

A man with dark, wavy hair and green eyes, wearing a white ribbed tank top, is the central focus. He is looking slightly to the right with a serious expression. The background is dark with a repeating diamond pattern of ornate, metallic-looking scrollwork. There are some glowing orange and yellow particles scattered around, suggesting fire or light. The title 'TOWER OF PAIN & Sorrow' is overlaid on the man's chest. 'TOWER' and 'PAIN' are in large, gold, serif capital letters. 'OF' and '&' are smaller, gold, serif letters. 'Sorrow' is in a purple, cursive script font. Below the title, there is a line of text in white, serif capital letters: 'SHATTERED EVER AFTER BOOK II AN ANDRETTI CRIME FAMILY NOVEL'. At the bottom, the authors' names are listed in white, serif capital letters: 'USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS SR JONES SILLA WEBB'.

TOWER  
OF PAIN &  
Sorrow

SHATTERED EVER AFTER BOOK II  
AN ANDRETTI CRIME FAMILY NOVEL

USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHORS  
SR JONES  
SILLA WEBB

# TOWER OF PAIN AND SORROW

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SR JONES  
SILLA WEBB

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# ELLIE

SURVIVAL IN CAPTIVITY is not easy. Only broken things flourish in a prison.

When I was a child, I caught a beautiful butterfly and put it in a jar. When my mother saw it, she was upset. “It will die in there,” she told me.

I watched as it beat its wings, sometimes beating them right against the glass cage I held it in. The butterfly valued freedom more than its wings.

“It’s so pretty,” I replied.

“Then maybe we should let it go and watch it fly? I’m sure it will be beautiful when it flies free. What do you say?” Mum had smiled at me, and I nodded, excited to see the beautiful butterfly fly away.

I’m the butterfly now. Trapped. Beating my wings against the cage I’m in. Except, my situation is worse. I’ve been captive for so long, my wings don’t work anymore. Broken beyond repair. If I were set free, I’d fall to the ground and fade away. I’ve become the broken thing that prefers the cage to the fight.

So here I am. Truly bound. Unable to move forward or backward. Like a piece on a chessboard that has been glued in place. Even if I could escape this prison, I wouldn’t be able to run. Instead, I’d be frozen with fear. Terrified. Breathless. Heart pounding. Pulse exploding.

I've been there before. Once. When I escaped. I had fallen to the earth the moment I slipped out the door and felt the blessed soil under my nails. Solid, reassuring, ancient. For a wonderful moment, I thought I'd done it. Finally free, until I realized that the outside was so *big*. When I looked up from the solid assurance of the ground, all I could see was sky, trees, and forest all around me.

There was the road but it was small, rough, and led both ways, and I didn't know which way would take me to civilization, and which would take me deeper and deeper into this forest. I knew that the road went deep because Father-Husband once told me a tale about a couple found dead in their car on this road, lost. Frozen.

The fates laughed and the trees shook their leaves as I turned and turned, panic setting in, unable to seek refuge in that moment. Which way should I go? The trees were looming at me. Mocking me because I didn't know the way. It was too much out there. The wind so loud. The sun so bright against eyes used to the dimness of my room.

I whirled and turned, and my heart rate went up and up. My hands started to tingle, then turned numb. I couldn't breathe. I looked back to the tower. In there I didn't feel this existential terror. In there it was mere dread, and that was preferable right then.

Of course, I tried to make myself move and take advantage of my audacious escape, but my legs were like shaky pipe cleaners.

Then *he* found me and dragged me back inside.

Back to this prison. The place I inhabit once more. Comfortable in my numb, slow burning apprehension.

I can hear him, moving around downstairs. Shuffling. Every now and again, he lets out a rattling cough, and the sound drifts up the staircase to me. He must be in the kitchen or perhaps even the hallway. What is he doing down there?

Maybe I ought to try to find a reason to join him. Perhaps for our meal this evening. I wonder what it will be? Stew



probably. He is not a good cook.

*My father.* He tells everyone that's what he is. Any searches of me in records show that I'm his, biologically and legally. I'm anything but.

He might be a wizard, this man who keeps me because he can make official records show what he wants. He told me as much.

No one visits. No one comes, except for the odd delivery driver and his weird artist friend. The one who talks about how he will find the woman of his dreams by making a glass slipper, like in the stories I read as a child.

Other than those sparse visits, we're alone in this strange womb of ours. Me up in my tower, him in the dilapidated home below.

One day, one day soon, he tells me, things will change, and he won't be Father-Husband any longer. Only Husband. Then I will be expected to do new things for him. He's been waiting, he says. Until I am of the age he has been shown in his visions. Twenty-one-years-old, two months, and five days at the hour of noon. That is the time he says, the date when he will make me his bride.

I am twenty-one now, as he told me so recently. The rest, I am not sure. Time here is fluid. Like a dream. Sometimes, I think it runs backward.

I look out of my dirty window and sigh at the dreary landscape. It's grey outside. The trees wear a dull grey-brown, stripped of their green finery by the cold. The sky is grey. The ground has turned to a grey shade of mud too. You'd only need one palette to paint this.

I do not have paints.

Only my Bible and a few other books that he gives me ... when he feels like it. And my doll.

Alone. Trapped. Half delirious with all the loneliness.

Maybe I ought to gnaw a foot off the way trapped animals do. Not to escape. Just for something to do. Something to *feel*.

I turned numb many years ago. I do feel things, but they are foggy. The sad, washed-out despair of melancholy. The bored, soul-destroying, low-level grief for a life I hated but still miss. The only thing I feel strongly now, the only thing that breaks through the fog, is panic or pain.

The panic I hate.

The pain?

I've kind of grown to enjoy it.

Sharp biting, brief awareness that pulls me out of my anxiety as if I'm breaking the ocean's surface and gasping for air.

It brings me out of myself. Makes me feel real. As if I truly exist.

I used to taunt Father-Husband when the panic came, but he'd beat me, and his kind of pain I *do not* enjoy. His pain is deep, bruising me for weeks, bone shattering even at times.

I like my pain sharp. Quick. A lightning strike of reality against the panic.

The panic comes more and more these days, as the time approaches when the disgusting man downstairs will want more from me. Needing relief from the stark reality, I stand and go to fetch my secret treasures. My pins.

The pins are hidden. I found them one day during the cleaning period. The time when Father-Husband locks himself in his tiny study and gives me two hours to make his living quarters shine. He counts and categorizes his things, and when I saw the old pins, with the colored bobbles on the ends, I thought maybe he counted those too.

I took one. Just one.

Hidden in the folds of my skirt, it felt like a sharp, pointed secret.

I played with it and gave it a silly name, but later, when I felt the panic come, that pin became my secret weapon. As the panic built, I scratched my thigh with it, and the release was intense. I scratched until the tears leaked free. My eyes stung

from being dry for so long. My skin burned where I had scratched little lines into it, but I didn't break the skin. The panic ebbed away, and I felt an odd soothing calm.

It was *glorious*.

"I'm real," I whispered.

Soon, the pin was something I used to quiet my anxiety and my terrors. It became my only friend.

As time went by, I learned to make the kind of pain I liked. A pinch here. A pull of hair there. A bite of my arm. The pin was reserved for a special treat. I was scared he'd see the marks. Not that he saw me naked, or not often. Sometimes, though, he'd say he needed to inspect me and see that I was *ripening*, as he called it.

Then I'd be naked. If he saw the bites, I'd react oblivious to the marking and say I'd done it in my sleep. Bruises could be explained from hitting furniture. I'm clumsy from captivity. Unable to navigate well from lack of movement in open space.

I do move. I make myself. Every day, I do the exercises we used to do at school. I remember them and practice them religiously. I can't get too big. Or too small. Father-Husband was talking to the artist one day, and he told him I was perfect as I was. Good thing too because if I got too skinny, or too fat, he'd have to do away with me and start all over again. His harsh words, not mine.

When I think those thoughts the panic comes, and I have to scratch some more.

I like that I stole the pin from him. Took something of his.

Now, I have more pins. A tiny collection of things that are all mine. I only took a few, careful not to let my desire give me away.

When the drawer opens, my skin goosebumps in anticipation. Taking out Blue, one of my favorites, I hold the tiny bobble tip carefully between thumb and forefinger and lift my dirty skirt.

Then I scratch the pin along my leg. I go lightly at first, relishing the sharp bite that is light enough to be pleasant. Then, needing the release, the tension inside me too much, I dig harder and gasp as a tiny row of blood dots blooms. I don't normally do it hard enough to draw blood. This is bad.

If Father-Husband claims me soon, he'll see this. God, I don't want him to claim me. I hate him. His voice makes me sick. His touch makes my skin shudder. His gaze is like ants crawling all over me. *I hate him*. Yet, I can't leave. The one chance I had, and I botched it, too scared to set myself free.

I had a life before. I know it, but most days I can't *feel it*. Perhaps that's for the best. It wasn't a good life. Mum drank, and my father was cruel and made comments to his daughter no father should make. Then things changed dramatically. My cousin came to live with us after my aunt died of cancer. Mum drank more, bereft at the loss of her sister, and Dad watched my cousin with hooded eyes.

He'd make comments about how my cousin's breasts were budding. How sexy she looked in her new school skirt. Then Mum died suddenly, and Father became our only guardian.

He took my cousin and made her something else in his world.

It hurt to see him doing this, knowing how wrong it was, and yet, I did nothing to protect her; I was just grateful it wasn't me. The pathetic little mouse, hiding in her room, knowing things were very fucked up but glad the fallout had escaped her. Finally, I found a modicum of courage. My cousin was starting to act as if she liked it, and that was worse. She lorded it over me and showed off the clothes he bought her. It wasn't jealousy or hatred that made me decide to act, but the realization he'd broken her and made her into what he wanted. It persuaded me I must do something.

I wrote in my diary that I would tell the school nurse. I would beg her to talk to my cousin and to help her.

The next day was Saturday, and in the afternoon, my dad announced we were going out for a drive. Five hours later, I was handed over to Father-Husband in a thick forest on a

gravel track, and my cousin's vicious smile told me exactly who had played a part in this.

"If it doesn't work out, where do I contact you?" the ragged-haired man had said to my father as he gripped me by the upper arm.

"Bury her out here in the woods. I don't want her back." My father climbed in the car and slammed his door.

As the vehicle drove away, my cousin opened her jacket, showing my diary nestled there under the fake silk lining. Then, she raised her middle finger at me and held it there until they disappeared from view.

"Evil little witch," I whisper as I draw a star on my thigh with the pin, my teeth clenched against the pain. Oh, God, the relief it gives me. I move to my other thigh, and with a foolish grin, I draw a love heart. Maybe these marks can be my personal tattoos.

As I stare down at what I've done, my heart picks up speed and not in a good way. Shit.

I never take it this far. It's as if the closer the day to him claiming me comes, the worse the urge to really do something crazy blooms.

Father-Husband will know these marks were deliberate. I can't claim I accidentally got a love heart scratched into my skin.

What will he do if he sees them? Will they heal before he claims me? I rub at the scratches as if I can erase them the way I could if it were pen.

Back then, after my dad left, Father-Husband took me into his disgusting home and told me how it was. How it would be. He'd seen visions from God, and I was to be his bride. He gave me a new name, Rosalia. Ellie was no more, he said. Then he made me climb the tiny, circular stairs, clinging onto the rope on the stone wall, terrified of the dank darkness. At the top was my prison. A small room in his bizarre tower. From the thick, warped window all I could see was forest.

And here I have stayed.

Nothing but me and my sharp little pins for company.

I have five now. I count them as I put Blue away. I better not do anymore scratching today. I've gone too far.

These pins are so delicious to me. Enticing in their simplistic perfection. I love the different colors. Red. Pink. Blue. Green. Brown. I favor the blue and pink ones. They are happy colors. The red is the color of the blood I sometimes accidentally scratch out, and *Red is also the leader*. The general. Brown is the most boring, and sometimes I sacrifice him in the silly games I play. Games a five-year-old might play but that I sometimes indulge in for want of something, *anything*, to pass the time.

Today, though, today I am not in the mood for games. Today, I am struggling not to take those pins and scratch *fuck you* onto my skin. The Devil makes work for idle hands, but what to do?

I have already completed my exercises. I've also indulged myself and read five pages of my book. Husband-Father only allows me one book at a time mostly, and he picks them. They are often dusty, historical tomes. The kind of book I would have eschewed in my other life, but those words are my everything now. I make them last. I read them out loud and taste them on my tongue like the finest chocolate.

Books are my lifeline. The one thing that gives me any feelings, other than my sharp, secret pins.

Well, there is one other thing but that is such a sin I try not to think about it. For the past two years, I've been doing a very bad thing with my pillow at night. I need to. The tension in me is too much to ignore some days. It builds and builds until I know if I don't do the pillow thing it will explode.

I was allowed to read *Pride and Prejudice* once, and I think about Mr. Darcy. Or more often, Colonel Fitzwilliam. I imagine being a young woman, living many centuries ago as a dashing British soldier sweeps me off my feet. The way he'd kiss me. Touch me. His lips against my neck.

I shiver. I don't have *Pride and Prejudice* anymore.

The Bible and a dictionary are the only books I'm allowed to keep all the time. I've read and re-read the dictionary. I love it. Finding new words and what they mean is fun. I don't read the Bible quite so much because Father-Husband is always reciting it in his horrible, gurgling voice. I'd be quite happy if I never read a word of it again.

He never touches me, except for my hair. He likes to brush my hair. It's so long now because I am not allowed to cut it. It flows down my back in thick, golden waves. He gets excited when he strokes it. I can see his erection pushing up in his pants. I know what one is. I was given to him when I was old enough to have seen the boys on the school bus sharing dirty pictures on their phones. Not old enough to truly understand how things were, but old enough to have knowledge of the basics from year three senior sex-ed at school.

One day soon, he'll touch me with that thing, and then I will use the pins and cut open an artery.

The banging on the door downstairs makes me gasp.

The sound is quiet up here in my tower, but it is so unusual, so unexpected my heart is racing.

I run to my window and stare out. I must put my forehead right against the glass to see down below the tower to the ground. There are two men here.

What the hell? They are not delivery drivers. No, they are something else.

They are big. Broad. With short hair and sharp clothes, they look like men out of the movies I used to watch. One of them steps back to look around as the other bangs on the door again. The one who steps back looks up, and my heart picks up speed.

I couldn't escape when I had the chance, but could I if these men took me? They look strong. Capable. Like the sort of men who wouldn't care what Father-Husband did or said to them.

I hear the rickety old door opening and the murmur of voices. They are distorted up here in my prison. I can't

understand what is being said, only that a conversation is happening. What if they've come from the police? Perhaps someone has finally reported me missing? But no. That makes no sense. If anyone were coming it would have been in the earlier years. Maybe they did look for me? Surely the school would have told the authorities I was missing. Why did no one come? I fall and stumble, making noise and hold my breath. Will I be beaten for this?

Father-Husband shouts up to me, something about bringing my food soon. That means the men down there have heard me. I can scream, shout, beg for help, but they might not hear me and it will get me a terrible beating for sure.

This is an opportunity. I can't let this slip through my fingers the way time has. I must act, but I must do so carefully, and cleverly. Grabbing Red, the fearless leader of my pin army, I lift my grey, torn dress and scratch my thigh. I cut harder, faster, and deeper than usual. The pain is neither here nor there. This isn't for pleasure; it is for purpose.

I wince as the blood blooms, red and pretty on my pale skin. I tear the underside of the ragged sheet draped over the rocking chair and dip my finger into the blood as I begin to write.

It's difficult to do and takes me an age to get the word done. Finally, though, I have it. A piece of cloth with one worked inked in my blood.

*Help.*

Now, I watch and wait.

Time seems to stop, like my breath held captive between the walls of my chest, begging for relief. Then they appear, like gods of the forest. They are leaving.

I bang furiously on the window, until I think I might make my hands bleed too. This glass is so old, so thick and solid that I doubt it will shatter, but I could break a bone against it.

Will they hear me?

The one who has the darkest hair ignores the noise, but the other one, the one with some golden strands under the light of



the sun, turns to look up. This time, he doesn't look away. Even from way up here I can see his face is beautiful.

*Is he an angel?*

The stupid thought fills my mind and for a moment, I forget what I am trying to do ... but then I remember.

He looks like he's going to turn away, and I can't have that. I bang again, and then I squeeze my hand through the tiny gap as I force the window open. It only opens a fraction, almost soldered shut by dirt and age, but it is enough for my fingers to slip painfully through. For a moment, I hover in space and time, and then I do it.

I breathe in, open my fingers, and let go.

It floats down through the air and the man catches it. My blood inked plea for help.

He has it!

Will he run back inside and break the door down? I hope so because I am in danger now that I have done this.

Footsteps on the stairs have my heart racing.

My gaze locks with the man's, and I stare imploringly. Pulling the window shut, I try to act as if nothing has happened as the rusty lock turns in my door and heavy footsteps enter the room.

The man stares at me, and my heart falters. This is it. The moment I might be let free.

But then he grabs the other man's arm, and they are leaving.

*He's going?*

Oh, no. My legs sag in horror. I thought it was a risk worth taking. A risk worth the blood and the pain sure to follow. It wasn't. Not one bit.

The car leaves, and the man I thought might be an angel is in it. Uncaring. He didn't rescue me, leaving me here to seal my fate.

I should have known. No one cares. No one will ever save me. Father-Husband told me that much himself.

“Oh, did you think if you banged on the window, they would rescue you, my child?”

The scratchy voice of my captor makes my skin crawl. He runs one hand down my arm, and I shudder where his long fingernails scratch against the skin. Those nails make my stomach roil with nausea. They are unkempt and give his fingers a feminine appearance that I find oddly repulsive.

Out of everything about Father-Husband, it is his fingers I hate the most. I sometimes imagine myself chopping them off one by one. Surely, I have lost my mind. Those aren't the thoughts of a rational woman.

I remember from when I was younger, before my captivity, that I'd sometimes see stories on the news about girls who'd been kept in basements for years, and no one knew, and I was incredulous. How could that happen? Surely no one would be able to get away with it. Now, I know different firsthand. It's very easy to get away with stuff because people either don't notice, or they don't care.

The first are oblivious too wrapped up in their own head and their own lives to really see what is going on around them. The second are uncaring. They might know a woman is being held prisoner, but what do they care? It doesn't affect them, and dealing with it most certainly will, so they turn a blind eye.

The angel down there looked the other way, and now I am going to be punished for his sin.

“You really shouldn't try to attract attention to yourself,” Father-Husband murmurs. “I was going to beat you. But I think we should move the day you become mine in all ways. We need to bring it forward, and I don't want my bride black and blue. I was going to leave you innocent in all things, but Jonas—”

“Who?” My voice is scratchy, unused.

Father-Husband seems as shocked by my question as I am. I can't believe I blurted that out, but who is Jonas? He never mentions anyone except for his artist friend. Is Jonas the man with the face of an angel who looked me in the eye and then left me to my fate?

"He's a friend from overseas. I talk to him on the net."

"The internet?"

He sighs as if I'm stupid.

He laughs in his strangely musical way. "My laptop is locked in a safe when I am out, and you're locked in here. I can see what you're thinking. Anyway ... what would you do? Where would you go?" His face takes on a cruel, twisted smile. "We all know what happened the one time you did escape. You came back."

I don't correct him. "I didn't come back; I simply never left."

"Anyway, Jonas says the date should be moved forward. One of his prophets has foretold it, and so we need to expedite things."

"I thought you saw the visions yourself?"

His face pinches as if I've waved a putrid stench under his nose. "Child, you are very nosy today. I do, but the prophets also see things and they are God's vessel. Two of them have foreseen that the date should be moved, and so it shall. In order for this to happen, you need to understand the ways of a wife. I want you untouched ... physically when we make ourselves one under God, but you need to know how to please a man. I could leave you unprepared, but I am not so cruel. In which case, I have some new books for you." He goes out the door and plucks a parcel from the tiny landing at the top of the spiral stone staircase. It's a small pile of books tied together with string. Placing them on the bed, he gives me an odd look.

"Start reading them. In one month, you will become mine in every way. We will create new life, and we will train them in the way to live as one with God and all things. You will show our girls how to submit to their husbands and the boys

how to be ruler of their kingdoms One day, we will cross the ocean to join others like us. For now, you will read these books and learn *what* to do with a man.”

He’s looking anywhere but at me. It’s as if he’s embarrassed by this conversation, which is odd. I know what sex is and how it works. Does he think I don’t? I say something incredibly bold for me. “I know that the penis goes in the vagina,” I state.

Spluttering and coughing, he turns red. His lips set in an angry line. “You speak like that again and I’ll wash your mouth out with soap, until you gag. You’ll taste it for days. Shut your mouth.”

He’s embarrassed, more than he is angry. For the first time since he took me, I realize something. I realize I might have some power here. This man is embarrassed about the things he wants to do to me. Maybe I can use that? Maybe I can make him so ashamed he won’t do them at all?

Then what, though? Will he kill me? He can’t simply let me go. He’d be arrested. Imprisoned the way I am now.

“I’ll make you something for lunch. A tongue sandwich.”

Then he’s gone. I try not to throw up at the thought. I hate the food he serves me. I eat it, though. For the same reason I do the exercises daily. I must stay strong. I tell myself if I ever get another chance to leave, I won’t freeze.

If I ever get another chance to leave. I’ll take it and no matter how scared I may be, and I’ll run as fast and as far as I can.

I only have one month to find my escape.



# JAMES

MY BOSS IS A MERCURIAL MAN. Unpredictable at the best of times, but now, with the woman he loves having been held captive by a crazed artist who was obsessed with her ... well, he's downright volatile.

Working for an Andretti was never going to be easy, but some days it's just damn shitty.

We got her back. We found his bride and brought her home to her castle, so the prince should be happy. He's anything but.

He's yelling at someone right now, and it sounds like they have two minutes to appease him before he progresses to violence.

Everyone is walking around him on tiptoes. Scared of saying anything that might have him exploding at them. Not me. Nico doesn't scare me.

He might be an Andretti, a mafia family whose name strikes the fear of God into most, but when you've been held by the Taliban and tortured for weeks, well, the mafia doesn't scare you.

Instead, his bad mood irritates me because he, and his moods, and the whole situation he's in, are getting in the way of what *I* want to do.

For the first time in a long time, I have something that interests *me*.

A girl. In a tower. A girl who wrote a note in blood.

Who is she? Why is she in a fucking hovel in the middle of a forest?

We had gone there to interrogate Maurice, a man whom Nico believed knew who had taken Cindy, and where they were holding her. Nico was correct. The old goat in the house in the woods *did* know, and he gave up the information eagerly rather than face violence. And that would have been that.

Except for *her*. As we were leaving, a woman banged on the window of the high tower of the shitty abode and threw me a shred of cloth. It was a note of bright red desperation.

Now I can't get her out of my mind, and I need to wrap things up here so I can find out more about the woman in the tower.

The yelling, as predicted, turns into something worse, and a loud crash rings out. I sigh, stretch, and prepare to enter the fray, bored rather than scared. Numb mostly, as usual.

The woman in the tower made me feel something though ... what, I'm not quite sure, but it was all-consuming. It took up space in my body. Filled the emptiness that normally resides there.

I couldn't see her clearly up there in her tower, but it was enough to see a glimpse of beauty. She had pale skin, long, wavy golden hair, and doe-like blue eyes.

Then she dropped the piece of cloth from the tiny gap in the pane, and I watched as it floated toward me like a leaf carried on the breeze.

I grabbed it out of the air and stared at the one word written in thick red.

*Help.*

That woman wrote a plea for help in her own blood.

*I don't know her. She's not my problem.* That's the mantra I keep telling myself.

*She wrote a plea for help in her own blood.*

*I caught it, so now she is my problem*, the devil on my shoulder argues.

My rushed internet search of Maurice— her father, allegedly— shows that he is indeed her legal parent, but my gut instinct tells me not to trust the information. Now that we're back home, with Nico's beloved Cindy safe and sound, I can focus my efforts into gaining intel about my angel in the tower.

I've asked some business acquaintances of Nico's to investigate deeper. People who can hack almost anything, or so they claim. Ex-Bratva and their ilk. If they can find information regarding the woman in the tower, it will be helpful. It won't change what I think I should do, though.

I should go and set her free.

I almost laugh at the thought as I stalk down the corridor toward the shouting and the crashing. Who do I think I am? A knight in shining armor? My armor is rusty and worn and fucked up. My soul is tarnished, and my morals are rubbed bare and worn thin. If I'm the solution to that woman's plight, then God help her.

The last time I set someone free, she met her demise shortly thereafter. I have been told it wasn't my fault, that I did what I could. Still, the fact that I saved her from the warlords in Afghanistan, gave her to the aid workers, only for the camp to be overrun later, and for the woman to disappear; well, I accept responsibility for the things I could not change.

Gabina. The girl I rescued and then let down.

I really shouldn't be saving anyone else, but I made a promise. I wouldn't leave a woman who needed help like that again. Furthermore, if I'm being honest, the whole thing intrigues me.

Why would someone living with their father write help in their own blood? Even if he *is* her father, he must be abusing her. No way would she do something so extreme otherwise.

"Hey, Nico." I enter the room and sigh at the shattered chair. A big man, one of Nico's enforcers, and a creature with



more muscles than brain cells, is cowering in the corner. He shoots a wide-eyed glance my way. Nico is breathing like a bull, and his hands are balled into fists as he stares at the cornered goon. Slowly, he turns his narrowed gaze toward me, my words penetrating the fog of his anger. “She’s home. Your wife is safe. We got her back. Go be with her. I can sort any shit out.”

There’s something in his gaze I’ve not seen before. Uncertainty.

I get it. He’d rather be in here beating on his foot soldier.

After all, *this* he knows how to do. How do you care for your wife when she’s been traumatized? I sure as shit wouldn’t know if I was in his shoes either. Much easier to shout at the staff and make everyone’s life a misery.

For a moment, I think he’s going to turn on me, but then he sighs, nods, and turns away. The man on the receiving end of Nico’s temper tosses me a jerk of his chin, which I take as a *thank you*.

These next few days, I’m going to need to get things organized for Nico and his new wife, Cindy. Legal shit. I will make sure she’s safe if anything were to happen to Nico. Trust money. Offshore bank accounts. An agreement with some dangerous men to keep her safe if it comes to the worst.

Once I have completed those tasks, my duty ends.

While I spend my days here organizing Nico and Cindy’s future, I will have two hackers investigating Maurice and his daughter. *It’s not time wasted*, I tell myself, as the itch to leave *right the fuck now* scratches at me. Waiting makes sense. The more information I have, the better.

Who is the old goat, and who is his beautiful captive?

I think—and this is fucked up, even I know as much—I want to set her free so I can claim her.

I don’t know her, but I *want to*.

Is she broken? She must be; she wrote *help* in blood. I like broken people, and broken things; they match my own

smashed up pieces.

I looked her up, of course, and found only one photograph of her. Online. One single picture, which is as shady as hell. She looks a couple of years younger in it, and she's listed as the only daughter of Maurice Legard, the man we interrogated. Apparently, she suffers a chronic illness and doesn't go out and about.

Maurice Legard was, at one time, a famous fantasy and science fiction author. Then he found a strange new religious fervor and tried to get his books banned. His *own* work. Fucking weirdo.

Maybe living with a guy who is so extremely religious he tried to destroy his own life's work is what had his daughter painting help in her blood.

Except ... I bet she's not his. I feel it bone deep. That wily sense of intuitiveness that's kept me alive against all the odds these years is shouting at me that woman *is not his blood*.

Something is very wrong with the picture. Why would he keep her in that fucking tower? Her room must be small; you can tell that from the outside. The stairs will be winding and narrow. Dangerous possibly. It isn't the sort of place you'd keep someone you care about if they are sick.

So, who is she? Where did she come from? Is he fucking her?

The thought makes my temper flare. Jesus Christ, I need to get a grip.

To do all of this correctly requires a clear head. I need to burn off some adrenaline. I march to my room and change, then hit the gym.

There are so many loose ends to tie up here, and I need to focus; there's no room for errors on this mission.

The house we are staying in belongs to Nico's wife, Cindy. Her stepmother, Yvette, and two step-siblings also live here, and I must get them out of this place ASAP and ship them off to their new life, on a tropical island.

It's not a reward. It's banishment.

They can never leave that place once they arrive. They fucked over Cindy, and now Nico is paying them back tenfold for their transgressions against his wife. You could argue that Yvette is partly to blame for Cindy being kidnapped.

The heavy bag in the corner of the gym has a tattered and torn picture of Yvette taped to it. I smirk, glove up, and let my frustrations loose on it.

I'm in the mood for violence, which is exactly why I can't go find someone to spar with. I'd probably kill them. Or they'd kill me.

Then what would my mystery woman in the tower do?

No, I can't get into trouble when I have a purpose now. The first one in years.

I swing at the bag, and my fist connects with a relished viciousness as I imagine it being the face of that old fucker in the house in the woods. I'll teach him to keep women captive in his tower. The man needs to die anyway. He's a loose end. The one person who knows that Nico and I paid a visit to the artist who took Cindy. The now dead artist. Yes, Maurice is a dead man. Nico will order it even if I didn't want to do it for myself.

I'll end his pathetic life.

Then I'll take that little captive of his and ... what? Every time I think of the next step to this, all I see is me *keeping her*.

My new toy.



# ELLIE

THE BOOKS FATHER-HUSBAND has given me are a revelation. They are naughty. Romance but with explicit sex scenes. Very explicit. Is he expecting these things from me?

They're a mix of all sorts of stories. Some contain strange mythical creatures like werewolves and vampires, others are more realistic with motorcycle clubs, or firemen. There are a lot that have billionaires as the hero.

Not one has an old man in a hovel in the woods, with dirty long fingernails and runny eyes as the hero.

I shudder. It's okay giving me these books, but the thought of kissing Father-Husband makes me want to gag.

Still, the books do increase my pillow sessions and the intense feelings I've been having.

I'm surprised Father-Husband gave them to me as they are surely sinful. Did he read them?

I keep coming back to the horrific idea he did, and he gave them to me because he expects all the same things from me.

One day, when its cleaning time, I find the courage to be bold and before he shuffles away, I turn to him.

"You know the books you gave me?"

"Yes, child." There is impatience in his tone, but his skin flushes along his whiskery cheeks.

"Did you read them?"

He lets out a giggle that's almost feminine and holds that musical pitch his laughter always does. It creeps me out.

"Of course, I didn't read them. That kind of stuff is stupid. For women. I asked someone to send me them and passed them straight to you." He fixes me with his watery, red rimmed gaze. He leans against the wall as if he's too tired to stand up straight and picks at his beard with his scraggily fingernails. "You know, giving you those books was a kindness, one I don't want to regret. I can take them away."

He knows I love reading. I'm particularly loving this kind of reading and the way it makes me feel, so it's an effective threat. "No, it's okay. I was only curious."

For some reason, despite not wanting to lose my precious stash, I push again, playing a dangerous game but wanting to test out my forming hypothesis. Father-Husband might just know less about the things in those books than me.

"I just wondered if maybe we'd be doing some of the things in those books. You know ... when we become husband and wife."

I smile at him and try to look innocent but seductive. I don't know if I'm remotely affective, but my words hit home because his color deepens and his gaze flits around the room like a tired bee desperate for a flower to land on. He clears his throat. "I'm going to leave you to clean now. Maybe the books were a mistake."

"No," I say immediately, hating the desperation in my voice. "They are nice. What I need to help me become ... become a good wife."

"They seem to be making you presumptuous and flirtatious. That is not a good wife. The books are so you understand the mechanics. The ways to please me. That is your role. They are not for you or for pleasing you."

"No, of course." I force my gaze to the ground. "I understand," I mumble my answer and try to put contrition into every line of my being.

"I hope you do, young lady." Then he's gone.

Young lady? He surely can't be much older than his early fifties, but he dresses, talks, and acts like someone from another century.

Grabbing my little basket of supplies, I set about making the disgusting living space shine.



“I KNOW HOW TO HANDLE A WOMAN.”

I press my ear against the door. Father-Husband is talking to someone, and his voice is loud enough that I can make out the words. He must be in the downstairs hallway, pacing perhaps as he speaks, so his voice is carrying up the stairwell.

“It has been some time, but I’ve fucked plenty before her. Countless women have taken my seed.”

Ugh, I think I’m going to be sick. It also means my hypothesis was wrong. Father-Husband has been with many women, and he knows exactly what to do. I can’t try to control him in any way once he decides the time to take me has come.

He coughs, and it rattles in his chest. “This time, though, when I fill her with my seed, it is going to be a union in front of God. To preserve our way of life. I will make her submit and yield, but if we want her to bear young, then surely the more satisfied she is, the more fruitful she will be? That’s what Lanson said and why he sent those damn books. That was the wrong thing to do. It seems they’re giving her ideas.”

There’s silence for a long time and then another cough and a dark laugh, not so musical this time. “If she doesn’t bear children within a year, then I’ll consider what you say. I paid a lot for her, though, and she’s been with me for a long time.”

There’s a dull thudding, and it sounds as if he’s kicking at the wall. “I don’t love her. Of course not. She’s a means to an end. A vessel. But she’s *my* vessel, and I paid for her, fed her, clothed her, and trained her. I am invested. It’s okay for you to say *start again if it doesn’t work out*, but I’m stuck out here,

not there with you on the compound and the many women you have there.”

He’s silent and then says, “Yes, she is beautiful. No, she can’t be given to anyone else when we get there.” He pauses. “Ireland would be better. For me. It is closer. Easier for us to travel there. No, she is not for sharing. None of you share wives; why should I? Well, then if you believe she’s chosen, that’s even more reason for her to have only one husband as is Godly.”

There’s another pause, then he speaks up, and I strain to listen as his pacing has carried his voice further away. “It’s not what God told me. He told me she was *mine*. The one to bring *me* a family and to make things right. The one to complete me, as bearing children will complete her. I’m not a fool. I know I’m not the handsomest of men, or the most charismatic, but once she is with child and births a bairn, she’ll only care about that. Give her two or three, and she’ll be like a dumb happy cow. They’re all the same. Once they have children, their minds rot.”

