscles loose. She doesn't even twitch at the rain hitting her face. Her beautiful fucking face. I allow my fingers to trace the line of her jaw and over her bottom lip before coming back to myself. I don't have a moment to lose here.

I survey the area quickly, making sure we're alone. I find my footing and stand, crouching to lift her from the ground. She's as light as she ever was, almost weightless in my arms, her head lolling on my shoulder. Her blond hair sticks to her

face. With her slender body tucked against my chest, I lower my head and step as carefully as I can across the muddy ground while moving quickly. My goal— the gate I left slightly ajar to make for a quick exit.

Ahead, I can see the guard still unconscious and propped up against the other side of the wall, his chin touching his chest. Did I hit him that hard?

I might have killed him, but the possibility only stirs righteous pride rather than guilt or sorrow.

He stood in my way. That's what happens to people who stand in my way.

*This is war, after all. In war, there are casualties.* River's reminder echoes in my mind. He's right and always has been, except when it comes to her.

*My angel.*

The nearly broken down, nondescript Jeep I've used for months sits in the deep shadows provided by gnarled oak trees lining the north side of the outer compound wall. It helps me blend in better than any flashy, expensive vehicle I was accustomed to in the past.

Thanks to the thick growth from the branches and leaves overhead, the gusty rain turns to a light drizzle once I reach the rear door and swing it open. I can see more clearly now that there's no curtain of rain in my eyes.

I laid a blanket out over the back seat before I made the trek up to the house, just in case I had to use the sedative. Even unconsciously, I wanted her to be comfortable. For now, I lay her across the back seat, my priority being to get the hell away from here before anyone sounds the alarm.

I doubt I would hear any alarm that's raised, and not only because of the near-constant thunder. The storm has reached its peak, directly overhead, lightning zig-zagging across the sky. I will barely need my headlights since the flashes are coming in one on top of the other.

None of that can touch the rush of blood in my ears, the victorious roar in my head. I did it. I took her from them. I

claimed her for myself.

She's back where she belongs.

*Mine. Mine. Mine.*

Climbing into the Jeep, I close the door, which provides a measure of relief. I can hear myself think. I can hear her soft breathing, too, smooth and even. She'll be fine. It'll be nothing more than a long nap.

And when she wakes up, we'll settle a few things. I can't stand the thought of her being afraid, not of me. Not when the only thing that's ever mattered is her well-being.

It occurs to me, as it has many times before, that her father and brother and the rest of her family might have done everything in their power to turn her against me. The idea leaves me grinding my teeth as I pull away, grateful for the Jeep's handling over wet roads. I don't have to slow down or be cautious. There isn't time for that.

I glance away from the road to take a look in the rearview mirror, my gaze landing on her limp, sodden form. She wouldn't believe any poison against me, would she? The mere idea makes my heart clench and my throat tighten.

*Has she betrayed me?*

I shake my head, a growl stirring in my chest and loosening the tension. That's River talking. He's never missed a chance to remind me of how she's forgotten I exist and written me off as nothing more than a villain. I refuse to believe it. She would never turn away from me. Hell, I tried hard enough to make her do that, didn't I? She refused. And she'll refuse now, I know it.

I'm so concerned with arguing with myself that I almost forget what needs to be done before another mile rolls over on the odometer. I should've done it back there, but I wanted to get away before anyone noticed.

We're a few miles from the compound now, the road empty, thanks to the late hour and the storm. I'm confident enough to pull off to the shoulder, the tires crunching over gravel before coming to a stop.

I'm about to undo a grievous wrong.

She's so thoroughly under the effect of the sedative that she doesn't react when I kneel over her in the back seat. I hate what I'm about to do, but it's a necessity. I begin probing the area under her left shoulder.

It's here, I know it is, implanted long ago. During what she believed was nothing more than an ordinary dental procedure, unaware because of the drugs used to knock her out.

The parallel between that event and this one isn't lost on me as my fingers find the hard lump no more than an inch in length.

The difference is I'm doing this for her own good. She'll thank me for this.

I withdraw the other instrument I brought along this evening from my pocket: a scalpel. The metal flashes when another burst of lightning fills the sky. The strikes aren't coming as furiously as they were minutes ago. The storm is beginning to pass.

With my left thumb and forefinger, I isolate the device, holding it still while taking the scalpel in my right hand. I release a breath, ensuring I have a steady hand before I run a quick, careful line over the top of the tiny lump. A shallow cut, but one that pains me just the same. I suck in a wince through gritted teeth. I hate to think of causing her pain.

*There it is.*

The tracker Xander implanted in her when she was a kid.

Little did he know the favor he would be doing me later on. After Q accidentally mentioned the tracker years ago, I made it my business to hack the software used to handle the information.

Without the presence of this tiny piece of hardware, I wouldn't have had such an easy time tracking her around campus. I smile into the air. I wish I could see his reaction when he realizes he's not as smart as he thinks.

I ease the bit of metal from her shoulder, then lean over to roll down the window before throwing the device out onto the road. If it isn't crushed by the weight of a passing vehicle, I'm sure it will be lost just the same. Like looking for a needle in a haystack.

“Once we're at the cabin, everything will be fine. It's so far away; nobody, not your pesky father, or overbearing brother, no one will be able to find us.” I tell her once it's over, my lips brushing her mud-streaked temple. “We'll finally be happy, the way we were always meant to be. I'll finally have my queen beside me.”



# SCARLET

“*T*hat’s right. Come back to me. I’ve missed you so much...”

I must be dreaming. That’s Ren’s voice; I’d know it anywhere. His voice is so clear, much more so than when I usually dream about him.

“I’ve been aching for you all this time.”

That’s how I know I’m dreaming. He’s saying all the things I’ve longed to hear. How he yearns for me and all that. I smile a little, squeeze my eyes shut tighter than ever, and intend to fall back into the dream threatening to fade away the closer I venture to consciousness.

If only something wasn’t tapping at the back of my mind...something I need to be careful of...a warning that isn’t clear.

“Scarlet? Are you awake?”

My heart skips a beat once reality comes crashing down.

*The storm. The garden. Wrestling in the mud. With Ren.*

How could I forget?

The shock of the memory makes me open my eyes, and right away, the strange surroundings add a new layer of surprise and confusion to what I’m already wrestling with.

Gone are the soft colors of my bedroom at home, and along with them, the pile of pillows on my bed. The walls surrounding me are sanded wood, bare of any decoration, and

the bed underneath me is little more than a thin mattress. I can feel springs pressing against my back through the rough sheets. Ren's scent surrounds me, lulling me to calmness.

He didn't take me into the house. He didn't even leave me in the garden. He brought me somewhere else.

But he's here... with me.

Which is what makes me turn my head on the pillow, leaving me looking into a face I've prayed for with every breath I've drawn in the past two years.

"Ren? Is it really you?"

"Who else, angel?" A shiver of pleasure races through me, waking up parts of me I was sure were dead. Numb, cold, dark. It's like he flipped a switch, and suddenly, the world is full of light again.

*And yet.*

It sounds like Ren. It looks like Ren.

But there's something else. Some other quality I can't put my finger on. Something's missing.

Right, and it was missing in the garden, wasn't it? Why is my head so foggy? I can't put it together. I only know I was afraid. Willing to hit, kick, and scream if it meant getting away from him.

He's always been able to see through me.

"I understand your confusion—even fear. I'm not taking it personally. I dropped out of your life for years and suddenly reappeared in front of you. I'm sure you're feeling a number of emotions, but I meant what I said back there. You never have to be afraid of me."

Easy for him to say. It's like an old movie I once watched with Mom and Adela, where the people in a small town were replaced by aliens who looked and sounded just like them. It was human feeling that was missing. There was no warmth behind the familiar words, no compassion or kindness.

I must be going out of my mind. There's no such thing.



Chuckling, he runs a hand over his stubbled jaw before standing and going to a small window opposite the foot of the bed. I follow his progress, taking in the rest of the bedroom. A small dresser and armoire occupy the wall to my left, the double bed pushed up against the wall to the right, and a basket of dirty laundry in the corner, telling me he didn't just get here today.

Outside the window, all that can be seen is trees and brief glimpses of blue sky visible between the leaves. He stands with his back to me, hands in his pockets, his broad shoulders almost filling the width of the frame. His too-long dark brown hair brushes the collar of a black T-shirt that's seen better days. There's nobody taking care of him, least of all himself, that much is for sure.

An emotion stirs in my chest. I've missed him so much, longed for him, and this is how we reunite?

"That was some storm," he muses. "But it appears everything has cleared out now."

Nothing is clear. Not a damn thing. Ren would hold me. Ren would kiss me. He would indulge himself in everything we've missed out on.

He wouldn't treat this like a business meeting.

"Where have you been all this time?"

When he neglects to answer me, I press harder, glaring at the back of his head. "And why didn't you ever contact me? Didn't you ever consider what that would mean? How scared I'd be for you? I've been worried sick, Ren." I try not to scold him, but we need to get over this before we can move on to anything else.

A second ticks by, then another.

*Nothing.* No response. I might as well be talking to myself.

Nausea claws up my throat, and an anxious worry settles into my bones.

*This is all wrong.*

If he would only speak to me, dammit.

I sit up slowly, cautiously, making the springs creak. My body's stiff, aching, and there's a funny sort of pain near my left shoulder. I guess I hit it on a stone in the garden. I look down over my chest and legs, surprised to see he changed me into clean but way oversized sweatpants and a thin Henley shirt. *His clothes*. A ghost of a smile pulls at my lips.

He does care about me, still, or else he would've left me in that muddy nightgown. I need to cling to that tiny bit of hope.

"You know," I murmur, watching him closely for any sign of trouble, "everybody's said all these things about you. Stuff you supposedly did. Bad things. I know they have it wrong, but how could I defend you if you never reached out to me to tell your side of the story? Do you realize how it looked when you ran away? Like you were guilty."

I gulp as his shoulders roll back, his chin lifting. "Right?" I whisper. "But I know you aren't guilty. You could never hurt Aspen or Quinton."

That's enough to make him turn his head partway, giving me a look at his sharp profile. Beautiful but forbidding. "Are you sure about that?"

"What?" I breathe, my throat getting tighter, my heart racing.

"I said, are you sure?" He turns toward me, brows drawn together over eyes I used to know so well. Eyes I wanted nothing more than to fall into and never come back.

"Of course," I insist, even though it's a lie. Now, it's a lie. It wasn't before when I clung to any last fiber of hope available. Relying on my finely honed talent for refusing anything I don't want to believe.

But I'm not delusional, either. There are limits to hope.

"Or do you think I'm being noble again?" His lips twist in a sarcastic smirk as he throws my words back in my face. Yes, I did accuse him of that years ago. The Ren I knew wouldn't make a joke of it.

He lets out a sigh before beginning to pace in front of the bed. "I can see why you'd think that," he murmurs. "I was

always there for you when you needed me. I was your hero.”

“You were,” I agree with a lump in my throat, emotion threatening to break through. “Even if you did break your promise.”

“My promise?”

No. Anything but this. *He can't have forgotten.* “To always give me a first on my birthday. The night of my seventeenth, I didn't sleep a wink. I waited past dawn, sitting at the window. You never came, never sent word.”

This time, there's no hiding the pain so intense it makes my voice crack. I cried for hours, curled in a ball on the bed, once I gave up hope. Cursing myself, my naivete. How easy it was for him to hurt me, to abandon me. “It broke my heart.”

Understanding touches the corners of his eyes, softening them, and when he speaks, it's with all the gentleness he was missing before. “It was impossible.” *Says the man who kidnapped me from my father's heavily guarded compound.*

“Nothing is impossible. All I could think was that you were dead or something bad had happened to you.” Or that he'd changed his mind about me—somehow, the thought is even harder to voice than the fear of him dying.

“You think it wasn't a struggle for me? That I didn't curse myself for letting you down?”

“My point is, even that wasn't enough to make me forget you. It didn't change my feelings for you, either. I know the real you, Ren.” Who am I trying to convince? Him or myself?

“You've never seen my bad side.” He glances my way, meeting my gaze. “You never will, either. But it exists, and it is capable of any number of terrible things.”

The thin blankets aren't enough to keep me from shivering at the flat certainty in his voice. He can't mean this. He can't mean he tried to kill my brother, his best friend.

Something about him is dark and furtive now. I can't put my finger on it—the way his eyes shift back and forth, never landing on anything for long. The way he fidgets, jamming his

hands into his pockets before pulling them out again, sometimes rubbing them on his thighs. He's jumpy, full of nervous energy, and unable to vent it in any useful way.

He's a caged lion, pacing back and forth. What happens when the lion gets tired of pacing? Who does it lash out at? The person stupid enough to stick their hand in the cage, obviously.

Ren was never like this before. He always had a self-possessed way about him. More than once, I've overheard Dad describing him as almost too laid-back, like nothing affected him very deeply. He knew how to let things roll off his shoulders.

I mean, I know that's not technically true. Things affected him deeply, the way they would anyone. He just knew how to handle himself, was all.

Unless he was enraged, like the night Enzo Grimaldi cornered me in the library. He was my avenging angel that night, full of murderous darkness that really and truly turned me on for the first time in my life.

This isn't the same thing at all. Not even close.

Then he was unhinged, but even that had an edge of control to it. He was self-possessed enough not to take things too far.

This version of Ren doesn't have the same grip on himself.

And I'm alone with him.

"Where are we?" Before he can answer, I insist, "We have to go back. You need to take me home. Otherwise, this will only get worse. You get that, right? Things are bad enough already. We can work everything out."

I'm babbling, but I can't stop. "Please," I whisper, trembling because I know my words are falling on deaf ears. "Please, take me back before they send people to get me. I don't want anybody hurting you. You know they will if they find me. They might kill you. There's still time to work this out, Ren."

A quick look over my left shoulder reveals a door open on the rest of what I now understand is a cabin. My gaze lands on a faded couch, the coffee table in front of it littered with dirty cups and dishes.

And beside it, a door.

I have no idea where we are. All things considered, there's very little chance of finding help.

But right now, more sickeningly afraid with every breath I take, good sense is in short supply. I have to get out of here. The one person in the world who I was sure I could count on is... all wrong. I can't even begin to unpack what that means or what to do about it.

I can do that later. When I'm out of here.

*Away from him.* Oh my god, I can't believe I'm about to run away from the man I've spent all these years loving in spite of everything.

I see him whirl on me out of the corner of my eye once my feet are on the floor. Fear sends adrenaline flooding my system, making me fly across the bedroom and into the living area, the front door in my sights.

"What do you think you're doing?" His voice is loud, harsh, and much too close to my ear. A cry of pure anguish tears itself from my chest as a steel band encircles my waist, and my feet are left kicking thin air instead of pounding the floor.

"Please!" I don't know what I'm begging for. For freedom? For answers? For him to love me again? Maybe all of that and more. A million panicked, heartbroken thoughts bounce around in my head, leaving me almost mindless in the face of a flight response run amok.

"Where do you think you're going to go?" he demands as he carries me back to the bed, his hard body pressed against my back. "We're in the middle of nowhere. What, you think I can afford to live out in the open? This is a remote cabin. All you will do is put yourself at risk if you go out there alone."

He's angry, but I can't tell if it's anger because I tried to leave or because of what might happen to me should I get away. If anything, his attitude only leaves me more confused than before. Does he care, or doesn't he? What am I supposed to believe?

"What are you doing?" I shriek when he removes his belt after dumping me unceremoniously onto the bed.

"This is for your own good. I'm disappointed in you." It takes no time for him to use the belt to bind my wrists together, then fix them to the rusted metal headboard. All the while, I watch him, searching for any sign of the man I knew and loved.

Did I just use past tense?

"Now. I'm going to fix you something to eat, and when I come back, I expect you to be in a more rational mood." He even has the nerve to shake his head, clicking his tongue like I'm a naughty child in need of punishment.

It's beyond surreal now. At the same time, I know I'm not dreaming this. It's really happening. I'm really trapped here, and I may as well be launched into outer space without a tether. Nothing to hold on to, no sense of where I am in relation to anything else. Floating in place, knowing I'll die without help. No idea what's real and what isn't.

At least when I'm alone, I can catch my breath. Even though it's no easy task, thanks to the dread that won't stop building. I force myself to breathe slowly, focusing on nothing more than the air coming in and going out. My panic response begins to calm down, and I'm capable of thinking beyond the immediate need to get away.

Something must have happened to him. That's the only explanation that comes close to making sense. He got hurt somehow. That would explain so much. His change in attitude, the way he refuses to touch me in any meaningful way. All that weird stuff he was saying about his darker side—what the hell was that supposed to mean? He must be sick.

I want to help him. The pain of being unable to understand him is quickly wiped out by the pain brought about by the idea of him needing help and being alone all this time with no one to care.

*Are you crazy? He didn't deny the accusations.*

Right. It's so easy to forget the things I don't want to focus on. Too easy. I can't let myself fall into that trap.

He hurt them. Q and Aspen—his friends, family even. And he doesn't even seem sorry.

And he swears he would never hurt me—is that supposed to make me feel better? Because I'm sure there was a time he couldn't have imagined hurting Q, either. Unless he's the best actor who ever lived. There's no way he could have faked years of friendship and camaraderie and even devotion to my family. I mean, my dad can sniff out a traitor like a pig sniffing a truffle, and he never so much as caught a whiff. He was just as bowled over by Ren's treachery as anyone else was.

If I crane my neck, I can see out through the bedroom door again. There's a lot of clutter out there. He's been here for a while. I hear him out there, rattling a pan, opening a can. He might be muttering to himself, a habit I guess he would've picked up being alone for so long with nobody to talk to.

How did he find this place? Is it his, or is he squatting here? What if he hurt the person who used to live here? No, I can't even let myself think that. He's changed, but he can't have changed that much. Even now, tied to a fucking bed, I still can't let myself believe the worst.

I would ask myself what it might take to get to that point, but I'm not sure I want to know the answer.

My chest tightens painfully when I hear him approach, his heavy boots loud against the wood floor. He's carrying a bowl of steaming soup in one hand, and a couple of slices of buttered bread on a paper towel in the other.

“You must be hungry by now,” he murmurs, taking a seat. “Once you're fed and thinking clearer, you won't make any

mistakes like trying to run away. That's not like you. You're usually a lot smarter than that."

My heart sinks further than ever when, instead of untying me so I can feed myself, he sets the bowl on the bed and dips the spoon into the fragrant broth. Watching him blow over the surface shouldn't bring tears to my eyes, yet here they are. A little gesture like that makes me believe he cares. Like this is all a big misunderstanding.

"Where have you been? Were you here all this time?"

"Open up." He's either deliberately avoiding my questions, or he simply doesn't want to hear them, shutting them off. Nothing about his demeanor reveals any anger, exactly. That same blank emptiness is what he's operating from, and it's just as unnerving as it was before.

I open my mouth. I have to trust he didn't do anything to the soup. I have to believe he wouldn't hurt me, or else I'll go crazy. Our eyes meet, and they don't look quite as empty as they did back in the garden, but something in them still makes it difficult to swallow the vegetable soup. Something that makes it tough to breathe.

If he had a head injury or something like that, it would affect him this way, right?

I try to shift my weight a little to make myself more comfortable, and I suck in a pained gasp. "My shoulder hurts," I grunt, trying hard not to put any pressure on it. "It's so sore. It stings."

"That was the tracker."

He says it like it's the most natural thing in the world. Like he's commenting on the weather outside. "The what?"

"The tracking device that was implanted in your shoulder years ago. I took it out." He raises another spoonful of soup to my lips. "Come on. Open up."

I open my mouth if only to keep hot soup from spilling across my chest. I don't even taste it anymore. "There was a tracking device in my shoulder?"



“Close to your shoulder blade, yeah. You were at the dentist, getting worked on, and that’s when your father had it put in.”

“He was tracking me.”

“I’m afraid so.”

While most of me doesn’t want to believe it, a very small but insistent part of me does. If anything, it makes too much sense. The way he always seemed to know where I was. I could never pull anything over on him. This was more than a case of having eyes in the back of his head and bodyguards everywhere.

Righteous indignation bubbles in my chest, forcing its way up my throat. “He didn’t trust me, so he had a tracking device implanted without me knowing it.”

“It’s not about trust. He thought he was protecting you.” If I wasn’t so angry about this, I would probably be more curious about how Ren is standing up for my father. Almost like he would have done the same.

“Protecting me?” I blurt out, almost breathless from the betrayal. “He thought he had to protect me? When Quinton’s the one who went missing twice? I’m the one who gets a tracker implanted in my shoulder? What the hell?”

For the first time since I found him in the garden, he smiles, and it’s almost like looking at the Ren I thought I knew. The Ren I’ve loved for so long.

“And you were in a hurry to get back to them,” he says, instantly killing the moment. It’s the bitterness in his voice, fairly dripping from it. This man has enough resentment to choke a horse. “Don’t worry. I took it out of you. He can’t control you anymore.”

“But why? Why did you do it? What made you hurt my family—your family?” I correct since that’s who they are. We’re family. Or we were.

My questions bring a curtain down between us, and he withdraws again, this time breaking off a piece of bread and

putting it in my mouth. No answers. He won't acknowledge my question.

No, no, I can't have that. I can't have him pull away again. There must be a way to get through to him, to get him talking to me. Not only because I'm so hungry for him in my soul, either. He's damn creepy when he goes silent. Eerie.

"I made a mistake back at MIT."

His brows lift, but he says nothing, stirring the soup and sending steam into the air to mix with the scent of the wood that surrounds us. It would feel homey and charming under different circumstances.

"I broke my promise," I continue, forcing the words out even though my heart's pounding, and I feel like I'm about to be sick. But if anything's going to get through to him, it'll be this. Because he still cares about me. He's proven it. "I let somebody else touch me at a party. A stranger who wore a mask. He fingered me. I don't know; I guess I tried to believe it was you. I needed to believe it after missing you so much for so long. But it clearly wasn't, and I've regretted it every day since."

That has to do it, right? It has to stir him out of this near catatonia. He'll get mad, sure, but he'll be real.

It'll be him, finally, fighting with me. For me.

He inhales deeply through his nose, then lets it out slowly while he stares down at the bits of carrots and peas floating in the tomato broth. What's he thinking? What's he going to do?

What he does when he finally lifts his gaze is the last thing I expected.

He smiles.

He might as well have hit me. No, a punch in the face would have felt more normal after what I just admitted. That, I could make sense of.

But a smile? One that never reaches those flat eyes of his?

"As if I would ever let someone else touch you," he whispers, the smile still plastered on his face.

The truth hits me like a ton of bricks.

*Oh my god.*

*It was him.*

*He was stalking me around campus.*

I was right—but it doesn't make me feel better.

All I can do is ask myself, who am I really locked inside this cabin with?



## REN

*I* imagined she'd pepper me with questions after getting food into her, that I'd spend hours helping her connect the dots between what her intuition must've told her over the years and the reality of me following her, watching, and protecting her from a distance.

Instead, she settled in and fell asleep, leaving me to watch over her yet again.

I can't say I'm sorry, either, which strikes me as both funny and sad. I've been waiting for this, looking ahead to our time together. Living for it. Yet more than anything, her presence has left me craving silence for a while.

At times like this, the difference between my old life and the one I live now is the starkest. I got used to things being the way they were over time, and I became a little more comfortable with my solitude every day.

Eventually, it became normal to spend an entire day or even a stretch of days hearing no other voice but my own and, sometimes, River's.

For the first time, a female voice is in the cabin.

*Female sweetness.*

Her scent surrounds me, wrapping me in a tight blanket. Vanilla, lavender, spring. The smell clings to my shirt and skin. It's enough to make me dread the prospect of a shower. I don't want to wash her away.

Now that I have her with me, my need to have all of her is stronger than it's ever been. I figured taking her would ease the all-consuming, painful cravings that are enough to ruin my sleep for nights on end.

I thought the sight of her sleeping peacefully, curled up in my bed, *our bed*, would bring me peace. Yet all it's done so far is remind me how empty life has been. Good thing I won't have to live another second without her here.

My heart stirs in my chest, and I watch as she attempts to roll over but is hampered by her bound wrists. I wince at the reminder of tying her up. I didn't want to do that—I regret it still. Though it's not like I can't pretend something about it was appealing.

Reminding her how thoroughly at my mercy she is. Reminding myself how simple it would be to claim her, once and for all, *fully*, until there's no question of who she belongs to.

Not that way, though. It doesn't matter that the feel of her wriggling and squirming against my body started getting me hard almost instantly. That the familiar and oh, so missed scent of lilac on her skin and hair turned me into a panting, salivating animal.

At least, that was how I felt. All rational thought vanished like smoke in the wind, replaced by the urge to rut like a mindless beast.

She's too precious for that, and she's still a virgin. I won't make her first time something she regrets, no matter what. I'm sure she believes after years without contact, the depth of my feelings for her has changed—if it has, it's only deepened.

Her brow furrows for an instant before smoothing out. When the ghost of a smile plays over those full lips, it awakens my imagination along with my dick. What is she dreaming? Whatever it is, I hope it's beautiful. From today on, she's finally going to get everything she so richly deserves.

Now, we have a future to look forward to together. Something we can work for as a team. The plans River and I

have put together are close to fruition.

Once it's all over, nothing but happiness will be ahead for both of us.

Soon, she'll see that.

The buzzing in my pocket turns what could've been a nice, much-needed moment of contentment into something darker. Irritation threatens to leak into my voice by the time I answer the call, leaving the bedroom in favor of going to the kitchen. The cabin isn't exactly spacious, but I don't dare step outside while she's in here. Even tied up and asleep, I can't completely trust her.

And I don't want her to wake up and find me gone. She's already scared enough.

"Took you long enough to answer." It seems I'm not the only one wrestling with irritation. His voice is tight, sarcasm ringing out. "I hope I didn't interrupt anything."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"You're so full of shit." The civil act is no more, replaced with flat-out contempt. "I gave you countless reasons you shouldn't do this. I practically laid out a PowerPoint presentation of all the ways kidnapping Scarlet will fuck everything we've worked for all this time."

I shouldn't have answered the call. No, scratch that—he would've shown up here if I hadn't. I wouldn't put it past him to make up some bullshit excuse like he was worried when he couldn't get ahold of me.

I can't have him here. Not while she is.

"I did what I felt was right."

"So she's there? You've decided to quit lying like a guilty child and admit what you did to completely fuck me over?"

"Not everything is about you," I whisper, my teeth clenched, gaze locked on the open doorway. From where I stand with my back to the sink, I have a clear view of the lower half of her blanket-covered body. She hasn't flinched, but that doesn't mean I can afford to take chances.

She'll eventually need to know about River—about everything—but this is not the time. Not even close. I'll need to catch her up on a great many things before I can introduce River into the mix.

“It's never been about me,” he snarls. I'm glad this isn't a video call, though the memory of how blank and black his eyes turn when he's at the height of rage is clear enough as it is. “It was supposed to be about us. Always. Balancing the scales, remember?”

“I remember.” Do I ever. Remembering isn't the problem. It's the inability to forget that's tainted every aspect of my life.

“So why do you insist on screwing us both over like this? After all the sacrifices we've made, you throw it all away when we're so close to the goal line?”

I have to close my eyes against the pain of his voice drilling into my skull. “I haven't thrown anything away.” Please, don't let her hear this. The best I can hope for when he's like this is to keep the conversation as quiet as possible. If I blow up, he'll follow, and this will become uglier than it already is.

“You don't get it, do you? Is her pussy lined in gold or something?”

White-hot fury explodes in my chest, rolling through me like a wave of fire and threatening to singe me to a crisp.

“Is it?” he taunts while I fight to keep myself under control. “Is that what made it seem like a good idea to go against my advice? No, not even advice. I fucking begged you not to do this because it means that Rossi bastard will be after you worse than before. You think it was a challenge, ducking him after you betrayed me by leaving your precious Quinton alive? How do you think it'll be now that you took his precious daughter?”

“He'll never find us.”

“Easy for you to say when you're desperate to make yourself feel better about what you did.”



*Don't let him do this to you. Don't make it this easy.* I'm hardly hanging on as it is, so the snarl running like a thread through his words only makes it harder to keep it together.

For Scarlet. It's for Scarlet. She's fragile enough without the added stress.

He'll never understand, and I'm past the point of trying to explain myself. I might as well teach advanced math to a dog. Hell, I might get further with the dog.

The years since the attack on Q haven't made River any more human or empathetic. There's no room for empathy as far as River is concerned. Black or white. For him or against him. It hasn't changed and never will.

No, if anything, he's hardened even further. Nothing but sharp edges. So brittle, so close to snapping. When he does snap, he'll shatter into a thousand jagged shards.

I'll be the one those shards embed in. Death by a thousand cuts.

He's working himself up into an epic meltdown, his rambling more like the drone of a hive of pissed-off wasps. "You'd better hope you can keep her in line."

Of everything he's said so far, that's what freezes the blood in my veins. "Or what?" I whisper, turning toward the window and staring out into the profound darkness of a new moon. What do I expect? To find him standing out there, glaring at me? His eyes like two sparks of furious light?

I think I see him for a second, but it's nothing more than my imagination.

And the increased concern for Scarlet.

"What do you think?" he taunts. "I'll do what you never could, that's what. One of us has to use their balls here, and you've already chosen how you'll use yours. Have you fucked her yet?"

"Don't," I warn, shaking. How? How does he do it? How do I let it happen? He's under my skin, good and deep. Maybe he's always been there.

“I mean, you go to all that trouble, you should at least get your dick wet.” He snorts, adding, “If I were you, I’d get it done sooner rather than later. No way of knowing how much longer she’ll be in any shape to fuck.”

I don’t need to ask what he means, and I don’t want to hear his disgusting explanation, anyway. “Listen to me.” I’m through trying to fake calmness. To hell with it. He knows I’m pretending, anyway. He always knows. “You touch a hair on her head, and you won’t like the consequences.”

“Is that supposed to be a threat?”

“What do you think?” I growl. The idea of him touching her, hurting her, leaves me straining to hurt him first. To draw first blood.

“Because if it is, you’re gravely mistaken. You’re not a threat to me.”

“Don’t make me prove you wrong.” I’m barely able to stop short of throwing the phone across the cabin after ending the call. The heartless prick. The cruel, hardheaded asshole.

“Ren?”

Scarlet’s voice is a bucket of ice water over my head, bringing me back to the present moment. To her, scared and confused. She needs me to be better than this.

Which means not showing what River’s threats did to me.

I was worried about what he’d do to Q? That’s nothing compared to what he’d do to Scarlet. If only to make me sorry for going against him.

She’s wide-eyed and trembling hard enough to rattle the bedframe when I reach her. “Hey. Everything’s fine,” I murmur, turning up the flame on the lantern beside the bed so the room’s not so dark. “You’re safe. I’m here.”

“Who were you talking to?”

My body is tight—seething, barely controlled—as I sit on the edge of the bed. “Nobody you need to worry about.”

“You sounded upset.”

It's easier to pretend I didn't hear her as I unlace my boots. "I'm surprised you woke up at all. You were out cold."

"It's been... stressful." She whispers the last word, her voice shaky like she's afraid to admit it, but at the same time, wants to be sure I know what I'm putting her through.

"It doesn't have to be. We can be happy here, so long as you trust me."

"I'm trying. I really am." Sincerity rings out in her voice and shines from her hope-filled face—only to fade as I stretch out beside her. She stiffens, her breath catching, and it's enough to make me hate myself. This was the only way it could go. I didn't have a choice. How can I make her understand that?

"It's only me. You don't have to be afraid of me." As if to prove it, I do what my body's compelled me to do ever since we arrived.

Rolling onto my side to face her, I take her in my arms. Awkward, yes, but there's enough give in the belt that I can pull her in until her head is on my shoulder. "You have to admit, it's nicer when you don't feel so cold. I know I feel a lot more comfortable with your warmth so close to me." *I'm not going to hurt you. I'm never going to hurt you.*

Slowly, the tension built in every joint and muscle begins to dissolve. Every breath releases a little more of it. The worry when I couldn't be with her. The physical pain of yearning for her the way I'd yearn for air if I were underwater. The certainty that I'd die soon without her. That the pain would consume me.

Yet it's the way she loosens up that's more gratifying. She could settle for letting me hold her close but takes it a step further by melting against me. Even now, her body can't deny the truth. Let her childish fear tell her to protect herself.

Her heart and her body know better.

"You know what this reminds me of?" I whisper, smiling at the wall, my chin propped up on the top of her head.

“What?” Her voice is muffled against my neck. The heat from her breath gets my cock twitching, waking up to the reality of her nearness. There’s nothing keeping us apart now. There are no obstacles beyond the ones I’ve created.

*I could take her here and now.*

“Around... six years ago? Do you remember?”

“I don’t—oh,” she groans, flinching against me, making me laugh.

“Yeah. Oh. We warned you, didn’t we? We knew you wouldn’t want to go camping with us once you got outside with the bugs, frogs, and snakes.”

“I thought you were lying about the snakes to keep me from going with you. I thought you didn’t want me there because I was a girl.”

“I mean, yeah, it had to do with you being a girl,” I admit, laughing again. This time, she joins me, and I can almost believe she’s come around. I don’t want to leave her restrained. Not when I know the pleasure of her touch. It’s been so long since I’ve felt it. “You were such a fucking pest.”

“I just wanted to be older and mature and for you to like me.”

“I did,” I remind her, brushing my lips against the top of her head. “Until we had to go home before we even managed to get the tent set up because you wouldn’t stop crying.”

She sniffs, scoffing. “It was dark out there.”

“No shit.” I kiss the top of her head again before running my lips over the shell of her ear. “Don’t worry. You’ll always have a lantern in here to make sure the darkness doesn’t scare you too badly.”

“I’ve grown up since then, you know, and I’m not scared of the dark anymore.” As if to prove it, she wiggles her hips, which only makes me twitch and strain worse than before.

I don’t know whether she’s doing it on purpose or not. I only know there’s no containing the erection threatening to

bust free of my jeans. My balls are heavy with need. I could come just from touching her.

“I’m well aware, angel.” Pulling back a little, I study her, unsure whether I can believe this is real.

She wouldn’t manipulate me, would she?

*How fucking deep have I let River drill his attitude into my head?*

This is my Scarlet. She wouldn’t use what’s between us against me.

At the moment, what’s between us is an erect dick that’s about to begin weeping in my shorts.

*It would be so easy to take her. She couldn’t stop me. No one would hear her screams.*

*I could ravage her, and nothing would stop me, not even her.*

I practically shake my head. *No*. She deserves better. *More*. I’m not going to fuck her like this. I want her to want it. To beg for it. The way she did the night of her sixteenth birthday. I crave it—undoing her, one kiss, one touch at a time. Driving her out of her mind with lust. I want her to feel the same way she makes me feel.

“You know...” She looks up at me through lowered lashes, her perfect white teeth sinking into her bottom lip. “If you want, I could take care of that. In fact, I’d be happy to do it.”

I gulp, my head spinning. Am I imagining this? Like a starving man hallucinating a buffet? “What do you mean?” My voice is thick, full of lust.

“I mean, you’ve taken care of me twice now, and I haven’t returned the favor.” Her cheeks flush, teeth sinking deeper into her lip. “Can I do it now?”

She has no idea what she’s playing with. I shouldn’t let her. I’m not myself, not when it comes to her, but the desire pooling in my gut, in my balls, is overtaking me. I want her mouth on me.

“I... I don't know.” I can't believe I just said that. But it's true, I don't know. I don't think it's a good idea. I could lose control, and control is the most important thing when it comes to my angel.

“Please...” Her voice drops low and hinges on the verge of a plea. “I want to make you feel good too, and I've never had the opportunity. Let me give you the pleasure you give me.”

Fuck, there is no saving me from this woman.

She is heaven-sent, and I'm never letting her go, even if I don't deserve her. Giving in to my desires and my need for her is the only thing that fills my mind at this moment.



# SCARLET

This is all wrong, isn't it? There's no way I should want him after what he's done. Usually, when a guy kidnaps a girl, the last thing she wants is to touch him.

Much less touch him the way I'm thinking of now.

It shouldn't come as a surprise. Since when has anything about Ren and me made sense?

I can't think straight. When he's this close and so big and warm and capable of overwhelming my entire awareness, I want nothing but *more*. More of him. His familiar, cherished smell—one whiff and I'm where I belong, who I'm meant to be. Everything that isn't essential in life falls away. It's addictive.

And that's only one of my senses.

His voice rings in my ears, and its deep rumble vibrates through me when he holds me close. The way he is now, so close it's like we're one body.

The feel of him, those rough hands taking a slow tour of my body. They hold magic in them. They have the ability to wake me up and make me crave. To leave me sizzling, burning, and trembling in their wake. It's enough to make my heart flutter, dancing on the edge between fear and yearning. This is dangerous, what he's doing to me. What he makes me want to do.

And it's more than begging him to touch and taste and all the things I've fantasized about so many times. More than



urging him to take what I've saved for him, only for him.

He makes me want to forget everything he's been accused of.

He even admitted it—and didn't seem the least bit regretful—yet I want to push it all aside like it never happened. With him, I'm questioning my loyalty and why it ever mattered in the first place.

Especially when he presses his erection against my stomach, a soft groan stirring in his throat. “You mean that?”

“I wouldn't say it if I didn't.” It's painful, straining against the leather binding my wrists. I grit my teeth against the bite of the belt but try again. The possibility of being able to touch him makes the pain worth it.

His gaze shifts, darting up to where I try to flex my hands in vain.

“Can you untie them?” I whisper, hopeful he will. “I need to touch you. You have no idea how much I want to touch you right now.”

“I think I do. I've felt that tremble, that same deep-rooted need for a very long time.”

Yes, I believe him when our eyes meet again.

When I recognize the naked need in them and understand, maybe for the first time ever, how he struggles to keep himself in check. It's not like it was ever a secret—you can't walk around with your dick sticking straight out and pretend there isn't at least attraction going on.

I never knew with this sort of certainty what a battle I put him through. It shows in the way his chiseled features pinch together like he's in pain. I hear it in the throb in his voice. I feel it in the pressure of his fingertips against my lower back, pulling me closer and trapping his erection between us.

He's a living, breathing pile of need.

*For me. It's all for me.*

I jerk my arms. “Please, Ren. Don't make me beg you.”

Though I will if he wants me to. Right now, I'd do anything for him because he's here, fully here, and there's no more of that weird awkwardness. The alien with no feelings is gone, and in his place is Ren. My Ren.

Dark brows draw together an instant before he shakes his head.

"No. No, I like you better this way." Light flickers in those familiar blue depths while a knowing grin tugs at his mouth. "I might lose control if I have your hands on me."

"Please?" I beg, nonetheless, because I know he likes it.

A visible shudder ripples through him, and something close to a growl escapes his throat, deepening the torment he's putting me through.

I need to touch, feel, hold.

"No," he says again, and when he lets me go, pulling back, my heart sinks. Oh no. I've pissed him off.

I'm too needy. He's going to punish me by going away. Immediately, my thoughts go to a bad place.

Instead, he rises to his knees, towering over me as he lifts a leg to straddle my upper half. This is so completely outside my realm of experience that I can barely process what's happening. I only know I could become addicted to the breathless anticipation of what's to come. Yet a tinge of fear zings through my gut.

*He wouldn't hurt me, right?*

*He couldn't.*

This is the first time I've witnessed him like this, and the thrill and anticipation overtake any fear I might be having. I remind myself that I have nothing to fear. Nothing beyond him leaving me like this, with my body burning for his touch, for relief from the ever-increasing tension that I'm pretty sure will kill me if it keeps going.

But I know I'd die if he stopped. There's no *pretty sure* about it.

How's he going to do this? What does he want from me? I can hardly form a question before another one comes in to push it out of the way.

"I'll do my best to take it easy on you," he vows, his voice raspy, thanks to the excitement making his breath come short and fast. I stare into his blue eyes as he continues. "But I can't promise I won't be rough. It's been a very long time since I did anything with anyone, and my desire for you is at the forefront of my mind."

I lick my lips, and he groans. "Whatever you need from me."

His grin lights up my heart while moistening my pussy even more. "I'll hold you to that."

His grin dissolves once he's lowered his zipper and dips a hand into his boxers. It's like my heart's going to explode if it doesn't slow down, but there's no slowing it. Every beat is heavy, the rush of blood filling my ears.

I watch with bated breath as he begins to pull himself free—the tension builds with every passing second, but he doesn't seem to be in any hurry. He has me where he wants me. He doesn't have to rush.

Who am I kidding? He's always had me where he wants me.

That hasn't changed.

"You want to give me pleasure?" All of a sudden, he's free, in front of me, the thick head of his cock sticking out from inside his tight grip. "That means wrapping your pretty pink lips around this." He strokes himself slowly, and I watch, mesmerized. "Are you sure you can handle this? You've never sucked a dick before, angel. It can take some practice, and it's not always enjoyable. Are you sure you want to do this?"

"How do you know I've never given a blow job before?" I tease with a grin.

Ren's hand is on me in a flash, and his fingers grip my chin firmly, forcing me to look nowhere else but at him. "Don't tease me, angel. You aren't in a position to tempt the

beast inside me. I've wanted your pretty mouth around my cock for a very long time."

A slow breath passes my lips while a nervous energy courses through me.

"I want you, and I'll do my best to do a good job," I promise in a shaky voice. "I trust you."

He lets out a long breath and releases his hold on me. "You have no idea what it means to hear you say that." Even as he speaks so gently, his hand moves up and down his hard length.

I've never seen a dick up close and personal like this. I've felt it. I've imagined what he would look like without pants. I knew he had to be big—it would only make sense with his large frame. But this is beyond what I imagined in all those lonely, late-night fantasies. He's thick, long, and veiny, and for a moment, I contemplate if this is going to work. If I'll be able to take him fully into my mouth.

I'm torn between fascination and anticipation as I watch a bead of clear liquid ooze from the swollen tip. He catches it with his thumb and rubs it over his head, groaning deeply, his eyes focused on me.

"Are you ready, angel?"

"Yes," I blurt out, straining, wishing I could take hold of him. I want him to teach me. I need to learn how to please him. He's already so good at pleasing me.

My breath catches when he reaches out, brushing hair away from my forehead, letting his hand slide over the top of my head until he cups the back. I can't understand how he can make me feel this way—breathless and nervous and helpless, and so deeply wanted. The heat already blazing deep in my core flares until I'm surprised it doesn't consume me.

"Open your mouth," he orders gruffly.

Nothing about him is gentle now. The look in his eyes has changed. There's still deep, burning desire, but there's something else. Possession, a need to own me.

He has an edge to him, something dangerous. He's no longer holding himself back. It's unbelievable how much that turns me on. How much more I want him. How wet I am, so wet and aching I could cry.

For once, it isn't my pleasure we're focused on.

It's his. He brings himself closer to my mouth, and his harsh breathing stops for an instant once the silky tip touches my lips. I part them to let him in, my entire body going still as I focus solely on the sensation of his velvet-covered steel invading my mouth one excruciating inch at a time.

*Am I doing this right? I guess he'd tell me if I wasn't.*

A deep groan comes from his full lips, and my pulse quickens. The sound is almost as good as the feeling of his fingers and tongue on me. The memory of it invades my mind. It leaves me squeezing my thighs together in silent desperation to ease the painful ache in my clit, as he slowly fills my mouth and, eventually, hits the back of my throat.

"Fuck..." He draws out the sound, and from this angle, I can just make out the features of his face. The way his eyes close and his nostrils flare, the way his lips part ever so slightly, and his head tips back.

Is it supposed to feel like this? So... powerful? Because that's the word that comes to mind as he pulls back, then pushes forward again. Slowly, so slowly.

*I have power over him.* I know it because he has the same power over me. When he went down on me and when he fingered me at the party, there weren't many conscious thoughts going through my head except for one.

I would've done anything for him.

Absolutely anything. He could've asked me to jump off a bridge, and I probably would've done it if it meant he wouldn't stop. My entire life hinged on whether or not he'd keep doing what he was doing.

With that in mind, I brace myself for the next sure thrust, for the next groan that tears its way from him when he reaches

the back of my throat and leaves me gagging and struggling not to give away the panic that's slowly creeping in.

I catch him watching me, our eyes meeting, and I'm sure he recognizes the way I'm fighting to go along with this. My heart swells in my chest. I'd do anything to make him feel as good as he's made me feel. To make him come the way he's so generously done for me.

*But.*

Instead of taking it easy or letting me up for air, his grip on my head tightens—my scalp tingles when he threads his fingers into my hair—and he drives himself deeper than before, so deep I gag. I should be better at this. I should be able to handle it. We were made for each other, yet his huge penis doesn't seem to fit well with my mouth. Tears of frustration and confusion sting my eyes, and as hard as I try, I can't blink them back.

They slip down my cheeks, a silent betrayal reminding me of how inexperienced I am. He only adds to the confusion when he grunts.

“Good girl.” He means it, I realize. The praise trailing off with a happy sigh while he enters me again, and again until he's fucking my face in a sure, steady rhythm I'm helpless to do anything against.

He's always teaching me something about myself.

How delicious danger can be.

How far I'm willing to go for something—someone—I want more than I've ever wanted anything. More than life itself.

Now, I'm learning how hot it is to feel used. Dirty, but in a good way. Like I'm nothing but a hole for his pleasure. It doesn't matter that I'm gagging, choking, practically fighting for my life, my lungs burning as I sip in as much air as possible every time he pulls back.

*I want this. I want him to use me like I'm nothing.*

So long as he praises me like he is. With his hand cupping the back of my head as gently as he'd hold a fragile piece of crystal, something treasured and cherished. It's all so mixed up, and I doubt I could make sense of it if I tried.

I don't want to. I don't need to.

"Take me deeper," he grunts between thrusts, banging against my nose every time he buries himself deep. "Suck it like my good girl. My Scarlet. My angel."

Yes, yes, this is what I've craved. What I've dreamed of. Being entirely in his hands, giving him what he needs. Making him happy—that's all I want at the end of the day. His happiness, which would mean mine.

A salty taste hits my tongue, one I savor. It must mean I'm doing something right, and it entices me to heighten the pressure from my lips while, with my tongue, I stroke the underside of his dick.

"Yeah... oh, yes... you're so fucking good..." He rocks his hips, the bedsprings creaking faster and faster. I'm caught between the panic flaring to life again as he gives me less and less time to breathe and the pulsing of my clit—my entire pussy—in time with him slamming deep. Almost brutally.

More. I can take more. I moan my approval, my encouragement, my need, and he growls before taking my head in both hands.

"My sweet, dirty angel," he pants with approval dripping from his voice. "Tied up like this. You like it, don't you? You like me using you. Owing your mouth." I moan in agreement. Nothing could be truer.

"You're hungry for more, aren't you? My cock? My cum? You want me to fill that pretty mouth with my cum, angel?"

I moan louder, eager, as greedy as he says. I want to make him come. I need to. Almost as much as I need his hands, mouth, and tongue on me. Knowing I can do this to him is a rush unlike any I've ever known. My lungs burn, and tears slip from my eyes as he gags me with his entire length. It's almost more than I can take.

He hasn't come yet, and I already can't wait to make him do it again and again in every way possible. I want to be his everything, in all ways, even if I'm afraid he's going to smother me or break my nose or both in his frenzy, a frenzy I know all too well. He's brought me to this point before.

And he held on for my sake, so I can do the same for him.

A feeling of pride overtakes me, almost as intense as the arousal threatening to tear my sanity to pieces.

*Go on, take what you need. Come for me like I've come for you.*

Like he can hear me, he dissolves in a flurry of furious thrusts, losing his grip a little more with every ragged breath. He tugs my hair hard, painfully, and I wince caught between pleasure and pain.

“Yeah... yes, like that... it's coming... get ready, angel... fuck!”

He slams himself deep one last time before going still. All at once, he fills my mouth with his salty fluid, more and more with every deep grunt until I can't hold it all, and it begins leaking out from the corners of my mouth, dribbling down my chin. I'm lost, caught in limbo, hanging between deep pride, relief that it's over, and a deep, desperate craving for more. It can't be over yet. Not when I'm so hot and wet and aching, I could weep. I hope he doesn't make me beg.

*I hope he does.*

I don't know what's what anymore. I don't know who I am or what any of this means. Taking pleasure in being used? Now that he's slowly withdrawing from my mouth, and I'm swallowing most of what he left behind, it doesn't seem so normal and even necessary to have my face fucked by someone who basically kidnapped me. Until he smiles down at me—hazy, happy, spent.

And I swear I'm glowing bright enough to light up the room.

“Good girl.” He strokes the back of my head, still holding it in his gentle, protective grip. “I knew you'd do well when



the time came. You were made for me. That sweet mouth took my cock so perfectly.”

Before I can think of anything to say—this is still so new, I don’t want to say anything stupid or awkward—he’s off the bed, grinning, tucking himself into his pants again.

I bite my lip, confused and unsure of what happens next. His cum is beginning to dry on my chin, and I’m starting to wonder if he plans on leaving me this way. Is this all a part of the game? Another way of controlling me? I’m not sure how it makes me feel.

I’m about to call out to him, to voice my questions, when he returns with a cloth in hand. “I knew it would be like an explosion when I finally had your lips wrapped around me,” he muses in a soft voice while he cleans my face. “But I didn’t expect there to be so much.”

He lowers the cloth, shining with pride that sends a lightning bolt of fresh sensation straight to my clit. “You did so well, angel.”

“Thank you. I wanted to be good for you. I didn’t want to disappoint you.” I beam.

“Oh, angel.” My heart soars when he runs the backs of his fingers over my cheek. “You could never. Not if you tried your hardest. I nearly came simply from the sensation of your lips being wrapped around me.”

This is the Ren I know. The Ren I missed with every beat of my broken heart. I’m home, finally, because he’s here with me.

I feel so full and happy that I can’t put it into words.

Something else keeps me from forming a sentence, too. Something that hasn’t eased in the moments since Ren came.

No. In fact, it’s worse than ever.

I lift my hips, whimpering pitifully. “Is there such a thing as blue balls for women?” I finally mutter in misery. “Because I think I have it. Please, help me. Make it go away.”

His brows lift in time with the amusement twisting his lips in a smirk. “You want a little relief? Did tasting my cock get you all worked up?”

“Yes.” Because what’s the use of pride at a time like this? I’m dying, I’d swear it, dying from arousal that’s crossed the line into pain. “Please, god, it hurts. Please touch me. Make me come.”

Before he can respond, I blurt out, “Fuck me, Ren.”

I don’t know where it came from. I didn’t mean to say it. Like deeper wisdom forced it out of me. Because that’s what I really want, deep down inside. I want to feel him inside me, locked with me. I want to feel like I’m his, body and soul. I need it. I’ll die without it.

The same dark need I saw earlier flashes across his face again, and for a heartbeat, I’m sure he’s going to give me what I need. I don’t even care that my hands have gone numb, and my shoulders are going to hurt like hell by the time I can move my arms again. He’s finally going to fuck me, to claim me.

*Thank god.* There’s no silencing the groan of misery that comes from deep inside me when he shakes his head.

“No, angel. Not yet. I won’t fuck you like this.”

“But it hurts,” I whine in a voice I hardly recognize. Can’t he see what he’s doing to me? Of course he can, and he likes it.

And, dammit, a part of me likes it, too. Even if the rest of me is not a fan.

“Don’t worry.” His eyes twinkle as he reaches into his back pocket. “I didn’t forget about you. I knew giving me pleasure would turn you on. You’re a bad girl, after all, angel.”

My eyes widen at the sight of a silver device. Small, shaped like an elongated egg, with a slim cord and control knob attached to one end. I’ve seen them before, but I’ve never used one.

“Is that a vibrator?” I ask with my heart in my throat.

“It is, and it’ll keep you feeling good while I go and cool off. If I don’t, I won’t be able to stop myself from fucking you now.”

Before I can beg him again to do just that, he yanks the sweatpants down to my knees and spreads my thighs. The cool air against my hot skin leaves me arching my back, almost sobbing in pleasure so intense it’s closer to pain. It wouldn’t take long to make me come now.

Why won’t he give me what I need?

I can’t see the vibrator anymore, but I feel the pressure as he inserts it into my sopping pussy. It slides in easily, thanks to how wet I am.

It feels foreign and slightly uncomfortable, but my arousal makes up for it.

“Fuck,” he breathes, staring down at me. “So wet. I can smell it from here.” The hunger in his voice is promising, but he doesn’t so much as lower his head for a lick. Instead, he picks up the control knob and twists it.

“Oh. My. God.” My head falls back, eyes closed, when a light vibration begins rumbling between my thighs, inside me. It feels so incredibly good and painfully miserable at the same time.

“PLEASE,” I whine. “It’s good, so good, but not enough to push me over the edge.”

Ren simply smiles knowingly before pulling the vibrator out and holding it to my clit. The orgasm hits me so fast and unexpectedly that, for a moment, I’m so overwhelmed by it that I worry I might pass out. I’m still coming down from my release when I feel the vibrator back in my pussy.

“This will keep you feeling good for now, and the next orgasm is going to be ten times stronger than this.”

Did he just say ten times? I blink my eyes open, the veil of pleasure still heavily draped over them. The orgasm I just had isn’t doing much to quench the thirst for more.

Even when I squeeze my legs tight, it's not enough sensation to do the trick. It's only enough to keep me close to the edge, to make me writhe and moan with mindless lust.

“You stay put, angel.” His lips ghost against my clammy forehead, his voice barely audible under my pitiful cries begging for relief. “And remember, only I can make this stop. I'm in control. Isn't that right?”

Only one word comes to mind, the only word I know right now. “Yes!” I nearly shriek—a sound that ends on a sob when I hear him chuckling as he exits the room, leaving me to my helpless misery.



## REN

“*R*en... Ren, please...”

I close my eyes, my back to the wall outside the doorway. On the one hand, the sound of her pitiful pleas is music to my ears. How long have I been starved for the sound of her voice, much less the sound of it when it's raised in helpless abandon?

On the other hand, I don't dare look at her. Those moans are enough to start me twitching and lengthening mere minutes after I came. Already, I'm prepared for more action.

That's the effect she has on me. That's the power of my need for her. My hands ache for the feel of her under them, and my dick longs to test the tight heat of her dripping pussy. Just the thought of it leaves me shuddering, now using the wall to keep myself upright.

“Oh my god!” She's stuck on the edge, straining for that extra bit of sensation that will push her over and into relief.

*Do it. Give that to her.*

Not while I'm like this, with my hunger as strong as ever. I would only end up hurting her. I haven't left her—both of us—waiting this long for it to turn out that way.

Besides, it would mean giving her what she wants. Setting the precedent that all she has to do is beg long enough, and everything she desires is hers. I'm not doing that. She's not the one who calls the shots.

Which means I'm stuck with my body on fire, my every impulse and heartbeat devoted to her. Squeezing my eyes closed as tightly as I can, I will away the tempting mental images stirred to life by her constant, guttural moans.

*This is not going to work.*

There's only one solution that's ever come close to doing the trick. All the long, lonely nights where even jerking off to the memory of her wasn't enough. When the idea of breaking into her apartment and taking her all at once seemed like a logical solution to my constant state of arousal.

Closing the bathroom door at least muffles the worst sounds still coming from the bedroom. Turning on the shower helps, too. I can almost pretend she isn't mere feet from me, that she didn't beg me to fuck her minutes ago. She has always been my greatest weakness, but never more so than now when she's here, at my mercy, with nothing and no one standing in my way.

I strip down quickly, in a hurry to get this over with. I'm well acquainted with the unpleasant sting of what feels like countless needles drilling into my skin—I would only do this for her. Stepping into the shower, I have to grit my teeth, letting out a growl of pure agony at the first touch of icy water against my overheated flesh. It leaves my heart racing, my entire body reacting to the sudden shock. Everything in me tells me to jump out of the tub, but I force myself to stay where I am, controlling my breathing, focusing on getting through it until the sting lessens, and I begin to adjust to the sensation.

It works like a charm. I've never been less interested in the thought of pussy than I am right now. But that isn't going to last, and I can't stay in the shower forever. I'm going to want her again and again.

She has no idea of the control she has over me. Just like she has no understanding of what I could be sacrificing. Of course, I would never go along with River's decision against bringing her here. That was a no-brainer.

But it does mean causing a rift that's been steadily growing with every mention of her.

She has the power to make me forget what used to be so clear. How the bastards who destroyed our lives deserve to suffer... endlessly.

And if she can make me forget that, however briefly, what hope do I have of staying strong in the face of lust?

*No. I will not hurt her.*

The thought of ever causing her pain strengthens me and leaves me washing up quickly and turning off the shower. When I reframe this situation that way, looking at it through the eyes of a man who doesn't want to hurt the woman he loves, it's all clear again. I'm not an animal, even if she makes me feel like one. I can control my desires.

Or so I tell myself a split second before she moans my name. Drawing it out, promising fulfillment beyond my wildest dreams.

The sound leaves me closing my eyes again, touching my forehead to the wood of the bathroom door. *It would hurt her. You can't hurt her.*

If I could only get that through her head.

My jaw is clenched almost as tightly as my fists as I approach the room in which Scarlet is losing her mind, thanks to what that powerful little bullet is doing to her. She's sweating in earnest now, hair stuck to her forehead and along her temple, her body rolling from side to side while she rubs her thighs together like a demented cricket.

When her gaze lands on me, standing in the doorway with nothing but a towel around my waist, her guttural cry threatens to break the very thin thread of resolve I'm still clutching with all my might.

"Please, make it stop," she begs, the bed creaking in time with her frenzied movements.

Fuck. How am I supposed to refuse her, deny her the pleasure she so badly seeks.



“How would you like me to do it?”

“Touch me. Please, let me come,” she sobs, tears cutting tracks down her cheeks.

I am her god at this moment. Only I can give her what she needs most.

It’s that thought—and the way she sobs, how broken she sounds—that has me taking pity on her. Without a word, I cross the space between us and take the cord to the vibrator in my hand. Giving it a firm tug, I pull it free and watch as her arousal leaks out onto the sheets.

*Fuck me.* I want to lick the sheets where she lies, devour her from the inside out until she is pleading with me to stop. There’s just one thing in my way. My ironclad willpower to make things good for her and be the man she needs.

She gasps, hips lifting, before another broken cry fills the room. “I’m so close. Oh my god, please...Ren.”

I can’t tease her anymore. Not when I understand all too well the agony she’s going through. “Just relax, angel,” I whisper before touching the vibrator to the tip of her engorged clit.

Her shriek leaves me trembling. “Oh! Oh, yes! More!” Her thighs are spread wide open—I should get this over with quickly, or I might forget my principles—with her shining, inviting pussy just begging to be filled.

Because I can’t shove my cock into her, I press the bullet against her flesh, holding it in place, watching intently as a look of pure, radiant relief washes over her, transforming agony into ecstasy. “Yes! Yes, oh god! I’m coming!”

Then anything else she wanted to say is lost as she rides out wave after wave of tremors, her thighs clamping shut, squeezing my forearm between them. I watch as the flush takes hold, making her skin glow, her juices drenching my fingers.

For her sake and for mine, I pull the bullet away as soon as she relaxes, then turn it off. She’s panting like an athlete at the

end of a marathon, which in a way, I suppose she is. I've really put her through it tonight.

And she took it. She took it all. Being proud of her now doesn't feel right, but I am just the same.

By the time her breathing takes on a more regular rhythm, I'm dressed again and untying her wrists. Her arms fall to the mattress, and instantly, I regret the welts left by the belt.

"Does it hurt?" I whisper, rubbing them as gently as I can.

"No," she assures me, her voice cracking after all that screaming.

"Are you hungry? Thirsty?"

She nods, her eyes closing again, limp with exhaustion. My sweet, exhausted angel wasted from what the man holding her heart and body hostage put her through.

"You just rest." This is a pleasure being able to take care of her. I've been alone for so long; the prospect of fixing a sandwich for someone else is a joy. Especially when that someone else is her.

It's not anything gourmet, but I have the feeling that after what she's been through, a peanut butter and jelly sandwich will taste just as good as the lavish meals her family puts together during holiday parties.

Strange how even the briefest thought of them sets my teeth on edge. Those are happy memories, or they should be. And they were back when I could think of Xander without resentment flaring to life.

I make sure to include a glass of water before taking the simple meal to the bedroom. She's still limp, recovering.

"Too intense?" I ask as I take a seat on the bed.

She chuckles as she opens her eyes. "Just a little. I literally thought I was dying."

"I wouldn't let that happen." I offer her half of the sandwich, guiding it to her lips, glad when she takes a big bite. Because it seems she's too worn out to do it herself, I lift her

head with one hand and hold the water to her lips with the other. She drinks deep, then sighs happily once I remove the glass.

With her appetite as it is, it takes no time before she's polishing off the last bite. I'm content to sit in silence rather than fill it with small talk. We don't need to do that. We're not strangers. There doesn't need to be any awkwardness between us. Having her here is enough.

The knowing look in her eyes when they meet mine confirms this. There's a deeper sort of understanding there now. A familiarity that didn't exist before. There I go, taking another one of her firsts when it isn't even her birthday.

"What do you need?" I ask once she's drained the glass and looking more like herself.

"I think I could use a shower..." She looks down at herself and frowns. "If that's okay."

I have to ignore the telltale twitch in my shorts while I nod in agreement. "Sure. I haven't shown you the rest of the cabin, either. Not that there's much to show."

Now I wish I had cleaned the place up somewhat before taking her, but I wasn't exactly thinking clearly, either. Too busy obsessing, watching her from afar, out of my mind with want. I would come back here to change clothes or shower, but that was about it. Everything that did not involve having my eyes on her became secondary.

Still, she gives no reaction as her gaze moves over the clutter in what passes for a living room. The kitchen is tidier, at least, with a small fridge and wood-burning stove.

Those two rooms comprise the entirety of the cabin aside from the bathroom, which is where I lead her. "This is cozy," she says, and she sounds sincere when she says it. Her eyes widen at the sight of the claw-foot tub in the rustic bathroom. "Oh, that's beautiful. This is really charming."

"I'm glad you like it," I murmur, fighting back a grin I know would come off as cheesy, like a little boy glowing under the praise of a teacher.

“Wait,” she blurts out, her cheeks flushing when I turn back after starting up the shower and explaining how tricky the taps can be, how they take a delicate hand. “Where are you going?”

“I wanted to grab you some more clothes, maybe fix myself something to eat.”

Her eyes narrow slightly, teeth sinking into her lip. This can only mean one thing, and desire and dread immediately begin fighting it out.

“Why don’t you join me instead? The rest of that can wait.” She slowly strips down, staring at me all the while. Almost daring me to look away.

Her body. Fuck me, every inch of skin, every curve seems like it was made for me. To be touched and held, stroked, and grabbed.

Eaten. Fucked.

*It seems to me she’s forgetting who’s in charge around here.* Yes, I need to focus on that because it’s the only way I’ll be able to resist.

“I already took a shower,” I inform her with a tiny shrug even as fire begins raging in me all over again.

“There are other reasons to get in the shower besides washing up.” As she speaks, she steps into the tub, leaving the curtain open. I can’t tear my eyes away from the sight of her, the water hitting her hair. It runs over her chest, drips from the pink nipples of her perky tits, and it’s all I can do to keep from growling like the animal she turns me into.

But I can’t stop watching. Nothing in the world could pull me away now.

I settle for closing the lid on the toilet and taking a seat, glued to every move she makes. “Look at my dirty little angel. Acting so seductive.”

Almost as an afterthought, she soaps up her hands before running them over her throat, her shoulders, and arms. It’s her chest I’m focused on, and soon she rewards my intense stare

by taking her tits in her hands and squeezing, running her thumbs around the nipples, and sighing.

This isn't put on for my sake. I know it. I feel it.

*And oh, what I want to do to her.* What I want to make her feel. What she went through in the bedroom will be nothing compared to what I have in mind.

“Are you sure you don't want to come in here with me?” As if to punctuate the question, she turns her back to me, bending slightly at the waist before running her soapy hand through her ass crack. Fuck, I could watch this all day. She is living, breathing porn, and she's all mine. No one else will ever look at her this way. She will never display her body for anyone but me, the man it belongs to. The man she belongs to.

If I'm not careful, that cold shower will have been for nothing.

“I'll get your clothes,” I mutter before practically fleeing the room. By the time I return with fresh sweats, she's finishing up, rinsing quickly now that there's no reason to linger.

“How was the shower?” I ask, watching her dry off.

She's endlessly fascinating. Even the most mundane activities take on new meaning. I'm desperate to be a part of her life, to weave every part of her with every part of me.

“Good, but I feel like I got hit by a truck,” she admits with a soft giggle. “But in a good way, if you can imagine being hit by a truck and smiling about it.”

*Adorable. Perfect. Mine.*

“Come sit with me. I'm starving.” Almost as much as I'm starving for her. Rather than send her back to bed, I gesture to the table separating the living room and kitchen.

Instead of settling for one sandwich, I make two for myself, spreading the peanut butter and jelly thick enough that they threaten to drip out. I haven't eaten since... before I took her.

*How did I forget to eat?*

She sits on one of the two wooden chairs at the small, round table, drawing her feet up onto the seat with her. Like this, she looks small, fragile, and so helpless. Every protective instinct in me rears up when I see her that way, looking so young, her blond hair—darker now due to its wetness—hanging against both sides of her face.

Immediately, a wave of self-consciousness swallows me. This cabin is nothing like she's used to. It's outdated, the chairs don't match, and the table is scratched and beaten to shit. It's a very dull comparison to all she had back home, and I hate it. I hate that I'm comparing myself to those fuckers. Yet I can't stop myself.

Disdain burns my lips. "I'm sure this doesn't look like much compared to the life you're used to living."

Her gaze goes from moving around, studying, observing, to locking onto mine. The blue of her eyes is brighter now.

"What makes you say that?"

"I see you looking around, and I know you probably have a lot of questions. I also know it's not much, but it won't always be this way."

"I'm not complaining."

"No, but you deserve more than this. We both know it. I only want to be sure you understand where I'm coming from. I'm not asking you to *rough it* for the rest of your life."

I pick up half of my sandwich and take a huge bite, which only inspires another bite. Sometimes I don't realize how hungry I am until I start eating.

While I chew, she asks, "How did you find this place? Does it belong to you?"

Instantly, my chest goes tight, and the sweet jelly now tastes like nothing. I have to force myself through the process of chewing and swallowing before leaving the rest of it on my plate. "Why do you ask?"

Her head snaps back slightly, her delicate features pinching as she winces. "I was only curious. Isn't it a natural question

to ask? I'm interested."

"Not everything is for you to know right now."

"Sorry." Her voice sounds tiny, tinged with fear, and instantly, I hate myself. There's still so much she doesn't know, so much I need to keep from her, but those secrets form a wall between us.

A wall she knocks against without knowing it.

"Why did you do it? I'm sorry," she's quick to add, flustered, her face flushing. "I have to know. Why live so far away from everybody who loves you? Why run away and seclude yourself?"

Every word takes effort. Every last one. "You and I both know there was no life for me at Corium or with your family after what I did."

Anguish contorts her face. She looks visibly pained by my statement, and I wish it wasn't true, but it is.

"That's just it. Why did you do it? All this time, I didn't want to believe it—"

My jaw aches, and a pain begins to form at the back of my head. "I don't want to talk about this."

"Really? Because I do. How am I supposed to live here in this cabin with you when there's so much you won't tell me? Why didn't you at least send me a message so I would know you were alive? I have been so scared for you all this time. Worried you might be dead. Don't you know there's nothing you could do that I wouldn't forgive?"

Just as my heart swells, my teeth grind in resentment. This is what she does to me. This is how she tugs at me until I'm afraid I'll split in half. How can I maintain my loyalty to River and our cause while maintaining my loyalty to her, to my heart, and to every dream she's ever inspired?

"I had business to take care of." I settle for responding, pushing my chair back from the table, and taking the unfinished half of my meal to the counter. It's easier when I'm

not looking at her to keep the wall between us, so I keep my back to her, staring at the wall over the sink.

“Business?” she asks, full of doubt. “What kind of business?”

I’m tired of walls. Tired of lies. Tired of holding myself back from the one sweet, good, perfect thing in my life.

That’s why, rather than whirling on her and demanding she shut her fucking mouth, I ask, “Do you remember hearing the name Safe Haven?”

It’s the first time I’ve muttered those two words to anyone but River in as long as I can remember. Since the old days, I suppose, immediately after everything that happened.

Speaking them aloud opens a door I hoped she would never need to step through. I didn’t want to expose her to this. The ugliness, the darkness. She deserves so much better than to be dragged into my fucked-up past.

On the other hand, if we’re ever going to have a future, she needs to know. I can’t hide it from her, especially not when River is hell-bent on bringing this war to a bloody conclusion. There won’t be any secret keeping with blood on my hands. It’s better to explain things now.

It will save time later. She’ll have the opportunity to think things over and see how right this is because she has no other option. She either follows me in the fight, or I carry her screaming into it. I’d rather do the first, but one way or another, there is no escaping our future.

I turn in time to watch her thick lashes flutter at the mention of the name, worry lines appearing over the bridge of her nose the way they always do when she concentrates.

“I feel like I’ve heard the name before, yeah.”

“But do you remember hearing about what went down there?”

The lines get deeper, her brows bunching together. “I don’t think so. I’m pretty sure I only heard about it briefly. You



know how it is. Women don't really have a say in the affairs of the family."

"Sure, I can see why you wouldn't have heard much. Knowing your father, he would have wanted to protect you from it all."

"So what is it? What is Safe Haven?"

"*Was*," I correct. "It doesn't exist anymore. It's where Luna and I spent the earliest years of our lives. It's where we were found before we met Sophie and Roman."

Her soft snort of disbelief speaks volumes. We're in the same house, in the same room, yet we may as well be worlds apart. "Since when do you call them by their first names? Whatever happened to Mom and Dad?"

"Of course, they're still my parents," I'm quick to confirm. "But for the purposes of filling you in on the past, they're Roman and Sophie. They're my current life."

"Okay..." She bites her lip, features still pinched, but lets me continue.

"Safe Haven was my past life. It's the place where my birth parents died."

She winces, her eyes roaming over my face, searching for signs of pain. I know that expression. I've seen it too many times to mistake it for anything but pity and sadness.

"Are you sure you want to talk about this?" she whispers.

Perversely, it's the concern in her question that makes me lash out before quickly reeling myself in. "Yes, dammit. I wouldn't have brought it up if I didn't. I'm trying to give you the answers you say you want."

"I'm sorry." She's quick to back off, down to the way her shoulders rise, nearly covering her ears. If she had a shell, she would have retreated into it. *Deep breaths*, I say inside my head, trying to stay on track. My anger isn't toward her. She's done nothing wrong.

"Look, I'm sorry." I heave out a breath and run a hand through my damp hair. "Safe Haven was a terrible place, and

the people who ran it...there are no words to describe them.”

She rubs her arms briskly as if to ward off a sudden chill.  
“What kind of place was it?”

There’s only one word for it. My lip curls with rage, remembering all the horrible, gruesome things they did under the guise of goodness.

“A cult. I was raised in a cult, angel, along with Luna... and my older brother.”

Her blue eyes bulge, and her shocked gasp fills the cabin.  
“Your—”

“Your father told us Safe Haven was dismantled,” I continued, speaking over her, my voice becoming twisted and thorny. Her beautiful eyes filled with horror. *She needs to know this. It’s the most important part of the story.* I smile; the justification for revenge beams along every cell in my body. “But my brother found me, and together, we’ve learned that was a lie. So now, it’s up to us to set things right.”



# SCARLET

This is almost as bad as being kidnapped.

Almost as bad as hearing what he did to Aspen and Q.

This is an atomic bomb compared to mere fireworks. It's left me trembling, hugging my knees to my chest while I try in vain to wrap my head around it.

An older brother? Immediately, I go back through the years, searching my memory for a single reference to a brother. Not once has Luna mentioned one, and I know Ren hasn't. That's the sort of thing a person would remember.

Like the fact that he grew up in a cult. So that's what Safe Haven is? I remember hearing Dad and Uncle Roman talking about it when I was a little kid, but it was the kind of thing where they'd instantly go silent as soon as I entered the room. And let's face it. It's not like I was paying strict attention. I was too young to care.

Ren hasn't said a word yet. He's too busy observing me like I'm a zoo exhibit. If I didn't know better, I'd accuse him of joking.

Nobody jokes about something like this. It would be too sick.

*As sick as injecting you with something to knock you out?*

"I've shocked you," he murmurs. There's no emotion behind it. Why should there be? He's only speaking facts.

“Yes. You did. I had no idea you had an older brother.”

“Yes, his name is River. Now you understand why I did what I did.”

*Record scratch.* “No, I don’t. I want to—you have no idea how much I want to.”

I lean in, reaching across the table for him. He’s still standing in front of the sink, though, and my gesture does nothing to bring him closer. “Ren. I’m here. I want so much to understand. I’m on your side.”

When all he does is stare blankly. *What was he expecting?* I ask, “What else can you tell me? What do you mean when you say my dad lied? What did he lie about?”

His jaw tightens as he lowers his brow, arms slowly folding in front of him. “He said the cult was destroyed, disbanded, whatever. But that’s obviously not true. He didn’t have what it took to stop them for good, and then he lied about it.”

“So you hurt Aspen and Q because my dad lied?”

“No. I didn’t want to hurt her. It wasn’t me at all. It was...” He sighs. “It was River.”

“River? How the hell did he get into Corium without anyone noticing?”

“Honestly, I don’t know. He doesn’t tell me every little detail of his life.” My eyebrows draw together. There is something odd about the way he talks about River. Something I can’t quite put my finger on yet.

“But you knew about it?”

“Not before it happened. But I knew right after.”

“Why?” Even though his body language screams at me to back off, I can’t shut down the stream of questions bubbling up in my mind.

“Because they were getting too close.”

“Too close to what?”

Ren presses his lips into a thin line. I know he doesn't want to talk about this, but I can't let it go. "Let's start at the beginning. Who is this brother of yours? Does anybody else know about him?"

"We're not talking about him right now."

"I'm just curious." No, it's more than that. We were supposed to have something real, something true, something meant to last. Yet he couldn't tell me he has a brother? I didn't rank high enough to hear about him? It's the bitterness of feeling like I didn't matter enough that makes me ask, "Where is he? Does he live nearby?"

He turns slowly away from me, opening the cabinet under the sink. "We are not talking about this. Not until I say it's time."

"So what do we get to talk about? I want to help you."

"Stop asking questions then," he mutters as he goes through whatever is under there. As if that's important at a time like this. What, is he going to scour the sink while we talk about the cult he grew up in that I've never heard anything about until now? Yet another thing he couldn't share with me.

Does this make me selfish? Maybe a little.

But I'm only human.

And there I was, thinking he was back in my life. Willing—eager—to dismiss the fact he kidnapped me, all because it means we at least get to be together. And being together is all I've cared about for so long.

I've been willing to forget that. To ignore what he did to my family.

And for what? To find out there's so much he chose to hide?

Even now, when he's the one who brought it up, there's still so much I'm not good enough to hear about?

"I only want to be a part of your life," I whisper, trembling, staring at the back of his head. What is he thinking? "Why won't you let me in? Why are you pushing me away?"

All at once, he straightens up, swinging around to face me.  
“Enough!”

Sirens begin wailing in my head.

*I went too far.*

But the thing about going too far is you never know you’ve done it until it’s too late, and there’s no going back.

There’s no going back now; that much is for sure.

Not when he looks like he wants to kill me.

The rage written all over his face freezes me to my core. Gone is the warmth and tenderness from earlier. All that’s left is a hard, blank look in his eyes. There isn’t even a scrap of desire in them. There’s only resentment. Even hatred.

“Ren?” I whisper. No, it’s more of a burst of air coming out of me all at once and shaping itself into his name.

“I fucking warned you, didn’t I?” He lunges for the table, and I let out a high-pitched shriek when his palms slam against it. “Didn’t I?”

“Yes.” I half sob, gripped by terror that only tightens its hold when he grabs the edge of the table and flips it to the side, sending it flying against the refrigerator. I jump, screaming, covering my ears against the crash.

“You push, and you push, and then you have the nerve to sit there and act afraid.” Before I can react, he’s on me, his hands wrapped around my arms, hauling me out of the chair. “Like none of it is your fucking fault. Poor Scarlet, the victim.”

I can barely hear him over the rapid beating of my heart. This is all wrong. This is not the Ren I know. “Why are you doing this?”

“Oh, right.” He squeezes my arms until tears spring to my eyes. “Now you’ll cry about it when you’re the one who started this with your stupid fucking questions.”

“You’re hurting me,” I whimper, which only makes him squeeze harder. Not the reaction I wanted. Since when does he

hurt me worse instead of stopping in his tracks?

“You think that’s worth crying about?” He bares his teeth in a snarl that leaves me shrinking back in fear before he drags me across the living room and back into the bedroom.

*Oh my god. What’s he going to do to me?* Usually, the idea of Ren dragging me to bed and throwing me onto it would get my heart racing for a different reason. I’ve lost track of the number of times I’ve imagined this very thing happening.

Except the situation was different in my fantasies.

In my fantasies, I wasn’t scared out of my mind.

He wasn’t staring down at me like he wished he’d never set eyes on me.

Like he wanted me dead.

“Why are you doing this?” My words fall on deaf ears, obviously, since he’s not paying a bit of attention while using what he fished out from under the sink: a length of rope, rough and thick, which he wraps around my wrists and cinches tight.

“Won’t listen...I fucking told him so,” he grunts, yanking my arms up by my bound wrists, tying the end of the rope to the bed frame.

What the hell does he mean by I told him so? Is he talking about River?

“What else am I supposed to do?” he growls.

It’s just like before, when I first got here, only worse. I was scared then, but he wasn’t acting this way. Enraged, full of hate.

“Well?” he demands, turning the full heat of his glare on me. “Tell me. What am I supposed to do with you?”

“I-I don’t know.”

A dismayed moan stirs in my throat when he takes hold of my jaw and digs his fingers in. “You don’t know? What the fuck do you know? Huh? What are you good for?”



He presses my cheeks until my lips pucker, so it's not like I can say anything, even if I had the first idea of what he wants from me. I shouldn't have pushed him like I did. I should've let it go and waited until he was ready to talk.

"Nothing." He shoves my head away before standing up straight, his chest heaving, his cold eyes staring holes into me. I can't hide from those eyes. Even when I close my own, turning my head away and bracing myself for whatever's coming next, I can still see him. He's burned into my memory, half of his face cast in shadow, his eyes so empty.

He would never hurt me.

*He sure looks like he wants to right now.*

Is he capable of controlling himself?

*Why couldn't I keep my mouth shut?*

It isn't his heavy breathing I hear next or any ugly words. I hold my breath, waiting. *Please, don't break your promise.*

He doesn't.

I exhale slowly, as silently as possible, when his footsteps ring out. Once he's out of the room, I shudder in relief before my muscles begin to relax.