Is that true? Is my mind going to rot? I don’t think it’s true. There are a lot of women with children who are amazing, powerful, talented women. Will a child make me happy enough to accept this life?

Not if I must lay next to Father-Husband every night. Nothing could make me happy. In fact, a child with him would be a disaster as it would trap me deeper in his plans.

I must get away before he can claim me. I can’t bear it. Him touching me. It will be sickening. Disgusting. Wrong.

He thinks he hears God; well, I hear something, and I’m not sure if it is God, or the universe, or my inner warrior. Whatever I am hearing is telling me I need to get away. I must try again and this time, I can’t fail.

It has been over a week since the two men came, and no one has returned. They aren’t going to save me, so I must save myself.



Walking over to my window, I look out and imagine myself in the forest below. My heart begins to pound. It's a terrifying thought. Out there.

In the wide open.

Sometimes at night, when I look out the window, I see shadows and shapes moving amongst those ancient trees. I'm convinced there are things in that woodland. Things waiting for someone like me to get lost so they can claim me.

*Okay, I tell myself, maybe it's just the forest that is scary; if you can get through it, you will be safe.*

Instead of the forest, I imagine myself in the middle of an open field. Oh God, it's worse. There is nothing but brown dirt and sky as far as the eye can see. Fear is ratcheting up, and my heart pounds. All the space. The *nothingness*.

A city. I need to imagine myself in a city. After all, that's how most humans live. A town, a city, or a village. Once I'm free, I can get to one of those places. Busy. Filled with other humans.

Intrigued, I go and lie on the bed, close my eyes, and immerse myself in an urban environment. There are shops, cafes, all the things I recall from before I was taken.

I picture myself walking into the newsagents and buying a fashion magazine, some gum, and maybe a drink. I walk outside, and there are cars and people. There'd be a lot of people. Would they all stare at me? Would they know I'm different? A freak who has been living in a hovel in the woods for years?

My heart picks up speed, and my skin prickles. I don't like this. They'll stare. They'll *know*.

I blink, and my panic recedes as I reassure myself I'm safe. I'm in my room in the tower.

*My. Room.*

Is this how I see my prison now?

I don't think I can leave.

“So if you can’t leave, Ellie, but you can’t be with him, you only have one option.” I whisper the words to myself, but they are thunder loud in my ears. It’s the only way, and I understand as much now.

I must kill Father-Husband.

Once I do, I can stay here, safe. *Alone*. I can clean the downstairs and make it my own. Maybe I can plant a garden outside with flowers.

Taking out my pins, I choose my favorite, and lift my dress. I drag the pin across my ankle, loving the sharp line it leaves on my flesh and the bright, pretty pain it causes me. I don’t scratch deep enough to bleed. That could cause an infection and I’ve already scratched deeply recently, to write my plea..

I smile as I scratch. I’d like to make Father-Husband bleed.

Maybe I can stab him in the eyes with my pins and then grab a knife and slit his throat.

He keeps the knives in a locked drawer, though. If my only weapon consists of some tiny pins, it isn’t going to be enough. I could hurt him, sure, but kill him? If I maim him, then he’ll only come at me ten times harder. But what if I stab him in the eyes? If he can’t see, he’ll be incapacitated. He’ll be in excruciating pain. Would I have time to get the keys and go through them, finding the one to open the knife drawer?

I bolt upright, my heart pounding now with excitement, not dread.

The cleaning bucket. It has a couple cleaning chemicals; maybe there’s one which would burn him? Or perhaps knock him out if I made him inhale it? But how? He’d overpower me easily if I tried. He might not be muscular, but he’s a man and still bigger than me, and I’m petite, and I don’t know how to fight.

There’s something tickling at the edge of my brain. Isn’t there chemicals you shouldn’t mix because they create noxious fumes? I think you can make chloroform by mixing some of

them? If I could make him sick enough, he'd be weak, and I could attack him.

Or, perhaps, if I could face going farther than the few steps outside the front door that I take during cleaning time, I could find some mushrooms? I bet there are poisonous types growing here. I could ground them up and put them in one of his stews and when it comes time to eat, pour mine down the toilet and flush it away once he's dead. I only go outside to empty the rubbish into the big black bin, but I could sneak a little farther and look.

The most satisfying way to kill him would be with my bare hands, but I'm not strong enough.

If only he'd brought me books with fighting instructions in them instead of lessons in sex.

My fingers brush over the one I'm currently reading. It's what the blurb terms a *dark romance*. The hero is a motorcycle club leader, and the heroine is his enemy's daughter. I love it because the hero isn't a good guy, but he's not truly bad. He's protective, and he wants to save the girl ultimately, once he gets to know her. He's not like Father-Husband. He doesn't keep her locked in a dark tower, away from the sunlight, until he turns her into a scared, terrified mess.

I know what true evil looks like now. True evil isn't sexy, but this MC club leader is, and so I pick up the book and lose myself in the pages.

I'm another three chapters in when a scene causes my breath to hitch. The hero has warned the heroine four times to stop being mouthy to him in front of his club, and she continues to disobey, pushing his buttons. He takes her over his shoulder, marches her into their bedroom, and spanks her.

The scene itself isn't what grabs me but the description of the feeling. The heroine describes the spanking as sharp, smarting.

I *like* sharp. I *like* smarting.

Curious, I roll onto my side a little and slap my thigh. *Ooh*. I do it again and then hit my ass cheek for good measure. It

feels nice. Like my pins but with an added *sensation*. An ache at my core.

I do it again and close my eyes and imagine a big, handsome, MC club leader spanking me. A man who will carry me out of my tower and save me. I won't be scared out there because he'll be with me.

My hand drifts between my legs, and knowing it's wrong and disgusting to do this, here in *his* tower, but needing the release, I stroke myself.

Eyes closed, one hand reaching behind me to ineffectively spank myself, and the other rubbing at my clit, I orgasm. It's a rush of pleasure that for a few minutes takes me out of the drudgery, horror, and soul-destroying boredom that closes in on me more and more with each passing day.

Nobody warns you about true evil. It's boring. Banal. Pathetic.

Father-Husband is *pathetic*, and I will never be the submissive little wife he wants because he isn't the powerful man *I* want. If he'd been different, even with the sick way he took me captive, who knows; maybe I could have come to like him. Before he took me, I read about something called Stockholm syndrome with the eagerness that teenage girls devour things that half horrify them and half fascinate them. Maybe I could have had that? But Father-Husband is too repulsive to me.

He's weak, and he picked on me when I was merely a child precisely because of that weakness. It makes me hate him. *Loathe* him.

He disgusts me, and I wish I could squish him the way I do the spiders I find running across the floorboards up here. Even then would I be free? He has made dark hints about people who would come for me if anything happened to him. About the forest too, and things which live there. Unnatural things, he said, which is one of the reasons it scares me so much. This is why I need someone to come for me. I need a savior.

I kneel on the bed and bring my hands together.

*“Dear Lord,*

*I sometimes sin, but I don't think you'd blame me truly if you understood how I feel. You're God, all seeing and all knowing, so you probably do. I'm so lonely here. So tired. So exhausted by it all.*

*I'm going to pray for something now that is maybe a sin too, but overall it will do good and balance out things here on Earth. So please, Lord, please, can you help me kill Father-Husband? I don't believe he's one of your warriors as he says. He's a bad man. A weak man. A man who will only take someone else if I escape.*

*He can't have me, Lord. He can't. It isn't right. It isn't your plan, so I pray for a sin because sometimes sins are the only way out.*

*Sometimes sins are righteous.*

*My crime will be virtuous, and it will save others from a man who is evil. He's corrupted to his soul, and his weakness and his evil are creating a stink in your earthly garden, Lord. Please help me be free of him. I'm begging you, Lord, please. Either by my hand, or maybe if you can send an angel to save me.”*

I pinch my eyes closed and then look upward and I continue. *“If you do, I promise I won't read anymore rude books ... or use the pins. Amen.”*

I go to the tiny sink in the corner of the room, brush my teeth, and comb my hair. There's a door to the right of the sink, and in the space there is a toilet, a shower, and another hand basin, but I use the one in my room as it has a mirror above it. The bathroom space is always extra spidery for some reason, so I spend as little time in there as possible. Showering and toileting are all I do. I slip inside now, pee, and rush back out, closing the door tight so none of the big spiders I often see in there can escape.

I slide under the covers and close my eyes, and hope the Lord answers my prayers.



# ELLIE

THERE'S A BRIGHTLY COLORED butterfly balanced precariously on my window ledge.

I stare as it beats its wings. The yellows and blues of a peacock butterfly—my favorite. Their coloring is so sunny and happy. Yet this one is here, in the midst of winter.

This is a sign. It must be. It's too cold. Butterflies just aren't up and about at this time of year.

The memory of my mother and me releasing my butterfly all those years ago surges back. The thoughts I'd had about being trapped and like that insect only came to me the other day, and now one is dancing outside the glass that traps me. It's no coincidence.

Today must be the day. The Lord has sent this beautiful messenger.

Today, I must take this prison from my captor and make it my fortress. Then it doesn't matter if I can't go out again. It doesn't matter if he's threatened, someone comes for me. I can find his weapons, and I can defend my tower. I'll survive here, the way he has.

Maybe I can have books delivered, the way he does food. I'll need to get into his computer, of course, but once he's dead, that won't be difficult. I can I send a message from him saying that all is well, but he's going offline for some time. That way no one will come looking for him *or* me.

Maybe. Those things can wait. What matters is getting Father-Husband out of my life for once and for all. The butterfly means it's time. I must be strong.

I dress, all shivery and shaky with adrenaline, and then take my red and brown pins out. Today isn't a day for my pretty beauties; today is the day for my warrior leader and my boring, but oh-so-effective brown worker bee.

This is crazy. Certifiably so, but then that ship sailed some time ago. You can't take a person and hold them captive in a tower for years, without fracturing their mind a little.

Once Father-Husband is gone, I'll get into his computer, and use his money for some therapy. I bet they do it by phone still, the way my friend in school used to get it. That way I won't need to travel anywhere. Father-Husband has a lot of deliveries out here. Not often. Maybe once every couple of months, but he gets food and supplies delivered. It's not easy to find this hovel. There's only one narrow road in and out, but the companies must know it. Yes, I will survive when he's gone so long as I can get the deliveries. I'd end up alone in the pitch black at night.

Thank God it is a cleaning day, so I have an excuse to be near him as I plot and plan exactly how to do this. I head downstairs once my door is unlocked, and smile at Father-Husband in what I hope is a demure, *butter wouldn't melt in my mouth* manner.

He shoots me an absentminded, half smile back. "Clean extra thoroughly, won't you? This place needs to be spotless for our nuptials."

Shuffling off to his study, he pulls the door closed and leaves me to it. I set about putting everything from my basket that I need out on the counter. I will clean as normal, at first, and when I'm about done, I'll mix up some bleach and vinegar, and hope to God it makes Father-Husband sick. Maybe it will burn his lungs. There is a way to make chloroform, but I can't remember it. If only I'd paid more attention in chemistry class.



Once he's coughing and spluttering, or being sick, I shall come down from the tower and offer to help him, and then I'll ... what? I feel my pins in my pocket. What part can they play? Oh, I'm so confused. Maybe I should simply drink the bleach. End it all now.

I tell myself not to panic, simply to clean and let my mind and thoughts calm. They're too jumbled right now, and this is my only chance. Cleaning soothes me, so I shall let it do that while I try to quiet my mind. God sent a butterfly, and I am sure he'll send me a plan. I need to quiet the noise so I can concentrate on the task at hand.

I'm about thirty minutes into what will be a good two hours of cleaning when I think I hear something outside.

I rush to the living room window and stare out. There's a car parked a few feet away, and it's sleek and dark. The door opens and I gasp, covering my mouth.

It's the angel.

The man with the sandy brown hair who showed golden streaks in the sun. The man I thought had deserted me.

He's back and alone.

In the gray, dim light, his hair looks to be dark brown, but it shines with strands of gold and brown when the sun hits it. Like he's been touched by the heavens themselves.

Why is he here?

*Bang. Bang. Bang.*

He pounds on the door with his fist, and I can only stare at the wood. Is he here to help Father-Husband with something?

The study door opens, and shuffling footsteps cross the room.

"What the hell?" Father-Husband mutters. "Who the hell is pounding on my door like a heathen?"

I watch in intrigue, as he opens the door only to go flying backward.

The angel strides into the hovel, and alert awareness urges me to take a step back as he looms in the small space. Fierce green eyes assess me. His face is taut with hard lines of anger.

“What the fuck?” Father-Husband rights himself and scowls at the angel. “You? I told you where the hell your mafia bride was. Due to the fact that I’ve not heard from my friend, I presume you have her home. You got what you wanted, now go. Leave us alone.”

“She’s not your daughter,” the angel says as he jabs a thumb in my direction.

“*What?*” Father-Husband’s cackle is cut short by a dry hacking cough.

“You heard me, Maurice. That girl is not your daughter.”

“Who is she then?” Father-Husband sneers.

“Why don’t you tell me?”

“Leave now, before I make you regret this. I have friends. People who would come here and eat your babies for breakfast and rape your wife for their supper. I mean it. Go and I won’t tell them what you did today. Stay, and I’ll send for them.”

They might be the people Father-Husband alluded to coming for me if I tried to escape him.

“Your cult friends?” The angel laughs softly.

Father-Husband stumbles back a little.

“Oh, I’ve been doing my research.” The angel laughs as he prowls toward Father-Husband.

Fear flickers in Father-Husband’s beady eyes, and I *like it*.

“I’m not scared of them, Maurice.” The angel shakes his head. “I have no children for them to eat, and no wife for them to rape. I can take care of myself. Can *you*? It will take them some time to get here, so right now, it’s you and me. I ask again. Who *the fuck* is she?”

Not once does the angel ask *me*.

I'm standing watching this as if I'm having an out of body experience.

"Some whore I purchased; that transaction has nothing to do with you. It's all legally binding."

The angel turns to me, giving Father-Husband his back. I want to warn him, but I'm rendered mute. Unable to speak. "What age are you, sweetheart?"

The angel's hardened gaze turns tender as his eyes meet mine. His clear, bright gaze burning me all over like the sun. Golden and beautiful and strangely hypnotic.

"Twenty-one." I shrug as if not quite sure, even though I am.

"When did you arrive here?"

"A long time ago." My voice is almost a whisper.

"How old were you?"

I search my memory for a milestone or event that would pinpoint my age at the time my father had given me to Father-Husband, and my face feels taut and contorts, my brows scrunching. "I was fifteen, maybe sixteen. I think fifteen." I frown and shake my head. "No ... I don't know. My memory is muddled."

Father-Husband reaches into the drawer.

My eyes widen, and still; I can't find words. My mouth opens, but my throat closes, and only a choking sound comes out.

The angel smiles and winks at me. *He winks.*

As Father-Husband raises his hand that grips the huge cleaver, the angel drops low, sweeps out his leg, and knocks Father-Husband backward.

My captor crashes to the ground, and a low moan escapes him as he drops the cleaver with a clatter.

"Maurice, Maurice, Maurice." The angel shakes his head as he walks slowly over to Father-Husband. "You're a pathetic fucking wretch, aren't you?"

“What do you want?” Father-Husband sobs.

“I want your wife-to-be here. The woman you bought and paid for. *I* want her.”

“You want ... Rosalea?” Father-Husband splutters and laughs. “You came here for her? *You?*”

“Yes, I came for her.”

He came for me? Me? This ... angel. This big, strong, amazing man came for me? But why?

“Why?” Father-Husband echoes my thoughts aloud.

“She doesn’t belong here with you. It isn’t right.”

“Why?”

“Because you’re a disgusting fucking freak, and you don’t deserve nice things.”

“*I paid* for that nice thing. Are you going to pay me for her?”

The angel shakes his head. “No, Maurice. That’s not how this is going to go down. You see, you took something that wasn’t yours.”

“I was fucking *sold* her. I told you. Take it up with her father.”

The angel stiffens. “Her *father*? He sold her to you?”

“Yes.”

“When she was a child?”

“Yes.”

“Name?”

“What?”

The angel bends down and picks up the cleaver. He holds it over Father-Husband’s throat. “The father, what is his fucking name?”

“Roger ... R-R-Roger Pride.”

“Do you have an address or phone number to go with that name?”

“Of course not.”

“Pity.”

“Why?”

“It might have saved you some pain.”

The angel moves so swiftly. Before the cleaver clatters to the floor, he grabs Father-Husband by the front of his shirt and hauls him up, and then he violently throws him backward. Father-Husband crashes into the table behind him, groaning as he attempts to scramble to safety.

“Listen, I forget your name, but ... surely, we can reach a deal here?” Father-Husband asks on a quivering breath.

“James. And no, we cannot. What’s her real name?” James asks.

“E-e-el-l-lie.”

Father-Husband points to me.

“You can take her. No money needed.”

James grabs Father-Husband’s chin and squeezes, contorting his features until he moans in pain. “Have you touched her?”

“N-n-no of course not. I’m waiting. She will be mine in a few weeks. I had to keep her pure until then.”

“Did you hurt her?”

“He beat me.” My voice is so quiet in the room, but it rings out as if I’ve screamed the words. “He broke my wrist once, and it’s mended a little bit crooked.”

James maintains his grip on Father-Husband’s chin, but his head swivels quickly, fierce green eyes looking from my face to my wrist. I hold my wrist protectively, emphasizing the pain I often feel from the injury.

James turns back to Father-Husband and shakes his head. He forces Father-Husband backward until he’s almost on the

floor, and then he stomps on his wrist, crushing it under his boot. A shrill cry of agony falls from Father-Husband's trembling lips as he pleads for mercy.

I'm horrified but also strangely absorbed. I want James to kill my captor, and that is so very wrong.

Then stark realization dawns on me.

*I prayed for this.* I prayed for Father-Husband to die, and God is answering that prayer right before my eyes. He sent his dark angel to return for me. I also made promises. No more pins. I think God would like me to extend that promise.

"If he kills him, I won't hurt myself anymore," I whisper under my breath. "Please let the angel save me."

How will I calm myself? The panicked thought hits me, but I push it aside. I can deal with that. If this man saves me, I know what will happen. He'll take me to the authorities. I'm old enough now to live on my own. I'll get help. Maybe spend some time in the hospital. Financial assistance from the state until I'm back on my feet. Therapy will help me. It will give me the strength not to use the pins or do the biting anymore.

Then another thought hits me, and this one terrifies me deep to my core. If I go to the authorities, they'll see how broken I am. How messed up, deep, deep inside, and they might send me to an asylum.

I read about them in *Dracula*, before I was sold to Father-Husband, and I know they're different now, but still the thought terrifies me.

I can't let my angel save me only to give me away.

Right now, though, there is the immediate issue at hand—what to do about my captor.

Father-Husband is still screaming, as James hauls him up to a standing position, but his wrist is dangling at an odd angle. He broke his wrist. For me.

This dark, avenging angel broke that disgusting man's wrist ... *for me.*

James watches me as if waiting for, what? An order? Permission?

Something surges in me, and it's astonishing in its power.

"Kill him," I say. My voice is so rusty and low, it sounds as if it belongs to someone else.

James looks at me, holding a crying, sniveling Father-Husband by the throat. "You want him dead?"

"No, please." Father-Husband begs, his rheumy eyes beseeching me.

"Yes." It's a simple decree. The power of the feeling is overwhelming. I can't look at his eyes, though.

I break the gaze with Father-Husband and instead look at James as he asks, "You give me your permission?"

"Do you need it?" He can do what he wants if he's a dark angel.

"To do this? Yes. He's all you've known for years. I can allow him to live. Keep him a prisoner, the way he did to you."

Who is this man? Maybe he's more dangerous and depraved than the man I want dead.

Then it hits me. He must mean in jail? He *must* be referring to that. After all, when James gives me to the authorities, won't they want Father-Husband too? He might get released from custody, though, escape and get away with his awful crimes.

I'll never be free while this raggedy, vile man is alive. His friends will come for me if he tells them to. "I want him gone," I say. James understands what I'm asking, if the hard-edged glint in his eyes means anything.

*Oh, this is such a sin.*

I'm a sinner now. No going back. This angel gave me the choice, the power over life and death, and I chose the worst sin of them all.

"Some sins are righteous," I say to myself. James pins me with a hardened glare, but in that fleeting moment, a lifetime

of words and communication passes between us. The understanding we have now is as wide as a canyon and as deep as an ocean.

Some people meet and create life. We met, and now we'll end one.

"Yes, they are." James nods once as his grip on Father-Husband's throat tightens. "Some sins absolutely are righteous. Doesn't mean you have to witness them, though. Turn around, sweetheart, and look at the wall."

I do as he says automatically.

There's a steeliness to James' voice, which makes me want to do whatever he commands. I stare at the wall and try not to think about what's going to happen.

"I could make this quick," I hear James say. "I have my gun, but after what you've put her through, I don't think it should be quick."

For a long while silence reigns, and all I can hear is my breathing.

Then the noises start.

Awful sounds ricochet around the room. Worse than I ever imagined. Choking, gasping, terrible sounds.

"Cover your ears, sweetheart, and sing something."

I do as James says. Clasping my hands over my ears, I sing the only thing that comes to my head. *Happy birthday to you*. I sing it over and over, and it seems to take a long time for Father-Husband to leave this earthly plane.

Gentle hands at my ears make me yelp in fright. I look up to see the beautiful face of my angel. Shakily, I remove my hands.

"It's okay. It's done. You're safe."

"He's d-d-dead?" I ask.

"Yes."



I turn and glance to the corner of the hovel. The slumped shape of Father-Husband is like a blow to my stomach. I wanted this, so why does it feel so ... scary?

For the longest time, I haven't felt anything other than despondency, boredom, and a fog-like sense of melancholy, but suddenly feelings rush in. And they are too much. Fear. Excitement. Giddy joy. Terrible despair. Who am I now? Where will I go? Do I have to go outside? *Now?* This moment? Will James let me stay here?

*Oh my God.*

*I can't breathe.*

I'm sucking in air, but it's as if my lungs won't work. Tears stream down my face as I stare at the sack-like body. I glance out the window and shrink back. James watches me, his face hard and impassive.

My heart is beating too fast. Am I dying?

*I'm free.*

Oh, God, I don't want to be free.

I want my cage.

*I know* my cage.

*I understand* the cage.

Why can't I get oxygen?

"Breathe out," James orders.

I can't breathe out because I can't get air in. I suck in some more, but none comes. I'm going to die.

"Fuck, do not go into acute hyperventilation," James mutters as he shakes me. "Breathe out for me."

I try, but the air is dry, and the room feels as if it's closing in around me.

"Shit," he growls.

The slap to my face is sharp. Stinging. Not hard enough to leave a mark, but hard enough to burn. I raise my hand to my cheek, and absorb a stuttering breath that inflates my lungs and

causes my chest to ache. I inhale again, slowly. Oh, blessed relief, I can breathe again.

“You back in the room with me?” James asks.

I nod.

“Good girl. Don’t do that again. I don’t want to slap you again.”

I nod.

Tears stream down my cheeks in sweet relief; I can breathe, truly breathe. How long has it been since I’ve actually inhaled life into my lungs without fear of it being my last?

Movement draws my attention to James pulling his phone out of his pocket. The screen illuminates, and as he presses a button, I react—

“No! Please. Don’t call the authorities,” I beg.

James’ eyes darken with something sinister and foreboding. “You think I was going to call the authorities?”

“Weren’t you? They will come for me, won’t they? Put me in the hospital. I don’t want that. Can’t I stay here? On my own? You don’t have to tell anyone.”

His face grows darker as his eyes narrow. “You want to say here? In this shithole?”

I nod. “Out there ... scares me. I can’t ... I can’t go out there.” I look around the small space, now covered in death and misfortune. “Here is safe.”

“It’s really not, Ellie.”

I flinch when he uses my name. My real name. He’s watching me closely as if he’s waiting for me to gasp for air again.

“It is. He’s dead. Gone.”

“He has friends. If they don’t hear from him, they’ll come look for him. If there’s no one here, then they will simply assume he’s disappeared with you. If you’re here and he’s not, then you will be in danger.”

“Oh.” How could I be so naïve. He’s right, and Father-Husband always warned as much. I’ll never be safe. “I can’t go out there. I tried. It was too big.” I take a step back, but James gently takes my hand in his.

“What was?”

“Everything. The sky. The ground. The trees.”

“You were alone?” He draws slow circles against my wrist as he looks into my eyes.

“Yes,” I mutter, unblinking.

“You won’t be. You’ll be with me now.”

“Until you hand me over to the authorities. Then I’ll be alone. God, they might put me in a mental asylum.”

“They don’t really have asylums anymore, Ellie, and you’re not a danger to yourself or others ... are you?” He asks the last question with no judgment. Only interest.

If they see the marks, the scratches, and the bites, would they deem me a danger to myself? I’m not going to do that anymore. I made a promise to God. Still, they might not believe me.

“I don’t know,” I whisper on a broken sob.

Why won’t these tears stop? Staring at my face with an intensity that is as burning as the sun on a hot summer afternoon, James presses something on his phone.

It rings, and he speaks into it, never once looking away from me.

“I need a wet work crew to come clean up a mess. Make it look like the person left, okay? Like they left with a woman. I’ll send the coordinates from the car. Make sure it’s our best that you send.”

Then he hangs up.

“What’s wet work?” I ask, confused.

“They clean up messes,” he says.

I look at the sunken form on the floor. I want to ask James to slap me once more, but I'm worried he'll think I'm insane if I do. Then he will definitely ring the authorities.

"I can't leave here," I say again.

"You have to; there's literally no other options."

"Where will I go? I don't want to go the authorities yet."

He cocks his head. "You really don't want to, do you?"

I get the feeling he's a cat playing with a mouse, and I don't know what the game is, but I do know I am the mouse.

"No."

"Then you can come with me."

"Where?"

"I have a house. It's not far. It's only a rental. I'm mostly living with my business partner now, at his wife's house. I rented a place up here because work seems to be based around this area for the foreseeable. Usually, I live in London. I'm thinking a long drive won't be your idea of fun."

His sentences are short, almost clipped. He's watching me, his face void of all emotion.

I can feel the tremors starting within me. Internal shakes striking hard, and the urge to grab a pin rides me. I clench my fists, letting my nails dig into my palms. That doesn't count as hurting myself; I'm sure of it.

"We can be at my rental in a short car ride. You need to come to the car with me."

"Out there?" I point to the outside.

He frowns. "Yes, of course. Out there."

"I can't."

His eyes narrow, and something dark and calculating enters his beautiful gaze. "I can make you."

Fear grips me.

“I’d really rather not, though. What are you scared of? Me? You say you don’t want the authorities involved. I’m offering you a safe place to stay.”

“Said the wolf to the lamb,” I reply, then clamp my mouth shut. Where did that come from? That phrase is from a kid’s book I haven’t thought about in years.

“Sweetheart, as much as I’d like to spend more time arguing with you. We need to leave. Gather all your shit so we can get gone. Where is all your stuff?”

“In the tower.” I point to the stairs.

The thought of clearing my things out of my safe space is too terrible to contemplate, but if I don’t want to lose my angel, or go to the authorities, I must do so.

“Do you want help?” he asks.

I nod and wipe the rebel tear from my cheek. I shouldn’t be so grief-stricken about leaving the tower.

He leans in close and brushes another tear from my cheek. I freeze, and my breath catches in my throat. I hated when Father-Husband touched me. This man also touches me without seeking my permission, but his caress of my cheek has my heart racing in a new way.

His thumb moves lower, and he cups my cheek. I lean into the touch, chasing the tender caress. My cheek nestles in his palm like a baby bird in the nest.

Slowly, he rubs his thumb across my lower lip once and my breath hitches in a soft gasp.

His gaze is focused on my mouth, and for a moment nothing exists but the space between us, as small as it now is. That space could be as wide as an ocean and as arid as a desert for how much I hate it in this infinitesimal beat of time.

“Christ,” he whispers. Then he shakes his head and steps back.

He clears his throat. “Lead the way.”



# ELLIE

I LEAD the man up the stairs, taking care to grip the rope so I don't slip on the worn stone and fall to my death. How ironic would that be if I died now?

I enter my room and stare at my meager possessions. "I don't have anything to put them in," I say.

God, how pathetic am I? I had bags when I arrived here, but Father-Husband took them, and now I don't know where they are. I grew out of my clothes, as I developed, from a teen girl to a young woman. Father-Husband gave me a few gross dresses, and I wore them until they were threadbare. Like the one I'm in now.

The dark angel stares around the room. He pulls the cover on my single bed back and frowns at it. Then he opens the tiny wardrobe and looks inside, tugging out one of my gray sack-like dresses. He makes a low sound in his throat, and I think it might be a growl. It hums in his chest as he shakes his head.

"Do you actually want any of this shit?"

"I have nothing else," I say.

"These are fucking awful. Do you have things that matter to you?"

I nod, and my cheeks flush as I gather my books and pins. I promised God I wouldn't use them to hurt myself, and I will try to stick to that promise, but my little pin army has helped me through my darkest days, and I can't fathom leaving them behind. I pick up my tiny rag doll, the only piece of my

childhood that remains. It's so old now, but my granny made it herself. She packed her with materials, sewed her up, and put a dress on her. She's called Lucy-Loo and I can't leave her.

With my precious belongings set out on the bed, I look at the man. "This is it."

"Okay." He picks up a towel and wraps my things in them as if they're made of bone China. "I've got them. I'll tell the team to ensure any other traces of you are gone. They can burn all this shit."

His face turns dark. "In fact, they ought to burn this place to the ground."

I suck in air and my hands ball into fists. *My home*. He wants to burn my home. I should welcome the thought. I've dreamed about doing it myself, but now Father-Husband is dead, maybe I could come back and live here. Make it mine? The world scares me.

He grips my elbow. It's not rough, but it is commanding. "Come."

I follow him down the stairs and as we approach the open door, it might as well be the yawning gates to hell. Out there is nothing but fear and terror.

As we reach the door, the man turns to me.

"Ellie. My name is James. You don't know me, but I do believe I was sent for you."

I know his name. I filed it away as soon as he stated it to Father-Husband. I believe he was sent for me too. "I prayed ... for an angel," I whisper.

He tips my chin up gently. There's something odd about it, though, as if he's struggling to be what he thinks I need in this moment. "If I'm your angel, then there's no need to be afraid, is there?"

I shake my head. No, there isn't. Unless I'm terribly wrong. After all, Corinthians tells us that even Satan disguises himself as a being of light.



I prayed so hard, and I have suffered so much. This man *can't* be a trick.

“I will keep you safe. I promise.” He is serious. Deadly so. “I’m far from perfect, but so long as you need me to, I’ll stand between you and the world.”

“Why?” I ask. Saving me, I understand to a degree. I asked God for him, and I must believe he sent this man to me.

It makes sense that he’d come back for me if he has *any* morals after seeing me trapped in the tower. Maybe God kept putting my image into his head, until he was so consumed with guilt and concern that he felt compelled to save me. After all, God works in mysterious ways.

What James is suggesting is more than I asked God for, though. Why is he taking me with him? Doesn’t he want to be rid of me as soon as he can?

He shrugs and purses his mouth into a hard line. “Because you need someone to protect you.”

He says it as if it’s the simplest thing in the world.

“Are you my someone?”

“I do believe I am, Ellie.” He laughs. “Unfortunately, for you.”

What does that mean?

He guides me to the sleek car and opens the passenger door, helping me into the seat. His words are so confusing. He said he was sent for me, but then he said this is bad for me? Why? How? What will he do to me?

He kneels by the door and places the towel full of my belongings on the floor. He takes Lucy Loo out of the towel and puts her in my lap. “It’s only a short drive, Ellie. Once we get to my place, you can have a room all your own just like here, but much nicer. I’ll get you some clothes, and you can take time to figure things out.”

I nod, but I am fearful. He isn’t doing this for nothing. Will he want to be my new Father-Husband?

I ponder this as I settle into the comfortable seat. The thought isn't entirely horrific to me. After all, he isn't a decrepit old man, like Father-Husband was. He's the opposite of that. He's *beautiful*. Powerful too. I can tell as much with the way he moves. The way he occupies the space around him. It's as if he owns the very air around him.

He smells of something fresh and nice like the grass in spring but with a mix of something sharper like lemons.

The door closes after he's satisfied I'm belted in properly, he moves around to the driver's side. He fastens his seat belt and starts the car, and the engine purrs to life. James smiles at me before he pulls smoothly onto the tiny road, and I watch in the rearview mirror as my tower fades into the distance.

The strong scent of leather permeates through the confined space, and I trail my fingers along the seat, the cool fabric now foreign to my touch. I might have spent many years in captivity with Father-Husband, in my tower, but before then, I was a normal teenage girl with dreams and desires. This car is very expensive, and this man is very rich.

Glancing out the window, my stomach flip-flops as I watch the trees skim by, and so I look at the floor and the faded worn slippers that cover my feet.

"We'll get you some shoes, Ellie. You'll have everything you need," the man, *James*, I remind myself, says.

"We?"

"I have a housekeeper. Lorraine. She'll help get you sorted and look after you."

Another person. A woman too. Oh dear God, I didn't ask for this. How will I talk to her? I've forgotten how to do the normal talking stuff. In my head things flow smoothly, but when I try to put them into words, it's hard. I often think I sound like a child, or as if I'm stupid. I'm none of those things. I am, however, very different to most other people because I've lived for years with only that disgusting hermit for company.

“There’s a gardener too, and a cleaner who comes in twice a week. You’re not going to be there alone with me.”

“I like being alone.” I shrug. “I don’t know how to talk to people.”

“You’re talking to me. Now.”

“You’re my angel, though.”

He laughs, and it holds an edge so dark it could turn the blue sky black. “You know, you’re the first person to ever call me an angel.”

I don’t answer that because I don’t know what to say.

“Tell me, Ellie. Why the pins?”

I cough abruptly, unprepared for the question. “I, erm ... I like them. They are pretty. And they are mine. I stole them.”