Not my arms or wrists, sadly. I thought the belt was uncomfortable? The rope is much worse, biting into my skin. Every slight twitch is punishment, chafing until I suck in a pained gasp.

That's nothing compared to the agony in my head and heart. Why did he do this? Why go this far?

Because I wasn't about to shut up, for one thing. Obviously, talking about what happened to him when he was a kid is a huge deal. He's never breathed a word of it to me before now, not because he didn't care, but because it hurts too much.

And all I could do was keep picking at him, asking questions, demanding. The lantern glows beside me, the flame dancing and jumping enough to make shadows dance on the walls. Shadows full of foreboding. Fear.

A sob begins to build in my chest. I pushed him to this. No, leaving me this way isn't right. But if he's never told anybody about his experience, and I was the first person he trusted, how else was he supposed to react?

A cult. *What kind*, I wonder? I've seen too many investigative shows and listened to too many podcasts because a range of ugly images instantly pops into my head. How did I not hear more about this? I wish I had been old enough to understand.

Yet another secret Dad and Uncle Roman kept. I sometimes wonder how they sleep at night with so much weight on their shoulders.

So Ren and Luna came from a cult. Nobody would ever guess it if they met Luna now. She's nothing but sunshine.

Until now, I wouldn't have believed it of Ren, either. He always seemed so normal. He had his darkness, sure, like Q. Like me, even.

But nothing about this is normal. This is not a normal reaction.

I'm in no position to help him through his memories; that much is for sure. I'm no trained therapist, and this is too personal for me. I can't be quietly encouraging when it feels like everything is on the line. His happiness, his peace, our future together.

Obviously, I need to take it easy from now on. No more pushing for answers. I can't put myself through this again, but that's nothing compared to the pain I've put him through. I won't push for what he's not willing to give. It's enough to be here, with him, just the two of us. Everything was going so well before we started talking.

Now that my heart doesn't pound like a bass drum anymore, I hear him out there. It sounds like he's cleaning up. It sounds like he set the table on its legs again, and soon, I hear the canisters that fell off the top of the fridge getting picked up and set down somewhere. Moments later, the sound of a

broom getting dragged across the floor brings up the image of him sweeping.

That's better than grabbing a knife from the drawer and slicing me to pieces, I guess.

Though I can't imagine him ever doing something like that. My heart won't let me entertain the idea, even lying here with my hands going numb. Ren wouldn't hurt me. He loves me. Look at all the trouble he took to bring me here.

I don't even know what I'm thinking anymore.

I only know it hurts like hell when I try to get myself free, rubbing my wrists together, twisting them as far as I can. The harder I fight, the tighter and deeper the rope digs in. I'll break the skin if I'm not careful.

What am I going to do now? How do I get out of this? How do I get through to him—not only for myself but for his sake too? Even more for his sake, come to think of it. I need to bring him back from the dark place I sent him to. I'm supposed to make his life better, right?

*I'm not doing a great job of it so far.*

The noise outside the bedroom eventually fades to silence. Shit. What's going to happen now? Only when the bedframe starts trembling do I realize I'm shaking.

What's he going to do?

How can I convince him to stop?

His feet fall heavy on the floor, the sound getting louder the closer he comes. I press my lips together, turning a whimper into a tight squeak. My chin quivers before tears begin rolling down my cheeks, soaking into my already damp hair.

This is Ren. *Why am I crying like this over Ren?*

Because I have no idea what he's capable of. I can't believe I'm having these thoughts about him.

I flinch, creeping closer to the wall when he enters the room. His cold expression and the lack of light behind his eyes

make my body freeze stiff; my heart wedged in my throat. When he reaches for me, I close my eyes tight, bracing for what comes next.

*Please, don't hurt me. Remember, you love me.*

Only once he loosens the knot holding me in place am I able to exhale, though his brusque, efficient manner doesn't give me much hope. It's like he's completing a chore he'd rather not be assigned and wants to get it over with quickly. If I didn't know better, I'd think he would rather leave me this way.

Without a word, he leaves the room again, taking the rope with him. The heavy footfall is the only sound ringing out in the otherwise eerily silent cabin. The sort of silence that can weigh heavy on a girl's heart. My heart is a lead weight by the time I sit up, stretching my shoulders and arms, then rubbing my sore wrists.

I guess I expected an apology or at least an explanation. I doubt any explanation would make things better. He could at least try. He might need to calm himself further—if that's the case, he can take all the time he needs.

I'll wait for the pins and needles sensation in my arms and shoulders to ease in the meantime. I have to grit my teeth to get through it without making a sound. I'm that afraid to upset him.

The old me, before he disappeared from my life, would never believe it. Being afraid to make even the tiniest sound around Ren, of all people.

Then there's been a lot about this experience I find difficult to believe.

I don't know how much time passes, each minute dragging out until the tension is enough to tear my heart to pieces. There's no way of knowing what he expects, whether I should leave the room or stay put. I'm afraid no matter what choice I make, it'll be the wrong one.

His sudden appearance in the doorway leaves me flinching like a hand-shy dog. He notices, too, his features pinching in

concern. “What’s wrong?”

At first, all I can do is blink, certain I must’ve misheard. The concern is still there, now tinged with confusion. *He’s* confused?

He is, and he’s waiting for an answer. I don’t know what he expects after what he did. How cruel he was.

That cruelty is gone now, replaced by the sweetness of the Ren I believed I knew. Whose secrets run deeper than I could’ve possibly imagined.

“Nothing’s wrong.” I even force a tight smile rather than risk setting him off again. “Resting. That’s all.”

I absentmindedly rub a sore spot on my wrist, drawing his gaze toward it.

“I did put you through it, didn’t I?” The playful tone in his voice and the twinkle in his eye tells me he’s referring to the vibrator and everything else surrounding it. If it wasn’t for the dull ache between my thighs, I might have forgotten all about it in the face of his sudden change in demeanor.

“You did.”

He chuckles on his way to the bed, where he sits before placing a hand on my leg. “I’ll take it easier on you next time. Maybe.”

I hope he does, even if it’s clear we’re talking about two different things.

There’s no understanding these mood swings and how he goes from hot to cold and back again. If I had my phone, I would research bipolar disorder right now. That’s the only explanation I can come up with at the moment. Or maybe it’s a bad habit he’s gotten into over time. Could he be unaware of the way he acts? Maybe he has been alone too long. Being this isolated must have had a bad effect on him.

And I’m afraid to point it out, still stinging from the punishment he doled out.

All I can do is cover his hand with mine and wish I understood anything about the person I once believed I knew

better than anybody else.



## REN

*The baby is crying.*

*No, wailing.*

*The baby is wailing, and the sound hurts my ears. I hear the fear in those cries, and I want more than anything to make it stop. To take the fear away. Just like all the other times when I'd pick them up and wrap the blanket tight, and we'd sit in the closet together until everything went quiet again. It isn't easy reaching over the crib railing, but I'm getting better at it.*

*I can't get out of my room this time to help him. I try the door and jiggle the handle as hard as I can, but it's useless. The door is locked.*

*Fear pounds at the back of my mind. Dread. I can barely move. I'm so scared. I wish I hadn't woken up—but the baby. The baby is so loud and louder all the time. There was no sleeping through it. I can imagine the red face and the tear-streaked cheeks.*

*Why so much screaming?*

*It doesn't take long to get an answer.*

*Because there are more screams—so many more—and from grown-ups. There are heavy footfalls outside the locked door—people running and voices raised in shouts. Angry, scared shouting, too.*

*Now I don't know if I want to go out there or not. Except the baby needs help, and I'm the only one who ever cares.*



*It's dark and cold, and why is there so much screaming?*

*The floor shakes, and dust drifts down from the ceiling. Now I'm really scared. Scared enough that it feels like I might pee my pajamas. I scramble back to my bed and dive under the covers, but they don't help. I don't feel safe.*

*Why won't somebody help me?*

The bed's shaking when I open my eyes to find myself in darkness again. Still. It's shaking because I shook it. I am trembling, and there's a cold sheen of sweat covering my skin. But it's not the cold that leaves me shaking.

It's always so damn clear. Vivid. That dream, which I now realize, was indeed a dream. How much is a memory, and how much is a figment of my imagination? I've never found out for sure, and I doubt I ever will.

My heart thuds in an alarming rhythm, my blood racing, my breathing hard and fast. My skin's about to split open so I can crawl out of it. That's how it feels. Like I have to go, get away, get out of here. Like I can outrun what's tearing me apart.

*Remember.* River's voice rises above the fading screams from the nightmare I can't escape. *Remember what they did to us. Remember where this all started.*

Normally, I'd shrink away from the sound of him speaking in my head. It's bad enough my brother plagues my waking hours, constantly pushing and more intense every time we speak because we're coming close to the final phase of the plan. I feel it. I know it.

And I don't need to be reminded since I already have enough on my mind, like the girl still sleeping soundly beside me. She hasn't so much as flinched since I woke up.

The sight of her and the sound of her soft breathing goes a long way toward calming what's left of the lingering aftereffects of my nightmare. The tension eases, and the dread quiets.

She shifts a little, one hand sliding up until it's beside her face on the pillow. The angry welts on her wrist are a grim

reminder of what happens when I'm not careful. My temper is too easily lost. I'm embarrassed by how little it took to spark frenzy in my gut.

Usually, I can control it or at least hold it back until the storm passes. It's become a habit over the years. A very necessary one.

But never more necessary than it is now. When she's here. I can't risk hurting her—the thought alone is enough to leave my heart aching. Because I have hurt her. The evidence is in front of me. The marks on her wrist tell me I left the restraints on her too long. I have to be more careful.

I reach out, longing to touch her, but stop short at the last second and pull my hand away. I'd risk waking her, but I don't know if I can stand what I'm sure I'll find when she looks at me.

Wariness. She'll try her best to move past my shameful actions, the way she did before we went to sleep, but I see it in her eyes. A flicker of worry. The impulse to shrink away from my touch.

I did that. It's my fault. Can I undo it?

One thing is for certain: I can't lie here anymore, beating myself up. I know better than to think I'll get back to sleep. I'm lucky if I catch a few hours at a time.

And when I do manage to sleep, I end up in the nightmare again. The dark room. The locked door. The screaming baby I can't reach no matter how I try.

By the time I'm in the living room, with the reminders of real life all around me, the dream has faded completely. I can pretend it wasn't such a big deal now, distracting myself by checking my email. Immersing myself in anything I can to avoid remembering the cold dread of knowing something terrible is happening and being powerless to stop it.

Only one new message waits for me, and it happens to have come from my brother. Who else? *Video call ASAP.*

He prefers to keep things as simple as possible over email in case one of us is ever hacked. I strongly doubt the

possibility, but he doesn't trust Xander. After two years of nobody hacking me or coming anywhere near me, I have to doubt it will ever happen.

Before placing the call, I practically tiptoe to the bedroom door and close it quietly, leaving it open no more than a crack before going to the kitchen table and opening my laptop. It's barely past three in the morning, but I know how River thinks. He'll be waiting—even if he managed to fall asleep, his Zoom account will be up and running.

It takes no time for him to answer, telling me he's waited up. This has to be good.

"What took you so long?" The dark circles that ring his eyes tell me he's been pulling long hours. Researching and doing recon. Always working toward our shared goal.

Though that doesn't mean I appreciate the attitude. "Sorry. I thought I'd sleep a few hours. I sort of developed a habit."

He snorts, brushing hair away from his forehead as he leans in closer. "I got a new lead. You know I hate waiting to give you news like this."

My pulse picks up speed, the promise in his announcement sending a shiver up my spine. The hair on the back of my neck lifts in anticipation. "Tell me."

"Guess who's been hiding in the middle of nowhere all this time—her and her son?"

I don't need to guess. Only one woman is in our crosshairs. "Rebecca." Nausea threatens to overwhelm me at the mere mention of her name. I see her in my mind's eye just as fresh and clear as she looked the last day I saw her: groomed impeccably, without so much as a speck of lint or dust on her perfectly smooth, fitted dress. The women always wore dresses, that much I remember. They had to be feminine at all times, and that was Joseph's unimaginative version of femininity.

She could be standing in front of me now, hands folded before her, a bland expression on her equally bland face. She always carried herself like a queen, though, didn't she? A

queen who controlled all of us even as she pretended to defer to her narcissistic asshole of a husband.

“We knew she and William would be together,” I murmur, glancing at the bedroom door to ensure we aren’t overheard. She hasn’t moved, though. I would’ve heard the bed creaking if she had. “What are they doing? Can we confirm—”

“There’s been a rash of disappearances in Reno over the past few months,” he offers before I finish my question. “Three runaway teens in the last two weeks alone. Not a sign of them anywhere. Other kids they’re known to hang around with all told stories of a guy in his late teens or early twenties seen around the areas these kids tend to frequent. One night, he handed out bottled water and blankets and shit.”

“Pulling the old benevolent leader act,” I mutter. We were young, sure, but I remember that much about Joseph. Making sure everybody knew all he wanted was to see to their physical needs.

That was how he hooked them. How he hooked our parents and everybody else who were a part of our lives in those days. Provide for people, pretend to understand them in a way no one else ever has, and they’re yours. Especially when the victims in question are too young to identify the stench of your bullshit.

It isn’t difficult to imagine Rebecca raising William in his father’s image.

“That’s where they’re building New Haven,” I muse, staring over the laptop screen into the darkened living room. *New Haven*, what a joke. There’s nothing new about it. It’s Safe Haven with an updated name and a fresh coat of paint to hide the ugly past.

How far have they gotten? How many people have they suckered in already? How long has this been going on?

“It’s as strong a lead as any we’ve gotten so far,” River agrees, excitement in his voice. He’s more animated than I’ve seen him in ages—when we aren’t fighting over Scarlet, at least.

This is different. This is hopeful.

And grim. So damn grim. I mean, it's not like we're planning on having a tea party with these evil, twisted fucks once we track them down.

"Reno's a big place," I murmur, looking at my brother in time to watch his face fall.

"You're not doing this."

"Doing what?"

"Backing down now when what we need is to take action."

I hold a finger to my lips before plugging in my earbuds, which I should've done in the first place. There was no way he'd keep his excitement in check, regardless of the late hour. "We can't go off half-cocked," I whisper into the microphone.

"Half-cocked? What else do you need?" He throws his hands into the air before clapping them on top of his head like he's afraid it will explode otherwise. I know the feeling. He's taken me to that place many times.

"Actual proof, for one. Or would you rather go cruising through Nevada without any real idea where we're heading or who we'll find once we get there? You don't honestly think they're unarmed, do you?"

He rolls his eyes, but his silence tells me more. He knows I'm right. "Going out there now would be like trying to go hunting with a water gun. We'd be way outmatched. It would be hopeless."

"So what? We wait?"

"We've waited all this time," I remind him, taking pains to keep myself calm in the face of his growing impatience. "So we wait a little while longer."

His growl is enough to make my hair stand on end. "You can afford to wait. I can't."

"Why not?" I demand before pulling myself back. I can't let him drag me into a fight. Not now. He'll only end up going

off. “Don’t you want to be sure we get this done the right way the first time around? We won’t get a second chance.”

“Fine.” He folds his arms, eyes narrowing into slits. “Since you think you’re calling the shots, what should we do now? What’s your big idea?”

Considering he just hit me with this new information, there’s no idea at the ready, and he knows it. He forgets how familiar I am with his sudden, irritating shifts. Like he wants to blindside me into throwing my hands up the way he does. Hoping I’ll give in and let him have his way.

Not this time. Not when we’re so close. We can’t afford to get greedy now.

“I want them to pay for what they did just as much as you do,” I remind him. If anything, the nightmare only strengthens my hatred and reminds me why this is so important. These people are responsible for destroying our lives and so many others. Killing our parents. Breaking up countless families when they twisted the minds of sons, daughters, sisters, and brothers.

I lower my brow the way he does, staring straight at the camera. “When we make our move, everything needs to be in place. Nothing can be left to chance. I want this over, once and for all, like you do.”

His breathing is heavy. Hard. The sound of a frustrated bull ready to charge, held back by something stronger. He doesn’t have to like it and refuses to hide the fact. No big surprise there. We don’t hide things from each other.

“What should we do next, then?”

I’ll overlook the resentment in his voice in favor of coming up with the next step. “I’ll do more research here. Police reports, missing kids. Hell, even unexplained deaths. Bodies turning up seemingly out of nowhere.”

“Right,” he grunts, nodding. “Anyone who decided they weren’t into the idea of signing over their entire lives to a bunch of maniacs.”

“Something like that. Recent Google Earth images might help locate any random structures in the middle of the desert. We need a location. Something definite.”

He nods again, slower this time. “What about *her*?” He can’t be bothered to speak her name.

Reflexively, my gaze darts up, fixing on the bedroom door. “What do you mean?”

“You aren’t planning on leaving her there alone, are you? While we do what needs to be done?” He snorts, lifting a shoulder. “Not that I mind much, either way.”

*Don’t. Don’t let him do it.*

“No, I can’t leave her here.”

“What’s the alternative?”

“What else? I have to get her on our side.”

His snort tells me all I need to know, not that I have any questions. “I don’t feel like spending the rest of my life waiting for that.”

“Nobody said you’d have to wait that long.”

“Nobody needs to,” he fires back, his voice flat. “She’s never going to understand. A spoiled princess like her?”

I grind my teeth, drawing a deep breath through my nose. It does nothing to cool the indignation burning bright in my gut. “You don’t know the first thing about her, so don’t pretend you do. I’ve already begun to explain what happened. How we ended up where we are.”

“How did she take it?”

“She was sympathetic, of course.”

“Sympathy is one thing. Being willing to do what has to be done is another. It wasn’t her parents who were killed. Her entire life wasn’t fucked up. She wasn’t separated from her siblings like I was.” His voice rises in volume with every word until he’s almost shouting.

The pain I hear helps soothe at least a fraction of my irritation with him. Out of all of us, he suffered the most. “I know. And she’ll understand. She always understands.”

“We’ll see.” No big surprise; he doesn’t have high hopes. His lack of faith in her leaves me teetering on the edge, ready to tumble headfirst into rage born of frustration.

We can’t afford that.

“You’ve never met her,” I remind him. “I’ve known her for years. Give me a week, and she’ll be on our side, ready to do what has to be done. I’m sure of it.”

“A week,” he repeats, quirking a skeptical brow.

“Seven days. In the meantime, I’ll do the work I promised. Everything will be on track by this time next week.”

“You’d better hope it is.”

Dread skitters its way across my heart. “Or what?”

His knowing smile confirms what I already knew. “What do you think? I’ve always preferred to travel light, and your little girlfriend is weighing us down.”

He ends the call, leaving his thinly veiled threat hanging in the air. He has a thing for getting the last word.

There’s nothing for me to do but sit in silence, the room only lit by the glow from my screen. I have work to do and not the first idea of how to accomplish what I promised. Doubt threatens to plant its seed in my head, but I push it out of the way before it can do so. There’s no room for doubt now. I need to have faith in her, in the strength of the devotion she swears she has.

*Scarlet. Please, don’t let me down.*





# SCARLET

*A*s long as I can remember, I've hated waking up in a new place, at least for the first few days. There hasn't been a sleepover or a family vacation when I haven't woken up with my heart in my throat. The first week at MIT was a real treat. Not only was I in a new bedroom, but a whole other state.

Should it have mattered? Not necessarily. I guess in my subconscious, I knew how far I was from home and wasn't a fan of the idea.

So it shouldn't come as a surprise when my heart wedges itself in my throat the instant my eyes open, and I find myself in a bedroom I haven't yet gotten used to. What surprises me is the way I remain frozen stiff, unable to breathe, even after my memory catches up to me.

I should be able to relax by now, right? I know where I am and who I'm with. *So why is it taking so long before I can move and breathe and think normally?*

Sometimes, I ask myself questions I already know the answer to.

I look to his side of the bed and find it empty. I run a hand over the pillow, and it's cool to the touch, telling me he got up a while ago.

The sun has barely risen, filling the room with thin, gray morning light. He's an early riser, I guess, even though we didn't get to sleep until way after midnight, according to the alarm clock on the nightstand.

I don't know if I'm glad or not that he isn't with me, considering I don't know what sort of mood he'll be in. He was contrite last night, but that was then, in the immediate aftermath.

Now that I know how he reacts when asked questions he doesn't want to answer, I'm less inclined to ask if he hurt himself while he was in hiding. If he's been struggling, I doubt he would take it well—and it would probably come off as insulting no matter how I'd try to make it sound otherwise. Nobody wants to hear they're acting like they have a head wound. Just the thought makes me cringe.

So does the discomfort from my chafed wrists when I pull the sleeves of my shirt over my hands to ward off the chill in here.

That settles it. No questions. If he wants to offer information, I'll gladly accept it, but I'm not going to be the one to start the conversation.

I can't believe I have to think this way about him. That I need to plan every move. I used to think strategically like this, but I was more interested back then in finding clever ways to seduce him, to get his attention, and make sure he couldn't take his eyes off me.

What I wouldn't give to go back to those days. Even the torment of wanting him and figuring he'd never look twice at me was better than rehearsing what I'll say to keep him from freaking out.

How do I get us back to where we used to be?

“Good morning.”

*Holy shit.* I almost jump out of bed at the sudden greeting, even though he delivers it in a soft voice. He's only wearing socks. There were no heavy footsteps to tip me off.

“Morning,” I pant, laughing shakily, a hand over my heart. “Damn. I need to get you a bell to hang around your neck. It gets so quiet around here.”

“It does, doesn't it? And a sudden noise sounds so much louder.” He chuckles, leaning against the doorframe with his

hands in his pockets while I sit up, shivering a little from the chill.

“I just used the stove and turned the oven on for heat, so it’ll get warmer in no time. I did my best to be quiet, so I wouldn’t wake you.”

“Thank you.” Once I’m on my feet, I stand on tiptoe to give him a soft kiss. The fact that he accepts it gladly leaves the room feeling warmer already.

Not only that, but he cups my face between his palms, stroking my cheeks with his thumbs. How does he do it? Something so simple, yet it lights me up inside and reminds me of why he’s been the only man for me ever since I was old enough to develop my first crush. His familiar blue eyes shine with all the love I’ve missed for so long.

Instinct leaves me wanting nothing more than to melt against him and beg him to come back to bed with me. One thing that hasn’t changed is the way my body responds to his nearness. I have no control over it. If he touches me or looks at me a certain way, I’m lost.

Now that I’m standing so close to him, though, it’s obvious he didn’t get enough sleep. “You look exhausted.” I run my hand over his scruffy cheek, which is paler than I’ve ever seen him, like he’s not getting nearly enough sunlight or exercise and far too little rest.

“I’m fine.” He kisses my palm before wrapping an arm around my waist. “I made you breakfast. Nobody will ever accuse me of being a chef, but I can fix oatmeal like a pro.”

“That sounds perfect.” I allow him to pull me from the room, wrapping my arms around him as we walk the short way to the kitchen table. If it could only be like this always.

If only, if only, if only I knew why he keeps swinging from one mood to the other.

Two bowls wait, both full of steaming oatmeal sprinkled with raisins. “I remembered you like raisins in yours,” he offers.

“I do. You pay attention to everything, don’t you?”

He's almost glowing as he pulls out my chair. "I pay attention to you. I always have." My heart could break from happiness, I swear. I have Ren back. My Ren.

Even if he looks completely wrung out.

Now I wonder if his mood swings have to do with stress and exhaustion. The stress would explain the lack of sleep, too. I can only imagine kidnapping someone and getting away with it would be a stressful undertaking.

I'm clinging to the idea like I'd cling to a life raft in the middle of a stormy ocean. But I need to hang on to something, anything to give me hope.

"So listen." He takes the chair across from mine and picks up his spoon to stir the raisins in. "We need to have a talk."

I'll have to ignore the shiver that runs through me and the goose bumps now pebbling my arms and legs. I don't like the sound of this any more than I like the way his voice went a little flat. Serious.

Something tells me this isn't going to be about anything pleasant or happy.

But I love him. And I want to help him in any way I can. That hasn't changed. "Okay," I murmur, stirring my oatmeal to cool it off a little. "I'm all ears."

My stomach's in knots now, unfortunately. Since when do I carry this pit of dread in my stomach when I'm around him? I hate it. I wish it wasn't there.

I wish so many things. For instance, that we could go back in time and erase everything that happened last night after I got out of the shower. The stuff before that, we can keep. Most definitely.

*Note to self: remember not to demand answers.*

Rather than settle back in the chair like he does, I sit on the edge, my body holding the memory of last night, even if I want nothing more than to forget it.

He doesn't seem to notice, taking a few spoonfuls before continuing. "I started to tell you about this last night. How it's

time to make things right. For my family and all the other families destroyed by those sick bastards. This is more important to me than I can explain. It's the sort of thing you have to feel in order to understand."

I nod slowly, less inclined than ever to eat. He'll notice and bring it up, though. That's enough to get me lifting the spoon to my lips.

He's right. I can't begin to understand what he's been through, no matter how much I wish I could relate, if only to help him.

"Do you want to be with me?"

His seeming change of subject, out of the blue, startles me into sitting up straighter. "Of course I do."

"No matter what?"

*Haven't I already proven that?* I know better than to ask. "Yes. No matter what. My feelings haven't changed."

"Good." A look of relief washes over his face. "Because I need you to join me in what I have to do. I need you to be a part of it."

Anxiety's been tapping at the back of my mind since he started speaking, but now it's threatening to break the door down. "How so?"

"I'm not asking you to hurt anybody—you don't have to worry about that. I would never put you in that position."

"But people are going to get hurt?"

His jaw tightens, eyes narrowing. "For starters."

One thing about being a Rossi: the prospect of violence doesn't bother me much. Especially when the violence is warranted. If anybody deserves it, it's the sort of people who'd run a cult.

"I can't hide it from you," he continues with a frown. "So I won't bother lying. Are you okay with knowing what we're working toward?"

“You and your brother?” I ask, and he nods in reply. Right away, questions bubble up in my head, but I shove them back down before my mouth gets away from me. *Again*. “Do what you have to do. I’m not going to try to stop you.”

His face takes on a glow that leaves me glowing inside. For a moment, everything else falls away, and there’s nothing but us. No past, no vengeance. No stress or sleepless nights.

This is how it was always meant to be. Ren and me sharing breakfast, smiling at each other from across the table. Nothing big and flashy. Nothing exotic, no jet-setting. Just the two of us. That’s all I’ve ever needed.

I can almost forget the pain I know my family is suffering now as I sit here gazing at the man I love.

*Almost.*

I should find a way to contact them. Maybe suggest it while he’s in a good mood, acting like himself. Maybe if I mention Adela, it might be enough to get through to him. Adela and Mom. They’re innocent in his quest for vengeance.

If that fails, I’ll be honest and admit it pains me to know I’m hurting the people I love, as it would hurt to know I caused him agony.

Anything, so long as he lets me reach out and ease their minds.

“It might mean a little traveling.” He goes back to eating his oatmeal, inspiring me to do the same. Now that he’s got that off his chest, the weight on mine also seems to have lifted. There isn’t a massive fist squeezing my stomach, either.

“Okay.”

“But I doubt we’ll be on the road for long. I’ll have everything well in hand by the time it ever comes to that. No wandering around aimlessly.”

“I trust you.” Still, even though I mean it, the idea of going on a trip sparks fresh doubt. I really wish it wouldn’t. Why won’t my stupid brain stop screwing things up?

And just my luck, he notices. I don't know how I gave it away. A muscle twitch? The inflection of my voice? No matter how, he sees through me. "What's wrong?"

I shake my head, eyes on my food. I've never been so fascinated by plain old oatmeal. "Nothing. This is a lot to take in all at once, is all. But I'm fine."

"Have you forgotten how long we've known each other? A wall came down in front of you just now."

Terrific. I need to work on managing my reactions if he insists on watching me so closely. Especially when my reaction has to do with someone he probably won't want to hear about.

Which is the better choice? Pretending nothing's wrong or coming clean? Which one will keep us in this warm, cozy place where all that matters is being together?

"If we're going to travel..." I hate this, I hate this, I hate it with every fiber of my being, with all the intensity of a thousand blazing suns. "I don't know. It might not be a bad idea to get word to my dad and brother. Let them know I'm okay, and they don't need to look for me. I don't want us getting pulled over because there's a description of us making the rounds, you know?"

Did that work? I sneak a glance at him, eyes darting up from what's turning into concrete after cooling off, to find him scowling down at his bowl.

"We don't have to," I quickly add, almost tripping over my tongue in what's dangerously close to panic. "I'm only thinking of you. There's enough for you to worry about. You don't need that extra concern. That's all."

He keeps me waiting for a beat. The longest beat of my life. It stretches out for years, millennia, while my gut twists, my heart seizes, and I forget to breathe. I would swear my wrists hurt worse than before, a silent reminder. A warning.

What will he do to me this time?

"I already sent a secure message to Q to tell him you're safe." He says it with enough sarcasm to send my heart



plummeting. “But thank you. If I ever need you to be concerned for me, I’ll tell you so.”

No, no, this is all wrong. How did I screw up so spectacularly? “I’m sorry.” Thanks to my shaking hand, my spoon rattles against the edge of the bowl, so I drop it in favor of digging my nails into my palms and wishing I would learn to keep my mouth shut.

Silence falls between us, so thick and uncomfortable that it leaves me squirming in my seat. The pop of wood in the stove makes me jump, but Ren doesn’t seem to notice. He’s busy brooding. I made him feel like I don’t trust him or something, I guess. Like I don’t believe he can make this work.

Right? Is that it? How do I know if I don’t ask?

I know better than to ask.

I can’t sit here like this forever. I miss him, and he’s sitting across from me. A few feet away. But that’s just his body. His soul—everything that makes him Ren—is far away. Lost behind years’ worth of resentment and a thirst for vengeance.

I know none of this is about me.

But I miss him. I want him back.

“I have a confession to make.” It’s a whisper and a choked one at that, but at least I managed to get it out. Speaking didn’t kill me.

His gaze meets mine from beneath his lowered brow. Nothing about his demeanor encourages me to continue, but I have to. I need to bring him back to me and break through the stress and strain of what I know weighs on him. He’s been alone for too long. He can’t stand letting me get too close after spending years answering only to himself, with nobody to help him.

“When we were talking about the camping trip, I wasn’t completely honest.” I raise my shoulders, wincing. “I wasn’t actually afraid of the dark.”

“No?”

“No. I made a big deal about it so you would pay attention to me. I know, it’s stupid,” I admit with a laugh. “But I already had such a huge crush on you, and I knew you only looked at me like a little sister you needed to protect. So I figured that was a good way to at least make sure you comforted me.”

He stays silent, content to stare at me. *Shit*. This isn’t working, is it? No, I can’t give up. Not on Ren.

“And the harder I cried, the more attention you gave me.” I shrug, folding my arms and putting on the same playful, flirtatious act I used to give him back in the day. “Really, it’s your fault. If you had told me to shut up and deal with it like Q did, it would’ve been a different story. But no, you had to go and be all heroic and protective, and my twelve-year-old heart ate it up with a spoon.”

I can’t help but smile fondly at the memory. Sure, I was a complete brat to drag the two of them away from a camping trip they’d been looking forward to, but it wasn’t like I set out trying to cut the trip short. And when Ren suggested we go home because I was so freaked out, I couldn’t backpedal. Q would’ve picked up on it right away. I was sort of trapped.

“Kids do stupid things,” I conclude, still grinning. “But even then, I knew you were special. I couldn’t get you off my mind or out of my heart any more than I can now. It was always you.”

He nods slowly, his mouth set in a firm line. “Yeah. I have a habit of thinking I can save you, don’t I?”

There’s nothing to do but let my mouth drop open in dismay when he stands, taking my bowl along with his and putting them in the sink. “Looks like it bit me in the ass that time.”

What the hell?

I can’t peel my eyes away from the back of his head as he washes the dishes. It isn’t until the pain in my palms screams loud enough for me to notice it that I realize I’ve broken the skin, nails having pierced both hands.

It doesn't hurt anywhere near as much as being dismissed so coldly.

Just last night, we were joking about the camping trip. He's the one who brought it up, for God's sake. I hadn't thought about that trip in years.

Now? We might as well be strangers, all because I made the mistake of caring about him and my family at the same time. Is this how it's always going to be? Having to choose between them? Because I'm not sure I can.

He's my choice, now and always, but they still care about me. Mom couldn't stand the thought of me flying to Corium—I can't imagine what she must be going through now. Is it so wrong to want to lessen their stress? Why would I want to hurt them all because I love him?

Guilt tugs at my heart, and I can't help thinking about Aspen. I really hope he got the message to Q sooner rather than later. I would hate to think about her going through stress while she's pregnant.

Naturally, I can't mention any of this to the back of Ren's head. I shudder to think how he might lash out if I dared.

Tears well up in my eyes before I can stop them. It takes rapid, frantic blinking to push them back. I don't want him to know how this is killing me. Seeing him like this. Knowing how badly he must've been hurt out here.

Stupid me. I used to think the most painful thing in life was being kept away from the person I loved.

Now I know there's a fate far more painful. So terrible, I'm afraid my heart's literally about to shatter. I can't reach out and touch him—not when he's like this, brooding in his dark place.

I can't ask any questions about it for fear of how he'll react.

I can't help him. Not at this very moment, at least. I don't know what to do. How to fix him.

No way would he want to act like this if he had any idea what he was doing. No, he either had a fall or was in an

accident. Or maybe he was sick with a high fever and didn't get treatment in time. This cabin seems very remote from what I've seen through the grimy windows. Trees and more trees. Even a moderate snow might make getting to a hospital all but impossible for a sick or injured person.

My poor Ren. Out here all alone, with no one to care.

And now he has someone who cares but isn't well enough to accept help. Not all the time. Not when his temper flares up, and he ends up shutting me out of his life.

Out of his heart, even. It sure seems that way.

I can't help but shed a tear, but I manage to brush it away before he turns to the stove and feeds more wood into its mouth.

*My Ren. I'm going to get help for you if it's the last thing I ever do.*

*Even though I know you'll make it difficult.*



# SCARLET

The birds chirp madly outside the bedroom window as I open my eyes on yet another day of wondering how the hell we're supposed to get through this together. After spending a long, boring day listening to him clicking the keys, he was still on his laptop when I went to bed last night.

He had his earbuds in most of the time, shutting me out in favor of the music he was listening to. He had it cranked loud enough that I could hear some of it, vaguely recognizing the driving beat of heavy metal. He was so deep into whatever he was working on that I might as well have not been here.

The sting of being ignored still paled compared to the piercing pain of being left alone with my thoughts. Even now, hours later, I want nothing more than to turn away from the dark self-reproach which gripped and threatened to break me.

*I'm putting my family through agony for this?*

I hate myself for having thought it, but there's no denying the bitter truth. My parents have already lost a daughter. I witnessed that torment, heard my father's powerless pacing and my mother's helpless sobs. Just like I watched Q break down and wished I could take it all away.

You can't absorb someone else's pain, no matter how much you love them.

This time, I'm the source of the pain. I'm the reason my father has probably threatened to murder dozens of men—if he's stopped at threats, which he probably hasn't. I'm the

reason Mom's crying and asking herself if she could've done something to stop this. And what about Aspen? What if—

*Stop this.* What good did punishing myself do yesterday? What might it do again today?

Oh no. My body curls on itself at the question. I couldn't take another day of nothing to do but torture myself. He needs to be in a better mental place today, or I might shatter for good under the weight of my guilt.

My poor, lonely heart sinks when I wake up to find him already out of bed. The pillow is cold, no big surprise.

And the keys are clicking away. Again.

Still? Did he ever come to bed?

I search my memory for any hint of him being here overnight, next to me, and come up blank. Maybe I slept deeply enough that I didn't notice.

Maybe he never went to sleep at all.

I know better than to ask for a clue as to what's so important. It must be something to do with this mission of his, which I hardly know anything about. Only that it's important—of course—and he supposedly needs me to be a part of it.

But not so important a part that I deserve to hear the details.

I wish I understood it. I wish I understood him.

He hardly notices when I emerge from the bedroom. It's chilly—there's no fire in the oven to warm the cabin. Does he feel it? I doubt it. He's consumed by whatever he's doing, still listening to music while leaning in close to his screen. He's almost squinting, studying something.

I know better than to get too close. His energy is so intense it's like a brick wall around him. Rather than make the mistake of disturbing him, I go to the stove and open the oven door before pulling a few pieces of wood from the pile in the corner and placing them inside.

If he's not going to take care of himself, I guess it's up to me. Not that I mind. I want to take care of him and be a vital part of his life. I only wish there wasn't this feeling of dread, like I need to tiptoe around.

It doesn't take long for me to get the coffee maker working and boil water for oatmeal. We'll need to go out for supplies soon. The idea sparks hope in my heart. It would be nice to feel like we were doing something normal.

Without a word, I set his bowl and a cup of coffee on the table, then leave mine to cool while I wash up in the bathroom. What happens if he doesn't eat? *Should I say something? Will I regret it?*

Are those my eyes in the mirror over the sink? They look haunted. Pained. All I've wanted all this time is to be with him, and now that I am, I'm walking on eggshells, almost afraid to breathe too hard.

This is Ren. He's the same person I've always known. I need to draw him out. Somehow.

It gives me hope to step out of the bathroom and find him eating like he is half-starved. "I didn't notice how hungry I was," he tells me before shoveling more into his mouth. My heart swells as I take my seat and begin eating, which is a lot easier to do now that I know he's in a good mood.

Rather than ask whether he slept, I say, "I didn't want to disturb you, but I figured you'd need to eat."

"Thank you." His smile softens what's left of my uneasiness. "Sorry to be so busy, but it's worth it. I found what looks like a compound outside of Reno."

"Oh? That's good." I don't know whether it's good or not, but he seems happy about it.

"My eyes are burning, though." He rubs both fists over his eyes, then picks up the coffee and drinks deeply.

"You look tired," I murmur, careful not to say too much.

"Yeah, but it'll be worth it." He sets down the cup and finally takes a good look at me. "How are you? Did you sleep



okay?”

“Just fine. I had the whole bed to myself.”

He offers a sheepish grin that threatens to break my heart. There’s my Ren, looking at me from across the table. “Sorry. I was too wrapped up to sleep. But we’re coming close to the end, angel. I feel it.”

“I hope so,” I tell him, and I mean it. Do I ever.

“I need you by my side. I can’t do this without you.” He stands up, stretching and groaning like he hasn’t been out of the chair in hours.

“And you don’t have to. You never do. I’m always here.”

He turns away toward the window, and even now, I can’t help but get lost in the sight of him. The sunlight plays perfectly off his features, highlighting his profile, the planes of his cheeks, and the sharpness of his jaw. His dark beauty brings to mind an angel.

An avenging angel, weapons in hand, prepared to wreak destruction on all those who cause him pain.

I want to help him. I do. I just don’t understand what he’s talking about or why my assurances aren’t enough. Am I not using the right words? Which words can I use, then? Do they exist, the magic combination of syllables that will somehow convince him of my devotion?

He’s still so far away. That’s a part of the problem. Maybe a big part of it. The separation that’s sprung up between us. The way it seems like he’s holding himself back, apart from me. Is it because I now know his secrets? That could be it. Like he’s ashamed somehow or afraid I’ll use his vulnerability as a weapon against him.

As if I ever could—but he has no way of knowing that. I’m the only person he’s ever trusted enough to tell about that terrible time in his life. It has to be scary, even if I doubt he’d ever admit it. Eventually, he’ll realize I’m not going to hurt him. He’s safe with me.

If only I knew how long it would take. I don't know how much longer we can go on like this, with me always afraid I'll say the wrong thing and set him off. Nothing could change my feelings for him, but if I can't show them for fear of him pushing me away? How long before something splinters beyond repair?

We need to get back to us. It'll be up to me to get us there. He's too lost, too deep in what he feels he needs to do.

I have to bring him out of that. Somehow.

With my heart in my throat, I approach him as quietly as I can manage, one slow step at a time. He must sense my approach, but he doesn't move except to grip the windowsill with both hands.

Holding my breath, I reach out, placing a hand on his shoulder. A tingle runs up my arm at the slight contact. God, it hurts. Being with him and without him at the same time.

"I need you." The entirety of my wounded, lonely heart is wrapped up in those three words. I can't think of a better way to get my point across. "Please, don't turn away from me."

He keeps me waiting, staring out the window, but at least he doesn't push my hand away. "I haven't. It's complicated."

"It doesn't need to be. Since when can't you share things with me? This is me, Ren. Scarlet. You wanted me so much before."

"I still do."

"So why won't you touch me? You've barely put a hand on me since the first night we were here together. Did I do something wrong? Please, tell me, so I can do better."

"It has nothing to do with that."

"What, then? Nothing has changed for me. I still want you more than I've ever wanted anything or anyone. You're the only person who matters." My voice cracks, and I'm almost embarrassed, but no. I won't allow it. I have to let myself be vulnerable. Maybe then, he'll understand these aren't mere words.

I take a step, placing myself against his back. So close, but so far. It's torture, standing here like this. Touching him, smelling him, and letting his warmth envelop me. Afraid of what happens if I go too far, yet not knowing what's too far until I've already crossed a line.

"You know," I whisper, "you owe me another first. It's not my birthday, but you have lost time to make up for."

He turns his head, looking at my hand before touching his lips to my fingers. A ghost of a smile appears on his face.

"You want to know why I haven't fucked you yet? That's the problem here?"

*One of so many.*

I try not to give away my disappointment. "You couldn't keep your hands off me before, especially when we were alone. Now, we're all alone in the middle of nowhere. No chance of anyone interrupting us, and you're treating me like I have a disease."

His slow, heavy sigh speaks volumes. "That's not it at all. I'm not trying to keep you at arm's distance. I'm trying to do the right thing. Once I slide inside you and claim you for the first time, there won't be any taking back your virginity. There won't be any changing who your first is, and I want to make certain I'm who you want."

"Nothing has changed, Ren. I wanted you years ago, and I want you more now. I've known you would be the one to take my virginity. I saved it for you." With my free hand, I traced the curve of his back, from broad shoulders down to his slim waist.

A shudder escapes him, his breath coming out shaky. That's nothing compared to what's happening inside me—the flood of emotion, the longing and hunger, the sense of hanging breathlessly at the edge of a precipice.

I wonder what will happen once I fall over. What's waiting for me?

"You'll always be mine after that. Once I claim you, there's no going back. No escaping me." He skims my

knuckles with his lips, sending tiny goose bumps of pleasure up my arm, the sensation going straight to my core.

It's almost too much. I can't stand the intensity of the sensations he stirs up without trying. I need him so badly. More than air, more than water, or food. It never ends, this need, this hunger.

"I don't want to escape you, ever." Then I think twice about it as I lean in, resting my cheek against his back. "No. There will never be any decision. It would be like deciding to breathe."

My breath catches when he turns and takes my face in his huge rough hands. Every time he holds me like this, I imagine him holding the most fragile piece of glass. "Still? You still want me, even after everything that's happened? After what I told you I wanted to do? After the things that happened with your brother and knowing I'm the enemy."

All I hear is him making up reasons we shouldn't do this or why we can't. I don't actually hear him coming up with a reason as to why he wouldn't want to. Everything else is an outside force pushing against us. I don't care what anyone else thinks. All I care about is him.

"Yes." I lean into his touch, my eyes closing so I can focus on the miracle of his hands on me. Holding me gently, tenderly. "Always."

He touches his forehead to mine, breathing heavily, his hands drifting down to my waist.

"Look at me," he whispers, so I lift my head, my eyes finding his. They're glowing, warm, and full of love.

I could cry—I think I might, too, the pressure in my chest and behind my eyes hinting at the wave of emotion threatening to crash down.

Anticipation bubbles up inside me. I know it's going to hurt. I've read enough romance novels and watched enough movies. I just hope Ren can make it good for me.

The temptation builds, and the longer he stares at me, the faster my heart beats. In an instant, the tension snaps, and his

mouth presses against mine, shoving all our worries to the wayside.

His kiss is like setting a match to a pile of dry kindling, the power of it is enough to make me shudder, and I snake my arms around his neck, pulling him down, demanding more. My body's running away from me, but I don't care. There's no room for conscious thought when I need him the way I do.

His arms close around my waist, and he lifts me off my feet, pulling me tighter to him, walking me across the room and into the bedroom. My nipples become tight peaks, my arousal splintering through me.

All the while, he kisses me—hard, deep, almost angrily. I meet his energy, our teeth clash, our tongues tangle, and my lips sting from the pressure as I give myself what I need for as long as he'll give it to me.

His hands roam my body the moment I'm back on my feet, moving up and down my back before dipping under my sweatshirt and pulling it up. Our mouths part only long enough to pull the shirt over my head and for me to do the same to his T-shirt. Then he's back on me, his arms close around me again, crushing my body to him the way he crushes his mouth to mine, and it's all I can do to keep from weeping in relief.

*He wants me. He still wants me.*

“Scarlet... my angel...” he murmurs like it's a prayer, his voice deep. He punctuates the words by peppering kisses along my jaw, chin, and down my throat. His kisses leave a fiery path on my skin, and I'm burning up for him. Every nerve ending is on fire.

I tip my head back, offering him my throat, and all of me. I know I won't regret it. I'm greedy for him. After all this time, I'm finally getting the relief I need.

“You taste so fucking delicious... like honey and nectar.” The growl in his throat makes every hair on my body stand on end.

His fingers trail against my smooth skin as he lowers me to the bed. My knees buckle as he's doing so, the need making

my vision hazy. I peer up at him through hooded eyes.

He seems to know exactly what I need and how I need it. He always has—on my birthday, at the party, now. *It's him.*

His own gaze is a feral mixture of desperation and need.

Body trembling, he pushes his own needs aside. I can see the physical strength and effort it takes for him to go slow, and I'm thankful. His shoulders and biceps flex as I run my hands over them. Though he seems tired, his body is still lean and muscled. The body of an athlete.

He leans forward and takes one of my stiff peaks between his lips. He tugs, his tongue circling the nipple, and a silent gasp escapes my parted lips. The sensations aren't foreign, but they spark an already roaring fire.

With his other hand, he gently massages my other breast, pinching the bud and rolling it between two fingers. He's worshiping me, and all I can do is tangle my fingers in his hair and hold him to my chest, refusing to let go.

“Oh god, that feels so good.” I whimper, and my head rolls from side to side in the wake of the tension building in my core.

And though his labored breathing hints at his haste to bury himself deep inside me, he takes his time, teasing every last ounce of bliss from my already heated body by lapping at my nipples, building me up until I'm ready to crack, all while his ocean blue eyes penetrate mine from beneath dark lashes.

That's the hottest part of all; when I look down to find him watching me. Our gazes meet, and something indescribable passes between us. Deeper and hotter than anything I've ever known. An unspoken understanding. He knows what he's doing to me and loves every moment of the absolute submission and trust I'm putting in him. And not only because it feels incredible—dear god, does it ever—but because we're together. At this moment, it's the two of us. Nobody on the outside, no past, not even a future. Nothing but the present moment.

My center is dripping wet, and I can feel myself clenching tightly.

*I want him. I need him.*

“You’re so fucking beautiful it hurts,” he whispers as his lips ghost against my skin, and I shiver at the profound meaning of them.

His hot kisses melt me to the core. Slowly, he works his way down my chest, over my stomach, and down my hips, inching closer and closer to the spot where I desperately ache for him. I can feel my cheeks heating as he pulls back his gaze, wandering over my naked body. I’ve never been embarrassed about my body, never worried about how I looked in his eyes, but now, half-naked, I feel doubt rearing its ugly head.

“I could look at you all day and never grow tired. I’ve waited so long for this moment, and all I want to do is sit here and stare at you while I enjoy the glow of your pleasure.”

“I’ve wanted this moment to happen forever, too,” I croak, the emotions swirling inside me, making it hard to speak.

“Waiting till you were old enough nearly killed me, but I knew it was the right thing to do. I knew that if I could give you time, maybe you’d realize I was nothing more than a lustful crush. Maybe you’d be able to move on and find someone else.”

I lick my suddenly dry lips. “There was never anyone else for me, Ren. I knew at the age of twelve I wanted you to be my first, to be my forever, and that hasn’t changed. Nothing can change fate or what we have.”

“I’m glad you didn’t find anyone else. I would’ve hated to know I had to end any lives at such a young age. There is no way I’d allow another man to touch you.” The jealous tone of his voice heightens my senses.

A moment passes between us, my chest rises rapidly, and my heart beats through my chest.

Ren shakes his head, and strands fly, but I’m so caught up in the beautifully dark look on his face. “I don’t deserve you, angel. I really fucking don’t... but that doesn’t mean I won’t

keep you. It doesn't mean I will stop myself from tainting you. Making you mine means sharing my darkness with you, and I can't wait to see you as the queen you are by my side."

Before I can form a coherent thought or response, he's on me again, his hands circle my waist, and his thumbs dip into the sides of the sweatpants. In one swift pull, he's exposing inch after inch of my skin to the cool air and his hot breath. I can hardly breathe now.

My clit throbs painfully, and a shudder ripples through me as he tosses the pants to the floor. I'm teetering, ready to dive headfirst into the abyss, when he finally touches me.

His fingers trail gently down my legs, and I spread my thighs without thought, beckoning him forward without speaking.

He drops to his knees by the side of the bed, and I lift my head to find him staring down at my bare pussy. A wet spot forms under me, my arousal as plain as day. I can only imagine what he sees.

I look back up at him. He doesn't appear unhappy—no, just the opposite. He wets his lips with the tip of his tongue, his nostrils flare, and his gaze becomes hooded, painting the picture of a man lost in lust.

"Mine," he growls. "All mine."

"Yes." In my desperation, I lift my hips, offering myself to him. Almost demanding him, my body so hungry I would do anything to get him where I need him most.

"So greedy for pleasure, aren't you?" He lifts my legs, hooking my knees over his shoulders before devouring my inner thighs with wet, sloppy kisses. Oh god, he's getting closer, closer to where I need him most. His teeth scrape the sensitive skin, his fingers sinking deep into my flesh.

A touch both bruising and sensual.

*If he's not careful, he'll mark me. Bruise me.*

I want him to. I want to bear the marks from his teeth on my thighs.



I want to feel him there even after this is over.

He nips at my thigh, his teeth sink into the meaty flesh, and I whimper. The touch of pain makes my blood pump faster.

“Jesus, you were made for me. I have hardly touched you, but your pussy weeps, begging for me to touch it.” He blows hot air against it, and I flinch. “So responsive, too, just like that night I ate your pussy for the first time. I wanted to die between your pretty thighs, and now I happily can. I can feast whenever I please.”

“Ren. I need you, please...” I beg, my core tightens, and I just need him to touch me. With a deep, primal grunt, he buries his face in my pussy at last, driving his tongue between my swollen lips to lap at my juices.

His deep, reverberating groans threaten to send me over the edge—I’m driving him crazy, turning him into a mindless animal driven by one need only: to claim me, once and for all. To indulge in my body.

The pleasure is so intense, but I need more. I grind my hips and plunge my fingers into his hair. My nails sink into his scalp, and I’m helpless to do anything but what my body demands. I need to come. I need the relief only he can give me. As much as I don’t want this to ever end, I’ll die if it doesn’t.

I can’t take much more of it.

By the time his tongue finds my clit and treats it to a series of quick, light flicks, the tension in my core explodes.

“I’m coming!” I scream, unable to stop myself.

Euphoria overtakes me, and I slip into a heavenly headspace while I spasm. My legs tighten around his head as I ride it out, wave after wave of relief rolling over me, leaving me breathless and on the verge of losing my voice while crying out again and again.

“Ren! Oh god, Ren!” I don’t know if I’m laughing, crying, or both. I’m completely wrecked and totally at his mercy.

He answers me silently by taking hold of my hips, his grasp firm, forceful even, keeping me in place. The pleasure continues to build, and even though I just came, I can feel another orgasm on the cusp. Pain and pleasure mix, and I can't stop the impending orgasm. The friction of Ren's tongue against my clit as he licks me faster, builds into a crescendo.

"Stop... oh god," I whimper, trying to escape his touch before it sets me on fire. Instead of falling from the cliff and reaching the valley, the sensation plateaus, leaving me suspended between tension and ecstasy. On and on it goes, with every touch of his tongue.

Just when I'm certain nothing can make this better or bring me more pleasure, I feel him at my entrance. He slips a finger inside my tight channel, and I nearly convulse.

"Come on, angel, you can give me one more. Gush that sweet nectar on my tongue and come on my fingers, so I know you're ready to take my cock."

His voice barely meets my ears, but I know one thing is certain.

He won't stop until I come again. My core tightens to the point of pain, and all I can do is fist the sheets with one hand and try to fight off his merciless touch with the other.

"I can't take anymore." I moan, on the verge of sobbing, but he doesn't stop. I can hear the wet strokes of his finger pumping in and out of me. He adds a second finger, stretching me, and I tip my head back into the pillows.

I'm on the verge of death. Death by orgasm.

"Come for me, Scarlet, or I won't give you my cock." I grit my teeth, and he curls his finger inside me, bringing my pleasure to a new height. He's touching something deep, something carnal and raw.

"Oh my..." My voice cracks, hell, maybe even I crack. I'm not sure. Everything fades to the background when I explode, my core tightening in pain and pleasure, squeezing Ren's fingers so tight I'm worried he might lose them.

Goose bumps pebble my flesh, and I'm floating, receding into the unknown. Ren takes mercy on me then, his fingers slowing, his tongue no longer on my clit, but instead against my thigh and folds, lapping up my release like a kitten with a bowl of milk.

"Delicious. I could eat you for every meal and still be hungry." His compliment makes me smile, but I'm so exhausted all I can do is sigh.

"I think I died and came back to life," I whimper as he slowly moves again, his fingers gently pushing in and out of me. My pulse rings in my ears, and my breathing is so erratic you would think I ran a marathon.

I watch, dazed, almost overcome all over again by the sight of him taking pleasure in me. *And it's for me. All for me.*

I've never felt more ready, more hungry, and needy for him than I do now. A few more strokes and he withdraws his fingers, bringing them to his mouth. Those blue eyes of his flutter closed, and pure satisfaction overtakes his features.

When his eyes open again, the blue is darker, more striking against his skin, and he stands, popping the button on his jeans to lower them along with his boxers. His cock springs free, standing heavily between his legs.

It appears angry, the head red and swollen with need. He crawls up the length of my body, blanketing me with his warmth. Placing a kiss on the side of my mouth, he arranges himself between my thighs.

This is where he belongs, cradled by my body, my arms and legs wrapped around him while he positions his dripping head at my still-quivering entrance.

*This is it.* My body tenses with anticipation while my heart thumps like a hammer, threatening to burst free of my chest.

If it were anyone but him looking down at me and anyone else's heart racing against my chest, I might be afraid. I might close my eyes and brace myself, waiting for the pain to pass. Hoping it would happen quickly.

But it's Ren. It's his familiar eyes and his beloved face.

“This is it, angel. Your last chance to be free. After this, you’re mine forever,” he whispers against my mouth.

If I didn’t love him before, I would be hopelessly, completely his now. This simple act of pausing to make sure I am ready is all I need to confirm this is right. This is meant to be.

Cupping his cheek, I stare into his eyes. “I’ve always been yours.”

He smiles. “Good. I’ll be as gentle as I can be, but I can’t promise anything. I’ve wanted you for so long... you make me unhinged.”

I nod, holding on tight.

I don’t care if he’s gentle or not. I want this too much.

Balancing himself on one arm, he rubs the head of his cock through my folds, wetting the tip. His gaze is caught between us, watching himself. It’s the most erotic thing I’ve ever witnessed. Taking himself into his hand, he guides himself to my entrance, nudging gently.

Our eyes connect, his hips press forward, and in a split second, the world fills with a burst of light, a single moment of pain wrapped in pleasure that goes deeper than anything physical.

*Soul deep.*

Finally, he’s inside me, entering me an inch at a time, and I feel every last bit of him as he stretches and fills me. It’s so much better than I ever imagined, better than my wildest dreams.

The pinch of pain and uncomfortableness are worth it.

I’m wet beyond measure, and that makes it easy for him to move in and out of me without much resistance.

“Fuck... so tight...” he groans, long and low, holding himself still for a moment before pulling back and plunging in again.

The force rocks me.

“You’re stretching me.” I groan as the pain dissipates.

“Yes, you’re mine in every single way. Only I will fit between your thighs and inside you,” he grits through his teeth, his hand cradling the side of my face. The battle between gentle and rough winds.

He thrusts forward, and I can feel how big he is, feel the way he forces me to take him, even as my body tries to resist. I lean into his touch, turning my head to kiss the palm of his hand.

I wrap my legs around him, locking my ankles to pull him deeper. He’s holding me close as well, and I know he would never let anything hurt me. I can fall to pieces so long as I’m in his arms.

A bead of sweat forms on his brow, and I can see the concentration etched into the dark contours of his face. He’s holding back, resisting temptation, but I don’t want him to hold back.

I want him to take from me with the same energy he gives me.

“Don’t hold back,” I whisper, eager to make sure he knows he can take from me however he needs to. “Don’t be gentle.”

“Fuck. You kill me, angel.” He lowers his head, his lips and tongue glide over my throat, and the sound of his heavy breathing in my ear mixes with my heartbeat. His hips piston forward, stroking me deeper and pushing me harder and faster. He’s on the verge of cracking, fucking me like he needs to, like he should.

“Fuck me, Ren,” I moan, dragging my nails across his back. “Fuck me. Please. Don’t be gentle.”

“You’re going to be very sore once I’m through with you,” he announces with a growl. All I can do is smile when he moves faster, driving himself deep, so deep and hard I have to grit my teeth against the mixed pain and pleasure—but more pleasure than pain, beyond the physical, the satisfaction of knowing he’s taking pleasure in me as I do in him.

That's the last thing that goes through my mind before I find myself reaching the edge of the cliff again, falling over it with a guttural moan a second before the sweet tremors roll through me, my muscles gripping him even tighter than before.

And he feels it. "Oh fuck, Scarlet. You're squeezing my cock so tight, milking me."

His hips move faster, in and out, in and out, quicker with every beat of my heart. I'm so wet, the sounds my body makes as he enters me should embarrass me, but they only add to the pleasure.

"Fuck, I knew this moment would be worth the wait. You're so perfect," Ren praises with a rabid look in his eyes, and all I can do is hold on as he plunges inside me, each stroke sinking its claws deeper into my core.

Pain spreads through my abdomen when he picks up his pace. I ignore it, pushing it to the back of my mind.

"I don't think I can stop myself from fucking you the way I want to." His white teeth are bared, and I can tell he's still holding back. A whimper escapes me, and his lips descend on mine a moment later as he fucks me into oblivion, every thrust opening up something dark and sinister inside me.

Sweat forms against our bodies, and I'm not sure how much longer I can take the ache in my core; though fluttering with bits of pleasure, it still burns with every thrust.

I break the kiss and look into his eyes. "Ren. I don't know how much longer I can go."

Gritting his teeth, he pushes harder, my body moving up the mattress—the only thing keeping me in place is his hold on me.

"Shit, fuck. I'm going to come. I'm going to come inside your pussy, inside *my* pussy." I don't miss the claim and hide my wince of pain by biting the inside of my cheek hard enough that I taste blood.

Throwing his head back, he lets out a roar that threatens to break my eardrums. He twitches deep inside me, and a wave

of warmth spreads through my center. After a moment, he presses a gentle kiss on my clammy forehead and falls to the side, leaving me all at once.

He's not gone long. I'm too limp and sedated to resist the pull of his arms. He gathers me up in them, my head resting against his chest, and I have the satisfaction of listening to his deep, happy sigh.

If I could only freeze us here, at this exact moment, for eternity.

When everything is perfect. When the world consists of the two of us and no one else. I've never been this happy, never knew it was possible to feel this deep sense of belonging. Fulfillment. I know who I am, where I want to be, and what I want to be doing as frequently as possible. In every possible way. Something tells me Ren won't mind. I smile at the thought and snuggle closer to him, practically purring like a cat stretched out in the sun.

Reality comes crashing in all at once when a strange, wet sensation between my thighs reminds me of what he did.

What is now dripping out of me.

Terror grabs hold of me.

*Oh god.* "Ren. You came inside me."

He snorts, then groans, his breath stirring my hair as his hand rubs gentle circles on my arm. "You're right, I did, and I'll do it again and again."

*Is that pride in his voice?*

Does he not understand the depth of what I'm trying to say?

"I'm not on birth control yet. You can't do that." I release a sharp exhale.

"I can't? You're telling me what I can and can't do? Especially when it comes to you? *No.* I'm clean, angel, and haven't had sex for a very long time, and I refuse to let anything come between us. There will be no barriers when I take you. I'd rather take the risk of getting you pregnant."

“I’m just saying,” I blurt out while dread begins rising at the edge in his voice. “I’d love a family, but—”

“But nothing. When you let me take you, we became one. I’ll cherish you, care for you, and protect you at any cost, but I will always come inside your pussy. It can’t be any other way. Won’t be.”

He smiles lovingly at me and is almost heartbreakingly gentle as he strokes my hair, the strands running through his fingers. “I told you, there’s no going back once I claim you. I intend to make you mine in every way possible. Getting you pregnant is high on my priority list, right beside marrying you.”

On the one hand, the fact that he’s even thinking along those lines is enough to make my pulse race. A future. A family. The two of us. I can almost see it in my head, so close I could reach out and touch it.

On the other hand, I wonder if I’m ever going to get a choice in when these milestones occur.

*Who am I kidding?* Women in our world rarely get a choice.

What we do is hold on to our men and love them as hard as we can.

My arms tighten around him like I’m thinking the thought out loud, taking the concept literally. I’m more than prepared to do that.

Even if it means loving him through whatever he’s going through.

He stirs, pulling me from the direction my thoughts have taken. I can’t say I’m sorry for it. I don’t want these troubling thoughts tainting what should be a happy, almost sacred moment. Lying in the arms of the man I love, I’m finally fully his.

“Let’s get you cleaned up,” he suggests with a chuckle. “We could both use a shower now, though I have bad news.”



“What is it?” I lift my head far enough to read his smirk and the way his eyes sparkle. If only I could make it so he’s always so happy and peaceful. I want nothing more.

“There isn’t always enough hot water. We’re going to have to share the shower and conserve it.” He can’t hide his glee. “It’s the responsible thing to do.”

I can’t feign seriousness the way he does, giggling at him instead. I’ve missed the playful energy he exudes. “We don’t want to be irresponsible.” My body has different ideas, though, sore muscles screaming at me like I personally offended them as soon as I try to move.

The soreness in my core leaves a slight sting as I press my thighs together. My heart softens until it’s nearly melted when Ren takes notice. His dark brows draw together with concern, his body stiffening beside mine.

“Are you sore? I tried so hard to be gentle, but my desire for you overrode every rational thought. I’d apologize, but I can’t. I want you to be sore. I want you to remember who it was that claimed you. Need you to feel me deep inside with every move you make.”

“I know.” The hand I smooth over his cheek seems to soothe him, but only a little. “Every first time hurts, or at least from what I’ve read.”

“The first time.” It’s almost like he’s savoring the words he whispers.

Like they’re the words to a prayer or a spell. He must notice the quizzical look I give him because he smiles sheepishly. “I can’t pretend the thought of being your first doesn’t make me hard as steel, angel. Hell, even now, I want to fuck you again.”

He cups my cheek, gazing deep into my eyes. “Your first and only.”

A sweet, pleasurable warmth spreads through me while he strokes my cheek, staring into the confines of my soul.

“My first and only,” I agree, and I mean every word with every part of me. “It’s always been you, Ren. And it always

will be.”

His slow, sure smile tells me it was the right thing to say.



## REN

Nothing in the world has ever been as important as what I'm doing now, crouched in the tub before the woman I worship, cleaning the remnant of my cum and her juices from her pussy as gently as possible after taking it for the first time. The first of many. My dick twitches at the thought and comes damn close to convincing me the next time is here and now.

At least I can say I made it into heaven one time in my life since I know I won't be going there when I die. Taking Scarlet's virginity, owning and worshiping her, broke something inside me while also fusing the warped pieces back together.

There is no way to describe the effect it had over me. I am her first, last, and call me a selfish bastard, but nothing makes me happier than knowing it will only ever be me who had her.

But no, not now. First, I need to care for her. The fact of her being mine extends past the freedom to claim her body. It's a responsibility. It means making sure she has everything she needs, and right now, that's the gentlest touch against flesh I made sore. I ignore the warm water hitting my shoulders and back, the hair dripping in my face, in favor of washing her most private places.

Rather, places private to everyone in the world except me. She'll keep nothing from me now, not ever again.

I stand when I've finished and set the washcloth aside in favor of drawing her into the protective circle of my arms.

“Sex won’t always hurt between us, once you become accustomed to it,” I promise, my lips brushing the halo of blond hair sticking to her forehead.

She has never been more precious to me. Nothing ever has.

“Even if it did, I wouldn’t care.” She has a knack for saying exactly what I need to hear. Then again, she was made for me.

I look down at her heart-shaped face and sparkling blue eyes seeking out comfort. I’m so lost in my own thoughts I’ve neglected her and that won’t do.

“This is much better than taking a cold shower alone,” I whisper, almost laughing. I can’t even count the number of cold showers I’ve taken in my life.

“Hmm?” Scarlet’s voice is soft and a little dazed, like she’s still caught up in the whole post-sex haze, her cheek resting against my chest while steam billows around us.

I can’t pretend I’m not glad. It’s gratifying as hell, being the man who took her to those heights. *Finally.*

She’s mine, all of her.

She’ll never look at another man, knowing what I can do to her. And she will never forget what happened today, not as long as she lives.

It was good for her, and that’s all I wanted. For her not to look back in regret, the way so many people do when they remember their first time. She’s not some random woman to me. She’s worth so much more than that.

“It’s nicer taking a shower with you than it is to punish myself with icy water, so I’ll stop wanting you so much.” I run the soapy cloth over her back in slow circles—probably too slow, come to think of it.

At this rate, we’ll run out of hot water, but I can’t bring myself to rush. Not when I finally have everything I’ve ever asked for.

“You did that?” She pushes away from my chest until there’s room to look up at me. Bewilderment flickers in her

eyes. “People take literal cold showers? I thought that was a myth.”

“I do—or I did.” I correct myself. Not anymore. Not now.

I have her, completely, and I intend to make the most of that from now on. Of course, I won’t be taking her again for a few days, but once she’s acclimated to sex, I’ll do whatever I can to satisfy my appetite for her.

She leans against me again, and I continue washing her while the hot water holds out. It’s the thought of the icy needles hitting her that keeps me moving when I’d really like to make her suck me off. Note to self: see what, if anything, can be done about upgrading the water heater.

As it turns out, the shower begins to run cool, so I turn off the taps. She shivers, rubbing her arms to warm herself while I reach for one of the towels waiting on the edge of the sink. I wrap her in it, tightening it around her.

“Go out to the kitchen so you can dry off by the stove.”

She wastes no time—the sound of her happy groan once she’s in the warm kitchen makes me laugh before I join her, drying off as I do. I’m less worried about the cold, but Scarlet is fragile. I don’t want her to go without anything.

“Let me help you with that.” Taking the towel, I finish drying her, then turn my attention to her hair.

“This is nice,” she murmurs from under the towel, and I don’t know whether she’s talking about the warmth from the stove or having me shower and dry her off. It doesn’t matter. She’s happy, and I want to keep her that way. I’d do anything to keep her smiling and feeling good.

If only there wasn’t the sense of betraying my brother throughout all of this. My loyalties hang in the balance here, and I can’t help but wonder what River would think of our slice of domestic bliss.

I doubt he’s ever experienced anything close to love, not with the way he hates being around other people unless it’s necessary.

We've both suffered tremendously.

I'm sure a psychologist would have a field day, shrinking our brains and studying the ways our shared trauma shaped us into who we are now.

"Okay, I think it's as dry as it's going to get it."

Scarlet giggles and ducks from beneath the towel before snatching it away. I must've zoned out. "I'm going to need a brush. Or a comb."

"You can use mine for now," I offer on my way to the bedroom.

Yet another item she's missing. I should make a list before going out to town—no, on second thought, she'll need to come with me.

I can't leave her alone here.

I want to trust her, but she's only human. And I've witnessed enough of her schemes when she was a kid to know how her mind works. She might not get it in her head to run away, but she's a curious little cat. I have no doubt she'd at least wander outside. What if she gets lost? Or hurt?

Nobody ever told me how stressful it would be, finally getting the one thing I've always wanted. The one person. She's my responsibility and a hundred times more precious than she ever was before, now that I've claimed her body along with her heart.

"Sit." With a towel around my waist, I pull one of the kitchen chairs close to the stove and take a seat before leaning back to fish a rubber band from the junk drawer. "I'll braid your hair for you."

"You'll what?" she asks with a tiny laugh, wrapping the towel around her chest. I wish she wouldn't, of course. I'll never grow tired of looking at her. But I can respect her need to be modest; we have the rest of our lives together.

"Sit your cute little ass down on my lap, and I'll show you."

Her blue eyes become skeptical, but she complies, perching gingerly on my lap before I pull her more firmly against me.

*Close. I always need her close.*

For one second, I allow myself to lean forward and breathe her in. She smells like me and her usual Scarlet scent. Wildflowers, pure. Her scent calms me in an instant, and I suck another greedy breath into my lungs before I grab the comb. Slowly, I comb, carefully untangling her wet locks. They're a darker shade of blond, thanks to the dampness, shining and fragrant. Her soft sighs along with the proximity of her ass to my dick threaten to get me hard.

I doubt she'd mind, but there are other things to accomplish. I can't indulge myself in her all day long, no matter how much I wish I could.

Once she's combed out, I separate the hair into three sections, which I comb again before taking them between my fingers and weaving them together.

"Who taught you how to braid?" she asks with laughter in her voice.

"Who do you think?" I work carefully, keeping the three sections smooth. "Luna. She used to make me practice with her on her dolls back when she first learned how. You should've heard her bitching me out when I'd get it wrong."

Her giggles take me back, reminding me of my little sister's giggles.

All the times I've heard the two of them laughing together. I used to roll my eyes and brush them off. I didn't have time for their bullshit—or so I considered it at the time.

A wave of wistfulness hits me out of nowhere. Longing. I've spent so long wishing for Scarlet, wanting her, craving her, that I forgot everything else I miss after taking its presence for granted.

"I guess we all do it," I murmur to myself.

"Do what?"



I didn't mean to say it out loud, so her question took me by surprise. "Take things for granted. Luna, for instance. She's at the top of the list. There's never been a day I didn't appreciate her presence, but I took the little moments for granted. Like when she bullied me into learning how to braid so I could braid her hair when it got too long for her to handle on her own."

My fingers are suddenly clumsy. Fuck, I miss her. I didn't understand until now how I deliberately avoid thinking about her so I could avoid the pain coursing through me. The guilt, the pressure in my chest.

*There were always going to be sacrifices. Necessary ones.*

Yes, and I'm doing this just as much for River and me as I am for her. Aside from Scarlet, she's the only source of sunshine in my otherwise dark life.

*Soon. We'll be together soon.*

I can't wait to tell her it's all over. She was too young to understand what went down at Safe Haven, but she lost as much as I did.

She'll be proud of her brothers. We can finally move on, all three of us.

I'm well aware it's the presence of the woman in my lap that will get me the rest of the way to the goal line. Not that I was ever doubtful. Even if I lost faith and decided I didn't have the balls to get it done, River would've never let me get away with giving up.

But Scarlet gives me the extra courage and focus needed to push forward. Only the thought of her sleeping peacefully last night, deserving so much more than a tiny cabin in the middle of nowhere, kept me working long past the point of exhaustion. The sooner this is all over, the sooner we can move on to our *happily ever after*.

And it will be one—for all of us.

Once I finish, I place a kiss on the back of her neck.

"Wanna take a ride with me?"

She turns around fast enough to almost whip me with the braid. “A ride? Where?” The way her eyes sparkle suddenly makes me feel sorry for keeping her here. There’s no other way at the moment. All the more reason to move forward and get this over with once and for all.

“The nearest town is a few miles from here. We’ll need more supplies, and you could use clothes that fit you.”

“That would be great.” I expect her to ask if I have the money—and for an instant, I think she’s about to do just that—but she bites her tongue. I mean, why would I offer if there was no money? But she’s a worrier. I have to adjust to that.

“How about I make dinner for us tonight, too?” I pull her closer, soaking in her warmth and sweetness. “Whatever you want.”

She buries her face in my neck, her lips tickling my skin. “I thought you didn’t know how to cook.”

“I’m not a chef,” I remind her, “but that doesn’t mean I can’t cook. You should see me boil spaghetti. And potatoes? I can bake the fuck out of a potato.”

“Either one sounds good.” Yes, I’m sure oatmeal and peanut butter are wearing thin. So thin, in fact, she hurries through getting dressed and even hums while she does so. It feels unfair, knowing it’s so easy to make her happy. It takes so little. How can I bring myself to believe I’m in any way worthy of her?

I have all this darkness inside me, seething and roiling. It’s so easy for me to lose my grip. All she’s ever wanted was to be with me because she only ever saw the parts of me that didn’t leave me recoiling in shame. She saw the good and figured that was all there was to me.

*Her hero.*

Now, her hero’s going to take her to the sort of town that has a total of maybe three traffic lights and one big box store, all so he can provide her with more than the bare necessities. It’s pitiful, really.

I'm not about to tell her that, of course. I'll keep it to myself, as I've kept so many things.

Such as the dual nature of this trip. The email from River I found waiting in my inbox this morning. The mission I'm on is one year in the making.

*He stays less than a half hour from the cabin while hunting for fresh victims in the area.* According to River's research, his favorite cult elder and mine covers this territory while Rebecca sends her son to Reno.

I suppose enough isolated, dissatisfied people exist around here to make venturing from the new compound worthwhile.

Christian Grady, aka my worst nightmare as a child. There was never any escaping his watchful eye. He couldn't have been too far outside his teens, yet he was given charge over us kids. I guess because Joseph imagined he'd be relatable.

*Relatable?* More like sadistic. I didn't understand when I was a kid, not entirely. I knew he seemed to enjoy inflicting corporal punishment—his quiet assurances to the contrary were bullshit that even I could see through. I had no idea that some people got off on feeling powerful over those they saw as weak.

He always reminded us that it was for the best.

That God wanted it that way.

When, in reality, Joseph wanted it that way.

He's the key. He's what we need to get into the compound.

On the surface, my goal is to get that information from him. Codes to open the gates and the schedule kept by the guards. We'll know what to expect once it comes time to drive to Reno and pay a visit to New Haven.

That is, once I get what I came for. A grim smile tugs at the corners of my mouth, and my blood starts pumping harder. I'll end him tonight and watch as his life leaves his eyes.

With that in mind, the eagerness to reacquaint myself with my tormentor, I hurry through getting dressed. Scarlet laughs

gently as I hustle her out the door, my anticipation growing with every passing minute.

*Do you know your heartbeats are limited, Christian?*

I see his smug face in my mind's eye, the big, dark eyes he could soften or harden at will. I can't imagine him having changed much over the years. If anything, he's probably worse. He knows what he can get away with after having used innocent kids like me for practice.

She's unaware, innocent as always, too busy taking in our surroundings to notice my distant attitude as we set off.

"Are there any other towns nearby, or is the one we're visiting the only one?" Her question stirs me out of my dark reverie. I'm not ready to share any geographical information with her. I'm not sure if I can fully trust her yet.

"There are bigger ones farther away," I tell her, reaching across the seat to squeeze her knee. "But don't worry. Once everything's settled, we won't have to stay at the cabin anymore. We can go anywhere."

"I was only curious. Not complaining."

Still, there's a strain in her voice—and when I look over at her, the concern written in the lines between her brows speaks volumes.

"You're worried, aren't you?"

She practically deflates on her exhale, as if she was only waiting for me to ask that question. Am I asking too much of her?

*What if I am? What then?* There's no turning back now. River wouldn't allow it even if I wanted to.

"Yes, I'm worried." She covers my hand with hers, stroking the backs of my fingers. "But only because I don't quite understand what you plan to do. I don't know how dangerous this will be for you or us."

"I can handle a little danger. I've been handling danger my entire life."

“Yeah, but you weren’t mine then.”

Is it possible for a heart to burst from pride? If so, we’re both in trouble since I’m the one behind the wheel. Now is not the time for my heart to explode. “I’ve always been yours. Believe me, I won’t take any unnecessary risks. I have a reason to watch my ass now.”

“Are we going to Reno?”

“Not right away.” I don’t have anything concrete to share, so I’ll leave it there rather than confuse her any further. The less she knows, the better.

“But you’re going to want to confront those awful people.”

“For starters, yes.” I don’t want to plant ugly images in her head, so I’ll also keep that to myself. When I wasn’t obsessing over my need for her, I’d pass the time coming up with new and inventive ways to inflict pain and encourage regret.

The very thought of making them bleed and pay for all their wrongs gets my pulse racing.

“Okay.” She’s shaky. Concerned.

I can’t have that. As much as I wish she would go along without asking questions, I’d rather she bring up her concerns if it means allowing me to reassure her so she doesn’t suffer in silence.

“Hey. You don’t ever have to worry about yourself. If you remember nothing else, remember that. I’d rather die than let anyone hurt you.”

“I know that.” Her smile is much more relaxed and sincere now, easing my tension somewhat. All I have to worry about now is keeping her by my side once we arrive in town.

As I park the Jeep in front of the Walmart, I warn, “Stay close to me. No wandering off. I don’t want to have to kick someone’s ass.”

“Where would I go?” She looks around, grinning while she shrugs. “I don’t even know how to get back to the cabin.”

I'd prefer she say she wouldn't know what to do without me, but I'll let it go. It's not worth getting into an argument over.

Is this what it means to be in a relationship? I'm sort of proud of myself.

Once we're inside the store, there's too much to look at and decide on to do much thinking beyond the present moment. I can almost forget the other reason for this trip while picking out leggings, socks, and underwear for Scarlet. And a pair of sneakers so she won't have to wear my spare boots crammed with extra socks so they'll fit better.

She's agreeable throughout, linking an arm with mine as we walk from one department to the next. Like she's satisfied simply to be together.

We could be any other couple running errands, one of those everyday events other people take for granted.

There's nothing every day about what comes after this.

"Ooh, so you're going with pasta?" Scarlet nudges me playfully, and I'm almost surprised to find myself holding a box of spaghetti.

I need to get my head in the game.

"Sure." I pull a few more boxes off the shelf, along with jars of sauce. Enough to make it so we won't need to go out for a while. After what I'm about to do, it'll be to our advantage to lay low.

Cereal, oatmeal, canned soup, chili, and stew. She offers no opinion on any of it, willing to go along so long as it means we're together. I don't need her to tell me so. I feel it. She only wants to be with me.