“Okay.”

He doesn’t push me, and I like that, but I can tell he doesn’t believe me either.

As he drives, I find myself watching his hands on the wheel. Father-Husband’s hands made want to throw up when I thought of them touching me.

James has lovely hands. There are corded veins on the back of them that stand out in contrast to his tanned skin. His fingernails are blunt, neat, and squared off unlike, Father-Husbands long, jagged nails.

The only jewelry he wears is a big watch on his left wrist.

I dare to glance up at his profile. He’s so handsome. Really striking. “Do you have a wife?”

I’m sure he must.

“No.”

“Oh. A girlfriend?”

“No.”

He glances in the mirror and then at me. “I did have,” he carries on. “Although, not really a girlfriend, she was more of

a casual thing. A companion. Then I moved up here to work with Nico.”

“Is Nico the other man you were with, when you came the first time?”

“Yes.”

“Who is he?”

He pauses and sucks his lower lip between his teeth as he focuses on the road, steering around a fallen branch in the way.

Blowing out a breath, he shrugs. “He’s a lot of things. My boss in some ways, my business partner in others. He relies on me a lot. I go where he goes, and he pays me a ton of money to do so, but also over time, our business interests converged. It’s ... symbiotic.”

“What does that mean?” I must have missed that one in my dictionary.

He shoots me a glance. “It means mutually beneficial.”

“Ah.”

“What age did you stop school?”

“I think I was coming up to fifteen or sixteen. Or maybe I was fourteen... Probably fifteen. I really don’t remember. I haven’t celebrated a birthday in many years, since Mum died.”

“Your father is a piece of shit,” he says between clenched teeth.

I can’t argue with that assessment.

“We can have some books ordered if you’d like to learn?” He glances at me. “You’re older now, I know, and it might seem childish to you, when you read some of the books, but we can maybe look at the curriculum and get you up to speed. If you’d like?”

“I could have a tutor,” I say dreamily, ignoring for a nice moment the reality that I’d be terrified to meet another new person.

He laughs and looks at me. “You’re twenty-one right?”

“I believe so. Father-Husband told me I reached the age of marriage a few weeks ago, or maybe a couple of months. I don’t know. Time ... it gets confusing up there.”

His jaw tightens, and something dark crosses his face. He looks at me again, and there’s resignation there. “Fuck, I ought to take you to social services. Although, I doubt they’d do much with you being an adult. Maybe they’d give you a flat.”

“The authorities?” I try to undo my seat belt in a panic. “No. You said ... *no, no, no*. You said you’d keep me.”

“Why are you so scared of them? They can get you a flat. A counsellor. A tutor probably. Get you set up. Give you financial assistance. There might be people looking for you? Other family, no?”

I laugh, and it’s hard as there’s a lump forming in my heart. “I have no other family left. Only my father, and he sold me and took my cousin as his new wife. The rest are dead. Mother, Aunty, Grandma and Pops. All gone. You promised me. They’ll, they’ll... I’ll be taken away. To an asylum.”

He shakes his head. “Ellie, I’ve told you, there aren’t any asylums.”

He pulls the car to a stop in a small layby and drums his fingers on the wheel. “Fuck. You’re ... you need a lot of help. This ... what I wanted, what I feel ... it’s fucked up. As fucked up as where you were before. I swear to God, Ellie, this might be about the only time you get rationality out of me on this.” He turns to me, and his gaze roams over my features. “Ellie, I’ll tell you right now, I am doing something good here. For once in my forsaken life. I’m giving you a gift. Take it.”

I don’t understand what he’s talking about, but I do know he’s thinking of giving me to the authorities. I can’t let that happen.

Without even thinking it through, I act. I unclip the seat belt and climb clumsily over the center console, resting my knees either side of his thighs as I kneel in his lap.

“What the fuck?” He puts his hands on my hips. “Ellie.”

“*Don’t.*” I look at him and bring my hands up to his cheeks. “You’re my angel. I asked God for you, and he sent you. If you abandon me now to the authorities, you’ve betrayed my prayers.”

His dark gaze roams all over my face, so many emotions flickering through his green eyes. Shock, awe, hunger. “You prayed for me?”

“Yes. I asked God for a savior.”

“Damn. I did make a promise,” he says.

“To God?”

“To whoever might have been listening.”

“What was the promise?”

“Not to leave any more women to the mercy of fate.”

I nod eagerly. “So, you are who God sent to me. You made a promise. I made a prayer. Now we can both do what we must.”

He shakes his head. “What if the things I want from you are far from angelic? You ever think about that? I very rarely do the right thing. Right now, in this moment, it seems I’m having a fit of conscience. I don’t think I’d be betraying your prayers, or my own promise if I took you to social services. This isn’t the same. It’s not Afghanistan.”

What does Afghanistan have to do with this? I frown at him as if waiting for him to tell me; instead, he only says, “You have one chance. If I were you, I’d run with it. Run far and fast.”

I *should* take it. A tiny, rational part of my mind knows that I ought to let go of his face and let him take me to people who can mend me. I’m so broken I need a team of master craftsmen to put me back together, but I can’t face it. I *cannot*.

People. Pity. *Judgment*. Those awful, long conversations I know they’ll force. Just like when Mum died and the people at school made me go to a lady twice a week who wanted me to cut myself open and bleed for her. She was like a vampire,

living from other people's pain and all the time looking at me with this pitying, fake sincere smile.

Those people make me feel like my skin doesn't fit and now, after this. Years of being missing. Held prisoner. The media will get involved. I'll be on the news; I'm sure of it.

James has said I can have my own room. There is a woman with him, so I won't be alone with a strange man. If I can just stay a while, until I feel stronger, and then he can hand me over. Now, though... I swear to God if he makes me go right now, the broken bits of me will simply blow away on the wind, and I'll never be whole again.

Scared, but knowing I need to reach that dark part of him I can glimpse smoldering in his gaze, I lean in close and plant my lips to his cheek.

I breathe in his scent and want to drown in it. Why does he smell so good? Instinctively, I put my nose to his throat and inhale again.

He groans, low and so quiet, but I hear it and feel the soft rumble against me.

It gives me the same feelings as the books Father-Husband brought to me.

This man is solid, reassuring, and warm. I want him to wrap me in his warmth and strength and hold me there. My body wants other things too. I'm twenty-one, and I've been starved of love and affection for so long that I'd probably combust if a handsome man looked my way. This man is much more than *handsome*.

"I want you to keep me," I say.

"Last chance." His grip on my hips tightens, and then one hand snakes into my hair and winds it around his fist. "I mean it, Ellie. Last. Fucking. Chance."

"Keep me," I whisper.

"You did this. Remember that," it's all he says.

He lifts me from him as if I weigh nothing and places me back in my seat. Clipping the seat belt in, he turns to the road

and guns the engine.

“You made this choice.” He glances at me.

I nod and close my eyes. I did make the choice. *Please, God, let it be the right one.*





# ELLIE

AFTER A LONG, silent drive, we turn off the road and up a drive toward a house. I gawp out the window at the massive home. Or, at least, it's huge compared to the small house I grew up in, and Father-Husband's hovel.

It has those big bay windows like most old homes have. It's made of a gorgeous creamy stone, unlike the dark color stone sometimes can be. There's gravel on the driveway and pillars on either side of the entrance.

Lamps shine brightly in the gathering gloom. James parks the car and gets out, jogging around my side, where he opens the door for me.

I step out and take his proffered hand. This is surreal. I'm being treated like a princess, but I'm dressed like an urchin.

He steps to the door and opens it with a key, leading me into a large hallway.

The floor is polished wood and smells of lemons. There's a sweeping staircase leading to an upper floor, and rooms on this floor leading off from the hallway. Something heady and sweet hangs in the air, cutting through the acerbic freshness of lemon.

I realize the sweetness probably comes from the huge vase of flowers placed on the bureau with the marble top. "Oh, you like flowers," I say to James happily.

He frowns and shrugs. "Lorraine will have bought those."

"Ah."

“Come. I’ll show you around down here and then take you to your room.”

“I have a room?”

He shoots me another confused glance. “Well, when I decided I was coming to save you, I asked Lorraine to prepare a room for you. I already told you that you’d have your own room; don’t you recall?”

My head feels like someone took my brains and mixed them up, so it’s all a jumble right now. I think about what he said. He knew he’d come for me, so he had a room prepared. “What if I hadn’t come with you? What if I had chosen the authorities?”

“Then the room would have simply been reverted back to the guest suite.” He leans in and murmurs darkly. “You chose, Ellie. Remember.”

I don’t understand. I’m not changing my mind, simply asking how he knew I’d come back with him.

Deciding it is best to keep my mouth shut, I follow James around silently as he leads me into room after room. There’s a grand kitchen. It’s like something out of the American soap operas my mum used to watch. A conservatory, which looks like it will be bright and airy in the daytime. The living room is cavernous and filled with cream furniture which looks too pristine to sit on. There’s what James calls a den, and that appears to be the comfiest room, with its casual furniture, shelves of books, and large television.

The dining room is preposterous in the opulence it displays. I remind myself this isn’t James’ house but one he is renting. Perhaps this isn’t his taste, but it must cost a fortune either way. I’ve been out of the world for some time, but I know this is expensive stuff. The same way I understand his car is not an old cheap banger like my dad drove.

James finally leads me upstairs to my room, and I follow with nerves whirling in my tummy. They make me feel all strange like I want to giggle and throw up at the same time.

“This is my room.” He opens a door to show me a room with a huge bed, a dresser, a closet and a second door, which I assume must be the bathroom.

“The attic is where Lorraine sleeps. This room is yours.” James pushes open the door next to his. This room is slightly smaller, but still way too big for me. It is lighter, prettier. I prefer it. The furniture is more proportionate in here. I won’t feel as if it is looming over me. There’s also a secondary door, like in the other room.

“Is this the bathroom?” I ask hopefully.

“Yes.”

“Does it have a lot of spiders?”

He gives a short bark of laughter and then looks at me with that puzzled frown again. “Spiders?”

“My bathroom in the tower was full of them.” I shudder.

“Christ. No, I don’t think it has spiders. Lorraine cleans it every damn day, so I think she gets rid of any bugs. You want to look?”

I nod, feeling all kinds of nervous. I pick at my cuticles as I stare around the room. There are clothes on the bed. “Someone left their clothes here,” I say.

“They are for you.” James goes to them and picks them up. “Simple things. You can shop for what you want now that you’re here, but you needed something for when you arrived. I ordered some basics, or rather, Lorraine did. I told her you were petite and slender, and she got some things in various sizes. They’re only casual, so it doesn’t really matter if they’re a bit loose. Once you’re settled, I’ll take you shopping.”

*Outside?* I glance at the window and flinch.

“Or, we can order the clothes to be delivered, from the stores. If you’d prefer.” He watches me closely.

There’s an energy in him I don’t understand. He keeps doing nice things for me. *Kind* things. He has a woman here. He’s given me my own room, but I can sense the darkness in him too. It’s as if he’s only holding something else back.

I swallow and glance at the window again. I can't think of the darkness inside James right now. It scares me, but it also makes me feel tingly. The way the books did.

"Yes, for now, I would like the clothes to come here." I focus on practicalities. "I don't like the outside," I whisper.

He walks to me and tips my chin. "You'll need to get over that," he says.

"What if I can't?"

"Then you'll be as much of a prisoner here as you were in the tower."

I laugh and shake my head at him. *Silly James*. No one here could be called a prisoner. It's beautiful. Spacious. "I won't be a prisoner here. It's too beautiful." *He is too*, I think as I look at him. *Beautiful*.

"Beauty can be a lie, Ellie. Don't be so easily fooled." He brushes his thumb over my jaw once then let's go.

He walks to the second door and beckons me. "This is your bathroom. I had Lorraine purchase things a woman might want to use."

I walk into the room and squeal as if I'm a child. I smack my hand over my mouth, embarrassed. Then I turn to James and wait to be told off, or worse—for the blow to land. Father-Husband hated sudden noise.

No blow comes, no lecture either. Instead, he watches me as if I'm somehow dangerous to him, which is funny because he's big and I'm small.

He's strong and I'm weak after so long in my room.

He's hard, and I'm buttery soft deep inside.

Still, he watches me with a wariness I don't understand, as if I'm a bomb that might explode and cover this stunning tiled room in my blood and guts.

I giggle at the thought, and his expression grows more severe. "What are you laughing at?" he asks.

“You. You’re watching me as if I’m a lion and I’m going to eat you alive.”

“I don’t think you’re a lion,” he says easily.

“What am I then?”

“I don’t know, and that’s what is puzzling me. I’ve never met anyone like you.”

“Why would you? Do you often meet women who’ve been held captive in towers?”

He barks out another of those sharp laughs. “You’re funny. See, how do you get to be funny? After what happened?”

“I’m just being me. Father-Husband might have held me, beat me, half-starved me at times, but he didn’t take away my soul.” I lean in close and whisper seriously, “No one can take away your soul, James.”

He stares at me, and I swear I see him shiver. “Christ, Ellie, I don’t know if I want to fall to my knees and worship you or burn you at the stake in my garden. Are you a witch?”

“I don’t know any magic, if that’s what you mean.”

I twirl and take in the luxurious space fit for a princess. I look up at James and beam with happiness and excitement for these blessings. But my dark angel looks broody and thoughtful as he runs his fingers through my hair, catching the golden strands and holding them up. “Maybe you don’t need to know magic to be a witch, Ellie, maybe you *are* magic.”

“This is the best room I’ve ever seen.” I clap my hands in delight.

“Shall I show you how to work the shower and bath and leave you to clean up?” James clears his throat before speaking, letting the strands fall slowly from his fingers, as if he doesn’t want to let go at all.

“Yes, please.”

“I’ll give you some privacy and come back in”—he glances at his watch—“an hour.”

He shows me how to work the shower and where things are. He tells me Lorraine bought me a whole load of toiletries and to use what I like. He says there is a hairdryer in the drawer in the bedroom under the mirror. Then he is gone, and I am alone, in the beautiful bathroom.

Staring around me in wonder, I hug myself. “This is my new home,” I say softly. “For now.”

Excited, I look at all the potions and lotions arranged on the glass shelf that runs along the length of the back wall. The bathroom walls and floor are a luxurious cream marble with flecks of stunning gold throughout. My fingers trail along the cool surface of the tiles.

I go to the shelf and look at the bottles. I find one that says shampoo and another that is conditioner. There are some shower gels and body washes. I chose a body wash that smells lovely, of roses and flowers, but rich as if there’s been something secret added to the petals to make it extra heady.

I used to make rose petal perfume as a kid when Mum was still alive. This reminds me of that, only better.

Once I have the water adjusted to the temperature that seems comfortable, I step beneath the warm spray. It is heavenly. I lather my long, thick strands, rinse, then repeat before applying conditioner. I pour the rose-scented body wash on a loofah and wash thoroughly from head to toe, exfoliating my skin as I attempt to wash the putrid reminder of my past from my flesh. I rinse the conditioner from my hair and the soapy rose-scented suds from my body, yet I can’t erase the smell of Father-Husband’s hovel. So I lather up the loofah and scrub until my skin aches and is angry and red. I can’t wash the past away.

Nothing can...

It has stained me soul deep. I’ll always be the poor girl who lived in a tower. Thrown away by her father and taken captive by a depraved lunatic.

The images of the past few hours hit me hard and fast, stealing my breath, and I double over in the shower, clutching

my belly as I gasp for air that's not available for the taking.

*He's dead.*

I wanted him dead, but oh God, *he's dead*. The only person I've really known for years is dead. *Gone*.

Tears fall down my face, and I swipe at them angrily. "Stop crying!" I say out loud. "You hate him; stop it."

The tears come harder, and I choke on a broken sob as my knees grow weak beneath me. I curl into a ball as the water flows and flows, and I close my eyes and grieve.

I cry for the little girl so shattered and torn, undeniably forgotten and left to wither away in a tower of stone.

I cry for the prayers I whispered that saved my life but tortured my soul.





# JAMES

LORRAINE IS WATCHING me with sharp, appraising eyes. She's been with me a long time. She knows my proclivities, and that the way I make my living is hardly upstanding. She doesn't judge me.

But that's exactly what she's doing right now.

"What?" I snap.

"I'm concerned, James. You say this girl was kept in a tower?"

"Yes, she was. For an undetermined length of time."

I sip at the glass of red wine and nod. I'm sitting at the breakfast bar in the kitchen, and Lorraine is supposedly wiping the counters down, but really she's in here so she can bust my balls.

"You don't think a woman who has been held prisoner should be with the police? In the hospital?"

I laugh at that. "Hospital? What, so she can wait on a bed in an overcrowded emergency department for ten hours, going out of her mind? You know what happened when I let the last woman I saved go." I'm referring to Gabina, the girl I saved only to leave her at the international aid camp and found out later she'd been taken from there and killed.

"This isn't Afghanistan, James," Lorraine says softly.

"We can get her the best help money can buy right here."

"Who is *we*?" she huffs.

I narrow my eyes at her. “You can be fired, you know.”

“Yes, I can. But then who would put up with your bitter depravity and your mafia boss, huh?”

Lorraine knows where all the bodies are buried. Metaphorically, not literally. She’d never say anything, though. I am so sure of this because I saved her from a life of hell. Lorraine was stuck, married to a high-up ambassador who abused her horrifically. She couldn’t leave because he said he’d have her killed, and he had the power to do so. We met when I was on a mission in some sand-covered hellhole, and her husband was stationed there too.

Somehow, we got to talking at an event one evening, and after Lorraine left, her friend drunkenly told me all about her life and how shitty it was. Over the next few weeks we kept meeting at various gatherings, and I began to mentally document the new bruises and the various ways she’d wear long sleeves or high necks to hide them, or try to cover them in concealer.

On my last week out there, I approached her and offered her refuge. I explained that I could get her out and make it look like she’d died in an accident. I’d give her a new name. A new identity. I wasn’t working alone, I had help, but Lorraine always saw me as being the one who saved her.

When she got back to the United Kingdom, she needed a job and a roof over her head, and I needed someone to keep house for me when I was in the country, and watch over things while I was away. I hired her, and over the years, we grew close.

She’s like my judgmental older sister, but one who will always be grateful to me, and no matter what I do would have my back. I truly believe I could kill someone in cold blood in front of Lorraine, and she’d get down on the floor, and calmly scrub up the blood.

Today, though, she’s looking at me and it’s something new I see in her gaze. Fear.

I tap the rim of my wine glass as I ponder this. “What has you so worried?”

“I feel as if you’ve brought a suitcase into this house, and we have no idea what is in it. Could simply be old clothes, or it could be a nuclear bomb. We can’t know until the suitcase opens. That’s what has me so scared.”

Her words send a tiny chill up my spine because I’d be lying if I didn’t admit to the same feelings.

Ellie is so innocent in many ways, and so petite. Abused. Frightened. Yet, there is something about her which makes me think she might be the most dangerous person I’ve ever met.

When she climbed on my lap in the car, I ought to have driven her straight to the nearest police station and dropped her off. I couldn’t have, though, because I wanted her in a way unlike anything I’ve ever experienced.

“That look on your face?” Lorraine breaks into my thoughts. “That scares me too.”

“What look?”

She shakes her head. “Obsession.”

I scoff, “Lorraine, I’ve only just met the girl. I’m not remotely obsessed with her.”

*Liar.*

“Either way, I’m going to be alone with her when you’re at work, and she’s creepy.”

“Lorraine, that’s enough. She’s not fucking creepy; she’s been victimized. If she hears you say that, it will break her heart. Treat her kindly. I mean it.” I sip at my wine. “I’m not going to work for a while. I’ve taken some time off.”

“You have?”

“Yeah.”

“I didn’t know organized crime work came with benefits like paid leave.”

“I know how to make bodies disappear, you know.”

She cracks up, and we're back to our usual banter. She teases me for working with the Andrettis. I pretend like I could ever hurt her. We wind one another up, and we make each other laugh.

She's never shown any interest in finding love, and the one time I asked her she said, deadly serious, that other than me, she hated men and she never wanted to share a bed with one again.

Glancing at her smart watch, she frowns. "Girl's been an awfully long time taking a shower. Do you want me to go see what's going on?"

"No, I'll do it." I push the stool back from the counter and head to the door. Turning back to Lorraine, I say, "Something smells good; what did you cook?"

She grins. "Lasagna with herby bread, and there's a big salad in the fridge. Plenty for her to eat."

"I'll see if she will come down and have some food."

I reach Ellie's room and knock, but there's no reply. I knock again, louder, and still no reply. I push the door open and step inside, calling out her name. Nothing.

The shower is still running. "Ellie?" I say louder.

I get no answer, but then I hear the strangled moan.

What the hell?

Racing into the bathroom, I stop dead in the doorway.

Ellie is curled up on the floor of the shower, the water beating down her back, and she's rocking back and forth as she moans.

Fuck.

What the hell do I do now?

I have a private doctor I can call. One who won't ask too many questions. There's also the veterinarian that Nico and I use to patch people up.

I decide to try to help her myself first, and if it doesn't work, I'll call one of them. She might need something to calm her down.

"Hey, Ellie." I step forward, but she doesn't move.

"Ellie," I say, sharper this time.

Her head jerks up. "He's dead!"

Like this, curled up in the corner of the shower, she looks so fragile. It tugs on heartstrings I thought had been snapped a long time ago.

Grabbing one of the big, fluffy towels, I get into the shower with her, ignoring the water wetting my clothes.

"Ellie, can you stand up for me? We need to get you from under this water."

She pushes the heels of her hands into her eyes. "It's all I can imagine ... those final moments and the strangled breath he heaved then finally his last..." she sobs and shakes her head.

"Listen to me, Ellie," I say as softly as I can. "You need to get up."

"Dead. Dead. Dead."

It seems my soft approach isn't working. I think back to the hovel she lived in, when I slapped her. It worked. I don't want to hit her ever again, but I can try something similar.

"Ellie!" I shout and snap my fingers in front of her face.

Wide eyes turn up to stare at me.

"Get the fuck up."

She blinks slowly, but then, as if a robot being given an order, she stands on wobbly legs. I take her arm and lead her out of the spray and then I quickly wrap the towel around her.

I got a look though, and she's curvier than her frame or baggy clothes would hint at. My mouth waters at the thought of all those pretty curves, soft skin, and all of it untouched.

She lets me lead her into the bedroom, and I gently guide her to sit on the edge of the bed. I turn back to the bathroom and grab a second towel and then sit by her and begin to dry her hair. As I look at her slender arms, I notice marks. Like cat scratches. They didn't have a cat.

Did that fucker do this to her?

“Did he touch you? Hurt you?” I ask.

“Sometimes he pushed me or smacked me. Often on my legs with a wooden spoon.” The words tumble out emotionless and dull.

“What did he do to your arm?” I hold it up gently.

She glances down, and her face flushes as she pulls her arm away from me. “It was an accident.”

She scoots away from me and crosses her legs, and the movement has the towel riding up, and I see more of the marks.

The memory of her insisting she take those pins with her flashes in my mind.

“Ellie, did you scratch yourself?”

Furiously, she turns to me. “No. Don't be disgusting.”

“It's not disgusting for me to ask how you got those marks.”

The blood on the note she dropped for me. Everything starts to click into place.

“Did you use the pins to make yourself bleed so you could write that note?”

She jerks her head toward me, and her expression is mulish. Her jaw set hard, and her gaze determined. “Yes, but that was okay. I needed your attention. There's nothing sinful about doing something like that if it is to save yourself.”

“Would it be sinful to scratch yourself for other reasons?” I ask carefully.

“Of course.”

“So you wouldn’t do that?”

“No. It’s a sin.”

“Lying is a sin too, isn’t it?”

“Is it?” She says this so petulantly I can’t help the smile that tugs at my lips. I swallow it down and shrug.

“I wouldn’t know, Ellie. I’m not sure what is and isn’t a sin. I do know I have committed so many the lines between pure and sin are blurred.” I brush my thumb over her arm where the marks are. “If you have sinned, Ellie, there will be no judgment from me.” She drops her head momentarily, her fingers trembling as they fidget with the hem of the towel. She looks up at me, her cheeks stained pink, and her eyes full of unabashed innocence.

“It won’t happen anymore.” She smiles at me. “I made a promise to God.”

If she’s been scratching at herself with those pins to alleviate some of her panic and emotional pain, then I don’t think a promise to God will eliminate that need. I don’t say as much. Instead, I simply nod and release her arm. I know all about pain. Wanting to both give it and receive it. It can be soothing for some.

Ellie. Ellie. Ellie. You ought to run so fast your heels catch fire.

I have a girl in my home who needs to feel the sharp bite of pain to soothe herself, and I’m a man who dearly loves to deliver pain.

Nothing gets me harder than hearing a woman cry out for mercy.

It’s a fucking dangerous combination. Her and me stuck together.

My brain is telling me to stop this now and send her away.

My dick is begging for her to stay.

My soul? That checked out of proceedings a long while ago.



“I like pain sometimes.” Ellie’s whispered words make me jump. “Not bad pain like Father-Husband gave me. But nice pain. Sharp stings. Scratches. I know it’s a sin, though. I won’t do it to myself anymore.”

*Oh, Ellie.*

*My beautiful, broken girl.*

*You won’t have to.*

*I’m here now.*



# ELLIE

JAMES RESUMES DRYING MY HAIR.

This man. This stranger saw me naked.

Another sin I have tallied.

I whispered confession about my pins and my love of the scratches they can give me. He hasn't said anything.

He's tense, though. I can sense it in him. All rigid muscles as if he's about to do something but is trying to stop himself.

When he's dried my hair enough that it isn't dripping down my back, he turns to face me. "I think you need some food and some wine to calm your anxiety. Are you okay to get dressed?"

I nod.

"No more meltdowns?"

"No."

"If you feel bad, we can always send for a doctor. Or someone to bring some medication to help you. But let us see if some food and wine help. It's been a traumatic day."

*It's been a traumatic life*, I think, but I don't say it out loud.

"You know something, Ellie?"

"What?"

"Liking pain isn't a sin."

“It isn’t?”

“No. Scratching at your skin until it bleeds isn’t good. You could give yourself an infection and scars. But the pain? Enjoying it? I don’t think that’s a sin.”

“What do you think it is?” I ask, confused.

“Beautiful.” He brushes my hair with his hand once. “I think it’s beautiful.”

He turns and walks to the door. “Get dressed and come down to the dining room. We will eat.”

The door closes behind him with resounding silence, and I consider his words. I’m confused by them. How can enjoying pain be beautiful? It isn’t normal. I know as much despite being hidden away from the world for so long.

I don’t often make myself bleed. I’m careful with my pins. In fact, the only time I purposefully scratched until I bled was when I sent my plea for help down to James on the wind. Normally, my scratches are surface only. The sting used to help take the panic away. As did a pinch here and there.

What sort of pain does James mean? What does he find beautiful?

I shiver and then realize I’m still wet and wrapped in a towel, so I dry off and pad into the bathroom where I choose a beautifully scented lotion to rub into my skin.

The clothes on the bed are simple: cotton t-shirts, light sweaters, jogging pants, socks, and plain white underwear in a variety of styles and sizes. Some sneakers too, the kind you just slip your feet into and don’t have laces, and finally, sheepskin booties.

After dressing in a pair of navy jogging pants and a white t-shirt, with a navy sweater over the top, I slip my feet into the booties and exclaim in delight.

*Soft.* They are so heavenly. Oh my. I wiggle my toes and smile. These simple clothes are immense luxuries for me.

My doll sits on the bed, and I yearn to take her with me downstairs, but I know it will make me look silly. Odd. Like a

child.

I feel like a child, though, right now.

“You’re a grown woman, Ellie,” I chide myself. “You’re not a child, and you’re no longer a prisoner. Start acting like the grownup you are.”

Heading back into the bathroom, I realize I don’t have anything to brush my hair with, so I look around. Under the thick glass shelf where all the potions and lotions live, there is a cabinet with dark glass sliding doors. I push the left-hand side one open and gasp.

Oh wow. It’s like a wonderland. There is a basket full of makeup. I haven’t worn makeup in years. We weren’t allowed to at home, or at school, but some of the older girls would sneak it in and share it in the girls’ restrooms at school. We had to make sure it looked natural, or we’d get sent to the deputy headmistress, but we still took the risk. We’d apply a smear of blush here, a touch of bronzer there, maybe a thin coat of mascara.

Hairbrush forgotten, I pull the basket out and sit on the floor with it between my outstretched legs. Digging through the contents, I flip open lids and unscrew caps. There are lipstick bullets in gold containers, and they smell delicious. A frosted glass bottle declares it is foundation, and two more match it in varying shades. Tubes of mascara are all gold or silver, not the bright colored plastic things we used at school.

There are logos and names that I recognize from earlier times. From my life before it was interrupted. All brands that are very expensive. Others, I’ve never heard of, but the packaging is luxurious and tactile.

I’m in heaven. Dare I use a little? Just a touch? Do I want to?

If I use makeup then—as Father-Husband used to say about artifice—it makes a woman more wanton. More tempting. Do I want to be tempting?

For James, I think I do. I’m not remotely ready for any man to touch me that way, but I might want one to desire me.

“Not one, Ellie. Be honest. You mean James.”

I shake my head. I’ve thought about him ever since I first saw him. I don’t know why. He called to me on some deep level.

*Because he’s your angel, a voice whispers inside me.*

*Or the devil sent to lead you astray, says a darker one.*

I brush them both away. Now I’m out of the hovel, and out from under Father-Husband’s control, and I already feel as if my thinking is clearer.

Maybe James is my angel, or perhaps, he’s simply a man. A handsome, good man who came back for me.

I prayed and prayed, and yes it came true, but if God was looking after me, why did he let me suffer for so long?

The thought is horrible. Frightening to me, so I push it away.

Instead, I focus on the glittering temptations in the basket. Standing and placing the basket on the thick marble ledge running under the huge lit mirror, I stare at myself. I’m pale. Sickly looking. No wonder, I rarely get any sunlight. Bronzer, I think. I open five compacts before I see one that is shimmering and golden. Taking one of the brushes out of the packaging, I swirl it over the powder and then dust it on my cheeks, nose, and chin, the way I used to do at school.

Wow, I already look more alive. Next, I take one of the mascaras and with shaky, uncoordinated fingers, I apply some to my lashes. One fine coat on the top lashes is all I put on, but once more the difference is dramatic. At least to me. I haven’t seen myself with any makeup on for so long that it’s jarring.

I like it, though.

Finally, I apply a tiny hint of sheer lip gloss from one of the fancy glass containers across my lips. Oh, no, that’s too far. I look wanton. Sinful.

My lips are full, I realize as I stare at myself, really taking in my features, and the gloss highlights them. I dab at it with

some tissue until barely any is left. Only a tiny bit. Just enough that it looks like I licked my lips.

I still haven't found a brush, and I don't want James to think I'm having another meltdown and get angry, so I brush my fingers through my long, thick hair and try to detangle it as best as I can. It will take some time to dry anyway. There's so damn much of it.

As I stare at my hair, something strange and alien blooms in my chest. A sense of hatred, for the hair that Father-Husband never allowed me to cut.

In the cabinet are some hair ties, and in an act of defiance I grab one, twist the heavy weight of hair up, and tie it in a messy, high ponytail. There, I think. Father-Husband would hate this.

I look younger with my hair up, yet older with the makeup. It's disconcerting. I could be any age from eighteen to twenty-five.

"Who are you?" I ask my reflection. Then, because I'm freaking myself as I truthfully have no idea, I walk out of the bathroom, head to the bedroom door, and take a deep breath as I step into the hallway.

When I enter the dining room, James is already seated, and so is a woman.

Is this the housekeeper he talked about?

She stands when I enter the room and smiles. "You must be Ellie. I'm Lorraine. I cook and clean around here and keep this one on the straight and narrow." She throws James a mock scowl, and he shakes his head, smiling.

Wow, he is absolutely gorgeous when he smiles. He hasn't smiled like that at me. He's barked out the odd surprised laugh, but mostly he's looked at me as if I'm a puzzle to crack wide open.

"You must be exhausted and hungry," she says.

How much does she know?

"I've made lasagna."

“What’s that?” I ask.

I never had that before. Not at home, or at school, and not with Father-Husband.

Her smile falters, but she forces it into place. “It’s ground beef, with a tomato sauce and layers of pasta and cheese on top. It’s very nice. Do you want to try some?”

I nod. Most of the food Father-Husband made was horrible. “Yes, please.”

She smiles and opens the lid on a casserole dish. Steam wafts from it, and the smell is delicious. My stomach emits a loud gurgle, and I feel my cheeks heat.

“I’m so sorry.”

“Don’t be,” she says. “It’s a compliment to how nice it smells. Sit and let me get you a little of everything to try.”

She serves me the lasagna, some salad, and a slice of bread.

“What did you eat? Before.” James asks.

I tear my gaze from the plate of food being fixed and look at him. “Mostly stews. Things done in one big pot. Potatoes, carrots. Meat. Mostly lamb.”

I shudder. I don’t think I ever want to taste lamb again.

“Sometimes we had something that Father-Husband caught or found on the road. Rabbit. Deer. I hated having to skin them.”

“He let you have a skinning knife?” James raises one brow at me.

“Yes, if he caught something. Why?”

“You could have used it on him.”

I think about this. I could have, couldn’t I? So why didn’t I do it?

Is it my fault I was kept there so long? Should I have fought to free myself long before now?



“James,” Lorraine says, with a warning tone. “It’s not always that simple. How could Ellie know if she could do that correctly? You’re trained. I swear you don’t think before you speak.”

He frowns.

Her next words are whispered as she passes by him, but I hear them.

“Victim blaming much, James?”

His face clouds, and he drums his fingers on the tablecloth. “I didn’t mean anything by it, Ellie. Simply curious.”

“I was scared,” I blurt out. “Of him. What he might do but also of outside.”

“Outside?” Lorraine is by my side now, and she places the plate gently in front of me and then pours a glass of deep red wine for me, along with some water from a jug into a clear, tall glass.