*How would she feel if she knew what came next?*

She'll have to get used to it, eventually.

And it isn't as if she's never been exposed to violence. She knows the score. Yet another way in which she's meant for me.

“Cookies?” She holds up a package of Oreos, smiling hopefully.

“Sure. So long as you’re willing to share.” Her smile turns to a frown before she grabs a second bag and adds it to the cart.

I can’t help but laugh before pulling her in for a kiss.

Though before our lips meet, I catch the eye of a flannel-wearing guy at the other end of the aisle. It’s not me he’s watching. Not when Scarlet’s ass is so much more interesting.

“What is it?” she whispers, touching a hand to my cheek to turn my face toward hers again. My gaze locks on the asshole who thinks it’s a good idea to stare at my angel.

*Mine, she’s mine; look away or learn to live without eyesight, dickhead.*

Finally, he notices me glaring and has the good sense to clear his throat before turning away. *That’s what I thought.* If he had the first idea of what I’m prepared to do to keep her by my side, he’d move a hell of a lot faster.

She looks over her shoulder, but it’s too late to catch him. “What’s wrong? You looked like you were ready to kill somebody.”

Maybe I was. “Nothing. Don’t worry about it.” She looks worried, though, regardless. Even my kiss doesn’t seem to soothe her.

Eventually, I’ll have to learn to balance my possessive nature and the realities of life. I can’t go around threatening to murder every man who makes the mistake of looking at her. Not that it would bother me much to do it, but it would hurt her. My precious angel. I can’t have that.

Her heart is too good and too pure to be tainted by my darkness.

What sort of man does it make me, then, dragging her along on this errand? I promised myself I wouldn’t bring her into it. That I would keep her innocent.

That was a fantasy. I have to drop the fantasies if I hope to be the man she needs. The fact is, our situation makes bringing her along with me a necessity. I already decided it's best to have her by my side since I can't leave her alone—and I don't know for sure how long this visit will take.

Christian might decide to be a tough guy and hold out on me.

Besides, she did say she's with me on this.

I believe her—but would still rather not test her this way. Not so soon.

*What's the alternative? Having River do it himself?*

It would mean bringing him here, where he would no doubt show up at the cabin and make things more uncomfortable than ever. And that's the best-case scenario.

Red flags aplenty wave in my head at the idea.

*No. It has to be me.*

I can't risk him coming here and taking his resentment out on her.

I can't let him put me in a position where I have to choose between them.

“Where did you go?” She nudges me with her elbow as I wheel the cart away from the register toward the automatic doors.

I hardly remember checking out. I was that distracted. Amazing how much humans are capable of doing while on autopilot. Guilt snakes its way through me. She's so happy to be with me, and I can't be bothered to give her my full attention.

“I have a lot on my mind. You know that.” When she frowns, I silently curse myself. She's the last person I want to alienate. I continue, “Sorry. I didn't mean to snap at you. I'm just... stressed.”

Stressed doesn't even begin to cover what I am, but I can't bear the thought of burdening her with my problems.



“It’s okay.”

But it isn’t. It’s as far from okay as possible. I want to punch myself in the face for being such an asshole.

At times like this, I wish River had never found me.

As much as I want Rebecca to suffer—and to keep other gullible people from suffering the way my family did—I can’t pretend my entire life hasn’t suffered as a result of our shared obsession.

Now, I’m causing my angel to suffer.

*There will be casualties.*

That’s what he told me, but I never intended for Scarlet to become one.

Once the bags are in the Jeep, I take her by the hips and pull her in. She stares up at me, her baby blues full of love and trust. She’ll never understand how desperately I cling to that now when I need her more than ever.

“There’s something else we have to do today.” Fuck me, this is hard. I can barely put the words together, dreading the moment the light drains from her eyes when she realizes the turn this trip is about to take.

“What is it?” she asks in her sweet voice, driving the knife deeper into my chest.

“You trust me, right?”

There it is. The bit of doubt that dims the light, like I knew it would. “I do.”

“Good.” I kiss the tip of her nose before leading her to the passenger door before I do something stupid like change my mind. “Then you’ll have to trust that what we’re going to do needs to be done.”



# SCARLET

*M*y leg bounces anxiously even as I try to ignore the dreadful tension tightening in my gut. We're not heading back to the cabin.

No, Ren drove us the rest of the way through town and continued on in the opposite direction, farther into the middle of what looks like nowhere.

The fact that only he knows where we're going sends a shudder down my spine. At least, I hope he knows, or we're screwed.

Nothing gives me any hint that we're lost.

It's obviously about his past. I know better than to ask for details. If he hasn't already offered up the information without being asked, he's not in any mood to share.

It was one thing to get him mad back at the cabin, where there was at least a roof over my head and a bed to sleep on if he lost his temper.

What hope do I have if he loses it on me now?

My stomach flips at the thought. I cross my arms over my midsection like that will help keep me from trembling.

*What am I thinking?* He wouldn't kick me out of the Jeep in the middle of an otherwise empty road, right? Not Ren. He would never put me in jeopardy.

I can't believe I'm entertaining the thought.

But then, I can hardly believe any of this is happening. It still feels like a dream. Sometimes it's good—very good. Happy and hopeful, like we're connected completely. The way it used to feel. No matter how many people in the world refused to truly see or understand me, I could count on Ren. He never expected me to be anyone other than myself. I could simply look at him and know he understood; no words were needed.

Those memories cast the current situation in greater contrast and make it more evident than ever that something is very wrong, that I might as well be sitting beside a stranger wearing Ren's skin.

I almost wish I didn't remember the happier times so clearly since I only end up feeling more lost and confused as things worsen. No, I can't let go of the memories. I need to cling to them tighter than ever when I'm so nervous about what might be coming next.

They're all that's keeping me in one piece.

If he would only turn on the radio. Riding in silence makes things worse. It draws the tension out until I'm afraid I might scream if only to break it. That scream is building in my chest, working its way into my throat. I press my lips together hard until they hurt.

*I'm losing it, aren't I?*

Dad's voice rings out in my head, the last I'd expect but the one I need to hear the most. *Stop this. You're a Rossi!*

Yes. He's—I'm—right. I can handle tension. How many tense, even dangerous, situations have I lived through? Sure, Dad always did his best to keep Mom, Adela, and me away from that part of his life, but it was impossible not to catch a hint of trouble when something bad was going down. I know what it means to suck it up and roll with the punches.

This is different from those days.

And it doesn't take me long to figure out why.

It isn't that I don't trust Ren. Not really.

But I trusted my father a lot more. Because Dad never had these crazy mood swings. Not that I'm aware of, anyway. I think I would've picked up on that over the years. Would he lose his temper when things didn't go the way he needed? Sure. Did we know better than to bother him with anything trivial when he was in the middle of something important? Most definitely.

He was never unstable, though, and that's the difference. Even after my sister's death, my father never lost his temper *with us*. As much as I love Ren, I can't pretend he's thinking clearly.

Which, considering I have no idea exactly where we're going or why, doesn't bode well. Who could blame me for worrying?

*He would never hurt me. Not ever.*

Sure, but that's the version of Ren who was never sick or injured or whatever made him the way he is now. Ready to snap at the slightest provocation. A man in that condition can't be trusted to do what needs doing.

There's a reason my dad would only let certain people into his inner circle. Why he'd keep information from some people and not others. It wasn't personal. It was a matter of whether he could trust them not to do anything irresponsible, like going off half-cocked and making decisions without his say-so.

I steal a glance at Ren from the corner of my eye. He's laser-focused, almost leaning over the wheel, gripping it tight. His sharp jaw is clenched, his nostrils flared, and every breath entering his body is heavy.

If I reached out and touched a finger to his arm, I have no doubt a spark would ignite. He's electric, a second away from an explosion. That intensity is good when the subject is me, my body, and our shared desire.

When he's driving me to the middle of nowhere? Not so much.

Twenty minutes pass, and he turns down a narrow road that seemingly popped up out of nowhere. No signs indicate its

presence, no lights, nothing. His gaze remains straight ahead, driven, on course. He drives without hesitation like everything is exactly the way he expected.

It's another few minutes before he slows our progress to something closer to a crawl. I can't help but glance up at the sky, noting the way the light drains with each second that passes. He was supposed to make dinner, wasn't he? At this rate, it'll be closer to bedtime before we return to the cabin.

I don't think he cares. He's too busy staring through the windshield, his head moving back and forth like he's sweeping the area for signs of something or another. "Do you need me to look out for anything?" I ask.

My voice sounds foreign, even to my ears. Too tight, too full of dread.

He only grunts without looking at me. So much for that.

Trees grow thick on both sides of what's now little more than a path in the woods. I wouldn't be surprised if he could hear my heart pounding, thanks to my growing anxiety. There's hardly any light as the woods get thicker.

A faint glow up ahead catches my eye. It disappears for a blink due to the trees growing around it, then becomes visible again. A house.

What are we doing all the way out here? What's he planning on doing? Whose house is this?

By the time he parks and kills the engine, my heart is in my throat, and I can barely breathe. Something bad is going to happen. I can feel it.

He spares a glance at me; the look in his eyes doesn't belong to Ren. It belongs to someone else.

"Stay in the car," he orders. I don't want to stay in the car. I want to follow him. Stop him from making a mistake.

The look in his eyes almost brings to mind what I saw earlier today when he was on his knees in front of me, staring between my thighs. Like he's looking at something he's

wanted for as long as he can remember, something finally within his reach.

“What are you going to do?” I whisper, dreading the answer.

“Scarlet, nothing is out here for you, and if you wander off and get lost or hurt, it will make everything harder. Stay put, so I don’t have to search for you.”

That’s all the explanation I receive before he opens the door and steps out, taking the keys with him. I watch, chewing my bottom lip as his retreating figure grows smaller before melting into the darkness.

Shit. What now? He doesn’t have a weapon, does he?

How’s he going to defend himself?

I’m asking stupid questions. For all I know, he’s checking the place out. He’s not going to hurt anybody.

*There I was, thinking I stopped believing in fairy tales a long time ago.*

No, he’s going to hurt someone. That’s the goal here. To inflict pain. It was written all over him—every tense muscle, every grunt, the intensity radiating from him. The closer we came to this little house in the woods, the worse he got. The more determined.

He’s going to explode on somebody. I almost feel sorry for them, though I know they must deserve it. So far, though, there’s been nothing but the same soft nighttime noises I’ve heard around the cabin.

How long has it been? Did he go inside? Minutes trickle by so slowly when you’re anticipating something that might not happen. I haven’t seen a change in the lights glowing from the two front windows.

I need to stop thinking. I most definitely need to stop asking questions. There’s no piecing this together on my own.

“Whatever he’s doing, he has a good reason.”

Saying it out loud helps a little. Not enough, but a little. I know I'm trying to justify his wrongdoings, but I have no right to judge him. I don't know the whole story yet, and I have no reason not to trust him.

I drum my fingers against my thigh as a cold chill seeps into the Jeep, but I ignore it. I'm not sure how long he's been gone. Minutes, I know, but it seems longer. Not so much as a speck of light filters between the tops of the trees, that much I know. It's fully dark, and still no Ren. There isn't any movement around the house. No shadows moving behind the windows.

It'll be a miracle if I make it out of this without screaming. The strain is that extreme, tightening me up inside until I have no choice but to pop like a spring or explode like a bomb.

*What if something happened to him?*

Great. Because I needed something else to worry my mind. I can't even get away if there's danger nearby. In the dark, unaware of where I am, unseen threats could be all around me, ready to jump out and attack.

I'd never forgive myself if I sat here, doing nothing while he was in danger. Maybe he needs help. What if he's injured and can't make it back to me on his own? I can't handle all the ugly, painful scenarios cutting through my mind. There's no defending myself from them.

Ugh. Screw this. I need to at least find out if he's okay. He couldn't have expected me to stay here all this time, alone, without knowing he was safe.

Carefully, I step out of the Jeep and leave the door ajar so the interior light will stay on—otherwise, I'd be in trouble. My sense of direction isn't the best in full daylight. Finding a darkened car in the middle of the woods? Forget about it.

The darkness presses in on me from all sides, so complete it's almost heavy. Heavy enough that I can hardly breathe with all this weight on my chest.

My shoes make very little noise beneath the gravel, and I hold my breath, afraid that the slightest sound will give me



away. The closer I venture to the house, moving slowly both from dread and caution, the more I wish I hadn't gotten out of the car. Goose bumps cover my body, and I'm shivering like I took a headfirst dive into an ice-covered pond.

*I want to go home.*

Yet something keeps me moving, drawing me closer. I have no choice but to put one foot in front of the other. Like there's an invisible lasso around me, pulling me in. I couldn't stop if I tried. I must know what's happening inside that house.

Is Ren the villain, or is he the knight?



## REN

*“Are you ready to admit what you’ve done?”*

*I’m so sleepy. I can barely hold my head up, but I can’t let it drop. He’ll hurt me if I let it drop.*

*I’m not supposed to go to sleep until I tell him what I did. Only I didn’t do anything. I don’t know what I’m supposed to say.*

*It’s so dark in here. So cold. We’re alone.*

*Nobody’s going to help me. My chin quivers when I remember that.*

*“You know what you’ve done.” He bends down, hands on his knees, and stares at me. I have seen his face like this so many times. “God knows what you’ve done. And most important, Joseph knows.” The mention of his name gets my chin quivering again.*

*“I didn’t do anything.” I can hardly talk; I’m so tired and hungry. Pain gnaws at me. I wish I could sleep because then I wouldn’t feel it.*

*My head snaps to the side, and I know I shouldn’t cry when he slaps me, but I always do. It hurts so much. I can taste blood.*

*I don’t know what he wants me to say. I didn’t do anything bad. I didn’t take extra food at breakfast yesterday. Somebody else must have done it.*

*My head snaps to the other side as pain explodes in that side of my face, too. The baby's in the other room but must feel how much I'm hurting. "Look what your lies have done," he grunts. "You made the baby cry. You're hurting everybody in your life with your lies."*

*He always says that just like he always sounds so calm when he's hurting me. That's what he does. It's his job.*

*"You know it pains me to punish you, but your mother and father know it needs to be done, so they called me in." He stands up straight, sighing—and he starts unbuckling his belt. He's so tall, like a giant next to me.*

*I know what's coming, and tears fill my eyes, but he won't stop if I cry. He might hit me harder like he did last time.*

*I hate him.*

*I fucking hate him.*

So many years have passed, and I still hate him. I hate him for what he did to all those kids, for what he did to my family. But most of all, I hate how my fingers are shaking. Even now, he has that power over me. A fear that's seated so deeply, it has become a permanent part of me.

I peek over my shoulder, making sure Scarlet listened. I can't do this if I worry she's in danger.

My feet are heavy as I drag them to the house, knowing my worst nightmare lies behind those walls. Most people would turn back, letting their fears dictate their actions. I let them fuel me.

Moving faster than before, I make my way around the corner of the brick house. I stay in the shadows, letting darkness camouflage me. My breathing is calm, my heartbeat even. My fingers brush against the gun inside my waistband. I hope not to use it. I'd rather make it slow and painful. Maybe a knife or some other sharp tool. A saw would be nice as well. I could cut off a limb and watch him bleed out.

Instead of going into the front door, where Scarlet can see, I head for the back. A single, bare bulb hangs over the door, which I reach up and unscrew. I doubt the fucker would be

able to recognize me all these years later, but I don't want to take a chance. All I need is for him to open the door to me.

Taking the gun in hand, I hold it close to my side before knocking. He's in there. I hear him, and my heart pounds as I wait. *Come on, Christian. Let's catch up.*

His shadow fills the window beside the door, the curtains parting slightly for him to look out. *Come on, come on, don't keep me waiting.* "I need help," I mutter in a last-ditch effort to get him to open the door. "Please, I'm lost. I just need help finding my way."

He moves away from the window—only to flip the lock. Stupid bastard.

The moment it's open a crack, I force my way in, shoving him into the kitchen table. "Hi, Christian," I grunt, grabbing him by the back of the neck and holding him bent over the table when he tries to run. "We need to talk."

"Who are you? What do you want? I don't have—"

"Shut up." I smash the side of his head against the wood beneath him. "You have what I want. It's not money. It's information."

"What sort of information?" He's already on the verge of tears, his eyes glued to the gun I'm holding close to his face. It takes nothing to break a weak man.

"Information on New Haven." Leaning down, I ask, "You don't recognize me, do you? I guess time has changed me. But I recognize you, even with the extra pounds and thinning hair. Time hasn't been your friend."

"Wh-Who are you?"

"I'll give you a hint, though I doubt you'll be able to pick one kid out from so many you tortured." I raise my pitch and make my voice breathy. "Please, Christian, let me out. I didn't do anything wrong. I promise. Stop beating me. Stop locking me in the fucking dark."

He whimpers when I press the gun to his temple. "Ring a bell? It doesn't matter. You're going to tell me what I need to

know, or I'm going to blow your fucking head off. Now. Show me where to find duct tape around here and remember there's a gun to your head."

By the time I have his hands and ankles bound, he's sweating like a pig, blubbering and whimpering when I throw him onto his leather sofa. "I'll tell you whatever you want to know. Just please, don't hurt me."

"Wrong choice of words." I bring the part of the gun down in a wide arc and smash it against his cheekbone. Like magic, the skin splits and blood begins to run down his face. "How many fucking times did I beg you not to hurt me? To please, stop hurting me?"

"I'm sorry!" All that earns him is another hit, another, until hardly any clean skin is left on his face.

"Now." I crouch in front of him, waiting for him to lift his head. His eyes are already swelling, and blood dribbles down his chin thanks to split lips. "You're going to give me the codes to access the security gates at New Haven. I'm driving out there tonight, and I'm leaving you here, like this, while I do. If they work, I'll call the cops and have them come out here to help you."

I pause, smiling at the spark of hope in his eyes. "If they don't work, I will return, and I will paint the wall with your brains. Do you understand me?"

"What are you going to do there?"

"It's none of your fucking business, is it?" I pull back my hand, prepared to strike him again, but his miserable whining stops me.

He must buy my bluff because he blurts out, "I'll tell you whatever you want to know. I'll give you the codes for the gates. Just please, please stop hurting me..." He trails off with a miserable sob that reminds me I'm here to get information. Otherwise I'd put a bullet in his head simply to shut him up.

Ten minutes later, I have what I need. A list of codes, including the code for the shed where the weapons are kept.

The guard schedule, even the specifics of where Rebecca and her son sleep. Because I'll be paying them a visit, as well.

By the time I'm finished, Christian is on the floor, unconscious, the growing wet stain on the front of his gray sweatpants evidence of his terror before he lost consciousness—before I lost my temper.

I have to believe he believes me. That I will come back here and kill him if I find out he crossed me.

He doesn't know I have no intention of returning any more than I intend to let him see the next sunrise.

He's so pitiful now, but then he always was. It was only because I was smaller that he seemed larger than life, looming over me, wearing that patented bland expression. Telling me he took no pleasure in punishing me when I suspected even then, as a child, that he enjoyed it.

Now I'm in control. And I have everything I need. "Goodbye, Christian," I whisper, standing above him with the gun in my hand.

This is it. All I have to do is pull the trigger to end his misery and mine. Call it closure.

I wrap my index finger around the trigger, my hand steady, my aim true. A single bullet to the head. That's it.

All I have to do is squeeze, even if my finger doesn't seem up to it.

Why the fuck can I do it?

The muscles in my arms flex, and my finger twitches on the trigger, but not enough to fire the gun.

"I had a feeling you wouldn't be able to go through with it."

I'm so startled, I almost lose my grip on the gun. "What the fuck are you doing here?" I whisper to my brother, slouched in the doorway leading to the kitchen. "How did you get in?"

River brushes dark hair away from his forehead, giving me a clear look at the way he rolls his eyes. “How do you think? The same way you did.” He jerks a thumb over his shoulder, toward the back door I never closed.

“You thought you had to follow me here? You didn’t think I could handle it? I got everything I came for.”

“Not everything, evidently.” His arms folded, he nods at Christian’s crumpled form. “He’s still breathing.”

“I was getting there.”

“Please. I watched you. You were going to puss out.”

“Fuck off,” I mutter.

“Fine. Maybe I came all this way because I didn’t want to let you have all the fun. You’re not the only one this bastard made miserable.”

He walks slowly into the room, snarling at the man on the floor. “Sick, twisted fuck. I would swear he got off on it, all of it.”

“He probably did,” I agree. “And he deserves to die.”

I don’t think I have it in me, is the thing. Beating the shit out of him, that I could do. Terrorizing him until he pissed his pants, sure. I can’t seem to take the final step.

Which is why I extend my arm, holding the gun out for my brother to use, instead. “You do it. You deserve a little bit of fun, too.”

“I have a better idea.”

My eyes widen at the sight of the knife he pulls from his back pocket. “Where did you get that?”

“Where do you think? The kitchen.” The small blade gleams when he holds it up. A paring knife. “Why give him the mercy of a quick death?”

I was thinking the same thing before I came in here. As always, he’s willing to take it that far, when all I do is think about it. I couldn’t even pull the fucking trigger.



“Don’t worry,” he says with a snide grin. “You don’t have to get your hands dirty.”

“I already have,” I remind him. The relief I felt when I first saw him is gone thanks to his attitude. He never knows when to stop. Especially not when there’s a chance to make me feel inferior.

“You tied him up and pistol whipped him. Don’t expect a medal.” He places the blade of the knife between his teeth before pulling Christian’s sweatpants and shorts down to his ankles. My insides twist up when I realize what he’s about to do.

But that’s not all I’m feeling. Somehow, this seems right. What he deserves. He shouldn’t die quickly. Not after everything he’s done. He should bleed out in agony.

“Hey. Hey, Christian. Wake up. You don’t want to miss this part.” When Christian doesn’t respond, River gives him a vicious backhand that makes his head snap to the side.

That wakes him up. River crouches over him, waving the knife in front of his swollen eyes. “Time to make your outside look like your insides.”

“Wh-What?” he whispers.

“You never had the balls to be a real man, so you had to beat up on kids to make yourself feel good. You obviously don’t need these.” He taps the flat of the blade against Christian’s balls.

“No,” he squeaks, twisting in terror, struggling against the duct tape. “No, don’t do that. I gave you everything you wanted! I told you everything! I was trying to help you!”

“You gave us information,” River explains, speaking slowly like he would to a kid. “But that’s not all we want. Not after all the shit you pulled. And not only with us. How many fucking kids did you torture?”

“I was only doing what was right! Please, don’t do this!” His high-pitched pleas only make River laugh while I watch, fascinated.

River turns to me, grinning. “I might need you to hold him down. Wouldn’t want to cut myself because he can’t stay still.”

Christian fixes his gaze on me, his head swinging back and forth while he flops around like a dying fish. “Don’t do this. Please, don’t do this!” he pleads, sobbing, sweat soaking through his shirt, tears cutting through the blood drying on his face.

I have nothing more to say to him. River’s right. This is what he deserves, and the symbolism is the cherry on top. When I crouch beside my brother, leaning all my weight against Christian’s legs to pin them to the floor, his sobbing turns into breathless panting. He’s too far gone to speak, to plead, anything. Because now he feels the tip of the blade biting into his sack.

“It’ll be over soon,” River promises with a soft laugh before he makes the first slice.

And Christian screams. A single, high-pitched scream like a mindless animal gripped in complete terror and unspeakable pain. A scream that cuts off when his voice breaks—but his mouth is still open, his entire body tensed. Blood coats my hands, painting them red the way it paints his thighs and the floor under him. So much blood.

With a satisfied grunt, River tosses the bloody lump on top of Christian’s chest. “Now, the score is settled,” he decides as he stands and stares down at the weakening body.

All I can do is watch the life drain from him. He’s still conscious, but it’s fading fast, his silent screams turning to soundless whimpers as he bleeds out on the floor. I hope every single evil act he’s ever committed is playing back in front of him now. One last look at his life before he burns in hell.

River brings me back to my senses after Christian has breathed his last. “We need to get out of here before one of his scum friends comes to check on him.”

I nod in agreement. “Scarlet is outside.”

“Of course, she is.” River rolls his eyes. “You better go and babysit then.”

“Why don’t you come out and meet her? Maybe then you’ll understand.”

River’s gaze is somber. For a second, I think he’ll agree, and for some reason, that leaves me feeling uneasy. “Not today. I’ll meet her when the time is right.”

Relief fills my veins, taking me by surprise. The thought of Scarlet and River meeting is both exciting and terrifying. They have been such a huge part of my life, but they don’t share a single memory. It’s almost like a coin I carry with me. They are both with me but each owns a side of a coin, part of my world yet not meant to ever meet.

I’m about to go to the kitchen to wash my hands when I hear a sound coming from outside the house.

And it could only be one person.

River’s head snaps up, and our eyes meet. His nasty smirk is all I have to see. He knows who’s out there.

*Damn her for not listening.*



# SCARLET

*A* bloodcurdling scream rings through the night.

It stops me short.

Freezes the blood in my veins, locks my joints, and tenses every muscle in my body. My heart squeezes inside my chest until I'm certain it has stopped beating altogether.

All of that from a scream.

Because it's the sort of scream that transcends pain and makes a person crumple in fear. So much fear. It tears through me on the tail end of the scream, that fear, and all of a sudden, my bladder feels heavy.

There's no question where it came from. Straight ahead of me.

*Inside the house.*

The sound echoes in my head, sheer terror and inexpressible pain. It almost didn't sound human, but I've never heard an animal sound that way.

Like a cat having its skin flayed while it's still alive.

*I need to get out of here.* I need to turn back and go to the Jeep. Now. Before Ren discovers I left. I was supposed to stay put, and now I'm here, and I really, really wish I wasn't. Still, the question lingers in my mind.

*What is he doing in there?*

Because, somehow, I know that scream wasn't Ren's. I'm absolutely sure of it. It feels like an eternity, but might not be more than a few seconds, before my body catches up to the horror show in my head and begins moving. I fall back a few steps, staring at the house while dread takes root in my stomach.

Certainty and dread.

Another sound rings out as loud and sharp as a gunshot.

The cracking of a stick under my heel.

It makes me cringe, and my heart stops again. I raise my hands to my mouth and press them against my lips.

*Shit, he had to hear that.*

And somebody did.

Without warning, the front door swings open to reveal a tall, broad-shouldered figure. He stands still as a hulking statue, only his heaving shoulders proof of him being flesh and not carved stone. The light fixture above his head casts his face in an eerie shadow, but I don't need to make out the chiseled features to know who's standing in front of me. I'd know his face anywhere, but it isn't his face that grabs my attention and holds it.

*I'm imagining this.*

I fell asleep back there, waiting, and this is only a dream. A nightmare. I'm imagining the scent of leaves and dirt and rotting things. None of it's real. It can't be, but it is, and every cell in my body trembles, and my brain urges me to go back to the Jeep. To turn and run before the beast can get me.

I can't drag my gaze from his hand. Blood drips from Ren's fists, splattering on the floor by his feet.

He lowers his head, dark hair falling forward. His shoulders still heave, and even from a short distance, I can hear his labored breathing.

*The blood.*

His hands are coated in it like he dipped them in a bucket filled to the brim.

“You were supposed to stay in the Jeep.” He doesn’t even sound like himself, though I know it’s him.

My Ren, only he isn’t right now.

He’s about the furthest thing imaginable.

*Drip... drip... drip...*

I can’t take my eyes off it. The sound of each drop plinking against the floor is so much louder than it ought to be.

*What has he done?*

“Scarlet,” he barks, drawing my attention. “Go back to the Jeep. Right fucking now.” The rage in his voice causes it to shake slightly. I begin backing away, finally forcing myself to turn around, so I no longer have to see the blood-covered hands that caressed my body only hours ago.

My feet threaten to get tangled in each other as I stumble frantically toward the glowing light from the Jeep, arms outstretched like I’m reaching for it. Like that will help get me there faster.

It doesn’t matter. I have to get there. I’ll be safe once I’m inside.

Yet the instant my fingers close around the door handle, my stomach gives a sudden lurch, and a rush of vomit pours from my mouth, splattering across the ground at my feet.

Like the blood splattering on the floor.

*Oh god.* That memory makes my stomach lurch again.

A fresh wave of bitter, acidic nastiness hits the ground, and when I lift my head, I can hardly keep the world from spinning around me. I’m hanging on to the door for dear life, touching my cheek to the cool metal. Anything to ground myself again. To drag me back to the present.

Slowly, the nausea passes, and I can breathe without a hitching, wheezing sound in my chest.

There's no pretending I didn't see it. Hear it. I can't erase it from my memory, no matter how I wish I could. Why did I get out of the car? Why didn't I stay here?

The piercing scream replays in my mind. Ren was the cause of that scream, the blood on his hands further evidence. I squeeze my eyes shut, but that doesn't help. Nothing will.

“So the pampered mafia princess tosses her cookies at the sight of blood.”

*Fuck.*

I didn't hear him coming, deafened by the pounding of my heart and the scream echoing in my memory. I'm afraid to look at him. I'm afraid not to.

Raising my head might be the hardest thing I've ever done.

At least, until I force myself to look at him, terrified at the possibility of what I'll find.

The first thing I notice is his washed hands. Strange how that's the first thing to come to mind when my gaze passes over the fists hanging at his sides.

He lifts an eyebrow over eyes as hard as flint.

“Well? Aren't you glad you disobeyed?” I can't speak, my tongue weighing a million pounds. “Did it ever occur to you that there was a reason to keep your ass inside the car? That maybe you might discover something you didn't want to discover?”

Before I can answer—not that there's an answer to be offered—he takes my arm and all but shoves me inside, then slams the door hard enough to rattle my bones. He's muttering nastily to himself as he walks around to the driver's side, then slams the door after shoving himself into his seat.

“Are you happy? Aren't you glad you came?” He barks out a cruel laugh as he turns the Jeep around. “It's a shame you didn't come in sooner. If you thought a little blood was worth puking over.”

“Stop it.” I must be imagining this.



*It can't be real.* He's being so cruel, so hateful. This isn't like him.

"Or what?" he taunts. "I thought I warned you once before about telling me what to do."

"This isn't like you." I shake my head, adamant, staring out the window at the trees rushing past. They might look beautiful under different circumstances, but now they're creepy. The shadows they cast hide too many secrets.

"What isn't like me?" He's snide, almost laughing at me. I don't know what's worse—the sound of it or the way resentment flares white hot, searing my insides with rage. I never would've imagined resenting him.

But it isn't Ren I resent. It's whatever has taken hold of him. This obsession of his. What it's doing to him. He's all twisted up by this cult stuff. Revenge appears to be the only thing he cares about.

"You were never mean before." When all he does is snort, it seems very important to make myself clear. I need him to understand what I'm saying. I have to get through to him somehow.

"How do you know? I might've been mean all this time. I could've been a real bastard, and you just never saw it."

"Maybe so."

All my pain threatens to come rushing out, and I don't know if I have it in me to hold it back. The dam has too many cracks.

Eventually, it's going to burst. "But you've never been like this with me. I could always count on your kindness and your compassion. You've always shown me light and love."

"Ever think how exhausting that is?" he jeers, the words like ice picks in my eardrums. "Putting on a mask, having to wear it for years?"

"You're only saying that."

"Yeah. Tell yourself whatever you need to hear to make it easier to sleep at night." Why is he doing this?

“This can’t all be because I got out and followed you. I only did that because I was scared.”

“Wow.” His voice is flat, grave. “Good thing nothing scary happened after that, huh?”

“Don’t do this,” I beg in a heartbroken whisper. “Please, don’t.”

His silence speaks volumes. I never understood before now that silence can feel different depending on the energy behind it.

Companionable silence, for instance, is nice. It feels comfortable, easy, peaceful. Then there’s uncomfortable, awkward silence. It’s unpleasant but not anything awful.

Then there’s the silence unfolding between us now.

It’s dark. Seething. It holds secrets, and I hate it.

I wish it didn’t feel so much like some of that anger might be directed at me. He was the one who wanted me with him, right? He made a huge deal about how critical it is to have me at his side. Now, he’s acting like he wishes he hadn’t brought me along. I guess it was one thing to want me with him before he had to do whatever it is he did. I don’t want to think about it.

*You have to. You can’t pretend this isn’t happening.*

There’s Dad’s voice again, even sterner than before. I know it’s the truth—there’s no burying my head in the sand. The stakes are too high for me to sit here and pretend I don’t know damn well what happened out there.

“You killed somebody, didn’t you?” I know the answer, but I need to hear him admit it. I’m not going to dance around the truth.

“What gave you that idea?” he asks in a light, almost sweet voice.

“Could you give me a straight answer?” I snap.

His heavy foot on the gas pedal makes us pick up speed until I whimper in fear. “You want a straight answer? Here’s

one—I cut the bastard’s balls off while he was still conscious. He screamed loud enough to make my ears ring, then bled out all over the floor and my hands.”

He turns his gaze from the road long enough to flash me a bright smile that chills my blood. “Aren’t you glad you asked?”

“Please, slow down,” I beg when he takes a curve fast enough to make the wheels squeal. He only laughs, adding a new level of horror to this nightmare, sending my already panicked thoughts into a frenzy.

It’s not knowing what he did. I knew it had to be terrible, anyway.

*It’s the glee in his voice.*

“Don’t act like you don’t know your precious father has done things like that,” he taunts while I reel in horror and try not to react at the way we fly through the dark. “Or that you don’t know your brother is capable of it. I only committed the kind of act that’s in your blood. Maybe that’s why you were so desperate to sneak around behind their backs with the wrong man when you knew they’d be pissed.”

That’s the problem. I always suspected the sort of things my father orders people to do when the situation calls for it. I’m not stupid. It’s one of those things that goes without saying. There has been a lot of that in my family.

Open secrets. Knowing glances. Tessa is the only one who doesn’t get it.

But to see the blood and the crazed look on Ren’s face that turned him into a stranger?

He’s the one who made that man scream like an animal, and now I have the mental image to pair with the sound.

Was he smiling when he did it, the way he is now?

*I’m supposed to share a bed with this man.*

I shouldn’t have asked. The less I know, the better.

I suppose if my mother could learn to look the other way, I can too. It's inevitable—I was always meant to marry a man from our world, and in my heart, it was always going to be Ren. There would be a time when I'd have to get used to ignoring what he does when we're not together.

When I think about it that way, letting the idea sink into my bones, I find a little relief.

At first.

Because there's one important difference. I'm sure of it.

*Has Dad ever treated Mom like he hated her after he killed somebody?* How much do I wish I could ask her, even though I know the answer? He's never treated her as anything but a precious gift. If it meant hearing her voice and being in her gentle, loving presence again, though, I'd ask a hundred pointless questions.

I've never needed her more than I do now. Not just her, either. All of them. My family. I need them, and I have no idea how to reach them.

No more than I know how to reach the man beside me.

"Do whatever you have to do," I whisper, trembling, sick to my stomach, and wishing like hell I had stayed put the way he told me to. "Just promise you won't take it out on me afterward."

I can barely hear his snort. "I never make promises I'm not sure I'll be able to keep."

*My god. What happened to him?*

*Who has he become?*

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"Where do you think you're going?"

The question makes me stop short halfway across the living room on my way to the bedroom. If this were any other time, and if I wasn't so heartsick, I might get sarcastic. *Where does it look like I'm going?*

I know better.

Instead, I wave an arm toward the kitchen. "I put everything away. Now I'm going to bed. It's too late to eat." And I couldn't swallow a bite with this lump in my throat, anyway.

"Who said it was time for bed?"

Fear skitters down my spine as he takes one step toward me, then another. He didn't help with the groceries when we got back, instead pacing around outside the kitchen window, muttering into his phone. Talking to River, no doubt.

The conversation did nothing to change his attitude. If anything, he's worse than before.

I back away from him until I hit the wall near the bedroom door. "Sorry. Are you hungry? I can fix you something to eat."

"I am hungry." He says it with a smile, grim and knowing. "But not for canned soup."

Never, ever in my life did I think a time would come when Ren would look at me the way he is now—hungry, needy—and I would do anything but melt and fall into his arms. I mean, this is all I ever wanted. For him to want me back. For us to be open and honest about our feelings instead of having to hide them from the rest of the world.

But for fuck's sake, he hasn't even showered. There's still dried blood on his knuckles and under his nails. Nothing like what I saw in the woods, but too much of a reminder for me to be in the mood now.

My mouth is so dry I can barely speak. "What do you want?"

"You're telling me you don't know?" He stops a few feet away from me, cupping his obvious erection with one hand. "I

want you to get on your knees and put this in your mouth. You're going to suck me off."

"I don't know..." I hedge, biting my lip. "I'm really exhausted. Maybe not tonight."

His head snaps back almost like I hit him. He's that stunned. "Are you serious?"

"Yes," I whisper.

"Who told you there was a choice?"

No, this isn't happening. He is not doing this. It was one thing to tie me up and drive me crazy with that bullet since I didn't exactly ask for that, either.

But this is different. At least when he did that, he had my pleasure in mind, even if it wasn't my idea.

This is completely about him taking what he wants without regard for me. And he still sounds like he hates me. None of this is right.

"Because you know..." I shrink against the wall when he comes closer again, his heavy boots slapping the floor. "I could make you do what I want."

"But you wouldn't do that." It's the hardest thing I've had to do yet, looking him in the eye when what I want is to run away. "You wouldn't hurt me like that. You wouldn't force me to do it if I don't have it in me right now."

I don't know who I'm trying to convince. I'm not sure I believe what I'm saying anymore. Tonight, he's shown me he's capable of anything.

His eyes narrow into slits, and for one horrible moment, I know this is it. He's going to force me, and he's going to like it. My breath hitches, but I fight back the tears, silently daring him to make his move.

His shoulders lower, and he drops his hand from his bulge. "Fine. Go to bed, then," he growls. "I have shit to do, anyway."

I don't wait around to see whether he means it. I slide along the wall and duck into the bedroom before closing the door. I actually close the door between us for the first time. I don't want him in here while he's in this mood.

Now the tears fall, hot and painful, while I fumble through getting into my nightgown and crawling into bed. My heart's breaking by the time I curl up close to the wall, shuddering as I silence one sob after another with the pillow pressed to my face so he won't hear.

To think, I once imagined Ren as my salvation.

As I surrender to the comfort of sleep, I have to wonder if he'll end up being the death of me instead.





# REN

The sound of my own gasp startles me awake.

I can't hear much else other than my heart pounding in my ears. The dream was so vivid this time, but then they have been ever since that night.

The only reason I'm not filled with uncontrollable rage now is knowing Christian is dead. He learned you can't outrun your sins, and it isn't some invisible man in the sky who does the punishing.

He's never going to hurt a kid again.

He'll never starve them, torture them, or twist their minds until they don't know fact from fantasy.

He learned what happens when somebody bigger and stronger than him decides to balance the scales.

My only regret after waking up is that we can't kill him again. When the pain and humiliation is as fresh as it was back then when I was nothing but a kid who couldn't defend himself. I didn't do anything wrong, but the truth never mattered. Not when Joseph decided otherwise.

I can hardly contain the rage blazing in my gut at the memory of being ignored, called a liar, having my every move and even every bite of food watched over. The rage burns as hot and bright as ever whenever I'm thrust back into those strange, confusing days.

If this goes on much longer, I'll end up with a hole burned through me. The only consolation I have is that soon it'll be

over—and if wiping out Rebecca and her evil asshole of a son is anywhere near as satisfying as it was to watch Christian bleed out, I'm more eager than ever.

And apparently, my cock is too. I'm hard as steel and have been since before I woke up. I can only imagine the vivid memories of Christian's final, tortured moments got it this way. The fact that Scarlet's smooth, plump ass presses against it turns my excitement into something deeper. Bigger.

I would normally work out until I collapse after waking up this way.

Rock hard, my heart pumping, full of adrenaline. It was the only way to burn off the energy that would otherwise leave me wanting to take the cabin apart with my bare hands—until now.

Now, I have a much better outlet, and she happens to be in my arms.

Warm and soft, she fits perfectly against me. The missing piece of my life's puzzle. I bury my nose in her hair and breathe in deep, my arms pulling her flush with me. *Lavender. Wildflowers.* Her sweetness and innocence.

I need it more than ever.

I need her.

A minute ago, I was vividly recollecting the pleasure of using my hands to help end a useless life. Now, they cup Scarlet's tits, molding and massaging; my thumbs and forefingers pinch her nipples until she wakes with a start.

“What are you—” she whispers, breathless, but her question is cut off by the presence of my cock sliding between her ass cheeks.

“I need you.” I groan in her ear before biting the lobe, reveling in her gasp. “Move your ass up and down my cock. You feel how hard I am for you? How badly I need to claim you right now?”

“Y-Yes.” She's shaking with desire, as she begins working her ass up and down my shaft. I look down between us to find

the fat head of my cock slipping in and out from between her round cheeks. They mold around me perfectly—yet another part of her body that seems made for me.

All of her is.

“Mine.” I sink my teeth into her shoulder, and she gasps again, louder this time. I can’t help it. The sound is heavenly.

The impulse was impossible to ignore. I had to taste her skin.

She tries to turn her head, to look back at me, the rise of fear in her voice speaking volumes. “What are you doing?”

I barely hear her whispered question over the pounding of my heart. I set things right. A surge of sheer exhilaration blasts its way through me, making me rock my hips while rolling her pink buds until she whimpers in pain.

“Can’t take it?” I ask before running my tongue over the side of her neck, layering pleasure on top of the pain until she writhes helplessly because, in the end, it’s all sensation. The fluttering of her pulse beneath her tender skin brings to mind a hummingbird’s wings.

Let her pretend all she wants. Let her shrink back in fear and act like she doesn’t know she needs this. Her body knows better, the same way I do.

“Then I guess that’s not your cunt dripping on my balls, right?” So wet. It takes so little. Because she’s mine, and only I will ever do this to her.

They took everything from me, but they can’t take this. She belongs to me. She always will. “My angel.” She whispers an affirmation, and my already racing heart threatens to burst as pride and love create a dangerously potent mixture.

I take pity on her nipples, instead closing one hand around her throat to hold her head in place while sliding the other over her slim stomach, coming to a stop at her pussy.

“My pussy,” I grunt, slapping the slick, swollen lips until she moans in agreement.

Not that she has a choice. I warned her, after all. There's no going back now that I've claimed her. She is more fully mine with every touch and every kiss, our souls winding together until I lose sight of where she ends and I begin.

A cry of pure lust that only grows louder when my fingers work deep into her greedy cunt escapes her lips. My hungry, dirty little angel. I smile against her neck, satisfied and even proud of what my touch can do.

Her muscles pulse, drawing me deeper while I prepare her for my cock. It's almost too easy to break down her defenses and make her desperate for everything I'm so ready to offer.

“What do you think? Can you take another one?”

Before she can answer, I add a third finger, stretching her tight channel.

“Oh god, Ren.” I tighten my grip on her throat, cutting off anything else she wanted to say. My hand moves in a blur, faster and faster, knuckles slamming against her taint until she goes stiff, muscles clenching tight enough to hold my fingers deep inside her. There is no escaping the pleasure I'll give her.

“That's right,” I rasp in her ear, my dick dripping cum at the sight, sound, and feel of the orgasm rocking her body and soul. “Come for me so I can reward you with my cock.” There's never been anything as beautiful as the symphony her body creates, and I am the maestro.

She's still coming down when I roll her onto her stomach, too limp to offer any resistance. Not that it would matter if she tried.

I'm too far gone. This is only going to end in one way, and that's with my cock buried eight inches deep inside her.

Her luminous skin glows beneath my hands as I take her full hips and pull them back, baring her ass and pussy to me. Mine, all mine, the rarest treasure. She's still trembling, muscles pulsing and sending sweet nectar dripping from her hole. I run the swollen head of my cock through it, causing both of us to groan.

*Fuck me.*

Her cunt drips arousal that coats her thighs. Somehow, I always knew it would be this way between us. Gripping one hip with bruising force, I use my other hand to guide myself inside. I slip just the head into her, watching as her tightness swallows me whole. The sight is enough to make me come right then and there, but I don't.

"Ren," she whimpers, and I smile, pressing forward and slamming myself deep inside her. My hips press against her ass, and my balls slap her clit.

"Oh, yes..." Her moan is nearly lost to the pillow beneath her, leaving me to take her shoulders and pull her up. Every day we're together, she'll bear my mark on her skin and soul.

"On your hands and knees." I want to hear every word that escapes her pretty pink lips. I need to touch every inch of flesh to remind me she is here, that she is mine. I start to roam her back and shoulders, my fingers leaving a trail against her trembling body before I circle around the front and cup her tits in my hands. Perfect size and weight.

Her nipples are as hard as diamonds, further proof of her arousal. I'll never get enough of every part of her. My hunger is endless, more all-consuming with every breath, with every twitch of the muscles gripping my cock.

Only when the pressure eases do I trust myself to move, pulling back just far enough to slam forward again. *Again*. My teeth grind, and my breath comes in short, hot bursts with each sure stroke. The blood pumps in my ears. Jesus. It's still not enough. Her skin, her moans, the unbearable pleasure of burying myself balls deep in her heat. It isn't enough. I need more. I need all of her. I release her tits and trail a hand over her hip, and bring my other hand to her backside. My gaze lingers on her pretty puckered ass.

*Mine*. The beast inside me roars.

Scarlet flinches, gasping at the unprecedented pressure at her asshole.

"Relax," I grunt, slamming myself home while gently playing with her virgin hole. I'll never hurt her, but I can't

promise she won't have a little pain with her pleasure. "Let me show you how good it can feel."

"Ren..." She gasps when our bodies slam together, and my thumb threatens to breach the ring of muscle she's clenched so tight.

"I don't know... I'm afraid."

"Shh, angel. Don't be afraid. I'll never hurt you. You know that. You're too precious to me." I spit down onto her hole and use it as a lube to ease my thumb inside. Her confused moan is music to my ears, compelling me to go deeper while pummeling her pussy.

"You trust me, don't you?" The words come out in a grunt.

There is a small pause, but she finally whispers, "Yes," making me smile.

"Good, because wait until I introduce my cock to this tight virgin hole. Your mind will be blown with pleasure."

Her high-pitched cry is still riddled with anxiety that quickly turns into something deeper, something sweeter, as I begin working her ass and her pussy in tandem. One day, she'll understand I know best.

What her body can handle. What she needs most.

She tosses her head back, her blond hair fanning across her back in a shimmering waterfall. Everything about her is entrancing, built to pull me in, to hold my fascination.

Taking a handful of her shimmering hair, I grip it tight, weaving my fingers through the strands.

*This is mine. She is mine. No one will take her from me.*

"Ren!" There's pain tingeing the pleasure in her cry, and I respond by pounding her tender flesh harder than before, withdrawing my thumb in favor of digging my fingers into her hip, pulling her back in time with my furious thrusts.

I must claim her again and again.

To make sure she knows she belongs to me.

“Ren... oh god.” I can barely hear her high-pitched cries over the victorious roar building in my head. Even the familiar tingle of growing pleasure at the base of my spine fades compared to the triumph of my claim.

“Sometimes I’ll fuck you like I love you, and sometimes I’ll fuck you like I hate you, but no matter what, you’ll squeeze my cock the same, angel,” I growl, pressing against her back, needing to be as deep as I can inside her.

She tries to turn her head, but I shove her down against the pillow before she can look at me. I remind myself that she’s stronger than she appears. She can handle it because she was made for me.

I wouldn’t do anything she couldn’t handle.

“Take my cock.” I rock her forward, my hips pounding against her ass, moving her up the bed. “Take it all. Take me deep.”

“I—I can’t.” Her voice is tinged with both pain and pleasure, but she hasn’t asked me to stop; she hasn’t shown me she can’t handle it.

“You can.” Our bodies crash together, and she moans. “You will. Right? Say it. Tell me you’ll take my cock. Tell me you’ll hold it inside you where it belongs.”

When she doesn’t respond, I have no choice but to wrap her hair around my fist and pull her head up, my hips sawing back and forth as I tug harder.

“I can’t hear you.”

A scream tears itself from her when I pull her head back. “Yes! Yes, I can. Give it to me.”

“Louder.”

“Ren, please!”

“Who do you belong to? Who does this pussy belong to?”

I drive myself deep, hard, balls slapping her clit. There is no doubt she’ll have bruises when I’m finished. “Say it.”

“You! Oh god, you!”

“That’s right, your pussy drips juice down my shaft and onto the sheets. You should see the mess you’re making.”

The sound of her submission and all it means sets off an explosion in my core. My thrusts turn into a frenzy that makes me lose my rhythm, my pace, and all conscious thought. The bed’s creaking is a discordant cacophony only overshadowed by our mixed cries of pleasure, pain, and even fear.

*Yes. Take me, my angel. My all.*

“Come on, angel. You’re going to come for me. Soak my cock with your sweet juices. I need your release like I need my next breath.”

“Ren... oh god,” Scarlet whimpers, but I can feel her muscles tightening, and I know she’s close.

I move faster, my balls slapping her clit harder. I’m nobody good and certainly not worthy of my angel, but she’ll never go without an orgasm when I’m inside her. Biting back my own pleasure, I continue my punishing pace.

“I’m...” The words are cut off as I press her face into the mattress, and ravage her, her tight cunt flexing and clenching around me. She draws me deeper, milking every drop of the cum I’m so eager to deliver, and we explode together.

My grip tightens on her hips, and I pour it into her through her own orgasm. Pouring all my rage, resentment, and obsession into her. Knowing she can take it. Knowing she’s my gift, my salvation.

“Mine.”

Now it’s a whisper, soft, certain.

I release her hair in favor of wrapping my arms around her trembling body, my cock still locking us together as I lie down with her pressed against me like she was when I woke up.

“You’re all mine, angel.”

She shudders, still softly whimpering while I trace a line from her shoulder to her ear with my lips. So precious. So incredibly precious.



“Nobody’s ever going to take you away from me. No one’s ever going to hurt you,” I tell her, tenderness swelling in my heart and pushing away the lingering darkness until I’m at peace.

Only she can do this to me.

“I love you,” I whisper, holding her tighter.

I barely hear her whispered response—*I love you, Ren*—before closing my eyes and sinking into a blissful, dreamless oblivion.



# SCARLET

*I*t's getting easier to wake up wearing a smile. The moment I'm awake and aware, the first thing I think about is Ren.

Another day spent with Ren.

Because that's who he is now.

He's been the old Ren for more than a week. The Ren who makes me laugh, who listens to me, who makes me feel seen and protected. Possessive, maybe even overbearing, but I like that. I always have. I guess it comes from growing up around extremely protective people.

Somehow, the cabin feels larger.

The air smells fresher. The sun shines brighter.

My imagination? Sure. So what?

I'm happy. I'm hopeful. What else matters?

My smile widens once I press my nose to his pillow, inhaling him, wrapping my arms around it, and pulling it in close. He promised we'd take a walk today. I never imagined something so simple bringing me such happiness, but it's not the walk itself I care about. Being with him and feeling connected are all that matters. We have so much lost time to make up for.

Plus, getting some fresh air couldn't hurt. He needs to get outside more, soak in sunlight and get healthy. He's gone too long without anybody to look after him. When he's in this

gentle, familiar mood, it's a lot easier to convince him to take care of himself.

He's already up, which comes as no surprise. I can't pretend I wasn't hoping he'd be in bed, though, if only so we could indulge in each other a little.

I crave our connection the way I always have and look for any opportunity to strengthen it.

Who am I trying to kid? I want him. I want his knowing touch, his searing kisses, and even the way he sometimes pushes my boundaries until I'm caught hanging on the edge of fear that only intensifies the pleasure. The sense of being owned, the way he takes my body and does what he wants, whatever he wants. Maybe it should scare me—maybe it should infuriate me.

It doesn't. I like it too much. It feels like coming home.

Giving myself to him, the man I've always belonged to, anyway.

And it seems to calm him down. In fact, when I think about it, the night he took me so hard and rough was the night his mood changed.

He's been mellow ever since. Yet another reason for me to wish he was here right now, so I could touch and stroke and kiss him.

I'm starting to understand he doesn't need as much sleep as I do. I'm learning his rhythms—yet another unimagined joy, something as mundane as that. He already made coffee, the rich aroma enough to make me sit up and stretch. One good thing about waking up alone: there's already coffee waiting.

“No. I didn't say that.”

My eyes close, and I wince at the sound of his voice.

Not that I don't like hearing it, but I hate to wake up and find him already talking with River. It's easier to keep him feeling upbeat and even-tempered when I'm the only person he has contact with. *Selfish?* Maybe a little, but in the end, he's what I'm most concerned with.

His health, his happiness.

He doesn't need River's anger and scheming to worm its way into our lives. Lately, things have been good between them. Happy. One night, I overheard Ren reminiscing with his brother over what took place in the little house in the woods. He thought I was sleeping, or else he wouldn't have gone into detail.

I made it a point to wrap my pillow around my ears. I don't want to hear it. I've already seen and heard enough. Not that I needed the details to feel chilled by the nasty, seething satisfaction in his voice.

Whoever that man was, he must've been pure evil.

So evil, people are rejoicing over his violent, painful death.

"That was your idea," he continues, his voice barely more than a whisper. "I'm the one who suggested going down there and using the codes I got from Christian... What do you mean? What do I think I'm going to accomplish? What the hell do you think?"

Goose bumps race over my skin, and I shiver in their wake.

What's he talking about? Going down where? To Reno?

"I asked him about that, remember? He said they're building one, but it isn't well-stocked yet."

A lump forms in my throat. What could he be referring to?

I've already learned how dangerous getting too close to his plans and activities is. The smart thing to do would be to pretend I never heard anything.

How am I supposed to when it's starting to feel more and more like River is leading Ren down a dangerous path? It's like we're battling it out, fighting for Ren's soul, even though we've never met.

I don't think I want to meet him, either.

"I would hardly call a handful of shotguns an arsenal, you know."

*An arsenal?*

Fear wraps itself around me like steel bands squeezing my chest, making it almost impossible to breathe. They're making it sound like these cult people are armed. And he wants to go in there and kill them?

One person against a small army?

It's concern and that terrible, all-consuming fear that pushes me out of the bedroom on tiptoes. He's sitting at the table, wearing a dark T-shirt and jeans as usual, leaning close to the screen.

Same story, different day. I can only see half of Ren's face, but it's clear from his profile alone that he's getting angrier with every word coming through his earbuds.

"Fuck off. This was all your idea in the first place, remember? You started it. This was what you wanted."

The tension in his voice sends an icy finger down my spine. Great. I had to go and jinx things, didn't I? Thinking we're on a good path since everything's been going smoothly for us ever since that scary, bloody night.

My heart thuds, sinking lower and lower.

I tiptoe a bit closer, rounding the table. I want to look at this River.

The man pulling the strings. I ought to at least be able to get a look at him.

Only... the screen is dark from this angle. A privacy screen so passersby can't make out what's there? I'm not even allowed to get a glimpse of what he's doing; who he's talking to? He doesn't trust me enough.

All at once, he whirls in the chair, his eyes hard and steely while he slams the laptop shut.

"What are you doing? Get back in the bedroom, dammit."

I'm so overwhelmed, so shocked that the notion of defying him doesn't occur to me. My feet are moving before my brain catches up, carrying me across the room and into the bedroom

again. I plop down on the bed, gripping the edge of the mattress in both hands, my insides twisting and churning.

Damn River.

Damn him for this.

He's the one who keeps turning Ren against me. I'm sure he doesn't like the idea of me being a part of their plan. He might even resent me for being here.

Whatever he feels, he's using it to twist his brother and turn him into this animal whose anger is always at a low simmer. Always ready to heighten to a boil at the slightest provocation. Even when I don't mean to provoke him.

I only want to love him.

He doesn't keep me waiting long, at least. It's less than a minute before his footsteps echo in the otherwise silent cabin. I brace myself, holding my breath and wishing harder than ever that River would have a sudden, tragic accident and leave Ren and me by ourselves.

I can't look up at him right away.

I'm afraid to see his face, what's written on it.

Only when he speaks can I breathe again.

"I'm sorry for snapping. You caught me by surprise. I was too deep in my planning, and being startled set me off. It wasn't your fault, and I shouldn't have taken it out on you."

He's leaning against the doorframe, shoulders up around his ears while he jams his hands into his pockets. "Forgive me?" he murmurs, lifting his brows.

"Sure. It's all right." I manage a weak smile, even though my anger toward River keeps me from meaning it. "You hungry? I could make some eggs." The sooner we brush this aside, the better.

He offers a sheepish grin. "That sounds great. You make them much better than I do."

I snort before getting up, standing on tiptoes to kiss him and run a hand over his scruffy cheek.

“Spoken like somebody who likes handing over the cooking duties.”

“No comment,” he mutters with a snicker, and we laugh together as I walk to the stove. At least his dark cloud passed quickly this time. There’s never any way of knowing whether it will.

My dark cloud, on the other hand, is still stuck squarely over my head as I pull food from the fridge. The laptop is still on the table, a reminder of River and his poison. I know they’re brothers, and they both suffered, but he’s become the symbol of all the problems I’ve experienced with Ren. Even the parts that aren’t his fault—like my suspicions about Ren being hurt or sick at some point—have become his fault in my scarred heart.

In other words, I need a scapegoat, and he’s as good a scapegoat as any.

*An arsenal?* I can’t keep the word out of my head as I set eggs and butter on the counter while Ren stands at the window, commenting on what a nice day it’s supposed to be. There are so many secrets in that head of his. I stare at his back, hoping he’ll come clean with me yet knowing he won’t. He wouldn’t want to admit he knows these maniacs could be armed.

What happens if we go to Reno and he’s killed? My entire body shudders at the idea, and I have to put down the egg I was about to crack for fear of crushing it in my hand.

No. I can’t even entertain the possibility of losing him.

“Where’d you go?”

His gentle, almost joking question stirs me out of the dark, horrible thoughts racing through my head. One glance his way tells me he’s concerned, watching me closely with his brows drawn together.

“Are you okay? Do you feel sick?”

I shake my head even though that’s exactly how I feel. Sick. Worried half to death. “I’m not sick. I’m worried about you.”



*Whoops. So much for keeping my mouth shut.*

I can't shove the words back into my mouth.

He takes it well, chuckling and shrugging like there's anything to be lighthearted about. "There's no reason to be."

"That's easy for you to say."

"Because it's true," he insists in a tone that reminds me far too much of how the men in my life have always placated their women. Like we're children, too dim and naive to comprehend their business.

I slap my hand on the counter in impotent fury. I'm tired of it.

"That's easy for you to say."

I didn't mean to yell it—and now, the way he lowers his brow and hits me with a stern look, I regret it. That doesn't mean I feel any differently, though. In fact, it feels sort of good to let my true thoughts out.

That good, warm, strong feeling is what makes it possible for me to lift my chin even under the weight of his glare.

"I'm sorry for getting upset, but I've tried every way I know how to calmly express how concerned I am. What if something happened to you? These people, this cult... I heard you talking to your brother. You mentioned an arsenal."

He doesn't blink, merely accepting this. At least he doesn't bother trying to tell me I'm wrong. If he gaslit me after all this, that might be the last straw.

I might fall to pieces, and I doubt anybody could put me back together.

Not even Ren.

His shoulders sink before a soft sigh eases from between his parted lips.

"I did. We're assuming they have one in place at the new compound because they had one before, at Safe Haven."

I can't keep my voice from shaking as all the emotion I've had to bottle up so far threatens to come pouring out. It was inevitable, wasn't it? Either I let it out or I die from it. "You're trying to be careful. That's good. But if they do have an arsenal? What then? You don't even have a single gun."

"I could change that."

"Ren..." He goes blurry an instant before tears spill over my lashes and onto my cheeks. "How is this going to end? How do you honestly see this ending?"

"How do you think? With them regretting they were ever born."

When all I can do is tip my head to the side while a sob bursts out of me, he groans and scrubs his hands through his hair. "What do you want me to say? We're going to kill them. We're putting an end to it."

"Who are they? How many people does that include? When does it stop?"

"Scarlet—"

I flinch out of the way when he reaches for me because I know how this will end if I let him place a hand on me. I'll forget why I was so upset in the first place. That's the power he has over me. The hold. He's had it since the first day I saw his face and heard his voice, and that hold has only gotten stronger with time.

"I want to talk this out. I need to. Don't you get that?" I pound my palm against my chest, but it doesn't hurt nearly as much as the idea of losing him.

Not when we've finally found our way to each other.

"Okay." He blows out another sigh that puffs out his cheeks. He's staying calm. That's a good sign. Maybe it was the tears or the fact that I won't let him touch me. He knows I'm serious, how important this is.

The only problem is, now that I have his attention and he's in control of his temper, I don't know what to say.

Why not start with the truth? "I love you."

A brief smile touches his lips. "I love you, too. Always."

I touch my chest again, this time leaving my hand over my heart. "For years, all I could do was think about you. Want you. I craved you for so long. You know I did."

"You made life impossible for me," he murmurs with a soft chuckle.

"I know. I wasn't about to give up on you. On us. Because I knew, I knew it in my soul, that you were the only man I would ever love. You're my soul mate. We were meant to be together."

"I agree with you."

"So how do you think it makes me feel to know you could throw it all away? For... revenge?"

He holds up a hand, breathing heavier than before.

I'm pushing him, aren't I? But dammit, I deserve to have my say. This is supposed to be a relationship, not a one-way street.

"Listen," I whisper, struggling to keep my own emotions in check before I do something stupid like start screaming or throwing things. "If you were to be shot... if I lost you..."

I have to turn my head away, my chest so tight I can hardly breathe.

"Just thinking about it hurts. It hurts so much. The thought of you dying or not being here."

"Don't think about it, then."

"Right." I bark out a disbelieving laugh, my head swinging around to face him again. "It's that easy. Though honestly, I guess it should be. I've had to stop thinking about unpleasant things my entire life. Just think about something nice, or maybe try not to think about anything at all. Is that what you're asking me to do?"

"It might help."

"Seriously?"

“What else do you want me to say?”

“That you’ll stop this? Maybe?”

His face falls—not that I didn’t already know I was asking the impossible, but a tiny hope flickered in the back of my mind.

Like maybe if he saw what this was doing to me, I might be able to get through. Whatever veil is over his eyes would lift so he could see the truth of how his actions affect me. Hurt me.

And him. How it’s changing him.

I’m afraid to say it. I don’t want him to take it as an attack. It would mean losing the ground I’ve managed to gain. I could end up back in the bedroom, locked away like a child who talked back one time too many.

“It’s hurting me,” I finally settle on whispering. “I’m sorry. I’m trying as hard as I can to follow your lead and trust this will all be okay, but the way you describe the people you’re after... they’re monsters.”

“Monsters who deserve to die.”

“Monsters who could be capable of anything.” I force myself to hold his gaze rather than back down. I don’t want to back down anymore. He’s too important. My love for him is more important than my fear. “I can’t lose you. It would kill me. I’d want to die, too.”

It’s like my words have the power to break through whatever was holding him in place. Even though I tense, wanting to hold myself back, he gathers me in his arms. I can’t pretend it doesn’t feel good, that my heart doesn’t cry out in relief at his touch. That burying my face against his chest and breathing in his familiar scent isn’t a balm on my troubled soul.

“Please, don’t say that.” His lips graze the top of my head, my ear, my cheek. “I can’t handle the thought of you dying, but especially not because of me.”

“Then please, please, rethink this.” With his T-shirt gathered in my fists, damp from the tears I can’t contain, I look up at him. “Please. For me. Protect yourself for me.”

He searches my face, his eyes troubled, muscles twitching. I want so much to take this away from him, all of it. I would give anything to spare him even a moment’s heartache.

But I can’t. Not this time. I can’t make this right for him.

He’s got to make it right for himself.

I know it. But I don’t have to like it.

His eyes slowly close, his head hanging low until our foreheads touch. “Scarlet. My angel. I wish I could. I really do.”

“But?” My lip trembles.

“But this isn’t about me alone. If it was, I might consider it.” He strokes my cheeks with his thumbs, his touch gentle and loving. “I wish I had the luxury of thinking about myself alone. But if they’re out there, doing the same shit they were before, countless other lives are at risk, and I can’t forget them.”

He lifts his head with a groan. “Like in Reno. Kids are going missing, runaways and street kids who’ve suddenly vanished after being seen with a guy who looks a lot like the son of the couple who founded Safe Haven. Those kids, their families... I can’t sit back, knowing what Rebecca is capable of, and not do anything about it.”

Dammit. Damn every last bit of it.

Because now, I’m looking at not only the dark, avenging angel.

I’m looking at a hero who leaves my heart swelling with pride and my love deepening beyond what I thought was possible. That’s what he is, no matter how well I know he’d tell me to get real if I so much as breathed the word. He’s as noble as I always imagined—no, more.

He wants to protect those kids.

Considering how his experience in the cult shaped his life—how it haunts him—who am I to stop him from doing what needs to be done?

“Hey.” He pulls my face close; the intense blue of his eyes mesmerizes, so much so that I nearly get lost in them. “You’re still with me, right? You’re not walking away. Are you?”

“Ren—”

“Are you?” he demands through clenched teeth. *What would he do or say if I did?* “Are you going back on your word?”

“No. No, I’m not. That’s not what I’m saying at all.”

I pause, drawing a deep breath, giving what comes next the weight it deserves. “I’m never walking away from you. I’m never going back on my word. I’m with you, all the way.”

“No matter what?”

The hope in his voice almost makes him sound like a little boy. The way it radiates from his face. I can almost imagine him as the little kid caught up in the twisted games those people played. He didn’t stand a chance, the poor thing.

So many others could be going through the same thing at this very moment. So many other little boys and girls who might one day carry around the ghosts of what they suffered.

*I can’t let him down.*

What’s more, I can’t let him go through this on his own.

“No matter what,” I agree, and I mean it with every beat of my heart.

“Good.” His face seems to transform when he smiles. I’d do anything to make him this happy all the time. Glowing, radiant with it. “River gave me more information this morning. We’re ready to get rolling on the next phase.”

I nod, forcing a smile that can’t possibly look sincere.

He’s so exhilarated, so full of excited energy, I doubt he notices.

“Shit.” To my surprise, he lifts an arm and sniffs, his nose wrinkling comically. “I need a shower. I’m sorry you have to come near me when I’m like this. Sometimes, it’s like I forget about everything else when we get deep into our plans.”

“I’ve noticed.” Either I’m very good at concealing my irritation with River or he’s too busy buzzing with excitement to see it for what it is. “You’re lucky I’m here to keep an eye on you.”

“Oh, I knew that already.” He smiles down at me, and I can’t help but bask in the warmth and glow of his love. If only I could turn him away from this crazy idea. Why am I not enough to make him see everything he’s risking?

“Get your stinky ass in the shower, then.” I give him a playful shove toward the bathroom, laughing before I turn to the table. The sight of the closed laptop leaves me scowling. I wish I knew how to reach River. I believe the two of us could have a nice, informative chat.

It isn’t the laptop or River on my mind once my gaze drifts a few inches to the left, where Ren’s phone sits.

How many times have I watched him tuck that phone into his pocket and wished he’d be a little less careful? He never leaves it lying around. There hasn’t been a chance for me to reach out to calm my family and ease the fears I know they must wrestle with.

Now, there’s more at stake. Ren’s safety, his life. He might be walking headfirst to his own execution, and nothing I say or do will be enough to change his mind. He’s set on this course. He’s almost manic with excitement.

Now more than ever, I need advice. I need help. I need my brother.

And there might never be another chance.

With one eye on the closed bathroom door, and my heart pounding like a triphammer, I close my fingers around the phone, glad to find it unlocked. It’s a new phone, a burner, but Q has kept the same phone number for years. I know it by heart and punch it in before I can lose my nerve.

“Hello?”

My brother’s distrustful bark brings tears to my eyes once again. I only thought I missed him before now; when his voice brings his face to mind in clear detail, the tightness in my throat threatens to strangle me.

“Quinton?” I whisper, one hand cupped close to my mouth to smother the sound.

“Scar? Oh shit, is it you? Are you okay? Where are you? Does Ren still have you? Has he hurt you?” I’m pretty sure it all comes out in a single breath, his questions almost overlapping.

“I’m okay. I really am.”

“Aspen told me about the two of you,” he announces, and it falls on my ears like a lead weight. “Why didn’t you talk to me?”

My heart clenches and a surge of heat—the heat of betrayal—threatens to singe my insides before reason calms me. Of course, she’d do that. I’m sure as soon as they knew Ren had taken me, she confessed our conversation. It might’ve been a means of convincing Q he had nothing to worry about, that Ren would never hurt me. That I’d want to be with him.

“She told you?”

“I know she broke her promise not to tell anyone, but you need to understand we were losing our minds. Mom was inconsolable, Dad was literally going to go on a killing spree, and I was right behind him. Aspen only told us so we would calm down.”

“We’ve had men looking for you far and wide,” he continues, his words still rushed. “Dad’s been working day and night, calling police departments and greasing palms to make sure we hear first of anything out of the ordinary. He’s on the edge. It’s a miracle he hasn’t killed anyone yet for lack of decent intel.

“And Mom’s... still beside herself,” he adds, some of the anxiousness draining from his rant. “There’s no comforting her, no matter how we try.”



This is nothing new. It comes as no surprise. She already lost Adela, and now I'm gone, too. I never asked Ren to kidnap me, so why does the crushing weight of immense guilt threaten to make me crumple on the spot.

There's no time for this. He won't be in there forever. We might already have taken too long. "Listen, please. I'm sorry I've had you worried, and please, please, tell Mom and Aspen I'm fine. I mean it. They don't have to worry about me. None of you do."

"Where are you? Can you tell me?"

"I don't know, exactly. But that's not why—"

"You can't tell me anything? Dammit, you should've called the house so we could track your location."

This is spinning out of control. I turn away from the bathroom toward the window, my voice little more than a breath. "Listen to me, for fuck's sake. That's not why I'm calling. I don't need to be rescued. I'm not the problem."

Wrong choice of words. So very wrong. "Ren is? What's wrong with him? What's he doing to you?"

"Nothing, I swear! But he's—"

Everything in me freezes for a heartbeat when the latch clicks. When Ren opens the door behind me.

In the time it takes the hinges to squeal, I end the call, clutching the phone to my chest in one trembling fist. Please, don't let him see. Don't let him know. All at once, a deep certainty of the betrayal he'll interpret this as slams into me and makes my stomach churn.

"Hey," he murmurs, sounding playful. "I was thinking, we should conserve the hot water. Wanna join me?"

He hasn't noticed. I wonder if he realizes he left the phone sitting out. I have to answer him. "Give me a second so the water will run hot by the time I get in there. I'm not used to cold showers like you are." I throw a careless grin over my shoulder, my teeth grinding together.

He only laughs softly, arching an eyebrow. “Better hurry. I’m not in a patient mood.” He ends on a growl before closing the door, leaving my body to sag a little as the tension breaks and my muscles go watery.

There’s no time to call Q again. All I can do is delete the record of the call, then place the phone exactly where I found it.

The sense of guilt at betraying Ren’s trust leaves a sour taste in my mouth, but I had the right intentions.

He needs help, and I don’t think I’m the person best suited to give it to him.



## REN

“*T*he biggest little city in the world.”

She hasn't said much throughout our drive, and until now, I imagined she was too upset to speak. Not that I'd be much fun to converse with. I'm a bit too distracted for that.

I've been too distracted all week.

With that in mind, I reach over to squeeze her thigh once we've passed beneath the sign spanning the width of Virginia Street. “It's a shame you're a little kid, or we could do some gambling.”

“Shut up,” she warns, swatting at my hand. “I look older than my age.”

“They'd probably card you, child. Not that it matters, we won't have time for that,” I continue, scanning both sides of the street as we roll along. I haven't seen any familiar faces, but I can't shake the idea of William being out here somewhere. Preying on stupid kids who don't know any better.

*Would he recognize me?*

*Are they on alert after what happened to Christian?*

*Get it together.* River's voice reverberates in my head like a gong, centering me for a moment. I can't afford to let paranoia tear me to pieces. Not with the stakes this high. It's all riding on me. All of our planning, countless hours of recon work.

The sacrifices. I've lost track of how many our mission has required.

I said goodbye to my entire life.

No, on second thought, not my entire life.

She's still here, beside me through everything. She's all I need. All the reason in the world to build a new life, a better life. For her sake.

And I will—we will.

But first, I have to do what I came to Reno to accomplish.

My angel is busy admiring the hotels and the people walking up and down both sides of the crowded street. My dark mood hasn't affected her excitement.

“Where are we staying?”

“You'll find out soon enough.” A pair of kids in clothes that have seen better days walk down the sidewalk not twenty feet away, and the impulse to pull over and warn them is almost too much to resist. I can't assume every kid who looks like they just rolled out of bed is a potential victim.

“Ren!”

Scarlet's squeal leaves me slamming on the brakes not a second too soon. Otherwise, I would've blown through a red light and gotten T-boned. Wouldn't that be a kick in the ass?

To die here, in the middle of the street, falling short of my goal. My death wouldn't mean shit, but hers... it would mean everything.

“You okay?” I ask, still searching the crowd for any familiar faces.

“Fine,” she says shakily, pretending to wipe sweat from her forehead. “I always love watching my life flash before my eyes.”

I have to get my shit together. This isn't only my life, but hers. My angel deserves my full attention. What happens tomorrow can wait until tomorrow. Tonight, it's all about her. *Us.*

That attitude lasts until I pull into the front courtyard of the hotel. Immediately, a valet approaches, wearing a smile as he reaches for the passenger door handle. “Welcome to Peppermill.”

*No.* My instincts scream out against letting anyone else behind the wheel. “Where’s the garage entrance?” I ask, leaning over Scarlet’s lap.

“Just this way, sir.” He gestures toward a ramp leading up to the adjoining structure. “But we offer complimentary—”

“No, thanks.” I pull ahead before he can finish his spiel and roll into the garage. I want to park close to the door leading into the hotel, in case there’s a need for a quick escape. There are so many possibilities and so many situations to account for. Scarlet can afford to giggle at the stunned valet’s reaction. She doesn’t have the outcome of years of planning weighing on her.

“You realize this is the first time we’ve ever stayed in a hotel together?” She winks my way once I’ve parked, unbuckling her belt. “Another first.”

I wish it was easier to meet her energy, to smile genuinely. At this time tomorrow, I’ll be able to. This phase will be over. Rebecca will know she’s in our crosshairs.

That is, if she’s still breathing.

If River has his way, she won’t be. As much as I’d like to guarantee it, I can’t pretend this is going to be easy or completely predictable. In a perfect world, I’d walk into her quarters and blow her fucking brains out, followed by her son’s and anyone stupid enough to get in my way.

In this world, the world in which I’m now walking the light of my life into the hotel lobby, I have more than myself to consider. Scarlet will have to come with me. I can’t take too many risks when I have her precious life to consider.

She wriggles happily when the arm I draped around her waist tightens at the thought of River’s reaction if I were to share my concerns.

I'm not about to let her go, and I'll be damned if I leave her behind.

"What's wrong?" she whispers when we arrive at the front desk, concern filling her voice. "Are you okay?"

"Why do you ask?"

"You keep looking around like you're expecting to find somebody." Her forehead creases. "Is River meeting us here, and you didn't tell me?" The way her voice sours doesn't leave much room to wonder how she feels about the idea.

"No. Nobody's meeting us here."

*Good.* Let her think that's who I'm looking for. I don't need her freaking out again like she did last week, getting emotional and leaving me questioning all of this in light of the pain it's causing her.

"You're sure?"

"I'm sure." Meanwhile, my head moves this way and that as I try to take in the many faces of everyone around us. I wouldn't put it past Rebecca to be a step ahead of me.

*"How many times must you be told?"* I can almost smell her perfume, heavy and floral, and it's enough to make me gag. I could always smell it on my clothes hours after being around her since she wore so much.

*"No matter how clever you think you are, someone is always watching you. We will always be one step ahead."*

Lids squeezed closed tightly, I breathe deep to steady myself. I can't get her out of my head. Over the past few days, I've seen her everywhere.

Along with William. Even Joseph, and I know he's dead.

It doesn't matter. He's still alive in my memory, just as big, imposing, and merciless as ever.

*Not this time, bitch. This time, I'm a step ahead of you.*

I flex my hands, remembering how they felt coated in Christian's blood. He always considered himself untouchable, didn't he?

Secure in his power. And look where he is now.

Even with all my reassurances, it isn't until we reach the suite I reserved that I'm able to relinquish my hold on Scarlet. We're safe here. "Don't open the door for anyone." I remind her just the same, checking out the bathroom and the closet in case someone is lying in wait. I wouldn't put it past them.

"Don't worry." She's busy exploring the suite, admiring the expansive mountain view, the marble counters, and the shower, even bouncing on the king-sized bed as if to test it out. It does look a lot more comfortable than the one we've gotten used to sharing.

"I do worry. You are far too precious not to worry about."

She only smiles brightly while unpacking our dinner outfits and hanging them in the closet. It took another trip to town, but we now own clothes suitable for dinner in a nice steakhouse.

From Walmart. Fuck, I owe her so much. She's used to more than this. She was raised to stand by the side of a mafia boss and shop in high-end boutiques.

Yet she's never once complained.

I'm able to forget everything else for a moment.

"Come here." I take a seat at the foot of the bed before pulling her onto my lap. "I want you to know I intend to make this up to you. If it takes the rest of my life, I'll make up for the time we've lost and all the shit I've put you through. I promise."

Her eyes twinkle as she runs a hand down my cheek. "I'm going to hold you to that."

For now, I'm at peace.

---

"I SHOULD HAVE SAT OUTSIDE."



It takes a second for Scarlet's comment to filter into my awareness, rising above the cheerful din of the restaurant and the ever-present chaos in my head.

"What do you mean?" I ask, turning to her, admiring once again how beautiful she is in the light from the candle in the center of the table. It casts a warm glow over her perfect face, and for a moment, I can almost believe she truly is an angel sent to me.

The sarcastic twist of her glossy mouth brings reality crashing back before she speaks. "We've been sitting here for forty-five minutes, and I think you've looked at me twice."

She then makes a big deal of looking outside, squinting, and leaning closer to the window overlooking the Riverwalk. "I don't see anybody threatening out there. You can't expect them to be everywhere we go. You'll drive yourself nuts."

She's being gentle and loving, but that doesn't keep me from bristling. "Don't tell me what I can and can't expect. I know these people. You don't."

Immediately, she sits up straighter, nodding firmly. "Of course. I didn't think about it like that. But I wish you could enjoy yourself a little since we came all this way."

"I'm enjoying you enjoying yourself."

All she does is pick up her silverware and return to her grilled salmon after offering a half-hearted smile. More than half of my porterhouse is still left, but I can't seem to find the appetite for it, no matter how delicious it is or how incredible it smells in the restaurant.

*Focus. Who cares about a fucking steak?*

True, when we're only miles from New Haven.