“It frightens me. Out there. I tried, once. I ran, but the trees, and the sky, and the wind...” I suck in a breath and clench my hands, my palms suddenly sweating. “It was too much,” I whisper, and my voice is so small, frightened.

Lorraine bends down, so she’s not looming over me. “Ellie, you don’t have to go out while you’re here, okay?” She’s friendly, safe.

I nod, and my breathing begins to calm. “You can, though, when you feel ready. Maybe we can do it together, in small steps?”

“You must think I’m so weird and stupid.” The words blurt out before I can stop them.

Lorraine gives a soft smile and pats my head. “My dear, not at all. I have been in a situation if not the same as yours, but similar enough to at least understand a little.”

She has?

“How did you get out?” I ask her.

“James.” Her reply makes my heart falter.

So he is an angel. He is a good man. He saves women like Lorraine. Like me. Why does he insist he's not my angel?

"Don't go giving her ideas that I'm a knight in shining armor," James grouses.

"Oh, I'd never do that," Lorraine says in all seriousness. "He has a dark soul, our James, and you are best avoiding him as much as you can. Spend your time here getting strong, and then, when you're ready, you can claim your life. You're only young." A sadness creeps into her voice. "Unlike me, you have your life ahead of you. You're very beautiful too. We'll get you well and help you find your feet."

"My feet?"

"Yes, you know. We'll help you get strong, and then we will help you leave, when you're ready. Won't we, James?" The question sounds like a demand.

"Maybe," James says lazily.

Lorraine stands and heads around the table to her seat. "I really think—" Lorraine begins.

James raises one hand, cutting her off. "You've done enough thinking for one night, Lorraine. Why don't we try to enjoy our meal now. Don't forget your place in the little hierarchy here."

Her cheeks flush, and she stares at him for a moment. I think she's going to stay quiet and eat. It's what I would do, but she surprises me when she says one last thing. "You employ me, and yes, you saved me, but that doesn't mean I won't tell you when I think you're being an unbearable asshole, and right now, you're being an asshole."

James shrugs, raises his glass, and salutes her. "Noted."

Lorraine purses her lips but says nothing else. Instead, she begins to eat.

I follow her example and take a bite. A tiny moan escapes me as the rich notes of slow cooked ground meat, spices, cheese, tomatoes, and other heavenly flavors coat my tongue.

James looks at me and his gaze is hooded, angry almost.

I lick my lips and continue to eat, but even though I dare not look at him again, I feel his eyes on me.

The atmosphere in the room is tense, and it alerts the butterflies and swirling feelings in my tummy, and soon I can't really eat anymore. I sip at the cool water, hoping it will calm my nerves.

Lorraine glances at me, and her face softens. "Don't be worried, Ellie. We spar like this. It's what we do. Also, we haven't seen each other for quite some time, so I need to get my digs in while I'm here. I've saved them up." She winks at me.

"Why haven't you seen one another?" I ask.

"James has been up here for work, and until this last week, he was living with Mr. Andretti and didn't have need of me here. I stayed in London and kept the house there."

"You have a house in London?" I ask James.

"Yes."

"And New York," Lorraine says. "Well, he has an apartment there. And a house in Tuscany."

"So many houses," I say in awe. "Do you have many wives?"

James splutters around a sip of wine. "Do I *what*?"

"Have many wives? Like one in each house?"

"You asked me before if I was married, Ellie, and I told you, no."

Oh, he did; I recall now.

"I don't want *one* wife, never mind a harem of them. Christ, I can't imagine anything worse."

Lorraine rolls her eyes. "One day, mark my words, you'll meet a woman who makes you want to take that step. It's natural."

"Yeah, and it worked out so well for you."

She flinches a little, as if his words slapped her across the face. “See? Asshole.”

The silence resumes, and I feel an overwhelming urge to fill it. “Father-Husband says that women are man’s burden. A test by God. We’re not easy to live with, or control.”

The silence grows heavier and a look that I don’t understand passes between James and Lorraine.

“I think he said those things, though, because he was weak. I mean, why else did he buy *me*? If he was strong, he could have found a woman himself, but he had to buy me, a young girl, because he didn’t have it in him to control a woman.”

Lorraine stares at James who is avoiding her gaze and looking at his wine glass. “Dear God,” she says quietly.

Oh, no. I’ve said something wrong. “I’m sorry,” I whisper. “Don’t call the authorities, please.”

“Ellie.” James’ tone has my head whipping around to meet his steely gaze. “I’ve already promised you I won’t call the authorities. Stop it with the fucking authorities.”

“I’m sorry.”

“And stop apologizing.” He blows out a breath. “Christ. I need some air.” He pushes his chair back and stalks from the table.

A moment later the bang of the heavy front door echoes in the room.

“I’ve made him angry,” I say.

“Not you. He’s a complicated man. James has a lot of good in him,” Lorraine explains. “He helped me, when he had no need to. But he also has darkness in him. A darkness that he covers with the coldness one sees on the surface. I’ve always believed deep inside is a raging torrent of something hotter. That man is the very definition of still waters running deep.”

“I don’t know what you mean.” She’s lost me now.

Lorraine sighs and pats her mouth with her napkin. “Ellie, when James helped me, he did so for a number of reasons,

some of which were altruistic and others because he could. It also helped the image of our country, as my situation was being talked about in high-up foreign circles. I've often wondered if perhaps the foreign office asked James to do what he did. Whatever his reasons, I paid him in kind with my loyalty. I've worked for him for many years. Why has he helped you though?"

I don't know, so I don't answer.

"I have my own thoughts as to why, and they don't sit easy. Now, knowing James, I wasn't too concerned at first. He's not the kind of man to force something on a woman. Whatever his faults may be. Then, you arrived, and I have seen the way you look at him."

"How do I look at him?" I ask.

"As if he plucked every star out of the sky and placed them in your lap." She smiles at me, and there's a sadness to it.

"He rescued me." That is far more precious than any star in the sky. "He took me from the hovel. He came back for me."

"Hhmm." She hums around her wine glass as she sips. "What else do you think of him?"

"I don't know anything else. Other than he's obviously very rich. I might have been held prisoner, but I did live in the normal world prior to being held captive. I know he has a lot of money to have that car, to have homes like this, and around the world."

"Yes, he is very rich."

"He's beautiful too." I slam my lips closed; why did I let that out?

"He is." She nods. "I can see it, objectively, but I think your feelings on the matter are anything but objective, and the fact you find him so is what scares me."

"Why?"

"Because you look at him like he's a prince from a fairy tale, and he looks at you like a wolf might watch a rabbit." She

shrugs. “Either way, you both look at one another with far too much heat for people who have only just met.”

I sip at the deep red wine and find I love the rich taste. It warms my tummy too, taking away the swirly butterflies that keep making me feel sick.

“I won’t do anything bad. I’m not a sinner,” I promise. I sip more wine.

“We’re all sinners, Ellie. Some of us are just better at hiding it than others.” She stands and starts to collect the plates. “Have you eaten enough?”

“Yes, thank you; it was delicious.”

A creeping bone-deep exhaustion is stealing over me, and as Lorraine tidies up around me, I sip at my wine, and soon I’m yawning every other minute.

“You ought to go to bed,” Lorraine says.

“James hasn’t told me to do that,” I frown. “Shouldn’t I wait until he orders me to?”

Lorraine turns to me. “No, Ellie, you really shouldn’t. If you’re tired, go to bed, and I’ll let James know.”

“I am exhausted. It’s come over me so suddenly.”

“Of course, you are. You’ve been through hell.” She pats my shoulder awkwardly. “Go get some rest, Ellie. I’ll wake you in the morning, okay?”

“Okay. Thank you so much, Lorraine.”

“It’s nothing.”

Oh, but it is. For me, her showing she cares means an awful lot.

Sad that I won’t see James before I go to sleep, I climb the stairs and as soon as I reach my room, I collapse on my bed.

My last thought is that if James is a wolf, and I’m a rabbit, that makes me the prey.



# ELLIE

I CAN'T BREATHE. Something is over my mouth, suffocating me. It's heavy and warm, and I can't get it off me.

Crying out, I struggle and try to move, but my body seems frozen. I can't get the air I need, and I thrash as the warmth and heaviness surround me.

*Oh, Lord, please no. Don't let me have escaped after all this time only to perish now.*

Then, the weight moves. I wrench myself to the side and grab for the light by the bed. Trembling fingers find the cord, and finally, the switch.

Bright light floods the room, and I bolt upright, quickly searching my surroundings. There's nothing here. The room is empty. Nothing is on top of me, only the heavy duvet.

A faint scratching sound in the far corner of the room grabs my attention. Heart pounding, I stare into the dim recess of the unlit bathroom. I see a figure; I'm sure of it. It moves slowly, long gray hair, stooped posture.

Father-Husband. He's alive?

No, he's dead. I heard him take his final breath. James assured me Father-Husband is dead, and James isn't the sort of man I believe could be wrong about such a thing.

Why is he in my bathroom then?

The scrape of a long, jagged nail along the door has me bunching the duvet in my fists and holding it up to my mouth



to hold the scream in.

*This isn't real*, I tell myself. I'm still dreaming. Yet, I'm awake; I'm sure of it.

Slowly, the figure moves toward the door and into the light.

I know one thing with utter certainty. If I see that figure, truly see it, I'll go mad. There'll be no bringing me back from the brink. I'll sink into the deep abyss, weighed down by the stones of my psyche.

Not thinking, only acting on instinct, I dart out of bed and run for the door. Once out of the room, with the door safely shut behind me, I stand on the dark landing and turn around, once, twice, three times. Where do I go?

I'm wearing a long, simple nightdress. It looks like an oversized t-shirt and has stars on it, so I'm decent if I want to explore. The thought of wandering the house gives me chills.

Downstairs is big, and it will be empty and dark.

James showed me his room. It's next to mine. He's in there. I wouldn't be alone there.

Scared of his reaction, but way less fearful of that than whatever is haunting my room, I tiptoe to his door and open it.

The curtains are open, unlike in my room, where I stupidly drew them closed. Light from the weak moonlight glistens across the bed where James is sleeping.

I cross the room on silent feet and slide between the sheets.

My angel will keep me safe. He might be complicated, as Lorraine claims, but he won't let a ghost harm me.

His warmth calls to me, and I scoot closer. Of their own volition, my arms wrap around him, and I snuggle into his back. He's naked, I realize with a jolt of heat.

Oh, no, there's a waistband around his hips, so he's wearing something on his bottom half. Thank, God. If I snuggled a naked man, that would surely be a terrible sin. This might only be a small wrongdoing.

After all, I only seek comfort.

James stirs and makes a soft noise deep in his throat.

I freeze. That noise is delicious and makes me want to burrow closer, but I dare not wake him. Who knows what his reaction will be.

Sleep eludes me, but at least here, in this room with my devilish angel, I don't feel afraid.

I drift asleep now and again, and I must fall into a deeper sleep as scattered dreams flit across my consciousness. Terrible dreams with awful images that have me jerking awake.

This happens repeatedly like some form of torture. At some point, I jerk awake with a sorrowful moan, curled up in the fetal position faced away from James.

Light floods the room, and I blink the sleep from my eyes. I roll over and shrink back as a large presence looms over me.

“Little mouse, what the hell are you doing in my room?” I'm wide awake now, my eyes wide as fear seizes my lungs. I suck in a staggering breath and sit up as I find my voice.

“I-I saw him.”

James frowns. “Who?”

“Father-Husband.”

The frown deepens, and two lines I haven't noticed before bracket his mouth. “He's dead, Ellie.”

“But he was in my bathroom. It's his ghost haunting me because of the terrible thing I've done.”

“There are no ghosts.”

“Oh, James, there really are. I've seen them before, from my window, in the forest. Why do you think I'm so afraid of it out there. In the dark at night when the wind howls, I've seen things.”

He rubs a hand over his eyes. “Ellie, listen to me right the fuck now. You keep on talking like this, and you will end up in

that place you're so scared of."

"The asylum," I gasp.

"Something like it maybe. You can't talk like this to other people."

"Or to you," I say sadly.

He reaches out and strokes my jaw. "You can talk about it to me, but no one else; you hear me? Not even Lorraine."

"Lorraine says you saved her. I don't think she'd do anything you didn't want her to."

"Ellie, this is all new. I don't ever do this."

"Do what?"

"Bring lost little urchins back to my lair. I don't quite know how anyone is going to react, and if you want to stay here with me, you can't say these things to other people, except, the person we find to come and help you."

"Help me? So you think I'm crazy?"

"No, Ellie. You're not crazy—you're traumatized. It's an entirely different thing."

"You'll find a person to help me?"

"I'm going to try."

I snuggle into him again, needing his warmth and his delicious scent.

"Ellie." There's a gruff warning in his tone. "I really don't think you ought to be doing that."

"Why not?"

He moves away, putting distance between us. "You can stay in here, but stop the cuddles, okay."

"I like the cuddles," I say.

"Christ, you need to learn a sense of self-preservation."

I laugh at that. It bursts out of me before I can stop it. "You don't think I have self-preservation?"

“Not if you’re cuddling up to an almost naked man you don’t know in the middle of the night, no.”

“I preserved myself for years with Father-Husband.”

“Ellie.”

“Yes, James.”

“Turn over, stick to your side of the bed, and go to sleep. You need rest. I’m here. You’re safe.”

It’s said as an order, a command. Oddly, it works. The basic instructions give me something to adhere to, and the emotionless way he says the words calm me. I do as he says. I turn over, close my eyes, and tell myself I’m safe. James is right next to me.

“Do you want the light left on?” he asks.

“Really? It won’t keep you awake?”

“I can sleep anywhere in almost any condition.”

“Then, yes, please.”

I close my eyes, a small smile on my lips as I feel safe for the first time in as long as I can remember. I focus on pleasant thoughts. Flowers. My pins. The box with all the makeup in it. Slowly, but surely, my mind drifts to sleep.



THERE’S something heavy over me again when I jerk awake. My heart is beating too fast, and I glance around fearfully as I listen for scratching nails, but there’s nothing.

The weight isn’t around my face like when I woke the first time, but it’s around my middle, pinning me against a warm, solid frame. The duvet is halfway down the bed, so my top half is entirely uncovered.

I glance down and see James’ arm around me. I look at it, taking in the detail. His skin is tan, his forearm is broad, muscular, and has fine hairs dusting it. Carefully, oh so carefully, I turn into his large chest. I examine it, fascinated.

The only person I've seen for so long is Father-Husband, and the thought of him made me sick, so I tried very hard *not* to look at him.

James has a strong, broad chest. It's bronze and mapped with muscles like his arms. A white jagged scar is etched over one big muscle on his chest. I forget what they call that muscle, and I wonder...

My gaze wanders farther down his torso, looking at the ridges of muscle covering his stomach and the trail of hair that dips into the band of his boxer shorts. He makes a soft noise in the back of his throat and I freeze, but he turns onto his back and pulls his arm from around my waist up over his head.

I swallow hard.

He is so very beautiful. I don't think he can be an angel. This man must be a sin because he's far too tempting to be anything else. I really want my pillow between my legs right now as I stare at James and his gorgeous body.

I think back to those books and all the things the men and women did in them. In one of them there were five people who did things together, and I know for a fact Father-Husband would not have let me read that one if he'd have known.

Does James have books like that here?

With a trembling hand, I reach out with one finger and trail it lightly down the ridges of muscle covering his abdomen.

As I look down, I lick my lips. There's a hard ridge under the cotton of his boxer briefs. Oh, my.

I freeze. I dare not move. I can't even breathe. Shit.

Did I make that happen?

I snatch my hand away and curl up, trying not to look at that bulge, but unable to stop my gaze from stealing a glance.

I want to see it, I realize. Without the cotton covering it. The idea of James waking up and showing me is too scary. He might expect something from me. I'd love to move the cotton down so I could see what he looks like there, but that would be a bad thing to do.

It would be a sin and a terrible way to treat a man who has saved me.

Carefully, I turn over, trying not to rock the bed, and I lie very still for hours, unable to sleep.

The moment the sun comes up, and faint light struggles into the room, I slip out of the covers, sneak out the door, closing it quietly behind me, and race to my room.

Once in my own space, with no one around, I take the spare pillow and push it between my legs.

Then I close my eyes and think of James and all his beauty.



# JAMES

WHEN THE DOOR CLICKS CLOSED, I open my eyes. I've been awake for a long time. Ever since I felt a finger trailing down my stomach and awoke to Ellie exploring my body tentatively.

I didn't make a sound. I was achingly hard, but I didn't let her know I was awake.

For an intense, insane moment, I thought she was going to touch me where I needed it most. I would have let her. I would have kept my eyes closed and my breathing even and let that girl explore me the way she clearly ached to.

Instead, she pulled her hand away as if I'd burned her and turned over. The minute light stole into the room, she slipped away like a figment of my imagination who was never really here.

What the fuck am I doing?

This is not me. I'm rational, to the point of coldness. Adjectives that have been used to describe me by my military superiors include: steely, determined, calculating, impressive.

Adjectives used to describe me by exes are: cold, hard, arrogant, unfeeling.

The only time I tried to be different, I got a woman killed. I made a promise, and I've executed that promise. Britain is a safe country for Ellie to be left with the authorities. Anything else I tell myself is a fucking lie. All because deep down, I want her here. That desire is the very reason I ought to let her go.



I ought to send her away. Somewhere nice and expensive and private. Not the asylum she fears but the sort of place stressed out celebs go to hide away for a month or two while they get off the coke and booze and recover.

She'd get the best psychiatric help, away from prying eyes, and in a state-of-the-art facility.

I ought to do that, but I won't. What if someone there sells her story to the papers? Or if the highly paid staff don't give a fuck and are only in it for the money? Worse, what if there are predators there?

No, I can't set her free.

There's something simmering away in the air between us and has been ever since I saw her face pressed against that tiny, dirty window.

There's a pull between us. It's dangerous, and it's a thread I should break right the fuck now, but I can't. I need to unravel it and see where it leads.

She says she prayed to a god I long ago stopped believing in to send me to her. She says I'm her angel.

Reaching over to the bedside drawer, I pull out the old family Bible, and nestled under it, in a cotton handkerchief is my grandfather's gold cross. I don't wear it anymore, but I used to.

I rub my thumb over the smooth gold, and picture my granddad with his kind, warm eyes, smiling at me as I played with the cross as a kid on his knee.

My maternal family background is Irish. My roots are deep in that Celtic soil, but I haven't been home for a long time. I lost touch with much of my family. My cousin got involved with criminals over there, and it broke my aunt and uncle.

How ironic that I've ended up with the Italian mafia, after the heart-wrenching agony my family went through at the hands of my cousin's involvement with much more petty crime.

My father, God rest his soul, would be turning in his grave if he knew the man I've become.

Thinking about Ellie, I at least know he'd approve of this. He wouldn't want that defenseless girl sent off to people who don't give two fucks about her and are only in it for the money. Or worse, the publicity.

*Yeah, you keep telling yourself that, my inner jaded critic sneers. You only want her here so you can fuck her.*

I do want to fuck her. Hell, I want to do more than that. I want to claim every inch of her. I want to mark her as mine in the most elemental way I can. Has she ever come? If so, it hasn't been at the hands of any man.

Groaning, I put the cross away and close my eyes. My hand drifts past my stomach and into the waistband of my boxers.

My dick is so hard, I let out a gasp when I touch it. Fuck me, I could almost shoot from one touch, while I'm thinking about my tiny mouse.

She's so small, scared, and meek. I bet inside her, though, waiting to be awakened is another side. A lioness. A wild and maybe wanton creature.

I keep thinking back to that moment when I looked at her for permission to end the life of that fucker who took her captive, and she told me to kill him. Her voice was different. It came up her throat as if through the bowels of hell itself, guttural almost.

Yeah, Ellie has another side, and I want to set it free.

First, though, I want to break her and have her fall apart in my arms, on my fingers, and on my cock.

"Shit," I grunt as I take myself in a firm grip and stroke.

My free hand pushes my boxers down, not wanting the waistband constricting me.

I close my eyes and imagine Ellie lost in pleasure. Her face would be slack, her mouth open, her eyes wide as she stares up at me as I make her feel things new and overwhelming.

She likes pain too.

“Fuck me,” I pant, the words a pained whisper.

Would she like me turning her peachy behind pink? A pinch here? A bite there? Would the sting of the crop be something she'd welcome. Is there a darkness in her that matches mine perfectly?

Her soft moan fills my head. *Yes, my pretty, quiet, little mouse, let yourself go.*

Her moan comes again, and I freeze.

That is not my imagination.

I sit up and strain to hear. There's a soft knocking against the wall from Ellie's room. What the hell is she doing? I think I can guess.

Climbing out of bed, and kicking my boxers to one side as they fall to the floor, I walk to the far wall and put my ear against it.

The bed is banging against the wall, and she's making these desperate little moaning gasps.

Holy fuck, Ellie might worry about sinning, but she's a dirty little sinner right in this moment, and I'm here for it.

I press my forehead against the wall, listening to the muffled sounds on the other side.

Is she stroking her clit?

I don't think so. The bed is rocking. She's either humping the mattress, or maybe her hand? Or a pillow.

Either way, Ellie is so damn desperate she's rutting her pussy against something and trying so hard to come it's making her moan and gasp, and then, oh, God, the most beautiful, broken little sob.

*Sweet fucking Ellie. I'm going to have you making that noise for me so often.*

I take hold of my leaking cock and spread the fluid from the tip all over as I work myself viciously.

When her noises reach a crescendo and the banging ratchets up until I'd hear it if were asleep, I come.

My cock spurts against the eighteenth-century wallpaper, painting the peacocks in thick ropes of my profanity.

The noises on the other side of the wall die down, and the rocking slows, until there's nothing but silence.

Her pussy will be wet. Throbbing.

I want to go in there and suck it and lick it and taste her as I make her come again. I want to lie between her legs and eat her until she's sobbing for me to stop, and she passes out into a deep sleep because I've wrung so many orgasms from her.

In shock, I stare down at my immediately hard dick.

Holy shit. It's been years, if ever, since I've wanted a woman so much.

I thought I was in control. I imagined this game would all be on my terms, but if that innocent young woman in there ever understood an inkling of how much I want her, the tables would be well and truly turned.

I'm in so much fucking trouble.



# ELLIE

I COME SO hard against the pillow that the noises I make are too loud. Slamming my hand over my mouth, I bite back the moans of lust until the powerful waves have passed. My core throbs against the pillow as my erratic movements ease, and then a wave of something else washes over me.

Melancholy.

Grief.

Exhaustion.

I cry softly and muffled as I push my face into the mattress. I should have thought to shield my face in mattress when I was gasping and moaning but at that point I had lost all rational thought.

I doubt anyone heard me, though. I imagine James is still asleep, and the walls are probably thick in an old house like this.

After what feels like an hour of crying, but might have only been ten minutes, I close my eyes.



*BANG, bang, bang.*

I jerk upright and blink a few times as I become aware of my surroundings.

Is that someone hammering at my door?

Then I realize it's not. It's someone banging down below. I clamber out of bed, yawning, and head over to the window. I look out and see a man standing on the doorstep, surrounded by boxes. The door opens, and the man passes the boxes to someone and then strides back to the van he arrived in.

What time is it?

I have no idea. I didn't bring the old clock that I had in my room in the hovel. Perhaps I should have. I hated the sound of it ticking the hours away night after night, but without it I don't know the time.

Outside, the light looks as if it's fading. Surely it can't be that late in the day? I panic and race to the bathroom where I wash my face and brush my teeth. I have a pee, and then strip my clothes off and wash under my arms for good measure, even though I only had a shower last night. I should wash my lady bits too. I sinned this morning and should wash it away, but I'm in a rush to get downstairs and see where Lorraine and James are.

Fear and anxiety are slowly climbing my body again, gripping me as I imagine they've left me all alone.

No, I chide myself, they haven't. Someone answered the door.

I put on fresh underwear clean jogging pants, and a t-shirt. No sweater this time. It might be the cold season, but the temperature in the house is toasty.

When I reach downstairs, I smell something delicious.

"Is that you?" Lorraine calls out from the kitchen and so I walk that way and step inside.

She's by the stove and is lifting something out of it.

"What's that?" I ask.

She places the baking tray on the surface and turns to me and smiles. "Coffee cake. Do you like it?"

"I've never had it," I say.

“I love it. Coffee and walnut cake. James does too. He might not admit as much, but whenever I make one, he always has a slice with his coffee, and that man needs fattening up.”

“He’s huge,” I blurt.

She laughs. “Yes, but it’s all muscle, and that’s not good for him. He needs a bit of good old-fashioned meat on him.”

Glancing at a watch at her wrist, she smiles. “I’m glad you slept so well.”

“What time is it?”

“Almost three in the afternoon.”

A small squeal escapes my lips, and she jumps.

“Good heavens, child, what?”

“Oh, nothing.” My cheeks warm as I realize how badly I overreacted. “It’s just ... before ... where I used to live, I’d get in trouble for staying in bed so long.”

“Here you can do what you please. No timetable to stick to.”

“What work will I do?”

“Work?”

“I have to do something. The devil makes work for idle hands.”

She crinkles her nose as if thinking while she looks at me. “You know, you might be onto something. It will probably do you good to have things to do. A distraction. Do you want to help me?”

I brighten. “Yes. That would be great.”

“Rest today, and then tomorrow, you can start helping me out with a few things.” She glances at her watch again. “I think James said something about someone coming to see you today to bring some clothes. Let me check.”

She grabs a large, glass rectangular object from the countertop and presses the screen a couple of times. A ringing noise fills the room.



Is that a phone?

Father-Husband had one. But it wasn't like the shiny, pretty object Lorraine has. Father-Husband's was like a brick. He said to me that he liked old ones as the government couldn't trace your conversations. He used to go on the internet, I know he did, but I think he had something that prevented his activity from being traced.

James' deep voice fills the room. "Everything okay?"

"Yes. Fine. Sleepyhead is only just awake. I thought you said someone was coming out today, but no one has turned up yet. Something about clothes?"

"Celeste is coming."

"From London?"

"Yep. She will be here soon. Got to go. Call me if you need anything."

Lorraine hangs up and carries on bustling around. I have questions.

"Where is he? Who is Celeste?"

"Oh, Celeste. She's a personal shopper."

"Has she brought clothes before? For James?"

"Not here, no. This place isn't his, and she usually doesn't shop for James."

"Who for?"

Her gaze flits about the kitchen as if looking for something. "Friends of his."

I might have been held captive and missed much of my youth, but I know friend means girlfriend. I hate the idea of James having girlfriends. It's utterly irrational, but the feeling is real.

"How many friends did he have?" I ask. "How many other women has Celeste brought clothes for?"

Lorraine looks at me, her eyes narrowed. "You're not as wet behind the ears as you seem, are you?"

I don't know what that means, and my fingers automatically go behind my ears to check if they are wet.

“Oh, Ellie. Come and sit with me. I'll make you a drink.”

She busies herself making coffee as I take a seat. When she hands me the drink, I take a sip and moan. “Oh, wow. What is this?”

“Coffee. Hazelnut latte. I should have asked but just made what I always have; sorry.”

She's sorry? For giving me heaven on earth to drink. “It's amazing,” I say in wonder.

“Haven't had a latte before?”

“No. Our coffee came in a jar. Granules. We poured hot water over them and added milk.”

She smiles at me, and for the first time it seems to hold true warmth. “This is a similar concept, only a little fancier. James always checks that there is a good coffee machine anywhere he goes.”

“There are so many things the world has that I've never tried.”

“Not before you were taken even?”

I shrug. “We didn't have a lot of money. I did have things, you know, normal things. Not this, though.”

“You never went to Starbucks?”

“No.”

“What have you done?”

“I've had fast food. Burgers, fish and chips; that kind of thing. I drank cider. Behind the bike sheds at school.” I blush but blurt out my secrets. “I've smoked. I didn't do any drugs, but some of my friends smoked things. I kissed a boy, only once. It was horrible. He tried to grope me, so I pushed him away.”

She laughs. “Sounds like your average teenage boy. Have you ever been abroad?”

I nod. “Once, when I was about nine, Mum insisted Dad take us. He booked us on a package tour to somewhere in Spain, but the hotel was all-inclusive and full of British people, and Mum said we might as well have stayed in Scarborough like we did most years.”

“What was she like? Your mum?”

I think about that. “Beautiful,” I say wistfully.

“Obviously,” Lorraine replies. “Look at you.”

“I meant inside as well as outside. She was a beautiful person. I’m not beautiful. Not like her. Inside, I’m broken. And outside, I’m dull.”

Lorraine rubs her fingers over the smooth surface of the table. “For what you went through, I’d say you’re remarkably unbroken. That makes you very brave. And you are beautiful. You need some sun maybe, a bit of nourishment for sure, but you’re a very striking young woman. I can see why he’s lost his head. You’re so different.”

“Different?”

“Yes. When you’re like James and you have gorgeous women falling over themselves for you, I guess it gets boring after a while. You’re different.”

I feel like crying. I bet he has gorgeous, successful women, like the ones I used to read about in my favorite magazines before my father sold me. I’m only different because I was captive for so long, and in many ways I know nothing about the world or life. Lorraine reaches across the table and pats my hand gently, and her touch is more soothing than I expected.

“You’re resilient, Ellie. A fighter. I don’t know if he’s seen those things in you, or if he just needs someone to rescue again, but whatever the reason, he’s most definitely into you.”

I sip at the delicious, frothy coffee. “More than the other girls he brings Celeste for?”

“I can’t say for sure, but my gut instinct is he’s into you more than anyone I’ve ever seen him with.”

I clap my hands and giggle. “Oooh, that’s exciting.”

“No, Ellie. If you understood these things, you’d be running a mile. It’s scary is what it is. A man like James obsessed?” She shakes her head. “God help us all.”

“God sent him to me, so he wouldn’t have done that if I couldn’t handle it.”

Lorraine taps the top of her coffee mug. “My darling child, God hasn’t had anything to do with that man for decades.” With those words, she pushes her chair back and goes back to the stove, leaving me to wonder what she means.



WHEN CELESTE ARRIVES, James is still not home. I wonder what he’s doing all day. Didn’t he say he’d taken some time off from working with the other man? Nico, I think he’s called. So where is he? With one of his girlfriends?

The thought makes me want to hit something, so I push it away.

Celeste isn’t what I was expecting. I thought she’d look glamorous like a model out of the magazines, but she has short dark hair, is wearing very little makeup, jeans, and a t-shirt.

It seems one of the things I need to develop is a filter because the moment she enters my bedroom, dragging a ton of bags behind her, I blurt out, “You can’t be Celeste. You’re not glamorous enough.”

Oh, my word. I did not just say that.

She stares at me for a long moment then bursts out laughing. “James warned me you were different. I am Celeste, and I’m not glamorous at all. Not when I’m working. If you saw me on a night out, you’d think differently. Got to be comfortable when you’re traveling all over the place lugging clothes with you.”

Her accent is soft. Northern English, I think. I like it.

She looks at me critically for a long moment. “Your hair needs a trim. The ends are split to hell.”

I shrug. “I haven’t cut it in years. I’m not allowed.”

“You are now, aren’t you?”

“I don’t know. James hasn’t said.”

Her face tightens. “What do you mean? James isn’t in control of how you wear your hair.”

“Isn’t he? He took me, so he’s the one in charge now.”

Her expression grows even darker. “I don’t think that’s how it works. Wait, what do you mean, he *took* you?”

Oh, no. I have used the wrong words. What if I lead her to be suspicious and report me and then the authorities come?

At that moment, the door opens and James strolls in, smiling as if he doesn’t have a care in the world.

“I see you’re already here.” He kisses Celeste on her cheek, and she smiles at him, but it’s tight.

James reaches into the briefcase he has with him. “I brought this with me. It’s a non-disclosure agreement. I’m afraid I need you to sign it regarding anything to do with Ellie.”

“What the hell is this?” Celeste backs away from James and glances at me. “You’ve never requested such a thing before.”

“Oh, come on now, Celeste. I know you must sign them for high profile clients all the time.”

“That’s different. She says you took her.”

James flashes his gorgeous green-blue eyes my way, and there’s surprise there. No anger, thankfully. I don’t want to upset him.

“My words come out wrong when I get stressed,” I say. “I meant saved me. He saved me. He’s my angel. I asked for him, and he came, and if you are going to think bad things about him, I don’t want your clothes.”

James smiles at me, and it’s softer than any he’s given me before. He comes to me and tips my chin up. “Can you give

me two minutes with Celeste, angel?”

He called me angel. Me? Am I his angel now too?

“Yes.” I nod.

“Good girl. Go wait in the hallway a moment.”

I do as he says, and the door closes behind me, shutting out their conversation. Staring at the wallpaper, I go up to it and trace the butterflies on it with my finger. It’s very pretty. I like butterflies. It was a butterfly that told me I would be rescued.

The door opens a few minutes later, and James stands in the frame, beckoning me in. “Celeste is ready for you now.”

I smile at him and slip past him into the room. I’ll try hard not to say the wrong thing again. Celeste, however, smiles at me warmly when I catch her eye. I glance back at James, and he nods. “It’s okay, Ellie. You didn’t do anything wrong.”

“What sort of clothes do you want me to pick?”

He leaves the doorway, letting it slide shut, and comes to me once more. He smells of berries, grass, and spices. It’s delicious. “Ellie.” His eyes capture mine. A laser beam of intensity. “I want you to pick whatever the hell you want. This is for you. Take it all or take nothing.”

“Pick?” I state. “Clothes?”

“Yes.”

“I don’t know what I like,” I argue. Panic is building in me. How do I pick? I haven’t had any choice in anything in ages.

“Hey.” Celeste touches my shoulder. “I can guide you, and there’s no right or wrong. This is for fun, okay. It’s not a test.”

“Not a test?”

“Nope. You can’t fail it. It’s just meant to be fun.”

“Angel, can you do something for me?” James brushes his finger down my cheek, and just like back in the hovel I lean into his touch. My face turns, and I do something so crazy, even I think the authorities should be called about me. I let my

lips touch the palm of his hand. *So warm and comforting*, I think as I kiss his skin.

James clears his throat. “Ellie. Erm, listen to me. I want you to do something for me.”

I look up at him, my face leaving the warm sanctuary of his palm against my cheek and lips. “Yes.”

“Can you try to enjoy this? It’s not a test as Celeste says. This should be enjoyable. You know your pins?”

I nod, and guilt hits me. Those pins are so wrong. An emblem of my sins.

“You treasured them, right? Their colors? They were yours?”

“Yes.”

“This is like the pins but better. There will be lots of colors. Lots of materials. You can pick anything you want, and it is going to be yours. Forever.”

“Forever?”

“Yes, for as long as you want.”

“Mine.”

“Yes, Ellie. Yours. Now, stay here with Celeste, and try some clothes on.”

“Okay.” I nod.

“Good girl.”

*Good girl.* That’s the second time he’s called me that. I like it. I like it so much. It makes me feel warm inside. I beam up at him. “Thank you. I’ll try to be.”

His eyes darken, and for a moment it’s as if Celeste isn’t here, and we aren’t civilized humans but animals, and he’s something wild and dangerous. The moment passes as Celeste gives a small, polite cough behind us.

“I’ll leave you ladies to it.” James leaves me alone with Celeste and her many bags.

“Come on.” She beams. “Let’s transform you and give James the shock of his life.”





# ELLIE

AT SOME POINT CELESTE LEFT, and I found myself in a room stuffed full of strange things. Things that aren't mine.

It was overwhelming. The amount of stuff. Not just clothes, oh no. Celeste brought with her shoes, scarves, belts, jewelry, even some perfume that she said I ought to try. I did, and it gave me a headache by the fourth bottle she spritzed onto the card.

I'm exhausted. Flopping on my back on the bed, I close my eyes. My mind drifts, and I'm back in my small room at the top of the tower. I jerk my eyes open and stare around me. No, I'm not back there.

Here is better.

Much better.

And yet, I'm still scared. Why?

Sitting up, I walk to the set of drawers at the far end of the room, slide the top one open, and reach into the back. There are my beloved pins. I take them out and go sit on the bed. With fumbling fingers, I pull open the tiny drawstring pouch they are contained in and pour my pin army onto the bed.

Red, pink, blue, green, brown. Leader, worker bee, two favorites, and green, who is a nothing, really. I never gave green a role. Taking Red, I let her sharp edge run along my palm. It's so light, there is no mark and no relief from the anxiety. Ugh.

I promised, though. I promised God. No more pins. No more pinching and bruising, and definitely not anymore biting.

I didn't promise not to do the spanking I tried, though, did I? Like I read in the book.

Putting my pins away, and sliding the drawer closed, I lean over the dresser and lift my dress.

Out of all the clothes I chose from the stash Celeste brought with her, this pink dress is the one I liked the most. It's not a baby girly pink, but a bright, bold slash of color.

The material is cashmere, Celeste said, and I've never felt anything like it against my skin. The dress is simple, high necked, long sleeves, and fitted to mid calf, but it gathers at the middle, and she says that flatters my shape.

Either way, right now, it's in my way, and so I hike up the skirt until my bottom is exposed.

The panties I'm wearing are no longer white cotton with holes in them. They are black silk. Brazilian brief style, Celeste informed me. I have a matching bra on too. For inside the house, she gave me some ballet flats that I can simply slip on if I'm wearing a nice dress.

Obviously, if I wear my casual clothing, I can still use the sheepskin boots.

The dresser I am leaning over was empty before, with only my pins and a few items in it, and now it groans with clothes of every shade and fabric imaginable. I don't think I'm the kind of person to wear those clothes.

Even this dress, as gorgeous as it is against my skin, makes me feel like a fraud. An imposter.

The anxiety is so bad. Is this who James wants me to be?

What would I be wearing if I hadn't been taken? Jeans. Cheap, fast fashion. Department store running shoes and leggings. Definitely.

Cashmere? Absolutely not.

The person Celeste dressed is not any version of myself I ever would have become.

I don't want to return to the hovel. I don't want to go back home. I never want to see my father or my evil cousin again. The area is run down and depressing, and if I never see it again, that's fine with me.

But where do I belong?

All I can see stretching far ahead of me is time, and I don't know who to be to fill that huge space.

How do I even begin?

God, this churning in my stomach is going to make me sick.

I raise my arm and bring it down on my ass, but it's weak, so I try again. It gives me a nice sting the second time, so I bend over the dresser some more and set up a rhythm where I hit my behind, and with my eyes closed imagine the biker gang leader from one of my romance novels is doing it.

“What the fuck?”

I yelp and stop spanking. My eyes are still closed, and I dare not open them. A man's voice, deep, but not James, speaks again.

“Well, well, well. Who are you?” I start to push myself up and turn to see a dark-haired man in the doorway.

James appears by his side and frowns. “What the fuck are you doing in here?” he demands of the man.

Then his gaze travels to me, and his eyes widen. I still have my dress halfway up, and I'm half bent over the dresser.

“Who is this?” the man demands.

“None of your fucking business. You came here to pick some stuff up for Nico, so why the hell are you stalking around up here?”

“I was looking for the bathroom. Keep your panties untwisted, James.”

The man smirks, and it's cold and nasty. "You're clearly not taking care of your new plaything, James."

"What the hell do you mean?"

*Please stop talking, I send up a prayer. God, please smite this man and make his tongue fall out so he can't say anymore words.*

I push myself to full standing with no grace at all and quickly smooth my dress down.

"I walked in here to find your new whore bent over the dresser, spanking herself."

One moment the man is laughing lazily; the next he's on the floor. James is standing over him, fist still raised as he stares down at him.

"She's not a fucking whore, and you don't get to walk into rooms in my home as if you belong here."

He hauls the man up by his shirt collar and pushes him away. "You've got what Nico asked you to fetch, so fuck off now, before I break your nose."

"I need a piss," the man states, his face red and an ugly expression in his gaze as he looks at me again.

He stares at me as if I was the one who hit him, not James.

"Too bad. You'll have to do it outside." James pushes him, and the man stumbles as he walks down the corridor. "Not on my land either; there are cameras."

"It's not your fucking land. You're only renting the place."

"I swear, one more word, Callum, and I'll break your jaw too."

"Fucking hell. I don't know what's going on in our world," Callum grumbles as he trudges away. "There's you hiding out up here behaving like this, and Nico totally obsessed with Cinders. It's shit."

"If I told Nico what you just said, he might order me to shoot you, so my suggestion is you leave now, without another word."

Callum stops, mid-step, and turns around. “Would you, James? Shoot me? I’ve worked hard for you, with you, for years now.”

“I wouldn’t fucking hesitate.”

Oh my word. James means it; I can tell.

“Guess it’s true what they all say then. You are as cold as ice.” Callum gives a bitter laugh. “I thought we were sort of friends.”

James wipes his hand over his mouth. “That’s the mistake you made, Callum. There are no friends in this life. Only hierarchy, orders, and keeping your mouth firmly shut. You don’t like that, leave. I’m not going to repeat a word of what you said, but if I hear you’ve repeated a word of what you’ve seen here, I’ll cut your tongue out.”

I freeze at those words. I asked God for that, didn’t I? Not moments ago. Is James my creation brought to life by God to avenge me? I really should be careful what I pray for if it is going to keep coming true.

“Jesus, James.” Callum shakes his head.

“One fucking word. I mean it. I won’t give you any pain meds either. I’ll know if you talk. No one can know she’s here.” James jabs his thumb in my direction.

“Does Nico know?” Callum asks.

“Of course, Nico fucking knows. No one else. You shouldn’t go wandering around houses uninvited. Now you’ve seen something, and you can’t tell a soul. I will find out if you do and, Callum, friends or not, and we’re not, it will go badly for you.”

“Right. I won’t say a word.” Callum looks hurt. More hurt than I would imagine someone would be from an argument with a friend.

When he’s disappeared from view, James shuts the door and stares at me.

“Is he a good friend?” I ask.

“No,” James replies absently. “We would have a drink some nights. Play some pool. Most of the men Nico employs are thugs. Idiots with bigger fists than brains. Callum isn’t like that, so some nights we’d talk, but he’s not a friend. I don’t have friends.”

“That sounds lonely,” I say.

“Not really.”

“Everyone needs friends, James,” I say sadly.

“Says the girl with none.”

“Not by choice.” I’m shocked by how snippy I sound.

His eyes are focused on me like laser beams, and I feel the question on his lips before he asks it.

“You were spanking your own ass?” he asks.

I can’t deny it, but I can twist the truth. He doesn’t need to know my innermost twisted weirdness. I nod and brazen it out as much as I can. I hold my chin high. “I’ve been bad,” I say. “So I punished myself.”

It’s still weird, but I don’t think it’s quite as strange as admitting I was spanking myself because I like how it feels.

He takes one step. “Why have you been bad?”

“I, erm, the clothes. There are too many.”

*Step.* “Is that all?”

“And the fabrics feel too nice against my skin.”

*Step.* “That doesn’t seem so bad.”

Something has changed in the air between us, and I know if I turn away, I can break this strange spell. I don’t. Instead, like the sinful witch I am, I turn up the potency of the magic. “It felt too nice. It made me ... tingle.”

*Step.* His eyes darken. “Tingle?”

“Yes.”

“Where?”

“All over. But I knew it wasn’t pure.”

*Step.* He's only three or four steps away now.

"You spanked yourself to be pure?"

"No. I spanked myself because I've been a bad girl, not a good girl." Lie. Lie. Lie. I spanked myself because it feels nice, and I can't use the pins. I spanked myself because I read it in the books, and I liked the sound of it so much that I tried it.

The spanking is another sin, not an atonement for one.

"You can't punish yourself," James says. "It doesn't work that way."

"Why not?"

He laughs. *Step.* "I doubt you do it hard enough."

"Sharp, not bruising," I say.

He frowns.

"Father-Husband hit me, and it bruised. It hurt after and left me sore. He broke a bone. I don't want that ever again." I keep my gaze on his. "I'd run if that happened again."

I would too. I know it. I might be weak and scared of out there, and the authorities, but I've taken the biggest step to finding my freedom—I've left the tower. If anyone treated me the same way that Father-Husband did, I'd flee.

*Step.* "He broke a bone, and we will get that bone looked at. I promise. If you'd like?"

"Yes," I whisper. "I think so."

"I'm glad he's dead." James has a hard edge to his gaze.

I don't reply because I'm conflicted. I'm glad too, but I'm scared he's haunting me because of it.

"I don't break bones," James says. Then he gives a short, mirthless laugh. "Or, at least, I don't break pretty girls' bones."

"What do you do to pretty girls?" I ask. My breathing is ragged, and my heart is hammering so hard in my chest it's almost painful.



*Step.* “I like to hurt them in a good way. An oh-so-nice but dark way.”

I gasp and stumble back until my back hits the dresser.

*Step. Step. Step.*

His arms reach out, and I’m trapped. Bracketed between his powerful arms, with the dresser to my back, there’s no escape. “Why the fear? You’ve just said you punish yourself. I like to do that too. Except I like to punish pretty girls.”

“Why?” I ask.

In one way, I love that he does because maybe he’ll spank me like the motorcycle club leader in the book. On the other hand, does that make him evil? Depraved? Unkind? Is he an *unkind* man?

“It feels nice. It gives me pleasure,” he says as he bends his face to my neck and rubs his nose along the skin there.

I shiver, and my nipples pebble hard and aching against the padding of the rigid bra I’m wearing.

“It gives them pleasure.”

“It does?” Am I not the only weird one who likes this? Other girls do too?

“At least I hope so. They do it with me of their own free will. I don’t pay them. They have their safe words.”

“What is a safe word?”

He brushes his finger over my jaw, and I lift my head, meeting his gaze. His finger trails over my chin and down the side of my throat.

“It’s the most important thing of all. It’s the protection that ensures the moment it’s spoken, everything stops.”

“Everything?”

“The scene.”

“What is a scene?”

His hand wraps around the nape of my neck, and he pulls me in until his forehead touches mine. He breathes out, “I

think you were sent to tempt me and lead me down dark paths,” he says.

I want to laugh at that. I don’t know how to tempt him. Or any man.

“Maybe one day I will explain it all to you.”

Then he lets me go and marches out of the room.

What the hell?

I follow him, keeping my footsteps light as I stalk right up to the door of his office. It’s slightly ajar, and I hear him speaking.

“I want you to come over.”

Nothing but silence. Then James says, “I know I said it was over. You agreed too, but if you’re not involved with anyone else, I want to do a scene.”

More silence. Then. “Nothing heavy. Spanking.”

Wait. Spanking? Who? Is he talking to a woman?

“Tallia.” He sighs.

God, it is a woman.

“It doesn’t mean anything other than I want to do a scene. If you’re up for it and you’re free, great; if not, it doesn’t matter.”

There’s a long beat, but strain and can make out a woman’s faint voice, but not what she’s saying.

“Yeah. We can negotiate when you arrive. I’m thinking of bending you over my desk here in my study and spanking that pretty ass pink, and then taking you to the edge until you’re crying. *Begging*.” His voice has turned deep.

No. No. No.

I don’t understand all the things he’s talking about, but I know he wants to do the spanking thing I need so badly with another woman. Why?

If I need it, and he likes to do it, why is he asking her?

Tallia. I hate the name, I think.

He came for me. Took me from the tower, so that makes me his. If I am his, then isn't he mine?

I don't stop to think before I push the door open.

James startles and drops the phone on the desk.

"Fuck." He shakes his head and picks the phone up quickly. "Tallia. Hold off on that for five minutes. I'll call you back."

"No. You can't." I shake my head.

"Ellie. You don't get to tell me what I can and can't do in my own home."

"Don't do it. I'm here. I need it. You like it. Do it to me."

He stands so violently, the chair tips backward onto the floor. "Jesus Christ, Ellie. I'm doing the right thing here. Don't fucking push this."

I stare at him, and I can see he truly believes that. He thinks bringing this Tallia person here and doing the things with her he wants to, is the right thing. It would break me, though, but I don't know why; only that it would.

I walk to the desk and bend over it. This is what he said he wanted Tallia to do, so I do it instead.

"Okay, get up; you win." His voice is so harsh it sounds guttural. "I'll call Tallia back and tell her not to come."

"Aren't you going to spank me?" I ask.

"Not now. No."

"Why not? I don't mind. In fact, I think I'd really like it."

"I need to be in control, if we're going to do this, and right now, Ellie, I'm very much not in control."

I stand up and smooth my dress down for the second time in front of this man.

"What should I do? Go to my room?" I feel deflated somehow. Rejected.

He shakes his head. “No, Ellie. Come eat with me. Let us get some food and wine. I need some time to think.”

What if his thinking leads to him deciding to send me away?

No. I push that thought away.

I’ll just have to give him plenty of reasons to let me stay.



# JAMES

I LEAVE ELLIE WITH LORRAINE, as she prepares the evening meal and slip away, back to my study. Firstly, I call Tallia and explain my plans have changed. She's not at all happy, and I don't blame her. She's not going to be someone I can call on again.

Not that I care.

Tallia is fun, but we don't share feelings for one another on any level beyond sex.

Next, I call Nico. I explain to him that Callum saw Ellie. I don't say how he found her, but I tell Nico that I've told Callum to keep his mouth shut. Nico says if he hears anything from the other men that make him suspicious Callum has talked, he'll let me know. I ask how things are with Cindy, and he says all is good. She seems better daily and they're planning a vacation.

Then I take out of my locked desk drawer, my old-school rolodex, where I keep the numbers I don't want to be found if anyone ever got ahold of my phone.

I flip through it to the letter J and then to Jayne.

It wasn't quite the truth when I said I had no friends. I have precious few, but I count Nico as a friend. Things might at times get tetchy between us, but he's a friend. The trouble is, he's a friend, and in some of our ventures, he's quite clearly my boss, but in others, we are partners. It means boundaries can shift, and at times I think he's being overbearing, whereas

at others he probably sees me as insubordinate. Still, we make it work.

I have a few friends from my days in the forces. I don't see them often, but they're true friends forged in gunfire and smoke.

Finally, there's Jayne. The woman who is the closest I've come to attempting something long term with. I met her in the scene back when I was loosely into it. Nico might think I'm some sort of Dom or, at least, I think he gets that impression from some of the things he says. I'm not. I play a little still, a bit of spanking here. Some mild humiliation there. I like to be in control. I love to inflict pain, with a lot of pleasure. Nothing heavy. Nothing like in the past when I was working through demons.

Jayne is still into the heavier, intense side of things.

We split when she met a switch, the guy perfect for her. There were no hard feelings, and they've been married now for years. She was older than me by almost a decade, and she must be in her forties now. We still speak on the odd occasion, and every year at New Year we write one another, and I update her on my life, which is usually a sparse letter. She sends me a long letter full of details about her family. She's a stepmother to a brood of kids now and loving it. She's also going to be a step-grandmother, as her husband is fifteen years her senior, and she says that is making her feel old.

Once in a while, if she's in London, she'll ask me to meet up, and we have lunch or a coffee. There's no lingering attraction there. No what-ifs? Just an easy friendship. I respect the hell out of her because Jayne is a survivor, and she hasn't had an easy life.

It's why I know she will be able to advise me right now on this situation under my roof.

"Well, hello, James." Her voice is friendly but cautious.

It's unusual for me to call like this, out of the blue. I'd normally text, maybe suggest a coffee. Mostly, it's her who keeps the contact going.

“Hi, Jayne. You all well?”

“Yes, things are good. You?”

I clear my throat. “Can you talk?”

“I’m alone. Fred is in the city, some boring board meeting, and his kids are at their mum’s until the weekend. What gives?”

“I have a situation. Do you swear to me to keep this between us?”

“So long as you don’t tell me where the bodies are.” She gives a soft laugh.

I don’t join in because there is a body. Not that I’ll be telling her that much.

“James, you’re worrying me.”

“Sorry. I have a situation.”

She blows out a breath. “As you said. This is not like you. Cut to the chase.”

“I have a woman here. She’s young. Traumatized. She’s been held captive by some sick freaks.” I add the plural to muddy the waters. I trust Jayne, but one can never be too careful. “I don’t think they touched her, but they were holding her as a bride-to-be. It’s fucked up. She hasn’t seen the outside world in years. They gave her a Bible, a dictionary, ratty clothes and not much else.”

“How did you come to be involved? Are there others?”

“No, only her. It’s a long story, and one I can’t go into. Suffice to say, we saved her and were going to take her to the authorities, but she begged us not to, so she’s staying with me.”

“Is she a minor?” There’s increasing alarm in her voice.

“God, no. She’s twenty-one. On her way to being twenty-two. Not a minor. There’s no way I’d let her stay here if she were. That’s the thing, Jayne. She’s terrified of being put on a psych hold, and frankly, they might.”



“Is she a danger to you?” Jayne interrupts.

I laugh at that. “She’s five-foot-four, and I’d guess around one hundred and twenty pounds, so no.”

“Just because she’s small, doesn’t mean she can’t do something to hurt you, if she’s messed up enough, James.”

“She’s not going to hurt me. Or herself.” I don’t know why, but I feel sure of both those things.

“You sound confident in that assertion, and you’d better damn well be, if you’re not going to hand her over to the relevant authorities.”

I sigh and wipe my hand over weary eyes. “I know. The thing is, what will they do for her? You know how stretched every single service is now. Years of austerity and all the shit that has followed means social services, health service, the police, and the local authorities are all hollowed out. They’re on their knees. Would she even get somewhere to live? I don’t know...” I pause and then give some more information. “If the media got ahold of her story, it would be carnage. They’d be all over it, and those damn jackals won’t give a damn what it will do to her long term. They’ll use her, write sensational stories about her trauma, and then spit her out.”

“You sound awfully involved in this. You’re not your usual detached self.”

She makes a keen observation because now that I think about it, no, I’m not. For a moment, my knee-jerk reaction is to scoff at her words and go back to being my usual asshole self, but I pause. Then I sigh. “Give me a second.”

I walk to the far wall, open the drop-down cabinet, take the heavy glass decanter and pour out a measure of whiskey into a tumbler. Then I sip it before I go back to the desk.

This place really came equipped with everything. I could live here. It’s a gorgeous house. I wonder idly if the owner would sell for the right offer.

“You’re right,” I say to Jayne. “I’m more involved than usual. No idea why.” I bark out a laugh. “I don’t love the girl. I barely know her.”

“You want her?” It’s a question, but there’s a certainty there.

“Yes.” No point in lying.

“But she’s messed up.”

“Jayne, one of Nico’s men walked in on her trying to spank herself.”

“What?”

“Yeah. Bent over the dresser. Trying to give herself a spanking.”

There’s a long silence then a small, choked laugh. “I bet your palm was itching to finish the job for her.”

I laugh too, the gallows humor giving me a little relief. “Yes, you could say that.”

“You can’t, you know.”

“What?”

“Anything like that ... you can’t. She needs help. If you’re not willing to hand her over, and I understand why you wouldn’t want to, then you need to get her some help. I know someone who is excellent, and she works in the kink community.”

I interrupt her. “I don’t think she’s into kink, per se.”

“You don’t know what she’s into, James. I’d bet, neither does she. The point being, either way, this therapist, whom I highly recommend, isn’t going to judge her for anything. Get her someone she can talk to. Give her space. *Room*. Let her feel secure. If she still wants those things, then you can maybe start some games, but nothing heavy.”

“I’m not into anything heavy,” I say. “Or, I should add, I haven’t been for the longest time. A bit of spanking, maybe a very light session with a flogger or a crop, but not heavy strokes.”

Her laugh is lighter than it was before. “James, you do realize that most people would run a mile from a crop, right? Yes, you’re not into heavy pain, or sadism, but you love the

control, and you love to turn their skin pink, and you don't know if that is going to be what your guest is really into. Do you?"

She's right. I know she is. Still, I do know my guest is desperate for some relief, even if it is vanilla. "I want her," I say simply.

"Does she want you?"

"She wants *something*. She was humping the pillow yesterday and coming so loudly, I could hear it through the walls."

"God."

"Speaking of God, she thinks I'm an angel sent to save her because she prayed for me."

"If she thinks you're an angel, James, she definitely needs therapy. I'm going to text you the name of a therapist, and I strongly recommend you call her. I also strongly recommend you don't touch that girl, but I know that will fall on deaf ears."

I bristle at her words. "You don't know that."

"Oh, but, James, I do. I can tell you're in over your head on this one. You've gone and fallen down the rabbit hole. You know, I always said you were the one man I could see never losing his head over someone. You like your pleasures, sure, but you always retained control. You don't sound in control right now. Me telling you not to touch her is like me telling you not to drink water if you've been in the desert for a week. Let me say one thing, though. Do not bring any kink into anything. Okay? Not until she's had time to talk and work through some shit."

I ask her an unrelated question. "Do you think I'm cold? You say I've never lost control."

"As cold as ice and as hard as steel, James. You and I worked because unlike so many others before, and I'm sure, after me, I could accept that. I always knew you'd never be my great love because it would be unrequited. One way only. You simply didn't operate that way. You never fell. *Never*. But

maybe, just maybe, you have a molten core after all, and maybe this young woman can reach it.” She blows a theatrical kiss down the phone. “Mwah, my beautiful but oh-so-chilly man, I must go. I have things to do. I’ll text you the therapist’s details, and call if you want to talk more.”

“Okay.”

She hangs up, leaving me with a headache. Cold. Ice. Steel. They aren’t the words you’d use to describe the sort of man who can take care of a damaged young woman.

*I ought to let her go.*

*I can’t let her go.*

I drum my fingers on the desk.

*I should let her go.*

I sip at the whiskey.

*I won’t let her go.*

My phone pings, and it is the text from Jayne. The therapist is called Dr. Sandra Denham, and her number is included. Sighing, and not wanting to, but knowing I must, I call her.

Two minutes later, I hang up and go to find Ellie.



SHE’S in the kitchen with Lorraine, and the meal smells like it’s almost ready. “Do I have time to talk to Ellie?”

“The food will be ready in around ten minutes, so yes.”

I take Ellie’s hand and lead her out of the room and toward the den. It’s only when I’m almost at the door that I realize I’ve taken hold of her hand as if it’s the most natural thing in the world. It’s so small in mine. Warm too. I get a sudden surge of something fierce and new in my chest. I don’t know what it is, but breathing around it is hard.

I drop her hand as if it's made of fire. Clearing my throat, I open the door and usher Ellie inside.

"I wanted to have a quick talk with you," I say. "There's a lady coming to see you tomorrow. She's going to come talk to you."

Ellie wrinkles her nose in confusion, and it's so damn cute I want to take her face in my hands and kiss her.

God, I'm so fucked. Maybe I need to be the one to speak with the good doctor, not Ellie.

"Talk to me about what?"

"Things. Everything. She's here to help you. She's going to come three times a week, for a couple of hours at a time. It will be intense, but she thinks that is what is necessary."

"For what?" Her expression darkens, and there's that streak of defiance she sometimes shows.

I find it beautiful that she still has it in her. "What if I don't want to talk to her?"

Knowing she might hate me for this, but knowing I need to do it, I make it plainly clear to her. "Ellie, if you don't want to go to the authorities, then you will talk to her. It's non-negotiable."

She paces up and down the small space. "What if she sends me to the authorities?"

"She won't."

"How do you know?"

"It has been agreed. She'd only do that if she thought you were a danger to yourself or others, and you're not. Are you?" I recall asking her that back in her hovel, but now it's a warning, not a question. So long as Ellie doesn't say she's going to cut my throat open in the dead of night, then she's not going to be reported to the authorities.

"She might say that, but she could be lying. I'm sure she'll want to send me away. To the asylum, or whatever they have today instead."

“She won’t. You’re an adult. You can do what you want. Unless you were sectioned, and trust me, Ellie, you’re not displaying any behavior to warrant that, then she won’t send you to the authorities.”

“If I can do what I want, then I can decline to see her. Can’t I?” She turns to me her eyes fiery.

Oh, God, I want to bend her over the sofa, hike her dress up, and turn her ass red. She’d fucking love it. She’s almost begging me for it.

Then I’d reach around her front with my other hand and strum her clit until she came against my hand, crying out as she was given her first proper orgasm. I wouldn’t let her rest either. I’d turn her around, pull her panties down, and suck her wet pussy into my mouth and eat at her like a fucking peach.

Then when her legs were shaking, I’d gently push two fingers inside her, crook them and find her G-spot, and work it until she came so hard, she wet my hand through and collapsed on the floor in a spent, sobbing heap.

Instead of doing any of those depraved but delicious things, I clear my throat and hold her gaze. “Ellie, you will talk to her.” My voice is firm with the demand. “Do you understand?”

She holds my gaze, and she loses a bit the fire in her eyes, and then, lips trembling, she lowers her head and nods. “Okay.”

“Good girl.” I go to her and pull her to my chest, needing to touch her.

She sighs and melts into the touch. Her body molds to mine, the way she molded her cheek to my palm before. This girl is bereft of touch. Of human comfort. So am I, in many ways. The difference is, I choose to be, and she’s been neglected of it.

She makes a soft sound in her throat as I stroke her hair, and it’s almost like a purr. “Thank you for doing this, Ellie,” I say. “You’ll see it is for the best.”

“If you say it is, James, then I trust you.”

Does she? Why the fight whenever I tell her to do something?

Oh, God, have I gone and got myself a natural little brat? The thought has my dick so hard I have to move away.

Ellie doesn't like that and makes a small, whimpering sound of protest and follows me, once more molding her small frame to my larger one.

"You're hard," she says. "Like in my books."

"What books?"

"The naughty ones that Father-Husband gave me to train me and help make me ready."

Fuck me, but come on. I'm only human and any minute now, I'm going to snap.

"The werewolf was my favorite. It was *so* naughty." She giggles against my chest.

"He gave you dirty books?"

"Yes. Only in the last few weeks."

I move back an inch or two and use two fingers to tip her chin up. "Did you like them?"

"I liked them very much," she breathes. Her eyes are dark, and her mouth is parted.

"Ellie."

"Yes."

"I'm going to kiss you. If you don't want me to, say something now."

"I want you to. I've never been kissed."

It begins as planned. A gentle, controlled brush of my lips against hers. I'm always in control. I'm famous for it. In the military, the command always knew they could rely on me to remain calm, no matter what. In the scene, when I used to be much more active in it, it was much the same. Women who wanted to safely test their limits would come to me because I was always. In. Control.

I lose the last shred of it as my lips taste hers, and she whimpers. It's that sound. That tiny, desperate mewl she makes as she presses her body closer to mine that shatters everything I've been up to this point in my life.

Possessing control of her small frame, I walk her backward until she hits the sofa behind her and then with her trapped between me and the high backed couch, I wrap those luscious locks of hers around my fist, and I take.

My lips roam hers, tasting, biting, soothing. I lick at the seam of her mouth and like the good girl she is, she parts for me, and my tongue claims her.

I moan against her, and she mirrors the sound with another one of those desperate mewls.

She's an uncoordinated kisser, but I don't give a fuck; she tastes like heaven, and her mouth is my new favorite thing.

My cock is pressed against her, and I can't help but push up harder, getting some relief. I realize she's pushing her pussy against me too, almost writhing against my leg.

Her breath is coming in small gasps against my mouth. Is she going to come? Just from this?

Is this what she does at night, only against the pillow?

If she comes against my leg, I'll fucking come in my pants in return like a damn horny teenager.

I deepen the kiss, wanting her to surrender to me utterly, and she does. Her body sags against mine as she lets me take, and I take, take, take.

I fucking plunder her mouth, conquering, vanquishing and it's so heady and erotic that I wonder why I've never thought much about kissing before.

It's always something I've done because it's part of the dance. This, though? I could do this for hours and never get bored.

Another uninhibited noise escapes, and this one is most definitely a moan. Like she's on the cusp of release and is begging for more.



Wanting to make her come more than I want my next breath, I push my thigh against her pussy and let her grind on me harder.

*Bang. Bang. Bang.* “Food is ready.” Lorraine’s overly bright voice on the other side of the door makes me think she maybe heard something.

I could tell her to fuck off and keep it warm, and she would. But the interruption is a bucket of cold water over me. A slap in the face of my lust.

I pull away, and Ellie moans. I tip her chin up. “Don’t worry, baby, we’re not done. This isn’t how it’s going to go the first time I make you come though.”

Her gasp and reddened cheeks make me smile. Christ, she’s the most messed up mix of innocence and sheer horny desperation I’ve ever met.

I love it too.

I always knew, didn’t I? From the moment I caught that note written in her blood and saw her beautiful but misty face at that window. I *knew*.

I didn’t know Ellie. I had no idea who she was, but I knew she was a pretty girl trapped in a tower who was desperate enough and *brave* enough to write *help* in blood. That fact alone was enough to send me on this path to hell.

When I spoke to Jayne, I thought she was almost clairvoyant with how she predicted how this would go. Now, I get it. She knows me well enough to understand that Ellie wouldn’t be here unless I wanted something from her.

I’m not an altruistic man. I don’t go around saving damsels in distress just for the hell of it. I saved Ellie because I wanted her. I wanted her because she is so spectacularly fucked up, it intrigued me and turned me on. I wanted her because she looked so lost and forlorn and beautiful against that glass imprisoned in her tower that it called to some dark part of me.

The moment that sealed the deal, though, was that infinitesimal second in time back in her hovel where she put her cheek into my hand and looked up at me through tear-

stained eyes. The trust, the submission, but that tiny grain of defiance. I was lost. Gone.

A thought hits me then, and it's so powerful it takes my breath.

She keeps saying I'm her angel, but she has it all wrong. *She's* the angel, and now that I have her...

I'm not letting her go.



# ELLIE

WE ATE AMAZING FOOD. Something I've never had before. Beef Wellington, with steamed vegetables, and a gorgeous sauce that I've already forgotten the name of. At this rate, I'll get fat. Then we watched a movie. It was enjoyable, but after a while I found it was too much. The television is massive, and the colors, movement, and noise began to overwhelm me. I stayed the course, though, not wanting to appear out of sorts. Who can't do simple things like watch a movie?

Lorraine and James seemed to enjoy it, and at one point James paused it and went and made a big bowl of popcorn. That was even more delicious than the meal. It dripped with butter and salt, and it made my lips tingle. We drank ice cold Coke with ice and lime wedges, and I felt like a princess.

Now, I'm back in my room, soaking in the bath. I'm scared in case Father-Husband comes to me again in the late night, scratching around in the dark. There's a knock on the bedroom door. The bathroom door is ajar, so I shout, "I'm in the bath."

"It's only me," Lorraine answers. "I have something for you. Can I come in?"

"Yes, of course." I have a ton of bubble bath in the water, anyway, so she can't see anything even if she comes into the bathroom.

"I have a nightlight, so you won't be in the dark. James said you had a nightmare."

My heart skips. He cares enough to bring me a nightlight. Then it drops. Or, he doesn't want me sneaking into his room

again, and this is his way of ensuring that doesn't happen.

"You know, there's a small room at the end of this corridor, and it's full of books." Lorraine appears in the doorway. "I'll plug this in, and you can leave it on all night. When I can't sleep, I find reading helps. Go take a look, and maybe choose a few books you might like."

"I love reading." I grin at her, so happy to think of a room with lots of books in it. "So, I can take any? Is there a limit? Like one at a time?"

She laughs at my words. "It's not a library, Ellie. You can take as many as you'd like. Although, you can only read one or two at a time, and when we go, we should leave them here."

"Go?" I don't understand. Where are we going? Or, am I going somewhere?

"James has only rented this place for a month. At some point, we'll have to return to London." She sighs. "Or, maybe not. I suppose if Nico and James end up moving more of their business up here, we might stay in the windy wilds of Scotland. God, I hope not. I already miss Fortnum's."

"What's Fortnum's?"

"It's a store." She smiles at me. "A wonderful store. Give me a second, and I'll plug this in."

She disappears, and I hear her plugging the nightlight in before she appears in the doorway again.

"If we leave, will I come with you?"

She scratches her neck and glances around the room. "I'm sure you will."

She's lying. I can tell.

Her face brightens. "If we end up back in London, you'd love James' house there. He has a library in it."