What are the odds that someone recognized me as we drove through town or while we drove the few minutes to the restaurant? Why did I think coming out for dinner would be a good idea? We should've gotten room service. I could be in bed with my angel right now, secure behind the double-bolted door while she's splayed out under me on that big bed. My

dick twitches at the notion, one I intend to turn into reality very soon.

Instead, we have a server who can't take his eyes off her every time he stops by the table. I've never had a server pay this many visits during a single meal. It doesn't help that Scarlet manages to make an inexpensive dress look like it cost a fortune, her perfect body encased in black fabric that molds itself to her every curve. I'm surprised a line of horny customers isn't waiting their turn to ogle her.

As if he hears me, he slows his progress on his way past. "And how is everything? How's that salmon treating you?" he asks her, wearing a smile that makes me wonder how he'd look with all of his teeth knocked out.

I rap my knuckles against the table. "Don't you have a job to do? Why don't you go someplace else and do it?"

He has the nerve to widen his eyes like he's shocked when he finally looks my way—*yeah, dickhead, I'm sitting here, too*—before sputtering, "I'm sorry, sir, I was only—"

"Keep moving unless you want me to talk to your manager."

He wastes no time scurrying away like the rodent he is, leaving Scarlet staring at me, her cheeks flushed.

I won't pretend to be sorry, no matter how embarrassed she is. "What? I'm supposed to sit here and let him hit on you without saying anything?"

"He wasn't," she whispers. "He was only doing his job. That's what servers do. Ask how your food is, and see if you need drink refills."

"They don't need to stare down a guest's dress while they're doing it." She adjusts the top of her dress, eyes shifting back and forth almost guiltily as she arranges her blond waves over her shoulders. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was trying to flirt with him.

But I do know better. This is Scarlet. She would never betray me.

*“You’ve betrayed your family.”* Rebecca’s soft voice slithers its way up my spine from across the span of years. *“You’ve betrayed Joseph. Christian informed me you’ve refused to fall in line. What must we do before you’ll stop with this defiance?”*

“Ren?”

My gaze snaps from the window and back to her. “What?”

She says nothing, merely lowering her gaze until she’s staring at the steak knife clutched tight in my fist. I guess I’d be nervous, too, if a knife was pointed at me. I loosen my grip, eventually lowering it to the plate.

The steak is probably cold by now, anyway.

*Rebecca isn’t here. None of them are. You’re destroying everything.*

“Maybe we should see about getting dessert in the room. What do you think?” I’m losing my grip here. And she sees it, making everything exponentially worse. I’m not sure if I’m more concerned with hurting her or with her getting cold feet at the last minute. Both, I suppose.

The fact is, I could always make it up to her later if she’s upset. We have the rest of our lives for that. On the other hand, I doubt we’ll ever get another chance to successfully infiltrate New Haven.

Maybe if her father had done the job correctly, we wouldn’t be here at all. Maybe if he had truly gotten rid of Rebecca.

*That isn’t her fault.*

I can’t take it out on Scarlet.

“I think that sounds like a good idea,” she murmurs and immediately starts looking around.

Heat flares in my gut, and my fists clench.

*Looking for her little boyfriend?*

I shake the thought away. I need to stop this. What the fuck is happening to me? I can normally keep a lid on my temper

for her sake—mostly—but now, so close to New Haven, so close to the most dangerous phase yet, all bets are off.

“We’ll go to the hostess and let her know we need our check.” I push back from the table and take her by the arm, pulling her along with me. She winces, and I loosen my hold. *Fuck*. “I’m not waiting around for that asshole to hit on you again.”

“He wasn’t.” I pretend not to hear that. I’m afraid if I wait, if I have to interact with him again, I might do something she’ll hate me for. The idea only heightens the rage threatening to eat its way through me.

A few couples are waiting for tables when we reach the stand near the entrance. The girl looks up at me, wearing a bright smile that quickly fades when she finds me scowling.

“Is there anything I can do for you?” she chirps.

“Yes. You can locate our server and our check since he wasn’t able to keep from flirting with my girlfriend long enough to do his job. We haven’t finished our meal yet, but I couldn’t stand sitting there a second longer.”

Her mouth falls open, and somewhere under the bass drum of my heartbeat, I hear Scarlet’s dismayed groan.

The hostess clears her throat, sputtering, looking back and forth between the two of us.

“I am so sorry. That is not how we—”

“I’m not interested in excuses. Please, just get the check, so we can get out of here.” She holds a whispered conversation with another server before they both hurry off, leaving the stand empty.

Scarlet has her gaze trained on the floor when I turn to her.

“What?” I whisper, eyes sweeping the entry. “What’s wrong?”

Finally, I lock eyes with a guy standing near the door, wearing a dark polo shirt and khakis. If there was ever a douchebag uniform, that’s it.

“What are you looking at?” I mutter, jerking my chin in his direction while the couple standing near him backs away slowly.

Rather than address me, he makes the grave mistake of smirking at Scarlet.

“If you ever decide to drop the psycho and date a guy who won’t embarrass you in public, let me know.”

*This fucking asshole.*

A siren begins blaring in my head, loud enough that I want to cover my ears but know it won’t make a difference. Even now, with my vision red and a craving for this stupid bastard’s balls strong enough to knock the breath out of me.

Though that’s where rational thought ends.

“Ren!” Scarlet’s high-pitched squeal fades to the background in favor of the pained groan that results from my fist connecting with the stupid asshole’s cheekbone.

*Douchebag.*

“Say it again,” I growl, hauling him upright once he begins to slide down the wood-paneled wall. “Come on, you piece of shit. Say it again.”

When he does nothing but groan, I pull my fist back and hit him again. *Again.* Blood blooms on his lips as if by magic, and the sight only heightens the joy of breaking his face open one blow at a time.

He thinks he can take her from me. He thinks I’ll step aside and let him do what he wants. That I’m weak enough to let that happen.

“Yo, dude, lay off him.” Some foolish bystander tries to pull me away, but all it takes is my glare to send him running with his tail between his legs. Whatever he sees, it’s enough to drain the color from his face.

He tried to take her from me.

*Nobody will ever take her from me.*

Not if I have to burn the entire fucking world down to keep her in my grasp.

“Ren! Stop!” I hear the fear in her voice when I let the now unconscious body hit the floor, but she might as well be miles away. Nothing matters more than teaching this piece of shit a lesson he’ll never forget. And if bystanders witness it and learn a lesson, good. Everyone needs to know.

“You’re not taking her from me.”

Dropping to one knee, I pound on his nose and his jaw until my knuckles are bloodstained and aching. And still, it isn’t enough.

“You are not.” *Another blow.* “Fucking bastard.” *Another.*

I register Scarlet’s body practically draped over mine before hearing her frantic cry almost directly in my ear.

“You need to stop. Now. We have to go.”

Her nails dig into my arms, accompanied by a fierce whisper. “They’re calling the police.”

That’s what does it.

Those four words are the pin that bursts the balloon of my rage.

Beneath me is a bloodied, battered man who, moments ago, was smirking and sure of himself. I did this. I wiped that smirk off his face before rearranging it for him. “Won’t be hitting on anybody after this, will you?” I mutter, standing, my chest heaving, my cock threatening to burst out from my pants, all from the sheer exhilaration of defeating my foe.

*Not with a face like that.*

I did more than defeat him. He’s out cold, his face a broken, bloody mess. Somewhere behind me, a woman weeps softly.

“Come on.” Scarlet tugs my arm, inspiring me to hustle us both out the door. No one bothers to stop us after they’ve seen what I’m capable of. I parked close to the entrance in case we needed to get away quickly.

As it turns out, we do.

It doesn't occur to me until we're rolling down the street that we never paid for dinner.

*Who the fuck cares?* I checked into the hotel under a fake name, and this isn't my Jeep. Even if somebody caught sight of the tags, there'd be no tracing it back to me. We're out of here in the morning, anyway.

*Right? Am I kidding myself? Fuck, I don't know anything anymore.*

Except one thing. "I will never accept that shit from anyone. Ever."

Scarlet shakes, whimpering, looking over her shoulder like she expects to find cars chasing us down.

"Are you okay?" she squeaks.

Am I? I'm fucking euphoric, my body humming, adrenaline still flowing. I could've killed the bastard, and I almost wish I had. If it hadn't been for her presence—and the others around us—I'm not sure I could've stopped myself. The smug, arrogant prick.

"I'm fine." I catch her staring at my fists and shake my head. "They're fine, too. It doesn't even hurt." Not when I'm flying high the way I am now. Nothing can touch me.

"That was..." She settles back in her seat, a hand over her chest.

"Are you okay?" I know she can't be concerned for him. I already told her I'm fine. It's not the first time she's ever witnessed violence.

I can't imagine why she's still shaking.

After keeping me waiting until we reach the hotel garage, she slowly turns to me. "I thought you were going to kill him. I thought he might actually be dead."

"I wish I had killed him. He deserved it." Turning to her upon parking, I stare into her shining, teary, blue eyes. She's crying. I see it, but for some reason, I don't feel anything. It

does nothing to me. “He was a disrespectful piece of shit who thought he could take you from me.”

She continues breathing heavily like she’s teetering on the edge of panic. Her chest rising and falling so rapidly that I’m almost worried.

“Nobody’s ever taking you away from me,” I whisper, taking her face in my bloodstained hands.

She doesn’t flinch away. She wouldn’t. She can handle anything I give her because she was made for me. She was made for this.

“Nobody ever will.”

She couldn’t have chosen better words. Desire for her is always coursing through my veins, but mixed with the adrenaline still present? It’s a potent combination, powerful enough to leave me practically dragging her into the hotel. My queen, my prize. I must get her back to the suite. I need to taste victory, to claim her again. Mine, mine alone.

She doesn’t say a word until we’re in the elevator. “Ren —”

I back her into the corner, caging her in with my frame, indulging my hands in the feel of her skin as I work them under her dress.

Nothing can stop me. *No one.*

Which is why the tensing of her body leaves me growling, our noses touching. Only when she cringes when I attempt to work my fingers between her thighs do I demand an answer.

“What? Afraid of a little public play?”

She tries to turn her face away, eyes closed, but she’s no match for my hand on her jaw, turning her to face me. Escaping me is futile; doesn’t she already know this? *Maybe she needs to be reminded.*

It’s then I see the problem. My hands, the blood dried and flaking off the bruised knuckles. Instantly, I release her, and when I catch my reflection in the mirrored wall, there’s no missing the flecks of blood on my shirt.



I wouldn't sully my angel with this asshole's blood if my life depended on it. He wasn't even a worthy adversary. There was no chance of him taking her from me.

A better idea stirs in the back of my mind when the elevator chimes, signaling we've reached our floor. She follows wordlessly—there's no mistaking the energy crackling between us, though, certain of where the night will end. Unworthy adversary or not, I fought and nearly killed someone for her.

She's still scared. I can feel it, smell it on her, but something else lingers beneath. The thrill. Her arousal is thick by the time I swipe the key card in the lock to our door. Yeah, she might be afraid, but she's equally turned on.

"Take that off. All of it," I mutter, bolting the door before crossing the suite. The fact that she doesn't need to ask why or what I have in mind stirs a smile as I step into the bathroom and turn on the shower.

"We should really talk about what just happened." Her tone irritates me, like a mother scolding her child.

"I thought I told you to take your clothes off?"

She stops in the doorway, shaking her head like the brat she can be. I ought to know. "We have to talk first."

"What is there to talk about?" I meet her gaze in the mirror before peeling off my shirt. "Unless you wish I would've let that piece of shit take you from me."

"That wouldn't have happened, and you know it." She crosses her arms over her chest—defensive body language if I ever saw it.

"You're lucky I know it wouldn't have happened, or I might not believe you."

"Ren..." The scolding tone is gone, replaced with sadness or maybe concern. I'm not really sure. "You can't go through life beating the shit out of everybody who looks at me in a way you don't like. You're going to get yourself hurt eventually, and for what?"

“It’s pretty simple.” I lather up my hands at the sink, now slightly aware of the stinging sensation in my knuckles but ignoring it. “Somebody looks at you or talks to you the wrong way. I make them regret it. No khaki-wearing asshole will talk that way to my angel and get away with it.”

She slumps a little, staring at the floor. “It’s not going to end well.”

“Let me worry about that.” I shake my hands off before turning to her. “One thing I won’t do is make excuses. I won’t explain myself, either.”

“I know that,” she whispers. I have to wonder, or else why did she start this? “I worry, that’s all. I don’t want you getting hurt because of me.”

“I can’t think of a better reason.” Nor can I think of anything I want to do more than strip her bare using my teeth. None of her scolding and worrying has so much as touched the blazing heat that leaves my cock stiff with yearning. Only she can extinguish the raging inferno.

“I’m serious.”

“So am I.” Pushing away from the sink, I begin unbuckling my belt. “Now, I believe I told you to take your clothes off. And I was serious about that, too.”

I give the open belt a tug, raising an eyebrow. “Would you like me to show you how serious?”

Damn if her eyes don’t sparkle in anticipation, even if she does remove her shoes before turning around and sweeping her hair over her shoulder. “Can I get some help?”

Can she? I’m of half a mind to shred the damn dress, that eager to touch her. I settle for lowering the zipper, then allowing the backs of my fingers to dance along the smooth line of her back, savoring the way she shivers.

She lets the dress fall as she turns while I finish stripping without taking my eyes off her. How could I when she’s a wet dream come to life? And mine, every inch of her, from the perky tits to the sweet, plump pussy she exposes upon

removing her panties, and the slim legs I'm practically salivating to feel wrapped around my waist.

The shower's running hot, the stall full of steam, which billows out once I open the door. She follows me inside without a word, as wrapped up in the moment as I am. I could lead her out the window, and she might follow under the spell of lust and the deep, undying connection we share.

Watching her step under the showerhead and tip her head back until water runs over her hair, I can't help but remember the asshole whose face I rearranged. He could never have her this way. He isn't remotely man enough. She could never belong to him.

The sight of the water running in rivers over her tits, hips, and ass leaves me stroking myself. "I could jerk off to the sight of you. You're almost too perfect." And all for me.

I'd rather touch her than myself, so I join her beneath the steamy spray and tip her head back until our mouths align. She blinks away water, smiling as her arms wind around my waist. "I love you."

"And you are my entire world." Cupping the back of her head in my hand, I brush my lips against hers—gently, teasingly—until she parts her lips and groans. So needy. So easy to excite.

So mine.

Only mine. No one is taking her from me. Ever.

"Ren..." Her whisper is soft, sweet, dripping desire just as surely as her pussy's dripping in anticipation. "Touch me. Please."

Not that I need the invitation.

I can't keep my hands off her, running them over her slippery skin, my hunger growing with every touch until there's no choice but to shove her against the marble wall. She gasps—from the force or maybe the sensation of cool marble against her hot skin.

The sound fills the stall regardless of the reason, cut off when I cover her mouth with mine and thrust my tongue inside.

Plundering, pillaging, the victorious conqueror and his conquest. Who am I kidding? I conquered her a long time ago—just as she conquered me.

Her pussy draws me in like a flame drawing a moth to fire. I have no choice but to touch her there, where she's wetter than the skin now being pummeled by the hot, steamy spray.

It turned her on, watching me beat the shit out of that guy for her sake.

“You never have to worry, angel,” I whisper over the sound of her helpless moans, fingers delving through her sopping folds.

Two fingers slide easily into her slick heat, causing her back to arch, her body melting against mine as if I hit the magic button to make it do so.

“You'll always be mine,” I rasp against her ear while she moans into mine, riding my fingers like she'll ride my cock soon. “Always. No one will take you from me.”

Her nails rake over my back, hips jerking frantically to meet my fingers. She's already so close—her body responding even more strongly than I imagined, and the thought leaves me fucking her mercilessly with my fingers.

“Say it,” I growl over her animal moans. “You're mine. No one takes you from me, angel.”

Her mouth falls open, and her brow creases like she's concentrating hard. “Yours,” she whines.

Not good enough. “No one takes you from me. Right?”

Her head bobs up and down frantically while her breath comes faster and faster, her body tight and tensed.

“Yes! Oh, please, I'm going to come. Let me come.”

*No.* I pull my fingers from her tight channel.

Her eyes fly open, a moan dying on her lips. “No, no! Please!” Pain sizzles across my shoulders, her nails digging into the flesh. “I’m so close.”

“Not until you give me what I want.”

When all she can do is blink rapidly, her chest still heaving, the hand I close around her throat seems to bring her back to reality.

As does the presence of my cock. I impale her on it with one sure stroke, lifting her onto her tiptoes. She’s entirely mine, body and soul, locked with me. Her very life is in my hands—a squeeze of her throat reminds her of this, causing her eyes to widen in surprise.

And something else. Something that reaches inside me and stirs up all my darkest, most devious impulses. It’s the darkness in her, I realize. The darkness that’s always been there, the only reason she’d be drawn to a man like me.

Behind her innocent blue eyes, it’s there, stirring to life at the knowledge of my control over her.

“Give me what I want, angel,” I whisper, still buried inside her. “And you’ll get what you need. You’ll cream all over my cock the way your body is dying to.”

I withdraw slightly before driving myself deeper, hard enough to make her wince. And to make her muscles tighten around me in response.

“No one,” I growl, punctuating it with a deep thrust. “Takes you.” Another, so hard I grit my teeth. “From me.”

“No one,” she squeals, barely audible because of the pressure on her throat.

“Again.”

“No one.”

I quicken my rhythm, the need to lose myself in her overtaking the need to hear her submission. Her pledge of loyalty.

“Never?”

“Never, oh god, Ren... never.”

Are those tears in her bulging eyes? Fuck, even they get me hot, compelling me to lean in and lick one from her cheek once it's spilled over. My thrusts quicken, and my balls lift with the promise of release just around the corner. I own every part of her. Even her tears.

“You are mine... mine... mine.” Her head bobs, her body sliding up and down the smooth marble at her back. She's tightening, clenching me, a high-pitched whine filling the air and finally breaking the instant she lets go.

There's no fighting it once her pussy begins its greedy milking, drawing me deeper, muscles fluttering, and finally forcing me to fill her with every drop of my cum. The world spins around me, and a roaring noise fills my head, but it's not as loud as the roar I let out, a roar of sheer exhilaration.

The triumph of claiming what's mine.

She's trembling against me by the time I return to my senses, my softening cock still inside her. I pull out and watch as precious drops of cum drip between us, mixed with the nectar she unleashed, and some instinct compels me to shove as much as I can back into her.

Scooping it up with my fingers, I bring it back to her entrance.

*What would it be like, watching life grow inside her? A life I created?*

“What are you doing?” Scarlet whines, her gaze lust-filled.

“Putting this back where it belongs,” I murmur, easing the two fingers into her tight channel. She's slippery, making my entrance easy, and I move in and out of her slowly, forcing my seed back inside her.

I need her bound to me in every single way possible. Her father can't prohibit our marriage or relationship if she's pregnant.

“My angel.” I punctuate it with a soft kiss to the crown of her head, my heart swelling. Her entire body lights up once

more.

“Ren... stop. You’re going to make me come again.”

All I can do is grin as I fuck her slowly with my fingers, watching her pretty face fill with pleasure.

“I think I like you better post-orgasm. Your eyes glitter with pleasure, your cunt dripping with desire. Any day you’re beautiful as can be, but when you’re like this, needy and writhing, you’re much more than beautiful.

You’re a masterpiece.”

“Oh god...” Her body trembles, and she holds me, her smooth nails sinking deep into my flesh. Fuck, it hurts so good.

Her muscles tighten, her nose wrinkles, and her lips part on a silent scream.

“You’re so pretty when you come.” I can tell the moment she hits her peak. Her pretty toes curl, and her pussy flutters around my fingers.

“Mine,” I growl, the sound louder than intended.

She’s all I need to bring me back to solid ground, to remind me of what’s at stake now. My entire life, my future, my reason for living.

As soon as she’s done falling apart, I take her into my arms, her body sagging against mine. It’s all on the other side of what comes after we get rid of New Haven. What I need to do. Must do.

It’s still on my mind by the time we’re in bed, skin touching skin.

As usual, she is the little spoon, curled up against me and resting in my arms, even with all the extra space in this big bed. Her damp hair is close to my nose, and I revel in the fragrance.

I can’t wait until nothing is standing in the way of fully immersing myself in her. In what she makes me feel. Once this

is all behind us, I'll marry her, and we can get started on the life she deserves.

“We'll head out to New Haven before dawn,” I whisper before she can fall asleep. “I'm going to need you to fight with me. I can't do this without you.”

Her breath catches, and my heart catches with it.

Only to relax, soothed, when she nods her acceptance.





## REN

*I*s it really waking up early if you never went to sleep?

I don't think I've ever anticipated something this much in my entire life.

I should've known I'd never get my brain to quiet down long enough for sleep to find me. I'm far too pumped, running on adrenaline and excitement.

It's enough to hold my angel while she sleeps, though it's been clear she's troubled for hours. Every so often, she stirs, sometimes groaning softly as if she's having a nightmare. All it took was my whispered reassurance of her safety to settle her down again.

*I promise. You won't have any nightmares once this is over.*

No matter where life takes us, I'll make it good for her. She will never regret following her heart to where it led. To my arms, where she has always belonged. The fighting I did with myself, the struggle to hold her at a safe distance, was all a pointless waste of time.

We were meant for each other.

The digital clock on the nightstand counts down the minutes until finally, closing in on four o'clock, there's no putting off the inevitable any longer. We're only a handful of miles from the compound, but I'd still rather move out as early as possible to have darkness on our side.

Catching them off guard will give us the best advantage.

Brushing my lips over Scarlet's ear, I whisper, "Wake up, angel. It's time to get moving."

She makes a sleepy noise, groaning softly while stretching like a kitten. "I didn't know I even fell asleep."

"You did. You even snored." I grin. "It's almost four now."

One more kiss against her temple before I unwind my arms from around her warm, soft body. What I wouldn't give to stay in bed, to slowly wake her with my touch, my kiss, until we both end up passing out from exhaustion.

*No, not yet. Soon.*

River's counting on me to do this.

I can't let him down. No matter how enticing the sight of Scarlet's body is beneath a thin sheet draped suggestively over her bare ass.

The thought of how he'd react if he knew I was wavering even for a second gets me up and out of bed. I go to the bathroom for a quick washup before vacating the room for her. She's already dressed and has gotten everything in order, the suitcase waiting by the door.

It's strange the way my heart swells at something so ordinary. Nothing about her wanting to be efficient is inherently special, but I can't shake the memory of the way she reacted when I suggested needing her today.

She's afraid. I know it.

She doesn't have to be—she has me to protect her, and I'd rather lose my life than risk hers. I suppose it's a human reaction, no matter how it picks at the back of my mind. What do I have to do to gain her complete trust?

I can't let this shit get in the way. Not now. Focus is the name of the game.

The image of a broken, bleeding, weeping Christian on the floor while I straddled his chest fills my mind.

*"Please. No more. I gave you everything you asked for."*

He did—at least that evening when we had our first visit in years. He gave me all the information I needed to make this trip a success.

He could've given me more back in the day, though. That was always the problem. Back then, I needed mercy. Understanding. Patience. I was a child in the hands of sadists who convinced themselves they were doing God's work. There was nothing holy about it.

Desire unfurls in my core, but it isn't the ever-present desire for the woman now emerging from the bathroom. This time it's darker. Seething. Hungry.

"Everything ready?" she asks before shoving her feet into her sneakers.

I grunt in affirmation, too deeply entranced by the siren song of sweet revenge. I need it. I deserve to destroy and eliminate every last one of the evil fuckers who took my childhood, my parents, and the years that should've been full of happiness and wonder but that were instead full of fear, pain, and distrust.

How long did it take before I could sleep without a light on?

*"Your tears are worthless."*

Christian shouted through the locked door to the closet, where he'd shoved me when I wouldn't comply with one demand or another. The cold, cramped closet where I spent so many hours.

*"God doesn't hear you because he doesn't hear liars who defy their elders."*

I wonder if God heard him screech when River cut his balls off. I can only smile at the reminder.

A deep breath brings me back to the present, where I wheel the bag down the hall and into the elevator. I doubt anything but a skeleton crew is on duty at this time of the morning, except in the casino on the ground floor.

We don't cross paths with anyone before reaching the door leading to the garage, where the Jeep is where I left it last night.

That doesn't mean my head's not on a swivel, of course, constantly on the lookout for trouble. I scan our surroundings, then check to be sure nobody's lying in wait inside the car before opening the door. Scarlet's quick to climb in, her features pinched, and her eyes narrowed. She might be more focused than I am.

Once we're out of the garage and traveling down a much quieter Virginia Street—but not empty, not even close—I blow out a big breath that better centers me. So close now. There's no turning back now.

“Stay close to me at all times.” My gaze slides to her.

Her hands are clasped between her thighs, which bounce slightly, letting me know she is nervous. “Understood?”

“Yes. Of course.” She blurts out a shaky, high-pitched laugh. “Where else would I go?”

“Just making sure we're on the same page. I don't want you slipping out of my sight or reach.”

“Are we, though? I still don't know what you expect to do when we get there or what you expect me to do. I don't plan on running away or letting anyone touch me, but I don't know the plan. Everything will be okay as long as I know what's going on.”

True. I guess she needs to know what River and I cooked up.

“Christian gave us the code for the front gate, so there's no need to wait for a guard to open it. We'll park roughly a quarter mile from the gate to lower the chance of being noticed.”

“Okay.”

I've already been through it in my head, visualizing the Google images and seeing myself walking the grounds. “The first building on the right is the guardhouse. A single guard

should be on post there. I can take him out and confiscate his weapon before we move further into the compound.”

With a glance her way, I ask a question I should already know the answer to. “Do you know how to use a gun?”

A stupid question, but at least it has the effect of breaking the tension.

“Do you know who my father is? What do you think?”

There’s my fierce queen. “I wanted to be sure. If it makes you feel better, you can take the guard’s gun, and I’ll use what we find in the arsenal. That’s the square shed behind the guardhouse.”

“Maybe you should keep it.” She shrugs when I look her way. “Using a gun is one thing, but actually having to shoot somebody? I’m not sure I could do that. I’m not a killer.”

It’s a total knee-jerk reflex sort of thing, the way my hackles rise at her apprehension. “Either way, you’ll need to arm yourself. I won’t have you going around unarmed. And I might need you to cover me.”

She’s breathing too fast. Too hard.

*Fuck.* This was a mistake. I can’t have panic attacks getting in the way.

Rather than drive the last mile through the patch of flat, empty nothing between us and the compound, I pull to the side of the road and turn in my seat.

“I know what I’m doing. Follow my lead and act decisively. No hesitating. I need you to trust me. I wouldn’t put you in danger without knowing the risk associated.”

She nods, gulping. “It’s just that I—”

“No.” It’s almost a bark, and it has the power to make her jump. “You can do this. I know you have it in you. Do you think I’d bring you along if you couldn’t take care of yourself? I need a second pair of eyes behind my head. We’re a team, and I trust you.”

Her wide, trusting blue eyes search my face like she's hoping I'll change my mind at the last moment.

That's not going to happen, and my steady gaze conveys this.

She sighs softly before stiffening her spine, her chin lifting almost defiantly. "Got it."

Now is not the time for my dick to stiffen, but I can't help it. She's never turned me on the way she is now, ready to march into war at my side, no matter the fear.

River was wrong. Bringing her with me was the best choice I could've made. She gives me the strength I need, the focus, as I start off again.

If she can do this, so can I.

We're still a long way off from dawn, but I flip the headlights off as soon as a slight flicker of light appears on the horizon.

The compound.

New Haven.

*She's in there. They all are.*

I can't risk anyone spotting our approach, which means taking it slow the last half mile before pulling off the road at what was once a gas station but is now the home to weeds and any number of small creatures who scamper away at our approach. I hold a finger to my lips, and she nods before we open our doors and close them as quietly as possible.

I can recite the codes Christian gave up before he died backward and forward while standing on my head. Studying never interested me much, but when the subject is one I feel a connection to? That is a different story.

There's never been a more compelling subject.

Scarlet follows close behind me, her hand in mine.

I'd rather not speak, something she seems to understand. The silence—and the touch of her hand—allow me to train my focus on the compound and whether there's any movement

from the outer buildings. A wide swath of land has been fenced in with chain link and topped with barbed wire; only a third or so has been developed. I never understood that. If it is such a peaceful place. If you can come and go as you like, what is the point of barbed wire? It was never a place to keep you safe. It was to keep you inside. Trapped.

They have big plans.

What a shame those plans won't come to fruition.

When we're close enough for me to identify movement in the guardhouse, I squeeze her hand before coming to a stop.

My heart gallops in my chest as I drop into a crouch with her following suit, our legs brushing, only our mixed breathing breaking the silence.

It's not much more than a trailer set on a cinder block foundation, giving the guards the advantage of extra height. I'm sure it's nice for them to sit up high and feel like hot shit because they have guns and permission to use them.

I knew there'd be someone in there, but was it too much to ask for the building to be empty? For something to work in our favor and balance the odds a little? At least only one figure passes the window overlooking the sliding gate. It's at least fifteen feet tall and accessible only by the keypad in the guardhouse or the keypad mounted alongside an intercom speaker.

If the keypad is smashed, shot, or otherwise damaged, it trips the alarm. Christian shared that piece of information with us in hopes that I would take it easy on him.

We'll see if he truly helped. If the codes are any good.

*If not?*

Turning to her, I fish the keys to the Jeep from my back pocket and press them into her open palm. "In case I'm hurt. You do not hesitate. You run straight back to the car and get the fuck out of here. Understood?"

The keys jingle softly in her shaking hands, then she closes her fingers around them before jamming them into her pocket.



“Good girl.” As much as entertaining the notion of failure makes me grind my teeth in frustration, I need to cover my bases for her sake.

I nod a moment before we start out again, keeping close to the fence. So close to reaching the gate. I can hardly breathe or keep my thoughts straight with the prospect of everything finally coming together ricocheting through my awareness.

*This is it.*

No more planning, no more going through it in my head. I’ve performed this little invasion a hundred times.

This is only the hundred and first. No big deal, right?

As much as I hate doing it, I release Scarlet’s hand before crawling the rest of the way now that we’re only feet from the window overlooking the gate.

When my foot slips on a stone and sends it skittering against the chain link, I freeze solid, my heart in my throat.

Scarlet’s soft gasp is lost to the sound of chair legs scraping the floor not twenty feet from where we’re pressed against the ground.

It’s still completely dark out here, the only lights mounted on tall poles inside the compound. When a dark figure fills one of the guardhouse windows, all I can do is hope he assumes an animal did it.

Hopefully, he’s tired after a long, boring shift with another hour and a half to go, so he’s not particularly interested in a harmless stray on the other side of the fence. Every beat of my heart draws the tension out like a blade.

*Go, dammit. Go back to what you were doing. Convince yourself that keeping children locked behind a fence topped with barbed wire is a good thing, and you’re a good person for it.*

It can’t be more than a few seconds, even though it feels like a year, but finally, he backs away. My chest tightens, but I can breathe again. Still, I wait a slow count of ten before crawling the last few yards.

Once Scarlet's beside me, I lean close to her ear.

“The gate will begin to slide open automatically. I need you to be ready to run. Go through the second you can fit and duck behind the other side of the building. When he comes out, I'll take him out.”

I can't make out her face in the darkness, but I'm fairly confident she's nervous as hell and probably wide-eyed with fear and dread. It's not enough to make her back down, though—she nods, her cheek brushing mine as she does.

My racing heart swells with pride.

*My angel. My queen.*

Here we go. No turning back now.

*Christian, if you can hear me while burning in hell, you'd better not have fucked me here.*

I squint at the keypad, my fingers sliding over the buttons before I press decisively, entering the numbers he gave up: 1-0-6-7-9.

For one excruciating moment, nothing happens. Scarlet lets out a strangled gasp while my brother's voice rings out in my head.

*You fucked it up, just like I knew you would. I should've done it myself.*

Instead of a screeching siren signaling a breach, a soft buzz sounds before the gate begins to slide open. We both scramble to our feet before I shove Scarlet toward the growing opening, close on her heels. The guard will be out of his chair by now, going to the window before heading for the door. It's what I would do.

And it's what he does, the door to the guardhouse clicking open not even a heartbeat after Scarlet and I round the corner. He wastes no time pounding down the wooden stairs, jogging toward the gate.

Since he leaves the door open, a rectangle of light pours from inside, giving me a clear view of the butt of a gun protruding from his waistband.

He begins reaching for it...

*Here goes nothing.*

I dart forward, reaching him before he wraps his fingers around the butt. I take hold, instead, while wrapping my left arm around his neck from behind, jerking sharply, cutting off his air so there won't be any screaming.

He fights or tries to—one thing about the guards around here that I remember from the past is their lack of physical size and strength. There were never any brawny guys in the ranks. They didn't need physical strength when they had rifles and handguns on their side.

In other words, it doesn't take long before my prey slumps, his legs turning to rubber. I jerk hard again, as hard as I can, satisfied by the feeling of something giving way under my arm. His windpipe. Satisfaction rings proudly through me.

Quickly, I drag him into the deep shadows behind the guardhouse, leaving him wedged between the foundation and a dumpster after checking him for more weapons. He only had the single gun. Not even a knife.

I wonder if that means Rebecca's feeling lax, secure. I can only hope so.

Scarlet exhales when I reach her, still crouched in the shadows. She leans against me for a beat before straightening up again. There's no time for emotions now. The gate opening was quiet enough, but if anyone happens to be up and notices it sitting wide open the way it is, we're fucked.

Yet I can't take the chance of closing it to cover our asses—that means having to open it again. We might not have time to get into the guardhouse.

All we can do is keep going, staying low as we cut diagonally from the guardhouse to the shed Christian assured me houses the group's growing collection of weapons and ammunition.

It never ceases to amaze me that no one thinks the presence of a cache of rifles in what's supposed to be a peaceful religious community is odd.

Another keypad is mounted beside the door, and it's with more confidence that I punch in the code. A buzz, a click, and the door unlocks.

There are no windows in here, so I feel safe taking a few seconds to catch my breath and listen for any sounds of running or shouting.

If we had to, we could shoot our way out—a theory confirmed once I find the short chain hanging down from a single bulb in the middle of the ceiling and give it a tug, illuminating the space.

“Holy fuck.” Scarlet covers her mouth with one hand at the sight of three walls covered in mounted rifles. A shelf runs along the walls, too, stacked with handguns and grenades. This is definitely more than a few rifles.

After checking to be sure the Glock I took from the guard is loaded, I hand it to her before choosing a pair of Rugers for myself. I'm not taking any chances.

And considering they're already loaded, Rebecca's not taking chances, either. They want to be ready for whatever nameless, faceless threat they're guarding against. Law enforcement, most likely.

All they did was make it easier for me to quickly arm myself.

“Okay.” I kill the light before joining her at the door. “Rebecca and William stay in the largest building at the far end of the compound.” Much larger, according to the satellite images. But then they would. I'm sure it was the first structure built once New Haven sprang to life. To think, they've been out here all these years, rebuilding everything they lost. How sickening.

“I'll watch out behind you,” she promises.

Her voice is tight with excitement and anticipation.

If I didn't know better, I'd think she's enjoying this.

In my head, I go through the plan while opening the door a crack and peering out into the darkened compound.

A pillow to the side of the head to muffle the gunshots.

William will go first—there's a smaller, attached structure that sprang up a couple of years ago, according to the series of images I studied. Christian mentioned something about him living off the main house. I suppose when he reached a certain age, he wanted to cut Mommy's apron strings.

But he couldn't be bothered to cut himself completely free.

We'll take him out first before going deeper into the main building, where Rebecca currently sleeps in peaceful contentment. I can almost imagine her living in comfort, resting easy in her piety.

She took everything from me and so many others and continues to do so. My teeth grind, and my hand tightens around the gun. I almost have to hold myself back, so eager to sprint across the compound and blow her brains out.

I nod once I'm sure the coast is clear, slipping out, practically hugging the fence running behind one of four longhouses where individuals, couples, and entire families live with thin walls separating them, sharing communal kitchens in each building. Beyond them is an additional pair of structures housing male and female restrooms and showers.

Only the main house has its own private bathrooms.

It's those communal lavatories that have me worried. People could wander out here at any time of night. I hold Scarlet back at the far corner of the longhouse, across from one of the bathrooms, watching and listening closely for any signs we're not alone out here.

I'm about to signal for her to follow me before a sharp cracking noise makes my heart lurch and my muscles tense. I know that sound. I know it too well. I hear it in my nightmares all the time.

The noise carries me toward the men's restroom, my feet moving all on their own. A second crack fills the air louder than the first.

Scarlet's light footsteps tell me she's close behind, but it's the crack of the belt that concerns me more. That and the high-

pitched whimpers following it.

*A child's whimpers.*

“You were warned about this, weren't you?” Another crack, so sharp and loud, it makes Scarlet suck in a gasp as we reach the open door. This isn't a part of the plan, but I can't walk away. I can't ignore this. Every fiber inside me pulls me toward the sound. I couldn't ignore it even if I wanted to.

“It's not mine! I just found it out here!” The voice of a little boy, no older than eight or ten. Full of pain, tears, and humiliation. He's so alone, the way I was. “I promise, it's not my comic!”

“Your comic book or not, you knew it was here, and you snuck out to read it in the middle of the night while your parents slept. Do not waste your breath or your tears.”

The past weaves itself with the present, the voice of the man dishing out the punishment blending with Christian's until I might as well be in that closet again. Or draped across the spanking chair, my bare ass earning red stripes no matter how I begged for mercy that never came.

“I'm sorry!” The boy weeps, and Scarlet clutches my arm.

*We have to go. Keep moving.*

There's a plan at risk, not to mention our lives.

But...

One lash, another, another.

Quick, brisk, stinging.

He's going to break the skin.

He's going to scar this kid.

This child.

*Rebecca... William... they need to die. This needs to end, and the best way to do that is to kill them. Now, while we have the chance.*

*Crack! Crack!*

The crying ceases, but the fucker is still beating him.

That's what makes me burst through the door rather than continue to the main house. It's what makes me seek out the sadistic prick lashing a little boy for being a little boy, lashing him long past the point of punishment.

I'm snarling, panting like a rabid dog by the time I burst into the shower room, where a tall, lanky man hardly older than me holds a belt looped in his hand while a small, skinny little boy—naked from the waist down and covered in crisscrossing welts—lies face down on the tile floor, breathing but otherwise still.

“Who are you?” He's breathing hard, his face flushed, and his eyes glittering.

I know that light. I've seen it before. Pure fucking evil.

Scarlet squeals in the moment it takes me to raise my arm. “Ren!”

Too late. I'm already squeezing the trigger, already firing on all the monsters of my youth. Monsters who still live and breathe in my subconscious and probably will for this little boy, too. This poor kid.

The bullet is already leaving the barrel, crossing the room, and tearing its way through the bastard's head.

The sound is deafening against so much tile. Tile painted red when the back of his head explodes and splatters the wall behind him. His eyes are wide open, staring in sightless surprise by the time he hits the floor.

My ears ring too loudly for me to hear what Scarlet is saying, but whatever it is has her tugging my arm. Her eyes are wild, and her face pale.

Finally, her voice begins filtering through as the ringing fades. “We have to go. It was too loud.”

Fuck. She's right.

By the time we burst outside, lights are flipping on behind two windows in the longhouses.

“Shit!” I take her by the hand, sprinting for the nearest longhouse again, running full-out in the narrow space before

the wall and the fence.