"What, a whole building full of books?"

"Not a building, but a whole room. A large one. There's also a game table in there, and sometimes when Nico comes around and they talk strategy and play poker with a few other

men. Not sure if that will happen as much now that Nico is married.”

“What’s his wife like?”

She shrugs. Pointing at the closed toilet, she asks. “Do you mind if I sit?”

I shake my head. “No. It’s nice having company.”

She sits on the edge of the toilet. In the hovel, that would have made me feel sick, but everything here shines. I saw two girls today, moving from room to room with baskets full of cleaning goods. “Do you think I should clean?” I ask her. “I did before. In the other place.”

“No, Ellie. You shouldn’t clean. We hire people to clean. I do some of it too. I do the daily cleaning and we have help to do a deep clean a couple of days a week.”

“I can help.”

“Do you want to clean?”

“I like being busy, having things to do. I was so bored before. Honestly, the hours I got to clean were fun, compared to the rest of the time.”

Her face softens, and her eyes look glassy, as if there’s a film covering them. “Oh, Ellie, I can’t imagine what you’ve been through.”

“It wasn’t good, but look where I am now.” I lift one bubble covered hand and blow on it, laughing as the bubbles float into the air and then land on top of the water.

“What do you want to do with your life?”

Lorraine’s question steals all my joy because it scares me. “I don’t know,” I whisper. “I have no idea what I want to do with my life.”

“What do you like?” she asks.

I shrug. “Reading. Animals. I’d love a pet. A dog, cat, or maybe a rabbit. Something that is mine to love.”

“Well then, see. That already gives you ideas. You like books, so you could work in a bookstore.”

“With strangers?” My voice sounds so small, and I almost want to cry.

“Or an animal shelter.”

“Like the ones where they take abused dogs?”

“Yes. You wouldn’t have to deal with people then. Just traumatized animals. You’d be good at that, Ellie.”

I look at her in shock, and suddenly I’m angry. Does she indeed? Why, because she sees me as a traumatized animal too?

“You have a kindness to you. A softness. You’re lovely to be around,” she goes on, and I feel terrible for the flash of anger as she clarifies what she means. “Animals would find your presence very soothing.”

“Do you?”

“I do.” She stands and smooths down her skirt. “I’ll let you finish your bath in peace. Feel free to check out those books and pick any you may want to read. If you need anything, you can find me in the kitchen, and if ... if you’re ever unable to sleep and you feel scared, Ellie, I’m in the attic. You can always come and wake me.”

She smiles again, gently, and then leaves.

I can go and wake her. I don’t have to lie here in terror, torn between staying with Father-Husband’s ghost, or disturbing James.

Her words mean so much to me. I stupidly feel tears on my cheeks and brush them away. I might have a friend.

I realize she never did tell me what Nico’s wife is like. Maybe one day, I’ll find out for myself.

After my bath, I slather myself in one of the gorgeous lotions in the bathroom, and because I feel like it, I pick up the silky nightdress that Celeste brought for me. It’s dusky pink, long, with thin straps and lace around the v-shaped neckline. It

caresses my skin deliciously as it slinks over my figure and makes me shiver with the pleasure of the unfamiliar sensation.

Everything is so overwhelming. Even putting on this negligee feels too much. Quietly, still nervous, even though Lorraine said I could, I tiptoe out of my room and down the corridor to the room at the far end. I push the door open and turn the light on. It's a small room, but it's lined with shelves, all of which have books on them.

I clap my hands together. Oh, wow. Entering the room, I trail my hands along the spines. There are hardback books about history, travel, cooking. Beyond the first two shelves of this kind of book, there are lots of paperbacks. I head to them and see these are mostly fiction. The first shelf seems to be crime books, and I read the backs of a couple and shake my head. Not for me. My life has literally been a true crime documentary, and I don't want to read about others.

Horror is next. Ugh, no. Then fantasy. Lots and lots of books about elves and battles. None of those interest me either.

On the back shelf are lots of books with drawings of girls on the covers, swinging shopping bags, or wearing hats and pretty shoes. These look more like it. I've picked two and am turning to go, when I see two books at the far end of the shelf. They have dark covers, with black roses with glass thorns on them. Curious, I pick one up. It's described as a "masterfully dark, powerfully erotic romance."

Oh, romance. Will it be like the ones Father-Husband gave me? I shouldn't read anymore of those kinds of books. I promised God.

I put them back but then reach out, grab one, and then race from the room as if God won't see my sin if I do it quickly. It's ridiculous behavior, but then these days, that's all I seem to do. Behave like an unhinged person.

No wonder James wants me to see someone.

I get to my room, climb into bed, and start reading one of the books with the pretty girl drawings on the cover.



I AWAKE DEEP in the middle of the night. There's that kind of silence you only get when you're all alone in a house. I listen carefully, and glance worriedly at the bathroom door, but there's no scratching sounds tonight. The nightlight is beaming it's warm, honey light into the room, and maybe that has scared the ghosts away.

I try to go back to sleep, but I can't. Turning my bedside lamp on, I pick up where I left off in the book, but I'm a bit bored of it. So far, it's all about a woman whose life seems to revolve around shopping and gossiping with her friends. I imagine it would be a fun book for most people, but I can't relate.

Knowing I shouldn't but finding myself inexorably drawn to it, I grab the other book, the one with the dark cover. I start to read and within minutes, I'm drawn into the story. It's good but twisted. The main character is a mafia princess forced to marry her father's enforcer. It seems she hates him but can't stop having sex with him. Lots of sex. Dirty, angry, hard, sex.

My core aches, and I grab the spare pillow.

I must be quieter than last time. I cannot make the same amount of noise. Last time, I got carried away and was horrified afterward when reality came crashing in that someone could have heard.

This time, I keep my movements as slight as I possibly can and still get friction. At first, I lazily move against the pillow as I read and re-read this one scene where the main male character takes the heroine and makes her suck his penis under his desk.

I've never tasted one, and never really wanted to. Any scenes like that in the books I had back in the tower left me cold. The idea of having sex was hot, but the thought of sucking that... No, thank you. Then I met James. The thought of doing it to James is entirely different.

In this passage in the book, which is from the heroine's point of view, she describes how the hero tastes, and how he groans as she uses her mouth on his hardened length. Even though she's under his desk, on her knees, she feels powerful.

I want to feel that way with James. I want to do things to him that make him moan for me. He's so big and strong and closed off that to make him shake and moan would be empowering. I would feel like a woman. Not a lost girl, but a grown woman who can make a man *tremble* for her.

James is not who I thought he was when I first saw him standing in the doorway of the hovel. No, he's no angel; I'm learning that much. Maybe instead of an angel, God sent me a flawed savior? James can be closed off. Cold, even, but he came for me, didn't he? So somewhere, he must have feelings. Can I crack him open and see them?

Why do I want to? I don't fully understand it, but it's as if right now, I'm feeling too much, and I want to see him show some emotion too. Even if the emotion is desire. *Need*. I still want to see it.

If I can be the one to invoke that in him, then all the better. In fact, the thought of another woman doing so makes me want to evoke violence.

I push those thoughts aside as they make me feel sick. Instead, I read more of my book, and soon enough the scene takes me to a place where I close my eyes and move against my pillow, my imagination placing me in the heroine's shoes, and James as the one behind the desk.

"You really need to stop humping your pillow."

I scream as I turn to the door.

Oh my God. James is standing there, his face dark, and his hair mussed.

"I'm sorry," I say immediately.

I don't know if I'm apologizing to James or God.

He closes the door slowly and deliberately walks into the room. He's wearing nothing but gray jogging pants, slung low

on his hips. I stare in awe at his body. It's so different from any man's I've seen before. Not that I've seen very many, but before I was sold, I saw men at the beach or at the park in summer and yet never any like James.

He's massive. His skin is a pale gold in the light of the room, and his hair is dark unlike when the sun shines on it. His eyes are dark too.

He stands next to the bed and looks down at me. I break eye contact because I'm burning up inside with shame. How could I do this? In his house?

"Will you punish me now?" I whisper.

"No." His voice is gruff. Different. "I'm not here to punish you."

"Then why are you here?"

"Because if I don't taste you, I'm going to lose my mind."

Taste me? "You want to kiss me again?"

Oh, that would be amazing. He's a brilliant kisser.

"No. I want to taste your pussy."

His words are so wrong. Dirty. They give me a twisted thrill, though. He wants to kiss me down there. Like in the books. Oh my word.

He throws the cover from me and takes the pillow, tossing it off the bed and onto the floor.

"I tried to be quiet," I say, stupidly.

"The bed bangs against the wall. The wall to my room."

"Did I wake you up?"

"No. I couldn't sleep."

"Why not?"

"Because of you."

"Why? What did I do?" I was being very quiet before I put the pillow between my legs to soothe the ache there.

“You haven’t done anything, Ellie, except for be yourself, and it’s driving me insane. I’ve made promises to myself, to other people, even to a god I don’t believe in anymore that I’d leave you alone, but I can’t.”

“I don’t want you to leave me alone,” I whisper. Then I blurt out my newest secret. “I was just reading in a book about a heroine who gets on her knees under her husband’s desk and ... uhm, she ... tastes his ... penis.”

“Christ, Ellie, you need to stop talking.”

James grabs my legs, the way he grabbed the covers, and pulls me to the edge of the bed. I have on the silky nightdress still, but nothing underneath, so when he spreads my legs and pushes the material up, I yelp and push it back down.

He pauses. “I thought you wanted this?”

I try to catch my breath. “I do. You shocked me is all. It’s all so wrong. We’re being very naughty.”

He smiles at me then, and it takes away the air I’m trying to breathe. “Yes, we are, Ellie. Sometimes being naughty can be a lot of fun. And really, who are we hurting?”

I think about it. “No one.”

“Yes, no one. You want this?”

I nod, swallowing past the knot in my throat. He’s going to do what I’ve read about in the books where the man licks the woman’s center, and I want that so much.

“I want this.” He gestures around the room with one hand. “I don’t see anyone else here who this impacts, so as long as we both want it, where is the harm?”

“We’re not married,” I say. Then I realize that sounds like I think he should marry me. I don’t. It’s only Father-Husband’s stupid voice getting in my head. “Sorry. It’s only, I was taught it’s a sin to have sex if you’re not married.”

“The sin was what that man did to you, Ellie, not what we’re about to do. So long as you want to do it, and so long as the man you’re with wants to do it, and you’re both over the age of eighteen, then it’s not a sin so far as I’m concerned.”

“Okay.” I hope he’s right because I need God on my side. Father-Husband was a horrible man, so maybe he was wrong about this.

“I want you to do something for me.” James grips my thighs, and his hands are rough yet powerful. The material of my nightdress bunches up, but not far enough to expose anything untoward.

I nod.

“Can you think of a word. One you like. One you won’t forget?”

“I know words,” I say. “Lots of them. I had my dictionary, and I loved reading it.”

“Okay, so what’s a favorite; you only need to pick one.”

I think for a moment, then smile. “Petrichor.”

“Petrichor?” he repeats as if I’ve said something stupid.

“It means the scent after rain has fallen. A unique smell, one I’ve always wanted to experience, but I’ve never been able to because I was locked away. Even if I got out into the forest, I’d be too scared to smell the rain.”

“Ellie.” James says nothing else. Only my name, and the word sounds broken somehow as if his chest is hurting. He pulls me to him, and his arms wrap around me, and he holds me and kisses my head. “I’ll take you to smell the rain, and you’ll be safe because you’ll be with me.”

“I’d like that,” I murmur against his chest. “Right now, though. I really want you to do the kissing thing.”

I sense that for some reason my choice of word is giving James second thoughts about what he said he was going to do, and I don’t want that.

He laughs. “You’re greedy, aren’t you?”

For him to touch me? Yes.

“So, petrichor. Remember it as your word, okay?”

I nod.

He's serious now. He let's me go, and I lean back on my elbows and look up at him.

"That word is your word to use if you want everything to stop."

I frown. "Can't I just say stop?"

"Yes, you can. But there might be a point where you might be saying no, and yes, and stop, and please and all sorts of things, and I'm going to try really hard to understand what you want and need from me, but petrichor is the one word that whenever you say it, whatever is happening, everything will stop."

I frown. "I wouldn't say it, though, if it's going to ruin things."

"No, Ellie." James' voice is rigid, stern. "You have to say the word if you need me to stop. You must promise me that, or this can't happen. I wouldn't normally give someone a safe word for something as vanilla as this, but I think you need it. It doesn't mean the moment will stop forever; it just means we will stop right then, and you can take a breather, okay?"

I nod. I don't understand it. In the books I read there weren't these rules.

"Why do we need them?" I try to keep my voice steady, strong. I'm a woman, not a little girl. I just need to understand everything that he's asking of me. "Is it because I'm broken?"

"God, no, being broken isn't a bad thing anyway. Broken things can be beautiful because they are unique."

His words make me want to cry again, but in a different way.

"The word is nothing to do with who you are, okay? It's only because you are new to all of this. Do you understand?"

I nod. That makes me feel better. I *am* new to all of this. Reading about things in books isn't the same as doing them.

"Good girl."

God, I love it when he says that. I don't know why, but it makes me want to melt and be even better, so he says it again.

“Now, is my good girl going to let me take care of her?”

His eyes are sparkling with humor, and I laugh softly as I lie back and take a deep breath.





# ELLIE

JAMES SWEEPS my nightdress up my legs, until it's crumpled around my waist, and the air of the room feels cool against my overheated flesh.

He pushes my thighs apart, and I lift my head to peek at him. He stares at my core with naked hunger etched on his features. The raw desire makes him look more beast than man. He gently reaches out and parts my folds.

Oh my word. He's staring at me, at my most private place.

"Christ, you're fucking beautiful."

Does he mean *there*? I don't know what to say to that, so I keep my mouth shut. The next moment it falls open in a gasp as he blows air over me. How can such a tiny thing feel so intense?

"You're so wet, so needy, and so fucking pretty." He kisses my thigh, his stubble rough against the sensitive flesh. He peppers both legs with kisses, growing ever nearer to where the ache for him is building.

His tongue finally sweeps over the bundle of nerves at my core, and I whimper. The sensation is overwhelming. Almost too much. As if he reads my reactions, James doesn't lick me directly there again; instead, he sucks me into his mouth as if I'm a ripe fruit he's tasting. He kisses my outer lips and sucks me again and again, until I'm panting.

Then he parts my lips once more and flicks his tongue over my clit. It's the most intense sensation I've ever felt. The way

he flicks so expertly over and around the small nub is mind-blowing. I can sense my climax approaching, but it feels so different to when I use my pillow. That is deep and pulsing but always leaves me chasing something. This feels as if it will blow me apart.

James stops, and I want to beg him to continue. He glances up at me as I look down at him. “Have you ever had anything inside you?”

I shake my head.

“I’m going to use my finger. If it hurts, tell me.”

I nod as fear consumes me. I don’t need anything inside me, do I? The feelings from his tongue are more than enough.

He flicks his tongue against my button then smoothly glides his finger inside me, and I find myself unable to worry about the repercussions of our sin as ecstasy overwhelms all rational thought. I wait for the intrusion, but it doesn’t come. The familiar building spiral begins. The sensation I get when I know I’m going to fall over that delicious edge, but it blindsides me with torrential force.

The first waves crest, and James slowly gently pushes inside me. It’s an odd sensation, but I can’t compartmentalize how strange it feels because I’m coming. I cry out and grasp the sheets as sensations assault me all over. My clit throbs as James flicks it and pinches, but inside—oh my God... It’s like a burst of fireworks have ignited. My muscles clench around James’ finger and I moan and cry and say things that don’t make sense as I come hard and long for the first time in my life with something inside me.

When the waves subside, James kisses both my thighs, and pulls my nightdress down. He covers me with the duvet and then leans over and kisses me.

“Go to sleep.”

I’m confused. Don’t I need to do something for him now? Like in all the books. “But, don’t you—”

“Ellie, you gave me a gift tonight. You’re not ready for anything else. Go to sleep for me. There’s plenty of time for us

to explore more.”

A deep, crushing fatigue is weighing on me now. It’s pulling me under to a deep, sedated place. Somewhere I haven’t been in the longest time.

“Can you stay? Please?” I ask as the darkness pulls me under. I don’t want to go down there alone.

“I’ll stay.”

The bed dips, and I realize he’s on top of the covers but holding me with one big arm wrapped around me. “Go to sleep. That’s my girl.” He kisses the back of my head, and the darkness wins.



THE NEXT DAY, I dress in jeans, a t-shirt, and soft, cashmere socks. The socks are heaven, and the simple clothes feel as luxurious to me as a queen’s robe. I don’t think I’ll ever get used to standing in front of a closet full of clothing. It gives me anxiety having so many options. Especially today, when that woman is coming to sit and judge me.

“*She just wants to talk to you and help you,*” is what James said. I know, though, what they were like to me after Mum died. Acting as if my responses weren’t normal. Saying I had to grieve. I did grieve. I just didn’t do it the way they wanted me to, and so they never left me alone.

I force some food down at breakfast, not really in the mood to eat. I feel sick at the thought of this morning’s meeting. Every time I think about last night, my belly flip-flops too. Not in a bad way like it does over the doctor’s visit, but in a fluttery, swirly way. I want to do it again, and again, and again.

Casting a nervous glance at James, I see he’s watching me with a frown. “You’ve pushed that food around on your plate and barely eaten barely any of it.” His mouth is set in a hard line.

“I’m nervous.”

“What about?”

“The doctor. I don’t want to talk to her.”

He sighs and brushes a hand over his face. “I know you don’t, Ellie. You must, though.”

“Why?” How can I change his mind? I once heard my mum tell her friend that you could get men to do anything if you used your wiles. I asked her later what wiles were, and she said I was too young to know, so I looked it up. Basically, using your womanly wiles is using sex to get what you want. It’s a nice theory, except I have no idea how to go about seduction.

Then I remember how he reacted to me crawling on his lap in the car. Instinct encouraged that moment, but it worked. I got what I wanted. I climb off my stool, abandoning my food, and clamber onto his lap.

“Ellie, what the hell?” He sits back in his seat, his face a mask of surprise.

I grasp his face in my hand. “Don’t make me see the doctor, please?”

James sighs and takes hold of my hand. “You must. It’s non-negotiable. You don’t want to go to the authorities, or for me to hand you over, so this is the only alternative.”

Why don’t my wiles work? Doesn’t he like me? God, I am so bad at all this. Maybe if I had crawled under the table and done to him like the woman did in the book, like I wanted to, and Tasted him... Then again, I can’t do that here where Lorraine might walk into the room at any moment.

“Don’t look so sad, baby.” He taps my nose and smiles.

I scowl. He’s teasing me, isn’t he? Treating me like a child.

“Oh, now she’s angry. Do you know, your emotions flit across your face like clouds across the sky? I can see every damn one of them.”

His words distract me from my anger. “Is that a bad thing?”

“No, I find it cute.”

“Cute?”

“Yeah, and that is too.”

I don't know what he means.

He taps my nose again. “You wrinkle your nose when you're confused or pondering something.”

I wriggle in his lap, liking the feeling of being there. I might not be hungry for food, but it seems despite last night's amazing orgasm, I'm hungry for more of him. I tangle my hands in his thick hair and lean in to breathe against his neck. He smells so delicious.

A warm hand holds me around the back of my neck, and I pull back to look at him. He stares deep into my eyes, and it's as if he's searching for my soul. I don't like that because I'm pretty sure my soul is as broken as the rest of me, so I look away, biting my lip.

“You hide away a lot, don't you?”

My eyes snap back to his. “What do you mean?”

“You look away a lot. Snuggle your face in my neck. You hide.”

“That's because you look at me as if you're trying to see my soul.”

“Maybe I am.”

“My soul is broken. I don't want anyone to see it.” The reality of the words I'm saying hits me so hard that tears prick at my eyes. I blink them away defiantly.

His face grows serious, all traces of the small smile playing about his mouth gone. “You can't truly think that. Ellie, your soul is probably one of the purest I've ever met on this Godforsaken earth.”

“I have committed a lot of sins,” I say truthfully, thinking back to my pin army. The scratching. The dreaming about Father-Husband being dead. Then the biggest sin of all, giving

this man the approval to kill him. “I told you to kill him,” I whisper, my head down, my eyes trained on his lap.

He wraps his hand into my hair and guides my head upward. It doesn’t hurt as such, but there’s a nice tug on my hair, which sends sparks right between my legs. *See, I think, a sinner.*

“Ellie. *Look. At. Me.*” His words are a growled command.

My eyes snap to his, which are burning with something fierce.

“You didn’t kill him. I would have killed him anyway.”

I frown. “But you asked. You asked permission. I gave it. His death is on me.”

“Yes, I did because in that moment, I thought you needed to say if you wanted him dead or alive, but if you think I’d have let him live? After what he did to you? Then you’re deeply wrong. I’d have kept him alive for a while, but only to make his remaining days a living hell before I killed him.”

“You said you could keep him a prisoner for me.”

He nods. “Yes, I could. Me and the man I work with could have done that. I wouldn’t have kept him alive forever, though, and if you want the truth, you chose the merciful option for him.”

“I did?”

His gaze holds mine in a beam of intensity. “You absolutely did. If he’d have come with us, and I’d made him my prisoner, he’d have still died, eventually, but he’d have suffered the torments of hell first.”

“How?”

“I’m trained in it.”

“What?” I squeak. “You’re trained in the torments of hell?”

What kind of an angel is trained in those things? My reassessment of James is obviously correct because this man is

not an angel. Perhaps he's closer to the devil than I at times feared.

He laughs. "No, but I'm trained in how to break someone."

I shiver. "You *break* people?"

His eyes don't flicker away the way mine would at such a huge question. Instead, he traps his gaze and nods. "I have, in the past. I've also had people try to break me."

"Oh, no. Did they?"

He laughs then, a sharp bark of surprise. "You would be a better judge of that than me. I'm sure a lot of people would argue perhaps they did. I don't feel broken, but then, until recently, I didn't feel much of anything at all."

"What changed recently?"

"What do you think, you little witch?"

I stare at him, hardly daring to hope. "Me?"

"Yes, Ellie. You."

"I've made you feel things?"

He laughs again, but it's darker. "Oh, Ellie, baby, if you knew just how much you make me feel, I doubt you'd be sitting on my lap."

"What would I be doing?"

"If you had any sense, you'd be running."

"I don't think I have any sense, James."

"Why?"

"I don't want to run."

His breathing is heavier, as is mine. "What do you want to do?" he asks lightly.

"I want to kiss you, but I'm unsure of how to start it."

"Just put your lips on mine, baby. It's as simple as that."

So I do. I put my lips to his, and he stays perfectly still as I explore the kiss. The taste of him makes a whimper crawl out

of my throat as I press closer to him. My softness meets his hardness, and it is heaven.

He's hard all over, including between his legs. I press against the rigid length, loving the way it helps ease the ache in my core. If this is a sin, then why does it feel so good?

James sweeps one hand up my back, holding me firm against him as he kisses me back, taking control. His tongue darts along the seam of my mouth, and I open for him. He tastes of coffee and sin. He's utterly addicting. If I could live on this and never need food or drink, I would.

Both his hands move to my front as he grasps my ribs firmly, tantalizingly close to my breasts but not touching them.

I want him to touch them so bad. He hasn't yet. Last night, he gave me a mind-blowing orgasm, but he didn't touch me all over the way I want him to. The way I need him to.

"James," I breathe. "I want more."

"I know, baby. Me too, but right now, you *need* to get ready to talk to the doctor."

He must be made of ice if he can turn away from the molten heat flowing between us. Or maybe he doesn't feel it as much as I do.

"Don't you want me?" I ask, blurting out the words.

He takes my hand and presses it between his legs. My eyes go round as I suck in a staggering breath. Wow, he's massive. It's a lot bigger than I imagined. "You feel that?"

I nod, and cheeks feel flush.

"That's how much I want you." He leans in close and bites the shell of my ear, making me shiver. "I *ache* for you, Ellie. I'm trying to do this right, though."

He presses his forehead to mine. "I'll make you a promise, if you make me one."

"Okay."

"I won't let anyone take you away from here, no matter what you say or do, but you have to promise me to stop hiding,



and I don't only mean with me, but with the doctor too.”

*Stop hiding.* Two simple words, but ones that terrify me. He wants me to let him, and this doctor, see the real me. There's a problem with that.

I don't know who the real me is.

As it turns out, that is one of the first things I tell the doctor when she arrives.

She is pretty, younger than I imagined, warm and friendly, and the first thing she says is to call her Sandra, not doctor. It makes her feel more relatable.

We're sitting in the large living room; I'm in one of the big chairs, and she's perched on the edge of the sofa.

“Ellie, before we talk, I'd like to do some basic tests. Is that okay?” Sandra asks. I agree, and she asks a long series of questions. I listen patiently, keeping my promise to James, but I try to hide my looming anxiety by clenching my palms and rubbing them against my thighs. It obviously doesn't work, because Sandra picks up on the nervous tick. “The good news is you don't show signs of depression, but you're highly anxious, which isn't surprising given what you've been through.”

“I don't want to talk about that, if it's okay, Sandra.”

Her smile is genuine, friendly. “I understand, Ellie. What would you like to talk about?”

I shrug as I consider her question. I haven't had the opportunity to have many conversations, except with James and Lorraine recently. “What do you enjoy, Ellie?”

“I love books.”

“Ah, lovely. I enjoy a good book from time to time as well.”

We carry on a comfortable conversation for near twenty minutes about books and our favorite characters, and somewhere in that discussion I find the courage to tell her, “I don't know who I am...”

“Ellie, dear, that’s completely normal for a young lady your age. You’ll find the woman you’re meant to be in time, but you have to open yourself up to life and be willing to explore the outside world to truly understand what is to live.”

Relaxed by her nonjudgment, we continue talking about books and soon we’re discussing my favorite. *Pride and Prejudice*.

“So that’s why I love Mr. Darcy,” I say to her, smiling. “I get that he’s arrogant and cold, but he’s not like that really, underneath, you know.”

“See, you say you don’t know yourself, but you know why you love Mr. Darcy,” Sandra points out.

“I suppose I do.” I smile.

“What else do you know? Tell me some basic things.”

I shrug. “I like animals. I’d love a rabbit, maybe two, and a dog. Maybe a cat, but dogs definitely. I like the dictionary. Finding new words and what they mean is fun. I don’t enjoy reading the Bible anymore, and I know that’s a sin, but Father-Husband used to recite passages to me, over and over, and he sounded like a broken record. I often hear his voice when I read scripture, and that bothers me.”

“Did you believe in God before you went to live with Father-Husband?”

I frown. I’ve never thought of that, which is odd because it’s an important question. “No, not really. At school in religious education, we learned about the Bible, but also other religions, and about atheists too. At home, my mum and dad weren’t religious. So, no, I suppose I didn’t. God saved me, though. I can’t turn my back on him.”

“If he saved you, maybe he wants you to have a free life? We can’t know Him, right?”

“Do you believe in Him?”

“I’m agnostic, which means I’m not sure. I do pray, though, to a higher power. That’s enough for me. Maybe that

can work for you?” She smiles then. “If there is a God, as in one being, then I think it would be a woman.”

I let out a shocked giggle. “Father-Husband says women are sinners, each one of us. We are the original sin.”

“He sounds like something of a sinner himself, and therefore a massive hypocrite.”

“He wasn’t a nice man,” I say softly.

“Did you like anything about him?” she asks.

“He gave me books sometimes. I liked it when he thanked me for doing a good job cleaning, but no, I hated him.” The words come out so strong and sure they surprise me. “I really, really hated him,” I whisper.

“That’s okay.”

“Is it? It feels like it’s bad to say that.”

“No, it’s not, and I’d argue that for you, Ellie. Hating him is healthy and might mean you will recover from this terrible ordeal more quickly.”

We talk about other things for a while. Then she suggests a break for coffee, and I have fifteen minutes in my room with my books. She strolls in the garden down below, all wrapped up in a big wool coat. It’s still cold out there at this time of year. I ought to take a walk in the garden, see the grounds. After all, it’s not outside-outside. It’s still part of this house. It will be safe.

We meet in the living room again, and Sandra wastes no time in asking, “What do you fear the most, Ellie?”

And the answer comes easier than I expected. “The authorities taking me away and locking me up for being mentally ill, or Father-Husband somehow coming back from the dead and taking me again. I know the second one can’t happen, but it still scares me.”

“Those are both valid fears, but you’re not mentally ill, Ellie. In fact, you’re remarkably strong.”

I smile at her, but it's as brittle as my insides feel. She doesn't know the reality of the things I do, and despite what I promised James, I'm not ready to tell her, or anyone, about my pin army and how I used them sometimes.

To my shock, though, she brings up the thing with the dresser. "I understand you were trying to spank yourself," she says.

My face burns so hot, I think I might burst with embarrassment. James telling her that feels like hot betrayal in my chest, bubbling away acidic and angry.

"Ellie, it's okay. I'm a doctor of psychiatry, but I'm also into the lifestyle. It's one of the reasons I'm here. James spoke with a friend, in confidence, who is also in the lifestyle as he wanted advice."

"What lifestyle?" I'm confused now; her words don't make sense. Also, what friend? A woman?

"Some of us who like to be spanked, we make it part of our life. A more integral part."

Her words take away all other thoughts. They make spanking and pain a part of their life?

"Oh." I'm not sure what to say.

"You don't have to talk about it yet. Or ever. I just wanted you to know, there's nothing wrong with it. Some of us like that sort of thing, and if we're all consenting adults and it is safe and consensual, it's okay. It doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you."

"It's not that I like being spanked in itself," I say to her. "I just like the feeling of pain sometimes. Not bad pain. Not like when Father-Husband broke my wrist." I glance at my slightly bent left wrist. "Sharp, quick pain is different. It sometimes stops my terror when it becomes too much."

We're getting dangerously close to talking about pins, and I shift in my seat.

"So you don't use pain to punish yourself?"

I think about it. "No."

“Or to hurt yourself?”

“No.”

“Do you do it when you’re angry or sad?”

“Maybe. It’s hard to say because everything I felt was so mixed up. Mostly I did it when I felt the swirly anxiousness. Like, I would feel as if I needed to run, but I couldn’t run. I would pace my room, but it didn’t always take the feelings and the ... energy, I suppose I could call it, away.”

“You wrote help in blood; did you often make yourself bleed?”

There it is. A direct question. I either lie, or I have to talk about my pins, and then they might get taken away. I get a flashback to being in the kitchen with James, on his lap, making a promise.

“No, I didn’t make myself bleed often. If I did, it would be an accident. I scratched myself but not deep, only to feel the sharpness and try to stop the buildup. Sometimes I pinched myself instead.”

“What buildup?” she asks softly.

“The feelings. If I didn’t stop it, sometimes my heart would pound so hard, I’d feel dizzy, and I couldn’t breathe.” Just talking about it and thinking back to the worst of it is making me feel stressed. My palms grow clammy, and I suck in some air as nausea assaults me.

“It sounds like a panic attack, which is entirely normal, I would argue, in response to what you went through.”

“What’s a panic attack?”

She then explains it to me, in detail, and it makes sense. It sounds a lot like the experiences I had in the tower sometimes.

“We tell people to snap a rubber band against their wrists to try to distract themselves from panic, so what you were doing isn’t a million miles from that, Ellie. What you did wasn’t shameful or a sin; it was your version of relief.”

I haven't told her everything, but her words are making me feel so much better. Lighter somehow. As if a huge weight is lifting from me.

"The danger is that sometimes the distraction behaviors, if rooted in something like causing ourselves a burst of pain, can become more entrenched and something deeper, so it's better to have other ways of coping. We can start to work on some of those in our time together, but right now, I want to tell you something important, and I want you to truly listen to me."

I nod and sit forward. Her tone is so serious, I'm a bit scared. Is she going to tell me that I'm sick after all?

"Ellie, you've been through hell. You see yourself as mentally unwell. You have said as much to me. As broken. Do you know what I see?"

I shake my head.

"Someone so strong she makes me want to applaud in admiration. Psychologically, I can't even begin to imagine how it must have felt for you, held captive for all those years. You survived it, and not only that, but you've come out of it so strong. You can't see it, but you're a survivor already, and I know as you move forward in life, you'll only grow stronger. You're quite a remarkable young woman, and I think we could do a lot of good work together, if you would like to try."

Her words are said with such sincerity they reach somewhere deep inside me. "You think I'm strong?"

"One of the strongest people I've ever met. You have a resilience in you, I don't think you've even begun to understand yet, but it's there. You don't need to worry about your reactions as much as you do, but that is easier said than done. Perhaps you could write some of your worries down? Ask James for a notebook and pens, and write down things that come to you and worry you? Or any thoughts, really. It can be helpful. I also feel exercise will be a big help for you. You aren't trapped in that tower anymore. If you experience that panicked, swirling feeling you were talking about, maybe put some music on and dance." She smiles at me. "What music do you like?"

“I don’t know as I haven’t listened to any in a long time. My mum liked nineties dance music, and I used to like dancing to that with her when I was little.”

“Okay, so maybe we get James to get you some nineties dance music and some running shoes, and when you feel bad, you can go for a run?”

“Out there?”

“You can stay within eyesight of the house. It has a big garden around it; you could just run around that, so you’re not going far, and you can always go inside when you’re ready. Or you can just put the music on in here and dance.”

“I don’t know how to dance,” I say.

“There’s no right or wrong way. Put the music on and move your body. There are videos online about it. You can find it on a lot of social media sites, where it’s called primal dance, or intuitive, or ecstatic dance. Lots of words for it, but it helps release emotion as well as moving your body and getting you in shape. You probably haven’t not had much chance to do a lot of movement in the past. And I’ll be here to see you regularly, so if anything comes up, we can discuss it in a safe environment.”

“That sounds like something I could try.”

“Okay then; well, until next time.”

She shakes my hand, which makes me feel all grown up, and as if I’ve got things together, when I assuredly do not.

We say goodbye, and I’m left feeling a strange mix of emotions.

There’s something I didn’t share.

I know what else makes me feel good and makes me forget.

*James.*





# JAMES

SANDRA COMES to the study to find me after her first session with Ellie.

“That’s one amazingly strong young woman,” she says.

I nod. “I know. She has issues, though.”

“Who wouldn’t have after what she’s been through?”

“Any advice for me?”

“She needs some space, to figure out who she is; what she wants.”

“What about self-harm?”

Sandra crosses her arms over her chest and leans against the bureau. “I’m not sure that what she’s been doing can exactly be described as self-harm.”

“Really?” I raise one brow, surprised.

“This is purely my opinion, but she never intended to make herself bleed or hurt herself, and she didn’t do it because she was depressed or angry. She did it to ease panic.”

“Is there a difference?”

“I think so in her case. It’s subtle, and you might get ten shrinks in here who would argue against me. My opinion is that she was doing something that helped because it was a short, sharp distraction technique. There are plenty of therapists who tell clients to snap an elastic band against their

wrist if they feel anxious. Is there that much difference to what she was doing?”

“What about the fact she was fucking spanking herself?” My patience is thinning. Maybe this woman isn’t as good as suggested. “That’s not normal.”

“Isn’t it? People masturbate. They do all sorts of things to themselves they enjoy.”

“So ... let me get this straight. Your assessment is she’s strong, not messed up, and everything is fine.”

Her soft laugh irritates me. “Oh, come now. I didn’t quite say that. She has a lot of work to do, and I’ll be here to help her every step along the way. She doesn’t know who she is, and I’d say that’s more of a concern right now than her liking a bit of mild pain to ease her anxiety. My assessment is that she isn’t a risk to herself, okay? I’m not worried that she’s about to start cutting herself or attempt suicide.”

I sigh and glance at my desk before I look back at Sandra. “How do I navigate this? You need to know; I’ve already crossed a fucking line.”

Her lips purse into a thin line. “You did a scene?”

“What? No. Fuck no. But we’ve been intimate.”

She cocks her brow and purses her lips in disappointment. “That surprises me; she seems rather naïve in most things.”

“She is. We didn’t go all the way. I don’t know what the fuck to do. Should I stop it?”

“If I was your therapist, then I’d say yes, probably you should stop.”

Her answer chills me to the bone because I’m not sure I *can* stop.

“I’m not, though,” she clarifies. “I’m hers. That girl needs space and time to learn who she is, but she also has other needs she’s yet to explore. She’s unusual, which is why you walked in on the spanking scenario. I don’t see the harm for her in you helping her explore her curiosities. The one who I think who will get hurt when this falls apart is you, not her.”

“Me?” I almost scoff.

“When she decides who she is and what she likes, you might very well find out, you’re not it.”

Ouch. Well, when she puts it like that.

“I’ll survive.” I laugh. “I’m not in fucking love. I’ve known her days. She’s hot. She comes crawling into my bed at night. It’s a temptation, but if you say it should stop, it can all stop.”

Her lips quirk up in a half-smile. “That’s up to you and her. She’s of age, and she’s not mentally impaired or insane, so she can consent. You obviously can consent. What you do together isn’t for anyone else to dictate. I’m simply saying that in situations like this, people can get hurt, and it’s not always the ones we think will be hurt who are.”

She taps her finger against her mouth. “As I repeatedly keep saying, you’re not my client, but you could put a lot of energy into this to one day find Ellie packed and ready to leave. You think it won’t hurt, but it will. She might walk away and not look back. If you and her are going to get physical, just protect your heart.”

“I’m not worried about myself, rest assured. Let’s focus on her. I ought to send her away.” I shake my head. “I’m older than her. She’s been held captive for years, and now she’s here, creeping into my bed, and it feels wrong.”

“Why? Would you prefer she go and find some twenty-two-year-old to play around with? Would that be better? I’ve only just met you, James, but you have an excellent reputation in our community. Isn’t she safer with someone in control of themselves?”

I bark out a laugh. “If I was in control of myself, I’d have never gone back for her. I most certainly wouldn’t have brought her here, and I absolutely, most definitely wouldn’t have let her crawl into my bed, on my lap, or all the other stuff she’s been doing, until I gave in.”

She sits in the chair on the other side of my desk, facing me with those bright, intelligent brown eyes burning into me.

“What did you do?”

“What?”

“You and her. What did you do?”

“You’re not my therapist, as you keep on damn well pointing out.” I bristle at the personal nature of the question.

“Right now, I’m asking as Mistress Mayhem, not as a therapist.”

I can’t hold back my laugh. “Mistress Mayhem? Really?”

She shrugs. “I know; it’s a terrible name.” She combs her fingers through her hair and crosses her legs. “Do you have anything to drink?”

I go to the bureau and pull it open. “Pick your poison.”

“Vodka please, with a splash of tonic.”

I pour her some and make myself whiskey and ginger. I hand her the glass, sip at my drink, and sit opposite her. “You want to know what we did?”

“Not in detail. Give me the basics.”

“I kissed her. I gave her oral.”

“What did she give you in return?”

“Nothing.”

“Why not. Didn’t she want to?”

“Well, she offered.” I take another sip. “I didn’t think she was ready, or it was right.”

Her smile is tinged with triumph. “There you have it. Do you think a twenty-one-year-old college kid will be the same? Will he fuck? He’ll most likely screw her, and maybe, if she’s lucky, she’ll get a half-hearted orgasm out of it. That girl has been held captive all while her body was going crazy. Hormones on top of hormones, and no outlet. Not even a pop star to fantasize over. Think about it. She’s going to find an outlet for it one way or another.”

She sips at her drink. “I feel I have done my duty by warning you of how this might hurt you. If we’re focusing on

her only, then drop the white knight act. The sex drive is incredibly strong in us humans, and she's going to experiment. Do you want it to be with you? Or some other guy ... or guys, plural, along with drugs and drink, because that's a route she could end up going down."

"What?"

"I've seen it before."

Fuck.

"You send her away, and I imagine the media will find out about her. I'm not saying you *should* do anything more with her. What I *am* saying is that your idea of being altruistic and sending her out there into the big, bad world isn't necessarily kind."

"Christ. I keep trying to put obstacles in the way of me and her, and the universe keeps knocking them down."

She nods. "Yes, and maybe you should be asking yourself why you're putting these obstacles up. Is it all because you think this is wrong, and that you should send her away? Or are you scared?"

"What of?"

She downs her drink in one smooth move. "I've already told you more than I should and warned you of the possible consequences. To explore your fears? Now, that would mean you coming to therapy too, and I don't see partners. She's my client. If you need to explore your own demons, James, then find your own therapist. In the meantime, stop projecting your fears onto her, and let her lead. Just an idea." She places her glass on the desk and then stands and heads to the door. "I'll be back for another session with her in a couple of days. I thought some dancing or being outside might do her good. Can you get some nineties dance music for her? Maybe take her outside for walks?"

Nineties dance music?

She opens the door. "Oh, and she'd like a dog."

"What?"

“She’d like a dog, or a rabbit, and I think something to love and care for might be just the ticket. You should see your face.” She laughs as she closes the door softly behind her.

A dog? Fuck me. Still, it’s better than a rabbit. No way are we getting one of those.

There’s a shy knock at the door. It’s busy in my study today. I roll my eyes, down my whiskey and go to the door. “Yes.”

She’s there on the other side. My temptation and my future sins, all wrapped up in the delectable package that is Ellie. Her big eyes stare up at me, and she trembles in fear. “I’ve smashed something.”

“What did you smash?”

“A vase. I think it might be expensive. It was heavy, though. When I moved it, I dropped it.”

The only vase I know of is some antique thing in the hallway by the front door. “Show me,” I say.

“Has she gone?” Ellie asks.

“Your therapist? Yes.”

“Did she tell you what I said?”

“No. Of course not; that’s between you and her. She only told me some things I need to do.”

“Oh?” Her eyes widen. “Like what?”

“Like getting nineties dance music downloaded, and something about a dog,” I mumble.

“A dog? Really? Can we?”

Her words stop me dead. *We*? She said *we*. Oh fuck, does she view us as a unit now? Something akin to panic claws at me. I can’t be this girl’s *we*. I don’t have it in me.

I take her arm, rougher than I mean to. “There is no *we*, Ellie. I’ll get *you* a dog. If you want one. It will help, I suppose, when you leave.”

“Leave?”

I nod. “Yes, when you’re feeling better and you leave to start your life, having a dog will be good company.”

She must understand that I saved her, but I’m not responsible for her going forward. I can’t be. I’m not built that way.

“Leave where? Where will I go? I don’t have money. Or a job.” Her voice rises with every word. “You promised not to send me away.”

Shit. I’m fucking up. Again. Me and her? We’re a terrible, bad idea. This only goes to prove it. A part of me is dying to grab her. Soothe her. Take all her worries away.

Another part wants to run far and fast and send her away *right the fuck now* because as I look at her, I find myself drowning.

Her eyes are huge, terrified, and so beautiful. I like the shimmer of tears. I’m that disturbed that I find pleasure in her pain and sorrow. It fits me so perfectly. Everyone thinks I’m cold, but I’m not. I’m just broken. Those parts of me that truly *feel* stopped working long ago; they had to, but Ellie?

She’s a miracle of nature because she went through worse shit than me, than most anybody, and yet. She still feels.

I’m living vicariously right now through this girl, and it’s fucking deranged. Dangerous too. Maybe Sandra is right, and I should be scared for my own sanity, never mind Ellie’s.

I place my hand over her chest, right between her breasts. It’s not sexual. I need to feel her heart still beating in there, the engine of all that angst and fear and pain inside her.

Shocking me to the core, she returns the gesture and places her hand right on my heart. “Does it still beat?” I ask, knowing, of course, that it does, but wondering how it can, when inside me there is nothing but a wind-blown desert.

“Strongly,” she says, smiling at me. Then she leans her head against me and sighs.

The sound she makes is as if I’m her shelter, and I don’t know how to react to that at all.





# ELLIE

HIS HEARTBEAT IS SO STRONG, like him. A reassuring beat of life. He's a solid wall of muscle and calmness, and I need him. Yet, he talks all the time of sending me away despite promising not to. How can I be good? How can I make him let me stay?

The kissing. He seemed to like the kissing. I could try something more audacious, but with my lack of experience, I'm terrified I'll mess it up.

Kissing it is.

I stand on my tiptoes and press my mouth to his. He stiffens for a moment, but when I dart my tongue out and lick the seam, he opens for me with a groan. I explore the taste of him, the warmth. He's so delicious. Kissing James is the weirdest thing. It's like eating the best ice cream in the world, except I never feel satiated. Never full. I always want more. I could do this until the world stops turning.

One moment, we're standing outside the study, and the next, I'm in his arms as James marches through the house, holding me.

"If we're doing this, we're not doing it in my damn study. Not for your first time."

"This?" Does he mean sex?

Wait, when did we go from kissing to him thinking we're having sex? Do I want to go all the way?

With him, yes, I do. It's scary though, because he's so big, and older than me, and I have no clue what I'm doing.

"Are we having sex?" I whisper in his ear.

"It's not only up to me," he says, chuckling deep in his chest. "Whatever we're doing, it's not happening in the fucking study."

He kicks open his bedroom door and walks inside, using the heel of his boot to push it closed. Then he lays me reverentially on the bed, as if I'm made of glass.

"I want you," he says simply. "Do you want this?"

"Yes. I don't know what I'm doing, though."

"Let me take care of that. Of you."

I'm so scared my heart is beating faster than it did when Father-Husband threatened to beat me. I'm also turned on. Excited.

It's a maelstrom of emotions churning in me, and suddenly, for the first time since James saved me, I want my pins. The panic is threatening. I need something to calm the rising anxiety, and my pins are the only relief I know.

He turns away, and I pinch my thigh discreetly, but he turns back in time to see me doing it for the second time.

"What the fuck are you doing?" His voice is cold as ice.

"Making the panic stop."

His face is serious. Oh, no, he's going to say no to this. Or worse—he'll send me away.

"It works for you, the pain?"

I nod. "Just a sharp bite of pain to take my mind off the anxiety. Nothing too intense." I glance at my wrist, almost instinctively.

He takes hold of it, gently examining it. "If we could fix this, would you want to?"

I nod. "Yes. I would, but I don't think it can be fixed now."

“I think it possibly can. We need to see a specialist. A surgeon.”

“Okay.” I nod and smile at him, hoping he’s forgotten the pinching now.

“I said I wouldn’t do this, but come here.” He sits, and I frown in confusion. “Get up and come to me,” he orders, beckoning me with two fingers.

I slide from the bed and walk to where he’s perched on the far end of the massive mattress. It’s the biggest bed I’ve ever seen. You could get stranded on it, unmoored and lost like a tiny ship on the waves.

I reach James, and he takes hold of my wrists, taking care not to squeeze tightly, and then he pulls me over his lap, making me gasp in surprise. “Sharp, quick pain helps you?” he asks.

I nod and bite my lip.

“Did that fucker ever do this to you?”

“Do what? What are you going to do?”

“Turn your ass pink.” His words have my cheeks heating.

“Oh, no. He would never. He used to smack my legs hard, or come at me with his belt, swinging it around like a lunatic. Or sometimes, when he was really angry, he’d kick or hit me. The worst time was when he twisted my wrist. He never did this, though.”

“Good. I don’t want to remind you of him in any way.”

I giggle at the thought someone as handsome and powerful as James could remind me of that old man.

*Thwack.*

I yelp in shock.

One hard smack to my left buttock has me squirming and trying to get free. This bite of pain is more intense than my pins.

“Count them out,” James demands. His voice is different somehow. Deeper, commanding.

“That’s a bit too much pain,” I say.

*Thwack.*

A second stroke lands on my other side. Holy moly.

“Count or I’ll start again,” he orders.

“One, two,” I say quickly.

“Good girl.” He kisses the top of my head, and my belly warms.

“Three,” I yelp at the next smack.

By the time I count to five, I begin to adapt to the spanking, and that sharp bite of pain feels ... good. Once I’ve counted to ten, James stops.

My backside is hot, and so is my face. The panic is gone, but now I have other emotions I need to deal with. Mainly lust. It’s burning hot and bright in my belly and at my core. I squirm over his knee, trying to get some relief.

Fingers snake into the waistband of my jeans and down into my panties. James slides his fingers into my slick folds and strokes, making me see stars.

“Oh, my,” I murmur.

“You’re wet,” he says with a growl of satisfaction.

He places me on my feet and unbuttons my jeans, pushing them down. I feel exposed when the denim falls around my ankles, leaving me in only my panties. They’re different from the kind I used to wear. These are silky, and although they feel lovely against my skin, I’m mortified when I glance down and see how clearly they show the damp patch growing on them.

“I’m sorry,” I whisper, as I try to wipe it away.

“Leave it,” James orders. “It’s fucking hot.”

It is? I don’t understand why me making such a mess is hot, but I’m glad he thinks so.

Then, as if to prove his point, he grabs my hips, pulls me into him, and presses his nose there and inhales. I don't know what to feel or think. It's so ... animalistic.

Hot kisses trail over my stomach as he pushes up the buttoned blouse I'm wearing. He tries to undo the buttons, but they're fiddly, small buttons, and he loses patience and tears the blouse open with a growl.

"That's silk," I say, shocked. "I think it costs a lot of money."

"I don't give a fuck," he says as he pushes the tattered material from me.

His hands are at my bra clip, and in one motion, he has it undone. It falls free, exposing my breasts.

"Jesus Christ, look at you." James shakes his head. "You're so beautiful."

His words make me proud and happy. *Beautiful*. I've always wanted to be seen as such by someone. To be the princess in the story. The Elizabeth Bennet to my own Mr. Darcy.

Rough hands slide up my sides and then palm my breasts. He squeezes them together, I groan as his thumbs brush over my nipples. Oh, God, it's better than I imagined. I've tried touching them myself, and the sensation is nice, but this is electric.

"Come here," he demands.

I'm confused as I'm already right in front of him, but he drags me onto his lap. With my legs curled around his waist and my arms locked tight around his neck, I can feel how big and hard he is for me. He bends his head and sucks one nipple into his mouth, and I cry out in astonishment. Oh, God, it's too much. Too intense. As if it has a mind of its own and knows what to do—even if I don't—my body responds. I tangle my fingers in his hair as my back arches, and I push my nipple deeper into his mouth.

He stops and lets go, and I almost sob, but then he sucks the other nipple between his sinful, hot lips. "Yes," I say. "Oh,

God.”

He works my nipples until they are aching, heavy, and sore but deliciously so. Between my legs a heavy, throbbing drumbeat has been building, and I need relief.

“James, I need ... I want ... it...”

“It’s okay. I’ve got you, baby.” He lifts me from him and pulls my panties from me. Placing me on the mattress, he parts my thighs, and climbs between them. Oh... His lips trail up my hot center, then he laves his tongue across my clit and sucks it between his lips. Oh... I push my core against his mouth, silently pleading for more. My eyes pinch closed as the heady fog falls over me, but I’m aware of every sensation burning a trail of lust through my veins, and I want his touch more than my next breath.

I fall over the edge and come as he licks and sucks at my core. I feel almost frenzied as I moan and my legs relax, falling apart.

“Look at you,” James says. There’s a note of dark, primal satisfaction in his voice. “Do you want me to make you come again?” he asks.

I nod.

“Words, Ellie. Use your words.”

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, please?”

He kisses my thigh. “That’s my good girl, asking so beautifully for what she wants.”

I want to be his good girl. I want to make him proud of me, happy with me, and I want him to be as turned on as I am. But he is always in control, so aloof and cool.

“Are you enjoying this too?” I ask him, worried.

He’s pushed up from the bed and is standing a few feet away, unbuttoning his shirt. “Are you serious?” He laughs and

looks down at me. “Baby, I have the most beautiful thing I’ve ever seen spread out naked and wet for me, and you ask that?”

“You seem very in control,” I point out.

James sighs and scrubs his hand over his face. “I’m trying,” he replies darkly, “and you should be thankful for how controlled I am right now because if I gave into what I’m feeling, I’d tear you apart.”

He shucks his shirt, and I stare in disbelief. Not at his muscles, as impressive as they are, or at the tattoos winding their way over his upper arms and around his lower stomach to his back, but at the scars.

Dressed, James looks like a big, powerful, rich man. Undressed, James looks like a man who fights, a lot. White jagged scars mar his golden skin, and long, tapered scars wrap around his muscles, and there’s a tight, round web near his shoulder. Scars decorate his chest like a map of steel and chaos, and beneath the hardened exterior lies a man so emboldened in strength and loyalty.

“What is that?” I point at the round web.

“Bullet wound,” he says.

I gasp and clap my hand over my mouth. “Oh, no.”

He laughs at my expression. “Ellie, it was a long time ago. I’m fine now.”

“You have so many scars,” I say, gently trailing my fingers across his flesh.

“You don’t like them?” He seems angry. “Most women think they’re hot.”

“Why?” I shake my head. “They upset me because I don’t like to think of you being hurt.”

“Oh. Well ... when you put it like that, I understand, but this was all a long time ago.”

“If anyone tried to hurt you now, I’d want to kill them,” I say.

His face grows darker than I've ever seen it, and I think he's angry. "You'd want to kill them?" he repeats my words slowly.

"Yes." My tone is firm, resolute.

"I feel the same way about you, Ellie."

He removes his clothes in haste, until he's only in his underwear. I stare in awe at the thickness of the ridge outlined by the cotton of his briefs.

He walks to the edge of the bed, and I sit up, so I can look at him better. He takes my hand and presses it against his hard length. It's so warm, and I can feel a pulse throbbing there. I stare and lick my lips.

"Christ, Ellie. The way you look at me. The way you are so damn protective, willing to go to battle over me... It's the hottest fucking thing."

Growing bolder by his praise, I move my hand up and down, and he groans. A patch of wet appears at the end of his length, seeping through the material of his boxers.

Is he responding the same way I do? With a shaking finger, I reach out and gently trace around the edge of his thickness, smearing the patch of wet.

"Fuck," he groans.

"Can I see it?" I ask.

He swallows and hooks his thumb into his waistband, pulling the material down.

I release a dismayed gasp when his thick, long length slaps against his belly.

"Well, that's not the reaction I was hoping for." His brow wrinkles as he stares at me.

"It's too big," I say. "That won't fit."

He laughs. "Trust me, baby, it will."

"For my first time? No. I need something smaller."

"I'll loosen you up. Don't worry."



“How?”

He shakes his head, a small smile playing about his perfect mouth. “Lie back, Ellie. Spread those thighs for me. Show me your pussy, and let me take care of you.”

His words are dirty. Wrong. Forbidden.

Still, I do as he says, lying back on the bed and parting my thighs.

He circles my clit with his finger, and my back bows off the bed. The intensity is so much more than his tongue. Harder pressure, it feels like tiny electric shocks coursing through me with his every touch.

He uses his fingers to open my lips and then bends his head and flicks his tongue across my clit, back and forth and I whimper at the sensations bombarding me. He flicks his tongue as he slowly inserts a finger in me. We’ve done this before, and I take his finger more easily this time, but then he adds a second.

Slowly, carefully, he moves his fingers, pumping them in and out of me. The mixture of him flicking my clit and using his fingers on me has my arousal building, until I can feel that sensation; the one I get before I come.

With a cry, I push my mound up at him as I come. He growls against me, and the sound is primal, deep. He bites down on my clit as I come, which excites me so much it prolongs my orgasm.

I throw one hand over my face, embarrassed at how badly I lost control.

He gently moves my hand, but his voice is stern and harsh in contrast. “Don’t hide from me, Ellie.”

He grips my chin, tilting my face until I’m looking at him. “Was that good?”

I nod, almost wanting to laugh. He can’t tell it was good? I had an orgasm so intense my legs feel shaky.

He reaches for something in the bedside drawer, and I realize it’s a condom when he unwraps the packet. We did sex

education classes in school, and the teacher had us all roll condoms down a banana. Then the class descended into chaos when one of the other students stole the diaphragm the teacher had brought in to show us. It was found three days later in the girl's shower, and no one ever admitted to taking it.

It strikes me then how normal that memory is. And that bastard Father-Husband took that from me. He stole my life, and I hope he's burning in hell for it.

My memories and the sudden anger leave me on an exhaled breath as I stare at James rolling the condom down his massive penis.

It's possibly the biggest I've seen. A boy in our class flashed the girls in the shower once. I was scared, but my friend had laughed at him and waggled her little finger, telling him to put it away because it was pathetic. I once saw another boy's when he let girls look at it for cigarettes and my friend, Sammy, paid him two cigarettes for us both to look. It was pretty unexciting, but I was worried the teachers would catch us, and we'd get detention.

I've also seen a little bit of porn and some pictures of a famous actor who had his nudes leaked on the internet. None of those past experiences prepared me for this moment, though.

It's one thing to see a man, half-hard, or in the abstract, on a phone screen. It's quite another to be faced with a strong man, with a massive cock, who is about put it inside you. My nerves have to returned tenfold.

"Ellie." James' voice is stern yet soft. "I'm going to take care of you; I promise."

"Will it hurt?" I ask.

He nods. "For a moment, it might hurt a bit. Even though you're wet and you've come. The pain won't last. I promise."

"Have you done it to women like me before? Ones who haven't had sex?"

He nods. "When I was younger, I had a girlfriend. Before I went off to fight. She was a virgin. We took it slow, the same

way we will, okay?”

“What about you? When did you do it first? Did it hurt you?”

He shakes his head. “It’s not the same for men. It didn’t hurt me. It wasn’t exactly amazing, though.”

“Why not?”

“She was older than me, and drunk. I hadn’t told her it was my first time, and it was a bit of a disaster all around.”

I want to know more, but I also can’t stop staring at him as he towers over me. His fist is now moving up and down his length, over the condom. James has the nicest hands I’ve ever seen. They’re so strong. Wrapped around himself, jerking up and down, they make me feel faint with need and longing.

All my questions and worries scatter like pollen on the breeze as I watch him work himself.

He bends down and kisses my neck and throat. He sucks the skin at the juncture between my neck and collarbone, and it sends electric tingles down my spine, making my nipples hard again.

Kissing me all over, he works his way down my body, until he latches his mouth onto my clit, sucking roughly.

He pauses for a moment to inhale, and I squirm at the earthy way he always seems to want everything about me.

“I swear to God, I’m addicted to your taste, Ellie. You’re so fucking perfect.”

I am?

He eases a finger in me again, then a second one. “So fucking wet and hot.”

He crooks his fingers expertly and touches something inside of me that has me squeaking in surprise as a flash of pain and pleasure bolt up my spine and to the tips of my toes. God, what was that? He does it again, and I panic. If he continues doing that, I might need to go to the toilet.

“That feels weird.” I gasp as he does it again.

“Weird good, or weird bad?”

“Good, but I’m scared because I think I might pee.”

He laughs then. “No, baby, you won’t. It just means I’m doing this right. You might get really wet, though.”

“Oh, James.” I try to grab him to anchor myself as he flicks at my clit with his tongue and pushes on that unfamiliar place inside of me, one I didn’t know existed. “Something is happening.”

“Yeah, baby, it is. You’re fucking strangling my fingers.”

I am? Oh, I think I might faint. It’s so much.

Panting, working for something just out of my grasp, chasing something I don’t understand, I scream when he presses hard and flicks my clit fast and unrelenting.

I actually scream. It’s mortifying, but I don’t have time to think anything else because I’m coming so hard it hurts and ... I’m wet. Something gushes out of me.

“Fuck, Ellie, that’s so hot,” James praises. He pumps his fingers in and out of me, and while I’m still experiencing those waves of delirious, powerful pleasure, he removes his fingers and slowly pushes himself in deep.



# JAMES

SHE CAME SO HARD she gushed all over my fingers and mouth, and now she's a wrecked mess laid out for me like a feast for kings.

You can save your swans, your wild boars, and whatever other delicacies royalty used to feed on—just give me more of Ellie. Her taste. Her scent. Her moans. That scream. That. Fucking. Scream.

It was desperate and wild, and it made me know for sure that once she gets the hang of this, Ellie is going to be hot as sin, all wrapped up in a package that is as pretty as a peach.

My cock at her entrance, I take advantage of the remaining waves of her intense orgasm to slowly push inside her.

Oh fuck.

I have to stop. She's so tight, and so warm, that if I don't pause and take a breather, I'm going to come.

I pepper kisses up her body, wanting to keep her floating on those endorphins. I want her to come again. I want to feel her strangle my cock the way she did my fingers.

I reach her gorgeous, full breasts and suck first one, and then the second nipple into my mouth. In this whole experience, I've been reacting to her. Watching, learning.

Ellie is my new hobby, and I want to learn all about what makes her tick. At some point, I'll take her down darker allies and into the depths of her sexuality. I want to own every part

of her, to dominate her and have her submit for me, but all in good time.

Right now, this is all about making her first time spectacular. It's not entirely altruistic. I want to do this again, and again, and a-fucking-gain and to do that, I need her to want it too.

I kiss her neck, inhaling her unique scent as I nuzzle her throat and then bite the shell of one perfect ear. When I claim her mouth, she moans into the kiss and our tongues duel as she kisses me with hunger.

I move inside her and push forward, then pull back when I meet resistance. I work my cock into her slowly. So very slowly.

It's like the most exquisite torture. All my body wants is to fuck. I exert that iron control over myself that I'm known for. The thing women often say they hate about me, my coldness, my steely sense of control, is the thing that I bet right now, Ellie is thankful for. There will be no sudden thrusts from me or panting, useless humping. I'm going to fuck her so good; she's going to come again and see fucking stars.

I need to be inside of her bare. If I don't feel her pussy without the barrier of the condom between us, I'll explode. Tomorrow, I'm having a doctor come out to the house to put her on birth control.

I'm clean, but I'll get another check, and one for her too. Then I'm going to fuck her deep and fill her with my cum.

There's something pounding inside me that I've never felt before. I've had sex. Hate sex. Angry sex. Boring sex. Funny sex. Friendly sex. I've even gone through the motions of doing what women term "making love," although, I never loved any of them.

Not once, in any of those encounters, did the kinds of thoughts running through my mind now occur.

Thoughts like *mine*.

Mine.

Mine.

Fucking *mine*.

I want to take her apart and own her. Devour her.

I'm still trying to hang onto my control and take this slow, but the urge to drive into her is so strong it takes super human will to hold back.

I break off the kiss for a moment to rearrange myself so I can stroke her clit as I slide into her. I want her to be broken, but in the best way. In a way she'll love and need and crave.

I want her under my spell. Totally and utterly addicted, and so I'm going to make this the most intense experience of her life, so she comes back for more, more, more.

"Put your arms around my neck," I grind out.

She does, and her breasts press against me. My arm is squashed between our bodies, but my fingers manage to move enough to gently strum her swollen, slippery clit. I keep my strokes light, so as not to overwhelm her and to make sure she comes again. I need her orgasm more than I'm chasing my own.

"James," she breathes on a whimper as I push farther inside.

"You okay, baby?"

"Y-y-yes."

"I want you to come for me again."

"I can't," she sobs. "I've already come too much."

"You can. Come for me, baby. I want to feel it. I want to make you feel so good."

"Oh, God, no, no. Too much."

And, this is why I gave her a safe word. We might not be playing, but that doesn't mean I can't break her. Vanilla can break someone if it becomes too intense.

Before I can ask her to clarify, to stop this despite my building need to come, she speaks again.



“Yes. God, yes. Oh, more. More, James.”

I flick her clit faster, and her fingers tighten around me, digging into the muscles of my shoulders and back and imparting a delicious bite of sharp pain.

“Oh, God,” she wails.

“There’s no god here, Ellie. Just you and me. I’m your fucking god now.” The words are depraved, fucked up, but while I might still be, only just, in control of my body, it seems I’ve lost control of my mouth.

Her pussy contracts around me as she comes, sobs breaking out of her as she convulses around me so hard I might pass out from the pleasure.

Her contracting muscles suck me in, and I push deep inside her as she cries out. I pull up to look at her face, which is a twisted mask of pleasure and pain.

“Breathe, baby,” I demand. “Just breathe; it won’t hurt for long.”

She doesn’t speak, but her huge eyes lock onto mine, and as I claim her, burying my cock to the hilt, tears spill down her cheeks.

Those tears reach some dark, fucked up part of me and with an animalistic roar, I come so hard I feel it all the way down to my toes.

Slowly the peak recedes leaving softer pleasure, lapping at me like waves retreating from the shore, and my sanity rushes back in to fill the void. I kiss her softly and lick one of her salty tears from beside her mouth.

“Are you okay?” I ask, and she chokes on a sob. Shit.

I gently pull out of her and see the blood on my white sheets. A stain that should mark my soul too.

What have I done?

“Ellie? Are you okay?”

I throw the condom into the trash can by the bed and pull her into a sitting position. She moves freely like a rag doll, and

the sobs increase. Do I need to call a doctor?

“Have I hurt you?” I demand. “Fuck, Ellie, speak to me.”

“No. No, I’m n-n-not hurt.” Her sobs calm as she takes a few deep, shaky breaths. Then she smiles at me weakly. “I’m just sore, but not in pain. It’s just ... I’ve been alone so long. No one has touched me. It’s all ... too much. And then, when you let me go, when I must go and be alone out there, and I know when I’m better I must, but ... it will feel so cold.”

She drops her head onto my chest and cries and as I hold her, I *know*.

I know it so fucking bone deep it owns me.

“You’re not going anywhere, Ellie,” I say, my voice sounding alien and harsh.

Her head snaps up in surprise. “I’m not?”

Those thoughts I had when I took her innocence, the pounding, insistent drumbeat of mine, mine, mine hasn’t receded. Not one bit. Her crying like this. Her breaking so beautifully. Her relinquishing her everything. It’s only made me realize a profound truth.

One I’ve known but not dared acknowledge since the moment I caught the note written in her blood.

I’m never letting her go.

Her blood is on my sheets now, and it’s a perfect match to the blood on the note, which I have kept in the drawer in the study.

“I’m not?” she says again.

I laugh darkly at her hopeful tone. “Oh, Ellie, baby girl. You shouldn’t sound so happy.”

“I shouldn’t? I think I’m happy. Very. You’re going to keep me?”

“Yes.” I nod.

“Then I’m happy.” She beams at me.

Oh, poor, innocent, darling Ellie.

You should be terrified.



# ELLIE

JAMES INSISTS on me taking a long, warm bath, and then he wraps me up in fluffy towels and dries me, before putting me to bed as if I'm a child.

He sends Lorraine to me with hot chocolate, and I curl up, happy, sipping it, and reading.

At some point, I must fall asleep because when I wake up it's dark. I'm scared for a moment, terrified of the ghost of Father-Husband lurking in the bathroom, but then a warm hand lands on my belly.

"You okay?" James asks, sleep slurred.

"Yes. How long have I been asleep?"

"I don't know." He yawns. "Hang on." He pulls his phone from the side and looks at it. "Over eight hours."

"Oh my word. I should get up."

"I think not. It's three in the morning."

"I'm awake, though."

"Go back to sleep then." He laughs softly and kisses my neck. I shiver.

"Maybe we can do something else?" I ask hopefully.

He laughs again. "It seems I might have created a monster. You need to recover and rest. Your pussy will be sore."

"Are you sore?" I ask, curious.

"No."

“Can I touch you then?”

“You want to touch me?”

“I want to see you come. I’ve seen it once before, ages ago, in a porn video, a man doing that, and it really turned me on. I want to see you do it.”

“Jesus, Ellie.”

“Do you think that’s why I was given to Father-Husband? Because I was a sinner; was that my punishment?”

The light clicks on, and I blink in the glow.

“No. Ellie, every teenager in Britain has seen porn at some point or another, so you looking at some video when you were fourteen, or however old you were, is not a sin. And even if it were, not enough of one to justify being given to that fucker.”

“What would justify it?” I ask, curious.

He stares down at me. “Nothing would, Ellie. Nothing you could do would justify that. Do you understand?”

I nod.

“I’ve read about it since. In the books.”

“What?” His brow furrows.

“What men do. You know ... when they...” I glance down to where his torso disappears into the covers.