We have to reach the gate before somebody closes it.

*I shouldn't have brought her.*

*I shouldn't have shot him.*

*He shouldn't have hit a kid.*

*I knew you would fuck this up.*

River's voice gets me moving faster, bolting straight for the gate and finding it standing open once we've cleared the longhouse. They haven't discovered the empty guardhouse yet. There's still a chance.

We pass the arsenal shed at a full run; the sound of raised voices and slamming doors drowns out Scarlet's panicked gasps for breath.

Just a little farther. A little more.

*I shouldn't have done it.*

*They're still alive. I fucking failed.*

"Hurry," Scarlet squeals when we're only feet from escape, and I understand why. Male voices ring out behind us, followed by pounding footsteps, but it's too late. We're already rounding the fence, running in the dark that isn't so dark anymore. The eastern horizon is beginning to lighten, which at least makes it possible to watch where I'm running.

Though I'd swear my feet don't touch the ground. I'm flying, weightless, triumphant, even in failure. One less evil bastard. One less abusive prick.

*One message sent.*

We reach the Jeep, and I forget at first that I gave Scarlet the keys. She unlocks her door, then thrusts them my way before throwing herself inside. Only once we're pulling away from the old gas station does the blaring of sirens split the early morning air.

I might not have taken out my intended targets, but I made sure they know they're vulnerable. Let them be the ones to



sweat it out for once, dreading the day it's their turn.

"Are you okay?" I shout, tearing down the road at eighty miles an hour, dust flying in all directions. "Are you injured?"

"I'm fine." She watches over her shoulder, still panting, almost wheezing. "I'm fine. Jesus, Ren. That was close."

She's not telling me anything I don't know. Another thirty seconds, if that, and this could've turned out much differently. I gave in to impulse, to the rage that still bubbles and flows through me like lava beneath a volcano.

"Why did you do that?"

The question leaves me gripping the wheel tighter, my foot heavy on the gas. I wish she understood how complicated a question she's asked.

I wish I had it in me to tell her.

One day, I will.

This is not that day. Not when the memories are so close to the surface. When I can feel the lashes against my ass and thighs just as clearly as if I were the one lying on that shower floor.

I can't lift the lid on that horror by discussing it.

I wouldn't want to hurt her.

It's better to leave the question unanswered. I'm too concerned with getting us out of here as fast as possible, putting miles between us and the compound.

I'll come back, and when I do, there will be no more mistakes.

No giving in to rage, no diverting from the plan.

All I have to do now is convince River I made the right move.



# SCARLET

*Two Weeks Later*

*I*'m a terrible person.

I have to be, or else why would I sigh in relief at the sound of the front door opening and closing?

*"I'll be sure to pick up some Pepto,"* Ren told me, kissing my forehead before he left. Naturally, it was nice to feel that.

He's the love of my life—that hasn't changed, no matter how strange and awkward things have been between us since Reno.

Just the thought of it is enough to make my already sour stomach feel even worse. That's how bad it's been lately. I'm walking around with a stomachache half the time, all from my nerves being on edge. Curling up in a tight ball, I close my eyes and breathe slowly in hopes of staving off a fresh wave of nausea.

Reno was supposed to be the end of things. When everything turned around, and we could finally build some semblance of a life together. I've already turned my back on everything and everyone else, and I still stand by that decision. He's all that matters. He always has been.

We were supposed to move forward. He kept promising, didn't he? That everything would be okay for us once he finally settled this vendetta against the cult's founders.

And I believed him because I had to. Because I love him.  
I should've known it wouldn't be that simple.  
Two weeks later, and things are just as bad for him as ever.  
Maybe even worse—and I know why.

*River.*

The thought of him makes me growl into my pillow. This is all his fault. He's the one who got Ren started on this in the first place, stirring up the past and feeding his rage. And he's the one who's been absolutely impossible to deal with ever since he found out Rebecca and William and the others are still alive and breathing.

Why he can't get off his ass and take care of this himself is beyond me.

I have my theories, though, and one of them involves setting Ren up to take the fall. River doesn't want to be the one with his ass on the line, risking arrest, or much worse, should the cult leaders decide to take matters into their own hands. It's much safer to urge Ren, to berate him and insult him, to tell him he has no balls and no commitment.

Not that I've heard it for myself, but from what I've heard Ren shouting in reply, I can imagine. At one point, he did tell his brother to do it his own damn self if he had such little confidence, which I'm sure had River backpedaling.

But not for long.

I'm the one who has to deal with the fallout, and I'm getting sick of it. If I had that jerk in front of me now, more than a few words would be exchanged.

I don't think he'd enjoy the outcome.

There's a reason Dad used to call me a spitfire. Why he more than once sighed in defeat and mourned the man who believed himself up to the challenge of taming me. I'd make River wish he could crawl into a hole and stay there once I finished with him. After everything he's done to make Ren's life miserable? He deserves it and so much worse.

The very thought of him makes my stomach churn again. I don't think deep breathing will help me this time—bile begins rising in my throat, and it's all I can do to stumble to the bathroom and drop to my knees in front of the toilet before my stomach begins heaving in earnest.

I hate him for this. For making our lives miserable. For turning Ren into someone I hardly recognize sometimes.

For forcing Ren to plan another trip to Reno.

The idea of it leaves me leaning over the bowl again, emptying all the foul bile in my stomach until nothing's left but to heave painfully with no result. After a minute or so of shaky breathing, it seems like the worst has passed, so I flush the toilet before standing on trembling legs and turning on the water in the sink.

I've been like this for the past week, maybe ten days now. It started not long after we returned, and Ren announced we'd be going back soon. The idea of sneaking into that bleak, foreboding place twisted me up, and I've been that way ever since.

Who could blame me? It wasn't enough for us to almost get killed or at least caught? To watch Ren blow a guy's brains out? I'd never seen anything like that before and hope I never do again.

The blood and brains on the tile...

I need to stop thinking about it. It's bad enough I'm sick every morning, throwing my guts up. Hopefully, Ren will find something to help me with it. He offered to grab ginger ale and saltines while he was out, too. Even though I only ever feel this way early in the day, and it normally passes before lunch, I figured it couldn't hurt.

My tooth brushing slows, and I lift my head, eyes wide in the reflection, face pale.

Only in the morning, only for the past ten days or so.

When was the last time I got my period? Before coming here, back at my parents' house. It's been more than a month since Ren took me.

I told him he couldn't come inside me because I'm not on birth control.

That hasn't stopped him.

*Am I pregnant?*

My hand trembles. The toothbrush drops into the sink, but I'm only vaguely aware of that in light of the shock waves rippling through my brain. I cup my boobs, staring at them in the mirror. They're a little tender.

I'm not making this up in my head.

I might be pregnant. I'm almost sure of it, in fact. Why else would I have all these symptoms? Now I wish I had gone with Ren so I could get a test. I wish I could call him to ask for one. Now that the possibility is there, I want to know for sure right away.

A baby. *Our baby.* The start of our family.

Tears fill my eyes while my hands slide down to rest over my belly. I can't wait to tell him. I know he wants a family as much as I do.

This could be what it takes to shake him out of this insane cult fixation.

Hope blooms in my heart at the idea.

Yes, this baby could be just what we need, what he needs to adjust his priorities. He'll now have more than just me to protect and love. He'll have our child, and nothing in the world means more than that.

After all, he's still the same person he always was at heart. Family means everything to him. That hasn't changed any more than our love for each other has changed. He's going to be so happy.

And New Haven will lose its luster. I'm sure of it. There won't be any more taking chances, no more obsessing. No more of these late-night fights with River that sometimes wake me up.

And we can get him some help to deal with his outbursts. The baby will convince him he needs to get himself under control and learn to live with whatever it is that left him so easily unbalanced.

We can make the life we deserve.

I haven't felt this hopeful in a long time, smiling and even laughing in glee as I wash my face before returning to the bedroom to get changed. I can't wait for him to get back. I can't wait to see the look on his face.

A baby. Our baby. Will it be a boy or a girl? How far along am I? The question makes me pause in the process of pulling on a pair of leggings to count back. Six weeks, I guess? Maybe seven? I'll need to get to a doctor sooner or later. I wonder if there are any in town.

There has to be, right?

So many questions, but this is different than the constant worries and questions plaguing me for weeks. These are happy questions, full of possibilities and promise.

"We're going to be so happy, little baby," I promise, almost overcome with emotion at the thought of holding the baby Ren and I created together.

Like a living symbol of our love.

As if on cue, the Jeep's engine rumbles outside. The sound leaves me almost jumping out of my skin with anticipation. This is it. This is what we need, what he needs. I just know it. I almost consider running out to deliver the news but force myself to wait the entire extra minute or so before he unlocks the door.

I pull in a breath, prepared to greet him as I leave the bedroom.

But then I see his face.

His narrowed eyes. The tight line of his clenched jaw. The hunch of his shoulders, his heavy tread as he crosses the room after slamming the door hard enough to rattle the walls and windows.

*Shit.* What happened this time?

There isn't much in the world that could sweep away my joy, but this does it. Like magic, I find myself shrinking back, wanting to stay out of the way. The less I bother him when he's like this, the better for both of us.

Right now, though, I doubt he even notices me. "Motherfucker." He slams a bag onto the kitchen table but doesn't bother unloading it, instead stomping his way to the cabinet where the glasses are kept. He snatches one from the shelf and fills it in the sink—then smashes the glass against the porcelain without bothering to take a drink.

I barely manage to stifle a shriek, backing into the bedroom and not stopping until my legs hit the bed frame. "Piece of shit... telling me what to do... thinking he knows the first fucking thing about me..."

Of course. River. It's always about that damn River. I guess he must've called Ren while he was out, or maybe it was the other way around. Something tells me Ren knows the mention of his brother sets my teeth on edge, so he might've waited until he was alone to make the call.

Look where it got us.

"Fucking asshole." I flinch when the refrigerator door slams, and again when one of the kitchen chairs hits the floor and, from the sound of it, breaks.

"I do all this fucking work, and he has the nerve to act like it's all on me."

I hate you, River. So much so a rush of warmth washes over me and leaves me trembling, not with fear but with rage.

There I was, ready to make the happiest announcement of my life, and instead, I'm afraid to leave the room. He couldn't have destroyed things any more thoroughly if he'd deliberately set out to do it.

What am I supposed to do? For the first time since this began, I wish my brother was here. Q knows Ren's ups and downs better than I do.



Yes, it's been years since they've seen each other, and Ren wasn't like this before, but still. He's bound to know some trick to calm him when he's pissed off and getting worse by the second.

I wish I could call him. If only to hear his voice. It might give me a bit more courage.

Ren slams a cabinet door, and I jump, teeth gritted. Something has to cool his rage before he tears the entire cabin apart. I stiffen my spine—he needs me, and I can't let him down. I can't afford to be a coward now.

Still, the best I can do is tiptoe back into the living room. He's standing at the counter, his back to me, hands gripping the edge.

His back and shoulders heave dangerously, his head hanging low.

“What happened?” I whisper, arms wrapped around my trembling body.

At first, he only breathes heavier than before. Louder. “Everything's fucked, that's what,” he finally growls. The sound of it makes every hair on my body stand on end. Whatever happened must've been brutal.

“It doesn't have to be. We can make it right. I know we can.”

My heart sinks when he snorts. “You would say that. It's easy to when you don't have the first fucking clue.”

I don't have a clue? As if I haven't been in the thick of things with him for weeks. As if I haven't suffered right along with him, hurting because he's in pain, running for my life from a bunch of nutjobs with a collection of guns that almost made me pee my pants.

He's so far away from me. It wouldn't feel right to announce the baby now, with all this stress and animosity in the air and a broken chair on the floor. I need to bring him back around first.

Only one thing comes to mind, something that always does the trick. That brings us back together.

“I was going to take a shower,” I murmur, watching him closely to gauge his reaction. “Do you want to join me? It might relax you.”

He keeps me waiting longer than usual—who am I kidding? I usually don’t have to wait at all. Normally, he’d already be in the bathroom with a trail of clothes strewn behind him. Since when is he not jumping at the offer?

“Yeah.” It’s a deep grunt. “Yeah, let’s do that.”

My heart’s not really in it right now, not with him the way he is, but it’s a means to an end. And it isn’t like I don’t look forward to any chance of being close to him. If it means shaking him out of what he’s suffering through, all the better. The shower’s running warm by the time he joins me, watching as I step into the tub and pull the curtain closed.

*Please, let this work.*

I want so much to tell him about the baby. I want him to be happy. By the time he opens the curtain, I’m under the showerhead, running my fingers through my hair as water runs over it.

The familiar look of lust comes over his face, making his nostrils flare and his lips curve in a pleased little grin. “No wonder he’s so obsessed with you,” he murmurs almost too quietly for me to hear—and even then, I couldn’t have heard him right with the water running over my head.

“Come on in before we run out of hot water.” I hold out a hand, and he takes it, stepping into the big tub and drawing the curtain closed. Instead of trading places with me so he can wet himself down, he runs his hands over my sides and draws me closer, my wet body against his dry chest.

“You look good enough to eat.” His hands slide over my skin, almost rough, possessively. That energy is still bubbling in him, I guess.

He’s feeling demanding, full of anger and frustration, and I don’t know what else. He would never tell me, would he?

Unless we're talking about us, or our relationship, he's not much on discussing his feelings.

"You can eat me once I'm nice and clean for you." I offer a suggestive wink, reaching around him to grab a washcloth.

The closing of his hand around my wrist brings me up short, my eyes going wide while he looms over me. "I have a better idea."

Ren is looking at me, but it doesn't appear as if he sees me.

My heart skips a beat. "What did you have in mind?"

He lowers my arm before wrapping my hand around his erect dick.

"Does this give you a clue?" My touch makes him groan before he closes his eyes and allows his head to fall back a little.

*Good.* Let this override everything else. Let him focus on the way he feels and how I make him feel. It will snap him out of his rage.

I stroke him slowly, teasingly, the warm spray running between our bodies. Even my conflicted feelings and the disappointment of not feeling free to blurt out my happy news aren't enough to keep my body from responding to his excitement. To what I'm capable of doing to him.

"Don't just stroke it." His eyes open long enough to meet mine—they're still hard, just as hard as what I'm holding in my fist. "Put it in your mouth."

He places his hands on my shoulders when I don't move fast enough and forces me to my knees.

It isn't easy, the tub being so slippery, but I can't pretend there's not something exciting about it. Being forced to give him pleasure.

Definitely not according to my own schedule, though. No, he practically shoves himself into my mouth before I have a chance to lick him the way he usually likes it. He's not in the mood for that. He wants satisfaction, and he's going to get it. Even if it means using me.

I'm not kidding myself. The touch of his hand on the back of my head, holding me in place so he can fuck my mouth, is enough to make me wet, my clit swelling in anticipation within the first few deep strokes that leave him hitting the back of my throat.

"Fuck... oh, yeah, that's good... your tight little mouth..."

His dark, filthy words take my desire and warp it into something deeper, something I'm powerless against. The sheer thrill of being with him like this, of controlling his pleasure and making him forget everything but this. Us.

"You suck cock like you're hungry for cum. Is that it?" He adds his other hand, gripping my head between them before pumping his hips faster. "You can't wait to drink my jizz?"

"Mm-hmm," I barely manage to get out, his rapid, unforgiving strokes making it hard to do anything but breathe.

Deeper, harder, so fast I have to fight for every shallow breath.

"Keep going, and you'll get your wish. Cock-hungry slut. Is that who you are?" He chuckles darkly, pummeling my face, my mouth, my throat.

I can't breathe. It hurts. Something is off. Ren doesn't take pleasure in hurting me if I'm not also receiving pleasure.

Yet when I slap my palms against his thighs and ass, all he does is laugh. The sound is cruel, and I can barely stifle a dismayed groan. I might as well not be here. He's using me, fully and completely, fucking a wet hole that might or might not be attached to a human being he loves.

Losing himself in the moment.

"So good... suck it, slut..." He begins moaning, his dick like a sledgehammer pummeling me faster and faster. "Such a warm mouth that will soon be filled with my cum. Are you ready, princess?"

*Princess?* I don't even get a chance to comprehend what he's said.

One more sharp thrust and the familiar taste of his cum floods my mouth. I'm grateful, opening my throat to take it all, relieved I'll be able to catch my breath. He doesn't normally come without getting me off first—at least once—but I'll accept it so long as it means he's back to his senses.

His hands loosen until they stroke my slick hair. His gentle touch sends relief through me, loosening my muscles and soothing me the way I wished to soothe him. "That was good. We'll have to do that again soon."

"Sure, we will," I agree, standing again, then turning to face the water so I can rinse my mouth and face.

He runs his hands over my hips, and I lean back against him. The father of my baby. I can't wait to tell him. I can't wait for all of it.

"Feeling better?" I take the chance of whispering, my head resting on his chest.

"Hell yes." The pressure of his fingers against my boobs makes me wince—they're tender, more sensitive than usual. "We might need to take this to the bedroom. But later. I've got shit to take care of."

The water's still warm but feels chilly just the same. So much for that. No, he's not throwing stuff around, but he's still sharp.

Still far away, no matter how close our bodies may be.

At least he's calm now. I have to take my wins where I can get them.

My brief hopefulness dissolves in the face of the mess he made in the kitchen. My heart sinks dismally at the sight once I'm out of the bathroom, wrapped in a towel. We can't live this way anymore, with his mood swings and unpredictability. Not when there's a baby coming.

*I have to help him through this. There's got to be a way.*

He's thinking something close to those lines when I join him in the bedroom, where he's finished drying off. "We're working on the plans for the next trip to New Haven," he

informs me, barely looking my way as he pulls clothes from the dresser. “We were talking it over earlier and—”

“So that’s it.” My heart is so heavy as I remove my towel to dry my hair a little before getting dressed. I should’ve known they were moving forward with the plans. Only the thought of going back to New Haven would leave him that enraged.

“What else?” He snorts over his shoulder, shaking his head. “The job wasn’t finished.”

“But we almost were—and you know they’re going to be looking out for you to come back.” And I’m carrying your child, or I’m pretty sure I am. We can’t risk this. Why won’t the words come out? I don’t know.

“So what? We’ll figure it out.”

“I’m just saying...” It’s a desperate move, but I have to at least try to get through to him. “Maybe a little help is in order. This is too much to take on your shoulders, all alone.”

“I’m not all alone, am I? I have you.”

Why does he sound so sarcastic? Like it’s a bad thing. I wish he didn’t leave me feeling so useless, but that’s the power he has over me. His opinion means that much.

“I’m not enough. I know it.” I pull on my clothes and sit on the bed while he combs his wet hair away from his forehead. He’s even scowling at his own reflection. How do I get through to him?

“What’s your suggestion?”

“Bringing in backup. There are so many of them, and only two of us. We’re hopelessly outnumbered—because you know they’ll have guards on Rebecca now. If they didn’t already. How do we get past them? Do you see what I mean?”

He lowers the comb to the dresser, pinning me in place with a cold glare in the mirror.

“What is your suggestion?” he asks again, speaking slowly, enunciating every word clearly.

This doesn't bode well.

But I have to get it out. "We do have somebody in our corner with a small army at his disposal. Let me reach out to my dad. He'll be on our side once he knows what you're trying to do. Of all people, he's aware of what they did back at Safe Haven. He'll want to get rid of them just as much as you do."

*There. I said it.*

And when he lifts his lip, snarling, I wish I hadn't.

"Your family. That's the answer?" His fists hit the dresser's surface, and the mirror shakes, contorting his reflection for an instant. "After all this, you want to run to Daddy with your tail between your legs?"

"It's not like that," I whisper.

"And should I kiss the ring? Fall in line like another good little soldier?"

"Why are you saying this?"

He whirls on me, and oh my god, the loathing. It's so thick I can almost taste it rolling off him as he lunges for me. "I fucking knew it."

I sputter in surprise and fear when he hauls me to my feet. "Ren, it's not like that."

My words fall on deaf ears. "Running back to Daddy, afraid to be with me, lying about being on our side."

"I didn't lie!"

His hands grip my arms painfully before he shakes me hard. "I should've ended them when I had the chance, all of you. But no. He didn't want to, the fucking coward."

"What?"

"He fucked that up, and he fucked up in Reno. One pathetic failure after another."

"Who?" I'm as lost as ever and more frightened with every word, every shake, every breath. His eyes widen, and his grip

loosens.

“He would never help.”

Now it’s a whisper filled with pain and uncertainty. “My dad? Sure, he would. He’s always seen you as a son, you know that. And you were a brother to Q. That hasn’t changed.”

“Not after what I did.” There’s sorrow and uncertainty, and it hurts.

I don’t think he’s ever sounded this way when talking about the attack—I don’t think we’ve ever discussed it, actually, after he admitted he was the attacker. I’ve been afraid to bring it up for obvious reasons.

“Time has softened that, and you had your reasons.” Reasons I’m still unsure of, but... “I know you did. You wouldn’t hurt him unless you felt like there was a reason for it.”

But that happened before he left Corium, and all this time, I’ve been assuming he was injured after leaving. Which means he wasn’t injured or sick when he attacked my family. So why did he—

He flings me away from him suddenly, and I bounce on the bed while he stalks from the room. “Fuck you, Scarlet. You’ve been a mistake from the beginning, just like I told him.”

“What are you talking about?”

My words fall on deaf ears since he doesn’t hesitate in slamming the door shut and locking it.

“Ren!” I jump from the bed and fling myself at the door, jiggling the knob to no avail. “Why? Why are you doing this?”

His voice is loud and strong on the other side of the door. “If you’re not with us, you have no place in my life.”

“You can’t mean that. You know I’m with you.”

He doesn’t say a word. He’s shut me out again.

I touch my forehead to the wood, tears coursing down my cheeks, my heart aching like it’s about to shatter.



*Please, Ren, please come back to me.*



# SCARLET

I'm unsure how much time passes.

I'm no longer crying. A numbness has overtaken my mind.

I never thought I'd find myself here, least of all with Ren. My eyes are swollen and hurt from the constant crying, but more than that, my heart hurts.

How long did I beg him to let me out? How many times did I tell him to speak to me, to let me explain what I meant? I've lost track, half out of my mind with fear and confusion.

I cover my mouth with my hand to stifle a sob.

The truth is right in front of me, written in blinking neon letters a hundred feet high. *I can't help him.* I love him, and I can't help him.

I'm carrying his child, and I can't ease whatever torture he's going through. Because that's what it is. He's being tortured by whatever lives inside his head.

I'm the world's biggest fool. But then, how was I supposed to know how bad things really were?

*Maybe you would have if you'd stepped back and looked at everything clearly.* No. Instead, I made excuse after excuse for him, explaining away the mood swings and how he treated me.

The way he not only killed a man but laughed at my reaction.

I should have seen it then.

Why didn't I see it? That he's sick, really sick.

*Because you didn't want to see it. Because you thought you could help him.*

Denial is a hell of a thing.

I can't believe it didn't hit me until an hour ago. If he pushed Q down the stairs, which he has admitted, he must already have been sick before he left Corium.

His condition was under our noses all this time, and we never saw it.

Not even my brother or father saw it. Either he was hiding it well or it only got worse over time.

Maybe he didn't even know—I'm sure he doesn't know now. Truly sick people never do.

My Ren. My everything.

He's so sick, and there's nothing I can do to help.

And while I have yet to confirm I'm pregnant, I can feel it.

If it was just me, this would be different. I wouldn't be this scared. Knowing myself, I would stubbornly hold on, convinced I could pull him out of this somehow. That there was still enough of him left, that I could get through to the part of him that's still healthy, still self-aware.

Maybe I could convince him to go to a doctor for my sake.

Now, I'm afraid I don't have the time for that. I don't know how he will react if I tell him I'm pregnant because I can't predict anything about him anymore. A light switch flips on and off inside his head, and he goes from his normal self to this other version of him. The version that is coarse and crude. Cold and violent, with a thirst for blood.

A sudden idea makes me shudder.

What if it's that part of him in charge when I tell him about the baby? What if he hurts me because a baby isn't in his plans? All that matters is New Haven and revenge. There's no room in that for a baby, is there? The thought leaves me cracked open.

I cannot believe I'm actually thinking this, but then I can't believe anything that's happened. Maybe I'll be able to figure it out one day, but this is not that day.

Today, there's only one thing I can do, one thing I have no idea how to pull off. I promised him I'd always be here, no matter what, but this is bigger than us. I need to get out of here to get him the help he needs.

It still doesn't feel real, thinking like that. I've sacrificed everything to be with him because I was sure it was right. That this is where I'm meant to be.

That was before. Before I saw the depth of his illness.

Before I knew I had a baby to think about it.

*Am I justifying myself?* Trying to convince myself this is the right thing to do? I guess so—and I have to try harder because a part of me, a very big part, wants to stay.

No, that wishes I could stay, which are two very different things. It would be nice if I could. If there was a way we could be together without me waking up every morning afraid of what I'll find. Of who he'll be this time.

I will not put our child through that.

This is about more than me. Maybe it's the wake-up call I needed.

I pull a shaky breath into my lungs. There hasn't been much noise on the other side of the door. No throwing or breaking of things.

No talking to himself, which I take as a good sign.

I'm sure he's still mad at me, or else why would he still have me locked in this room? I tiptoe over to the door and press my ear to the wood, closing my eyes to block out everything but what I hear.

It takes a minute or so, but I'm pretty confident that what I'm hearing is his soft, steady breathing. I'm sure he laid on the couch at some point and is now peacefully asleep. Good, and not only because he needs it.

I've never seen a person go so long without sleeping more than a couple of hours a night, tops. Eventually, he's going to break down in a very serious way.

I can't be here when he does. As much as I hate the idea of leaving him alone to suffer, it has to be done. I'll return for him with the help he needs. Things will be different then.

My eyes sweep the room before I even know what I'm thinking about. Like my survival instinct has kicked into overdrive while the rest of me fights to catch up. My gaze lands on something I bought at Walmart before we went to Reno, anticipating a nice night and the potential to dress up and do my hair.

A handful of hairpins sit on the dresser, practically begging to be used.

I grab a couple of them, unbending them as I crouch in front of the doorknob. I've never actually tried to do this before, but I've seen it done, and I understand the mechanics. It's only a matter of doing it quietly enough that Ren won't be disturbed.

This is insanity. The part of me that wants nothing to do with this, the part that thinks it would be perfectly reasonable to pretend this never happened and settle for hoping he feels better when he wakes up. The voice screams in my head. *This is Ren. He wouldn't hurt me.*

I need to wake up. The fact is, he has already hurt me. Just because I'm not bruised doesn't mean no harm has been done. He mocked me for my reaction to the way he killed that man, taunted me, and treated me like I was nothing. That's not even counting the anxiety he's made me feel.

That part of him is still inside. I can't pretend it's not. I've pretended all along, and it hasn't helped anything.

That's what I need to keep in mind as I begin to pick the lock. My hands are shaking too much at first to be effective, but the memory of what I'm carrying inside me and how much they need to be protected focuses my energy and steadies me. I can get through this. I have to get through this.

Slowly, I insert the first pin into the lock, turning the tumbler slightly before inserting the second tiny piece of metal. I ease it in, feeling around for the pins comprising the lock, concentrating hard on the feel of them as I go from one to the next, lifting them as I slide the metal along.

*Am I doing this right?*

I think I am, but I won't be sure until I finish. It does seem like it's working, but no matter how hard I try, this is not a silent job. The knob jiggles, and metal scrapes against metal. Panic rises up, bubbling over the surface.

I'm making too much noise. I know it.

Especially when I drop one of the pins to the floor. In the silent cabin, it's as loud as if I'd struck a drum, but that could also be my overheated imagination running away with me.

Either way, I freeze up with my heart in my throat at the sound of movement from the other side of the door.

He moves fast, so fast there's hardly time for me to get out of the way before he unlocks the door and shoves it open.

"What do you think you're doing?" he demands, his blue eyes stormy, his lips pulled back from his teeth in a nasty snarl. "Trying to get away? Is that what this is? To think you promised him you would always stay."

All I can do is stumble to my feet and cry out in a desperate plea for mercy, hoping to get through. "Ren, please, don't do this."

If anything, my plea makes things worse. With a growl, he lunges at me, arms extended, but somehow, I manage to duck past him and into the living room.

He catches me easily with a heavy arm wrapped around my waist. He throws me down onto the couch, all the air seeping out of my lungs.

"This is how you want to play it? I'll be the cat, and you be the mouse? You know there's no getting away from me."

I roll onto my back, frantic, trying to sit up but held in place by his much larger body, caging me in. "Stop this," I

beg, my voice clogged with emotion. “This is me, Scarlet. I love you.”

What am I even doing? Trying to pull him back to me. He finds it hilarious, his bitter laughter ringing out over my breathless sobs.

I only need to get to the door. That’s it. I have a general idea of the direction of town, even if it is miles away. Once I get to the road, though, I might be able to flag down a passing vehicle. That’s my only hope. First, getting past him, which right now seems as likely as outrunning a bear.

“You’re the problem,” he whispers, his hate-filled eyes burning holes through me. I shrink back into the cushion. “You’ve always been the problem.”

There is so much hatred in him, so much rage, and when he looks at me, I understand one thing with crystal-clear certainty—he would kill me if he could.

Whatever is in him, whatever is in control now, wants me dead.

The man before me, the man who wiped my tears, gave me my first kiss, and protected me for years, is the complete opposite of Ren at this moment. All of Ren’s love, protectiveness, and devotion have been twisted into something that seems downright demonic in comparison.

“Listen to me. I know you’re still in there. I know you still love me.”

“Would you shut the fuck up? God, this stupid fucking bitch never stops talking and is always in the way. I told him. I fucking told him what happens when you get women involved in things, but did he want to listen, did he? No,” he barks, lunging almost like he wants to bite my face like a rabid dog. “No, he thought he knew better. Thought loving you would make him whole, would stop him from falling off the deep end. Would keep his humanity in check. He always thinks he knows best, but he doesn’t.”

He’s completely lost it. It’s only when I register the wetness on my cheeks that I realize I’m crying again. My



breath comes in hitching sobs, every muscle of my body tense, prepared to flee. But I have to get past him first, don't I?

"Shhh, it's okay. We can talk this out."

"What is there to talk about?" he screams, pressing me into the corner of the couch. My eyes dart around wildly, my survival instinct kicking in on the heels of a fresh wave of adrenaline. He wants to hurt me. He's going to hurt me, that crazy light in his eyes and his empty, soulless smile speaking of unfathomable pain and destruction.

"Please," I sob, gripped by panic and the growing certainty he wants me dead. "Please, it's me. Remember us. Remember everything we have and what we've been through."

"Who is we? We don't have shit."

"That isn't true. We have so much. We always have. Please, don't forget that."

He cuts me off, a hand wrapped around my throat, a hand which tightens until pressure builds in my head, and even pulling in a sip of air is a struggle.

His face becomes a mask of stony loathing, eyes hard and sharp as flint that glows with a murderous light.

"You're in the way. You're the problem." He says it like he's finally figured out something plaguing him. "It's all about you. Things were fine before you came into the picture. Once I'm rid of you, he'll be mine again. And we can do this together. We can hit our goal."

"Who?" I squeak out, my heart fluttering and my body screaming to run, fight, escape.

Leaning in, he growls in my face. "Who do you think? Ren. Your precious fucking Ren."

One moment, my heart beats heavily against my rib cage; the next, it simply stops beating. I can hardly breathe. I almost forget everything in favor of searching his once familiar eyes, looking for the truth.

That can't be right. I must have misheard him. That's the only explanation. It's Ren's hand around my throat, and Ren's

body pressed against mine. His presence, his scent, the depth of his eyes, and even the tiny freckle on his nose. This is Ren.

“But you’re Ren,” I whisper. “You are.”

It hits me all at once, cold certainty settling into my bones before he even says a word.

“Are you fucking blind?” He barks out an unhinged laugh. “I’m sorry, princess, but Ren isn’t home right now. All you get is me.”

*Oh my god.*

All this time.

*I missed it all this time.* How could I have missed it?

Every clue, every hint. The mood swings, all of it, every memory comes rushing back at once, flooding my fragile mind. It’s all so clear. I could give up here and now and let him do what he plans because, dammit, I’ve been so stupid. But I can’t. I won’t. I’m stronger than that.

“You’re River,” I breathe, and it isn’t a question.

He smiles and even inclines his head. “In the flesh. And once you’re out of the way, he has no reason to fight me anymore.”

Then he squeezes, his fingers pressing hard. The force bruises, and there’s no question where this will end unless I do something. *Now.*

I flail, running my hands over the couch, pounding at his shoulders, clawing at his face, but I might as well be fighting air. Air that’s now in short supply. My lungs are burning, the pressure building in my head until I know it will explode; there’s no way it won’t.

I’m dying. He’s going to kill me and my baby.

Our baby. My poor Ren.

But this isn’t Ren.

*And I’m not dying here today.*

In a last-ditch effort, I throw my arm behind me, my hand flailing around in search of something, anything before I lose consciousness.

I'm already starting to, my vision becoming hazy and spotty.

"I should've got rid of you earlier."

My fingers close around an object. Something heavy, solid. There's no time to be indecisive. Maybe that's what gives me the strength to swing my arm up, the lamp firmly in my grip, before bringing it crashing down against Ren's skull.

It's like magic. All at once, the pressure is gone, the world coming back into focus as I suck in as much air as my lungs will hold. He groans, then tumbles off the couch and lands on the floor.

A trickle of blood runs from the side of his head and onto the wood beneath him. Coughing, I sit up, rubbing at my throat.

He's out cold, but his chest continues to rise and fall. Even now, having come so close to taking my last breath, I don't want to kill him.

Ren is still in there somewhere.

But I can't afford to wait around for him to show up again.

As soon as my head is clear, I jump to my feet and run for the door—only to look back at him, thinking about the Jeep. The keys, where are the keys? In my mind's eye, I see him taking them from his back pocket, the way he's done so many times. Do I have a chance of rolling him over to grab them before he comes to? No, I can't take that chance. I already came close enough.

If he wakes up and still thinks he's River, I won't stand a chance of surviving.

Instead, I fling the door open and take off at a run. The cool air is a shock to my sweaty, overheated skin while the bright sunlight leaves me squinting until I'm swallowed by the shadows of the trees.

How long will he be unconscious?

How long do I have? The idea of him catching me gets my feet moving faster, carrying me down the worn path leading to the main road. It's maybe half a mile away, but it might as well be ten or twenty.

Keep going, keep moving. He could be behind me at any second. I have to get to the main road. I have to get there before he comes to and follows me.

Dammit, I should have taken the Jeep, but it's too late now. I'm already halfway there, ignoring the stitch in my side in favor of running for my life—and my baby's.

*I am so sorry.*

*I'm so sorry this is happening.*

*I promise I'll get you out of this.*

Even if I don't quite know how yet. I only know I need help.

He's River, and he's Ren. How didn't I see it?

I can't not think about it, the memories overlapping like snippets of a gruesome horror movie. The dark screen. I explained that one away, didn't I? Just like everything else—the fact that I never saw him, never spoke to him, never heard his voice. Or that I'd never even heard of him before this, in all the years he was so close with my brother, with the entire family.

When I first woke up, after he brought me here. I knew something was off. How could I have been this blind? I even told myself he was like an alien from that old movie, didn't I? My feet slow in their relentless pounding of the ground, my body threatening to give up under the weight of my self-hatred.

Walking around in Ren's body but without Ren's soul.

Because he wasn't Ren. He was River, and River hates me. River wants revenge, and nothing will stop him.

If I don't haul ass, I'll be the one he gets his revenge on. I can think about all of this later when there's time to sit around and blame myself for all the little hints I missed.

And I will. I'll blame myself until the day I die.

A rumble up ahead leaves hope exploding in my chest, and it's enough to carry me the last few hundred yards until I burst out onto the shoulder of the two-lane highway. A passing truck, well beyond me now.

Still, it's a sign of life. Somebody's bound to come up soon.

I throw a wild, panicked look over my shoulder, relieved that there's no sign of Ren or River following me. He might still be unconscious, for all I know. I did hit him pretty hard. Guilt blooms in my chest.

*It was him or you.* Right. I have to remember that.

Instead of standing around and waiting, I begin walking, staying close to the tree line in case I need to hide. There's always the chance of him following me. He could be right behind me now, speeding his way to the road, cursing himself for not snapping my neck. It still burns, but I have to ignore that. I can't afford to slow down.

What am I going to do? There's only one solution. What I should have done all along—God, I've made so many mistakes. So desperate to be with him that I ignored what was playing out right in front of me.

I jump like a scared rabbit at the sound of an engine somewhere behind me. Instinct leaves me darting away behind an overgrown bush. This is it, it's him, he caught up to me. He's never going to let me go.

Instead, peering out, I find a white truck rolling my way. Before I know what I'm doing, I jump out, waving my arms over my head as it approaches. *Hurry... hurry, please.*

My heart's about to burst out of my chest by the time the truck pulls up in front of me, the passenger window rolling down. An older man sits behind the wheel, and it's clear he's concerned.

It hurts to raise my voice, but I push through the pain. “Please, help me. I need to get to town. Fast. I have to get away.”

He casts a look over his shoulder. “Away from who? Is somebody hurting you?”

I blurt out a sob, my head bobbing up and down. His gaze lingers on my throat, where—if the pain is any indication—bruises are already forming.

“Come on. Get in. I’ll take you to the hospital.”

Panic rears up at the thought. “No, please, don’t do that. I only need to get to town. Somewhere I can get picked up.”  
*Think, think, what do I do next?*

His shoulders sag, and he sighs, nodding. “Fair enough.” He unlocks the door, extending a hand to help me inside. Only when I have the door closed, and we’re rolling away can I breathe freely. I can’t take my eyes off the mirror mounted to the door, staring at it and watching the spot where I was picked up fade until it disappears.

“Do you have a phone? Can I please use your phone to call for help?”

“Of course.” He reaches into his jacket pocket and pulls out a cell. “But I’d feel a lot better if you’d let me take you to the hospital, just the same.”

“No, that’s all right. I just have to get someplace where I can wait to get picked up. I’m sure it won’t take long.” With a shaking hand, I dial the only number that comes to mind. The number I should have tried to dial weeks ago when all of this first happened.

There’s no turning back from this, and I know it.

But I don’t have a choice.

I have to do this for myself, our unborn baby, and Ren.

The phone rings once.

My father’s deep voice vibrates in my ear. “Who is this?”

“Dad?” I whisper, my voice shaking so hard with emotion I can barely speak. “I need your help.”

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*Thank you for reading book one of this duet.*

*Ren and Scarlet’s story continues in [Touch of Chaos](#).*

# ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**J.L. Beck** and **C. Hallman** are a *USA Today* and international bestselling author duo who write contemporary and dark romance.

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The Bet

The Dare

The Secret

The Vow

The Promise

The Jock

### **Bayshore Rivals**

When Rivals Fall

When Rivals Lose

When Rivals Love

### **Breaking the Rules**

Kissing & Telling

Babies & Promises

Roommates & Thieves

\*\*\*

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### **The Blackthorn Elite**

Hating You

Breaking You

Hurting You

Regretting You

**The Obsession Duet**

Cruel Obsession

Deadly Obsession

**The Rossi Crime Family**

Protect Me

Keep Me

Guard Me

Tame Me

Remember Me

**The Moretti Crime Family**

Savage Beginnings

Violent Beginnings

Broken Beginnings

**The King Crime Family**

Indebted

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**The Diabolo Crime Family**

Devil You Hate

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Convict Me

Runaway Bride

His Gift

Two Strangers

This Christmas