“You want to see it?” His voice is hoarse.

“Yes. Very much.” I bite my lip nervously and nod.

He lies back and puts his hands up, under his head and winks at me. “I’m all yours, baby. Do with me as you wish.”

I pull the covers back and see he’s wearing cotton jogging pants. “Can I take them off?” I ask.

He makes quick work of undressing, then laying back and putting his hands behind his head once more.

I take my time to drink him in as his length grows, bobbing against his belly. In a suit, James looks lean and fit, but naked, he’s much bigger than you’d imagine. I think it’s because he’s

tall, and dresses so well that he can hide just how muscular he is. Like this, though, there's no hiding the raw power his body contains.

I trail my hands down his chest, where a light smattering of hair leads down between his pectorals to a line down his stomach to his hard length.

He sucks in a breath as I run my fingers down his body, and I smile as his stomach clenches. I reach his huge erection and my fingers brush over it tentatively. It twitches as if it has a life of its own, and James lets out a ragged exhale.

This is what I wanted. This feeling of power, the same as I read about in the books. I might not be under a desk servicing James, but his response tells me I am making him feel things. The same way he made me feel things earlier.

I explore the head, which is darker than the rest of it, and when I touch him there, trailing my finger around it, a pulse of liquid beads at the top. I gasp.

“God, Ellie,” James groans. “You’re killing me here.”

“How do I make you feel good?” I ask.

“Grip it,” he says. “In your fist. Like this.” He reaches down and holds himself tight and then he glides his hand up and down, spreading the fluid at his tip over his length.

“Okay, let me try,” I say, my voice trembling and unsure.

My mouth is watering, and I know I want to taste him, but this is enough for now. I want to see what it's like when he comes before I try to swallow it. I move my hand up and down his length the way he showed me, and he watches me with heavy, hooded eyes.

More fluid beads at his tip, and his breathing is irregular and harsh.

His thighs tense, and he bites his bottom lip as he groans.

“Am I making you tremble for me?” I ask.

“Fuck, yes, Ellie, you are. Work me, baby, make me come for you.”

I move my hand faster, and his hips thrust in rhythm, then with a harsh grunt, his cock erupts in thick spurts.

I gasp in shock at how much there is as he spills all over his belly and my hand. I bring my hand to my face, and flick out my tongue, tasting a tiny bit of the fluid on my fingertips.

James watches me, and his face darkens as he twists his hands in my hair. “Jesus, fuck, Ellie, come here.”

He pulls me down onto the bed and rolls me beneath him and kisses me so deep and hard I can barely breathe. Then he moves down my body, roughly pushes my legs apart, and sucks my clit into his mouth, kissing me and sucking me until I come with a soft cry.



WHEN I WAKE AGAIN, it's morning. I stretch and smile then wince. There's a mild tugging discomfort deep inside me, low in my belly.

I turn to smile at James, but he isn't there.

Not worrying, guessing he's working in the study, I head to my room and take a shower, and then I stand in front of my wardrobe. So far, these clothes have been nothing but a stressor for me. The choice they present is too much. I have picked for comfort every day, but now, I don't. Instead, I slip on a silky camisole that falls to just above my knees and go study myself in the full-length mirror.

I look at my body, really look, and try to figure out if it is sexy or not. My breasts are full, and my waist is small in comparison to my hips, but I have a belly. It's a soft curve that I don't know if I like. When Celeste came with all those clothes, she left me some style magazines and I spent some time looking at the women in them. I don't look like those women. My thighs are thicker, my stomach isn't flat, and my boobs are too big.

I'm medium height. Father-Husband measured me once and said I was five-foot-four. Not tall enough to be one of the



models in the magazines, but not small enough to be petite and sexy, the way the boys said my friend Sammy was. The girl was only just five foot, and boys used to joke that she could give them a blow job without kneeling, which clearly wasn't true. She wasn't that small.

I wonder where she is now? Will she be at university? Or working? When I was with Father-Husband, I didn't think about people from school or my old life much. It was too painful as I was convinced I'd never see anything like it again. I'm still convinced I'll never have a normal life, but now, instead of living in a nightmare, I'm living in a dream.

Turning back to the closet, I try to pick something James would find sexy. I want him to want me. I need him to desire me. Both because I want him and crave more sex, but also because I need him to keep me. He said he would, but he might change his mind again.

He seems conflicted about me.

I need to end that conflict and make him only want me for now and ever. Then, maybe he will marry me, and I'll be safe forever.

I smile to myself as I search through the clothes and pick out the perfect dress. It's cold outside, but this house is always nice and warm, so I don't need to wrap up in wool jumpers and the like. The dress I have picked has long sleeves and is made of a satiny material. I pull it over my head and watch as it falls to my ankles like water.

It's a dark olive green, and it hugs the contours of my body perfectly, skimming over my belly and thighs.

Next, I pick out some shoes and try on heels, but I can't walk in them, so I take them off. I try running shoes, but they look stupid with this dress. Finally, I pick out a pair of shiny, black ankle boots, with a small block heel. I pull them on and go look at myself. Perfect.

The boots give me some height, but I can walk in them. They add something to the dress, and I head downstairs, happy.

As I hit the landing, I hear male voices and head in that direction.

“He’s a fucking lazy cunt, that’s why.” I hear a man with a rough Scottish accent say.

His words are coarse and spat out as if he hates them as much as the man he’s talking about.

“I think we should fuck him up as a warning to the others.”

“He’s only been with the crew for two minutes, and he thinks he’s running it.” I recognize James’ voice immediately.

Hesitantly, I push open the door and walk into the living room.

Five male heads all swivel my way.

“Well, hello there, and who are you?” The man with the rough accent smirks at me as he takes me in. “Had some fun last night, James? Where the hell did you find her? Haven’t seen her around here, and it’s a small community.”

“She’s not part of this community.” The man who speaks is the dark haired one who came with James to the hovel the first time. “She’s under our protection.”

“Oh, fuck ... uhm... sorry,” the man with the accent says. His brown hair is the color of mud, but his eyes are like the sky on a cold winters days. Icy blue, they hold no warmth at all. “Nice to meet you, Miss.”

His words are deferential, but his gaze is anything but. His eyes roam all over my body, as if he can see right through the dress.

James is staring at me coldly, no warmth at all in his gaze.

“I just wanted to say hi,” I say stupidly to him.

“And now you have. Why don’t you go grab some breakfast, Ellie?” James speaks to me as if I am no one. *Nothing.*

What the hell?

Hurt slices me like a hot blade, cutting into me and flaying my over sensitive skin.

How can he have been so intimate with me and now be so cold?

“Did I do something wrong?” I ask.

“Ellie, we’re discussing business. Go find Lorraine.” James dismisses me with a wave of his hand.

I do as he says and sit miserably at the kitchen counter as Lorraine bustles about, making me a breakfast I now don’t want to eat.

When I’m halfway through one of the two slices of toast, the door opens, and James stalks in.

He pours himself a coffee from the carafe and sips at it before turning to me.

“Stay away from those men,” he says bluntly. Then his eyes narrow as he looks at me. “Are you wearing a bra?”

“No, why. I have a slip on under this.”

“You can see your nipples, deary,” Lorraine says with a sigh. “If you’re going to wear nothing but a silk dress, then maybe a bra underneath?”

“Definitely a fucking bra underneath if you’re going to walk into a room full of those fuckers,” James adds.

“Why are you being so nasty to me?” I ask, and I realize my emotions are ramping up as my mouth is all wobbly.

“Oh, boy. I’m going to go dust the library.” Lorraine shakes her head at James. “You’ve opened a Pandora’s box of neediness here, lad, make no mistake.”

Not sure what she’s talking about, I focus on James.

“I didn’t know; I’m sorry.” I hang my head. Will he hurt me now, beat me the way Father-Husband would?

James tilts my chin up, using two fingers. “Don’t fucking hide from me,” he snaps.

I flinch.

“Jesus, Ellie. What the fuck?”

“Sorry, I thought you were going to hit me.”

“Hit you? I ought to fucking put you over my knee, but I don’t think you mean that, do you?”

I reach for his belt buckle, but he grabs my wrists to stop me. “I don’t think now is the time for sex, Ellie.”

“I’m not trying to have sex, James.” I almost giggle when I say the word but then sober up when I think how much this is going to hurt. “I’m taking your belt off so you can punish me and hit my legs.”

“Your legs?”

Has James hurt his head? He’s acting weird and repeating everything I say.

“Yes, like Father-Husband did, if I got things wrong.”

His face is thunderous, and he balls his hands into fists. Oh, no. I wait for the blow. Instead, he takes a deep breath in, his nostrils flaring as he blows it out. “Ellie. I am not going to take my belt to you.” Then he smirks. “Not unless it is to turn that ass *red*.”

I feel my cheeks heat. I won’t like it, not even on my ass. I know it. I hate the belt now.

James strokes my cheek. “Don’t worry, baby. I won’t belt your ass. I don’t think you’re a belt type of girl. Much more one who will take to the flogger.”

“What’s a flogger?” I squeak.

“Keep on walking around with your nipples poking out and looking like pure seduction, and you’ll find out.”

I can tell by his tone that he’s not angry anymore. He’s not going to hit me with his belt or his hand.

“There’s something you need to understand,” James says. “If I tell you to do something, I expect you to do it. There are dangerous men in my world, the kind who will eat a sweet little thing like you for breakfast given half a chance. I expect when it comes to your safety, you obey me, okay?”

I nod.

“The other thing you need to understand is that I will never take my hand to you in anger.”

“You won’t?”

“No. Fuck no. If you’re a brat, I’ll spank your ass red. I’ll spank your pussy until you come.”

He’ll spank my pussy? How does that even work? My mind is whirring with intrigue.

“I won’t *ever* lift a finger to you in anger.”

“So ... how will you correct me if I do something wrong?”

He frowns. “If you disobey me about your safety, I’ll lock you in your fucking room until you understand.”

I swallow hard.

“Anything else, I don’t correct you, Ellie. We discuss it. Like adults.”

“I don’t know how to discuss it.” I feel so stupid.

“You will. In time.”

“What if ... what if I want to be told what to do?”

He goes so still it’s as if he’s turned into a sculpture. “I think that might be a very dangerous thing for both you and me.”

“Why for you?”

“It plays into certain proclivities I have.”

I make a note to look up that word in my dictionary later.

“Okay.” I shrug and nuzzle my hand into his palm the way I love to.

He brushes his thumb over my lower lip, and I part my mouth for him on instinct.

He slides his thumb inside and I suck it with a small moan, which crawls up my throat.

“Jesus, Ellie, you were made for me,” he rasps. “God knows where that leaves either of us.”

I glance down and see his hard bulge and press my hand against it, loving the feel of his desire for me.

“Hey, where’s the toilet in here?”

A man walks into the room, and James drops his hand from my face and steps back as if we’re no one to one another. It lacerated my heart and soul, but I try to remember what he said about those men being dangerous. Maybe he has a reason to do this.

“Not in fucking here,” James snaps.

The man’s brows punch up toward his hairline, but he simply laughs. “Okay, asshole. Keep your panties on.” The man looks at me, and his gaze lingers for a brief second before he tips an imaginary hat at me, making me giggle, and leaves.

“I’ve got to get back in there. Work calls.” James checks his watch. “Oh, there’s a delivery coming for you in around thirty minutes. You might want to be down here when Lorraine answers the door.”

“I can answer the door,” I say.

“Let Lorraine. I don’t want you to answer the door ever. Understood?”

I swallow. “Okay.”

“Always so good,” he murmurs as he brushes his lips over my cheek and leaves.

My head is spinning. The man is hot and cold. Angry then amused. He isn’t consistent at all. There’s a word to describe a man like him. I try to think of it and then it comes to me. *Mercurial*.

James is indeed mercurial.

I never know truly where I stand with him.



# ELLIE

WHEN THE KNOCK at the door comes, I stand in the entranceway to the kitchen, which is near the front door and peer around the corner as Lorraine answers.

A grinning man presents her with a box, tied up with ribbon. "I've only just tied the box up, but open it straightaway," he says.

She nods and thanks him, and he goes back to the car and brings out another box, full of all sorts of things, which I can't properly make out. This second box he places on the floor. "We've gone over everything; do you need me to explain anything again?" he asks.

Lorraine glances behind her, sees me, and shakes her head.

"Well, you have my number. Any questions, call. You have our best there; take good care of him."

Him?

"We will. Thank you."

Lorraine closes the door and turns to me. Then she shocks me by opening her mouth and shouting, "James!"

The living room door bangs open a moment later, and the man himself appears, looking pissed. "What?" he snaps the question at her.

"You don't want to miss this."

"I've got important work shit going on," he says.



Lorraine smiles. "I'm sure you can take a moment."

"Not really."

Lorraine puts the box down and places both hands on her hips, her arms at right angles. She looks like an angry Italian Nonna, even though she's blonde and too young.

"Christ. Okay." James rolls his eyes but stays.

The door to the living room opens and closes again. "What's all the commotion out here?"

The dark-haired man joins the group in the hallway. The one who came with James the first time to my hovel.

"You're looking well, Nico," Lorraine says.

"Love suits you." James makes a love heart with his hands and bats his eyes with a mocking smirk.

Nico scoffs but his lips twitch. I look from him to James. Nico is a very handsome man. One might say objectively, more handsome than James. Or, at least, more striking, but James has something Nico doesn't. A cool competence that makes me feel safe. I get the sense that very little ruffles James whereas, and I might be wrong, but my impression of Nico is of a man who gets angry and impatient very easily.

A man like that would be no good for me.

I realize then that while James may very well be mercurial in many ways, he isn't unpredictable. It's an important distinction, and I think back to the kitchen when he calmly explained to me that he'd never hit me in anger. I believe him. He's a man who simply wouldn't lose control that way.

"Let's go into the kitchen," James says. "I'll see you in a minute." He nods at Nico.

"Nah. I'm coming too."

James' grinds his jaw, tension ticking there, but he doesn't argue.

I slip into the kitchen, and Lorraine and the two men follow me. Lorraine kneels, carefully placing the box on the

floor. It makes a noise. A snuffling noise, high pitched. What the heck? I glance at James.

“Open it then,” he says.

“Me?”

“Yes, you. I told you there was a gift coming for you today.”

Nervous, not sure what I will find, but hoping it’s what I think it is, I unwrap the ribbons.

*It might be a rabbit*, I tell myself, which will still be awesome, but not as awesome as a puppy.

When the powder blue ribbons are unfastened, I peel the cardboard back and squeal, clapping my hands over my mouth.

A golden, fluffy, chunky puppy sits in the box, staring up at me, blinking.

I look at the pup, and it looks at me, and everything stops. Nothing else exists except for me and this gorgeous little being.

“Take him out then,” James says.

I glance up at him, and though his words might have a tinge of impatience, he’s smiling.

Reaching down, I pull the dog out of the box, carefully. “He’s a boy?” I ask.

“Yeah. A big chunker he is too,” Lorraine says.

Holding the dog in my arms, against my chest, I feel the tears build and pour down my cheeks. “He’s so warm.” I breathe in awe. “He’s heavy too.” I giggle.

“His dad is a top gun dog, and his mum is a top show dog,” James says.

Neither of those things mean anything to me. To me, he’s simply perfect.

“He has a long, fancy, stupid name, but you can name him whatever you like.”

I stare down at him, my warm bundle of love, and kiss the top of his head, breathing in his scent. “I need to think about it,” I say. “Get to know him. It’s a big responsibility naming someone. You have to get it right.”

The pup starts to wriggle in my arms, so I put him down. He immediately goes to the corner of the room and pees. Oh, no. I stare up at James, terrified he’ll get rid of him, but he just rolls his eyes again.

“I’ll clean that up,” Lorraine says.

“No.” James holds his hand up. “Ellie will.”

He turns to me. “He’s your puppy. Your responsibility. Lorraine looks after the house, but you look after him. You feed him, walk him, train him. Don’t go outside the grounds, though. Not alone. Got it?”

I nod and smile. James trusts me to take care of another living being. It’s a huge responsibility, but it makes me sure I can do it, that he clearly believes in me.

I push up and run to him, wrapping my arms around his solid chest where I nuzzle my cheek on a content sigh. It’s obvious I’m not thinking because if I thought first, I wouldn’t do this with the other man standing there and watching. “Thank you so much,” I say on a breathy sigh.

“You’re welcome, Ellie.”

I expect James to push me brusquely away, but instead, he drops a kiss to the top of my head and then gently pulls back. “Now, go clean up his mess. There’s a box of his things and written instructions in the hallway. Lorraine also talked in depth with the breeder. Anything you need to know will be in the instructions, or Lorraine can tell you.”

“Training and everything? All written down for me?” That’s going to be a lot of instructions.

“We can order some books for the training part of it, if you’d like?” Lorraine says.

“Yes, please. I’m going to train him so well.”

“The breeder said only positive training,” Lorraine says. “Kindness and carrots only, no stick.”

The dark-haired man, I recall his name is Nico, makes a grumbling noise in his chest. “That’s the whole problem with the world today. No stick.”

“I’ll never hurt him,” I say, looking at my new puppy with so much love in my chest. I turn to Nico and wipe the tears that start to fall. “You know, using the stick doesn’t work, not really. It might make someone, or something, behave, but that person, that *thing* will only grow to hate you deep down. Will resent you. An obedience born out of fear isn’t true obedience. How can a person who uses violence and fear ever be truly sure that the person, or animal, they are controlling with it won’t turn on them one day? They can’t.”

Nico stares at me as if I’ve grown a second head.

James moves, subtly, to stand between me and Nico. He tips my chin up with his thumb. “Baby,” he says softly, and then he kisses me.

It’s only a soft, brief touch of his lips to mine, but he does it right in front of Lorraine and Nico.

“Never thought I’d see the day,” Nico says when James steps back.

“Could say the same for you.” James shrugs.

Nico laughs. “Nah, I’m just a bastard. A motherfucker, but I’m still capable of feeling things like a normal human. You? You’re the Tin Man.” Nico cocks his head at me and smiles, but it holds a dark, evil edge. The next words he says seem to contain a warning just for me. “How have you melted his heart, when he doesn’t have one?”

He leaves the room, and the air in it turns much cooler.

“Well, he’s just been a bit of a bastard,” Lorraine huffs. “Come on, Ellie, darling, I’ll show you where the things are to clean up this mess the little horror has made, and then we’ll bring his things in here and sort through them.”

I nod at her, smiling. Nico tried to cast a cloud over my happiness, but I have a puppy, an actual puppy that's all mine, so his mean words don't hurt me at all.

It turns out, I really should have paid more attention to them because it might have saved me a world of heartache.



# JAMES

ELLIE IS OBSESSED with the damned dog. I'm glad she has something to be interested in, though. In the four days since she's had the puppy, she's immersed herself in reading and watching YouTube videos all about how to look after a puppy.

It's all she talks about over our meals in the evenings.

Her therapist has visited and said it is doing her a world of good.

The only break I get from the doggy news is at night, in bed, when I take Ellie all over again. So far, I've kept it tame. Gentle. I haven't fucked her hard the way I want to. I haven't pushed her to the floor and choked her with my cock. I haven't pushed her over the desk in the study here and fucked her raw as I spank her ass.

I *have* wrung more orgasms out of her than I can count.

The doctor came yesterday and examined Ellie. I made sure it was a female, and I explained the exam to Ellie beforehand to ensure she understood what the doctor would be doing and that she would be comfortable having someone in her personal space as such. She agreed to undergo the exam with no reluctance at all. If she would have been reluctant or refused the exam, that would have presented me with a problem, but I would have ordered the exam anyway, and then she would have hated me. But Ellie is obedient, eager to please my every request.

I've created a greedy little monster in Ellie when it comes to sex. She seems to want my cock all the time. I'm sure that

will pass, eventually, but right now, I'm enjoying every moment of being inside of her.

I got checked out too and was given a clean bill of health.

Worryingly, the doctor asked to talk to me and told me that Ellie's periods are irregular. She said she believed it was due to a mixture of stress, very poor nutrition, no exposure to natural sunlight, and no regular exercise. It freaked me out and worried that her cramped, cooped-up life could have affected Ellie in other ways.

The doctor told me there was no sign of sexual trauma to Ellie, which correlates with what Ellie told me; at least that piece of shit didn't touch her that way.

She also said that she believes her wrist can be mended properly, and she can get Ellie a consult with an excellent surgeon. She booked Ellie into her clinic in two weeks for a battery of tests, including an ECG and will update us on her appointment with the surgeon.

Getting Ellie to the doctor's office for the tests will be challenging. The girl still seems terrified of the outdoors. She'll go outside with Pup but not beyond the boundary of the house. I watch her now, running outside, Pup frolicking after her. Pup can't go out into the wider world yet anyway, not until he's had all his shots.

Suddenly wanting to be with them, I storm out into the hallway, grab my heavy jacket, shove my feet into some rain boots and head outside. It's fucking freezing today. I wouldn't be surprised if we got snow later. The sky has that heavy, expectant look as if pregnant with snow.

"Pup, come. Come," Ellie calls to the dog and holds out a treat.

"You know, if you don't give him a name soon, he'll only respond to Pup, and he'll be stuck with that name for life."

Her head whips around at my voice. Her hair is down, and it's a luxurious veil of silk, falling beyond her waist. She mentioned cutting it yesterday, and something deep within me rebelled. Her long hair is beautiful, different. I think I have a



weird fetish for it. When she sits on my chest at night, peppering kisses on my skin, exploring me, her hair trails over my skin, making me hard.

When I see her naked, that hair caressing her skin, I want to wrap it around myself and jerk off with it.

When we watch a movie together at night, I wrap my fist in it and hold her to me, or if I'm in a gentler mood, I sift my fingers through it.

"I can't think of a name for him," she says seriously. "He's going to be so handsome; I can tell. He's almost regal. I thought of Prince, but that doesn't fit him."

I stare at the dog. He is regal, and his father looks like he won Crufts, he's that handsome a dog. "How about Duke?" I suggest.

Ellie looks at him and wrinkles her nose. "I'm not sure."

"Alexander?" I ask her. "After Alexander the Great."

"Ooh, I like that." She turns and looks at the pup as he rolls onto his back, kicking his legs in the air and wriggling around. "Not sure I like Alex for short."

"He could be Xander for short."

"Xander," she thinks about it. Then she calls out. "Xander, come here."

She says it Zander, as if it is with a z not an x.

"Or Odin," I suggest.

"Odin. I like that one, but I think he's an Alexander and we can call him Xander."

I nod. "Xander it is. How is the training going?"

She laughs. "Good, but in tiny bursts. He gets tired and loses his focus."

I make eye contact with her sparkling blue eyes and realize something. She looks alive. Really alive. For the first time since I rescued her from that cursed tower, Ellie is glowing. I've instructed Lorraine to make sure her meals are full of

nutrients, and the doctor prescribed some high-strength vitamins, but it seems what Ellie needed most is love.

My heart twinges, and my stomach revolts. The thing she needs most is the one thing I don't think I can give. Sure, I can fuck her senseless. Look after her. Keep her safe. I'd kill another man who looked at her the wrong way because so far as I'm concerned, she's mine. But owning something and loving it are two very different things.

If she finds out my heart is barren, will she run? Ellie strikes me as someone who once she finds herself will have an insatiable appetite for life. A greedy, open heart that needs nothing but love flowing to it in return for her giving you her all.

I can't do that.

I swallow hard and blink to banish the images.

The one time, the only time, I let myself care, the woman paid for it. Something in me broke afterward. I didn't love the girl, of course. Didn't even know her, but she touched something deep inside me, and she died. I didn't save her. Gabina was young and seemed so innocent, much like Ellie. I fucked up and made the wrong decisions. The same way I will with Ellie.

My love, if I even had any left to give, would be a curse, not a blessing.

If I can't love her, though, how can I make sure I can keep her?

A small, sadistic smile plays around my mouth.

By making her so dependent on me that even when she finds out I'm lacking, she can't and won't leave.



THAT NIGHT, Ellie comes to bed, in my room, as she always does after getting ready in her room. I could move her in here, but I still need to feel that this space is mine. She sighs as she

snuggles under the sheets and curls up on her side, away from me.

Well, this is new. Normally, I get kisses, and they lead to other things, and I fuck her. Slowly, carefully, but I fuck her.

“What’s wrong?” I ask.

“I feel awful leaving Xander down there,” she mutters painfully quiet.

“The fucking dog is not sleeping in my bedroom,” I snap. “If you want him with you, have him in yours.”

“But I’m in here,” she points out, whipping around to glare at me.

“You don’t have to be.”

She tenses, and her eyes widen, locked with a fear so intense that it paws at something deep within my chest. “You’re kicking me out?”

“No. I’m stating that if you want hair all over everything where you sleep, you do that in your room. Not mine.” I stand firm. Xander’s cute, but that little shit is not getting his fluff all over my bedding. Abso-fucking-lutely not.

“Fine. But then you won’t get sex.” She harrumphs to herself as if she’s won the battle, swinging her legs over the edge of the bed.

I laugh. “I’ll come to your room. Fuck you, then leave you to sleep with the smelly dog.”

She turns to me then, her eyes a myriad of emotions that flash so rapidly you’d miss half of them if you weren’t paying attention. “He doesn’t smell.” Her tone is harsh, angry. “His scent is gorgeous.” Soft, loving, adorable. “He’s lonely down there; I hear him crying at night.” Small, afraid. Her eyes lower and well with unshed tears. “I know what it’s like to be alone at night.”

Fuck. Me. How the fuck does this girl reach into the darkest part of my soul and light up the man she sees in me. The man she wants me to be?

Now if I say no, I'm a total asshole because she sees herself in the dog. "How about we make a deal, baby?"

She lifts her face to me, hopeful.

"He can come in here *after* we've fucked, but he sleeps in his basket in the corner of the room. He does not get on the bed."

"Thank you. Shall I get him now, or shall we make love first?"

She's so weirdly direct sometimes.

"Do you want to fuck?"

"I always enjoy making love with you, James."

"We don't make love, Ellie. We have sex."

Her face tightens, but she doesn't say anything.

"Do you want to have sex?" I ask her curiously. "I'm not getting a sexy-times vibe right now."

"I always want sex with you, James." She repeats the same sentiment.

I narrow my eyes at her. "Really? Always?" Is she trying to be some sort of perfect Stepford Wife, sex doll hybrid for me? I don't fucking want that. I want her authenticity.

If I wanted the sex doll, always receptive fake-ass girlfriend, I could have had her from one of a hundred nameless, faceless women who hang around Nico's club like rock band groupies. Women have a thing for bad men, the villains who are ruthless to the core. I don't understand why, but some really do. I suppose the same way some men want the always receptive, supple sex dolls.

I might like to be a controlling, dominant asshole, but there's a difference between a natural bratty little sub, and some girl who thinks all men want is her to bend over the pillows every night, ass in the air.

"You do know you don't have to fuck me every night, right?" I watch Ellie closely. "That's not part of the deal."

“What deal?”

“This. You being here.”

Her brow furrows. “My being here is a *deal*?”

Sometimes, I forget that although she might be innocently naïve in many ways, until she was fourteen or so, Ellie led a normal life. She’s also smart. She reads. She read Jane Austen for God’s sake, and that stuff is full of waspish wit, so my Ellie isn’t as naïve in all ways as I might at times think.

“All I’m trying to say is that you’re welcome here. In my home. I want you here, with me. Yes, I want to fuck you, but you don’t have to do it like it’s your duty.” I sigh. “In fact, I’d fucking hate that.”

“It’s not a duty, James.” She moves closer and takes my hand. “Remember when I once asked you if you found me attractive and you showed me?”

I nod.

She slides my hand down in the covers and uses it to push up her nightdress. She’s not wearing any panties, and when she spreads her legs, I find her wet and swollen.

I glance at her face. “Have you been playing with yourself?”

She flushes so pink it makes me laugh a little. “No. Of course not. That’s a sin.”

“Ellie, it’s not a sin.”

“Well, it’s wrong... I save this for you.”

“I’m glad you do, but you can get yourself off too. It’s hot.”

“You find it hot?”

“Sexy.”

“Really?” Her eyes widen in disbelief.

“Yeah.”

“I’ve only ever done it using the pillow.” She shrugs. “I don’t think that’s sexy.”

I find it incredibly so. The idea of her being so needy she rubs her little pussy against her pillow. I say nothing, but my fingers idly flick her clit, and she gasps.

“Have you been reading spicy books again?”

She giggles. “No.”

“Why so horny?”

“I watch you,” she says. “The little things you do make me this way.”

My heart stutters. No modern-day woman would ever admit something like that. Everyone these days, men, women, they’re all playing games. *Don’t act too keen. Make him fall first. How to neg her and make her beg.* The internet is full of bullshit toxic advice telling men and women how to act when in love, and half the time the advice sounds more like it’s preparing them to go to war.

Ellie hasn’t seen that shit. She hasn’t been in school and suffered the first rejections of young lust. She hasn’t experienced any of those things. It makes her much more open.

“Like what?” I’m not an arrogant man seeking compliments. I really want to know what I do that makes her wet, so I can keep her soaked.

Her cheeks are still red, and she bites her lip. My cock throbs at the sight.

“Tell me,” I coax, my voice deep and throaty.

“Well, you rolled your sleeves up today, and that was sexy. I like the way you rub your jaw when you’re thinking. That’s sexy. Your watch on your wrist is sexy, and you wore that today. When you get undressed and I see your arms, they’re so big.” She sighs, and it’s heavy with lust and want.

I really have created a greedy monster. Not simply greedy for sex but greedy for *me*. A thought hits me then—do all women feel like this about men? I’ve spent my life thinking us guys go around getting turned on by the littlest things, like a

flick of hair or a flash of cleavage, but are women the same? Is Ellie giving away the secrets of the sisterhood?

Ellie better never have those thoughts about other men. I'll fucking blindfold her if she does.

I want her, but not missionary again. Tonight, I'm going to take her harder. I want her from behind. I want to flick her clit while I ram into her, and I want her to scream my name until her voice is raw and raspy.

I pull her up and flip her over onto her stomach, making her gasp in shock. Then I grab a couple of pillows and arrange her on them at the perfect height, so she bares the heaviness of my weight without enduring too much pain.

"What are you doing?" she squeaks.

I climb behind her and roughly shove her legs apart. This is my favorite way to look at a pussy—from behind, framed by a gorgeous ass, looking like a fucking peach, and Ellie's is no disappointment.

Her lips are swollen and puffy, but her tiny clit peeks through, showing me how lustful and wanton she is.

"What are you doing?" she pants.

"Looking at you," I tell her as I roll the condom over my rock-hard cock.

"Oh..."

She sounds scandalized, and I want to laugh. I also want to shave her. In fact, I'm going to book an esthetician to come and take all the hair off her gorgeous pussy so when I fuck her bare, she'll be all smooth for me.

She yelps like I spanked her when I suck her into my mouth and work her clit hard and fast with my tongue. It doesn't take long before she's pushing back against my mouth and panting. I thrust myself inside her to the hilt.

I don't take the same care as I have before, too fucking turned on to be careful. When I'm seated deep inside her, I grind deep and reach around her to play with her clit as I do.

“Oh, God,” she moans.

“James!” I snarl.

“Sorry?”

“It’s *oh, James.*”

She is silent for a moment, but then her moans build, and like the perfect gorgeous thing she is, she chants my name. “James, James, James, James.”

Broken, begging, and writhing, she arches her back as she comes, and I slam into her viciously, chasing my release. I wrap her long, luxurious hair around my fist and hold onto her as I fill the condom with spurt after spurt.

In two days, I’ll be filling *her*. First her pussy, then her mouth, and soon, her ass. Ellie would look really good wearing a butt plug, keeping me inside her for hours as she went about her business.

I fall over her back, kissing her neck and shoulders. I lift her hair and let it fall across her back, admiring the golden strands. God, her hair is going to feel divine wrapped around my fist when I take her virgin ass for the first time. When I guide my dick down the length of her slender throat. I shake the thoughts from my head or I’ll take her again right the fuck now. Fuck, she keeps me hard.

“I need to cut it,” she says absentmindedly.

“Don’t you fucking dare.” I yank it a little to show her who is boss.

“James, it’s a mess. It needs it. Anyway, I hate it.”

I tie the condom and throw it away, and then turn her over, and pull her to me, holding her in my arms. “Why? It’s gorgeous.”

“Because *he* said I couldn’t cut it. He said it was a sin. I don’t want any memory of him, James. Don’t you understand that? I want it short.”

“Short? How short?”

“Like the girl in the film last night.”



The girl had a boyish crop. She was pretty, and it suited her, but in no way is Ellie doing that. “Absolutely not,” I say.

“It’s *my* hair, James.” Ellie looks up at me, and for the first time, I see a true spark of defiance in her gaze.

“No.” I can’t articulate why, but her hair isn’t just something I find erotic; it’s a part of our story. The way I saw her in that tower, like Rapunzel.

A sadness fills her gaze, and I realize I sound like that old fucker to her right now, so I say something I rarely say.

“Please.” I hold her gaze. “Please don’t cut your hair.”

Her features relax, and the sadness dissipates. I can read her face so easily it’s almost scary. Can she read me the same way?

“Can I trim it?”

“A few inches, that’s all.” Then I brighten as I think about her shaved for me. “I’ll book you a spa package.”

“What? I’ve never been to a spa. Will I have to go alone?”

“Don’t worry, baby. The spa will come to you.”



# ELLIE

THE SPA DOES INDEED COME to me. A couple of days after James said he'd book me a spa package, a gaggle of women arrive at the house.

It's unnerving. I don't know how to react around them. Lorraine is different. Even though she isn't, I think of Lorraine as being like an aunty. A motherly figure. These women are younger. One looks only around my age.

They are so pretty too, with all their makeup and the wild, bright colors in their hair.

I stare at one of them who has rich, dark hair, shot through with vibrant shades of pink. "Can I have pink in my hair, like yours?" I ask her.

She shakes her head. "We've received strict instructions regarding what we can and cannot do."

I realize I don't know where to take them. Feeling stupid I glance around the hallway, wondering if I should call James.

"This way, ladies." Lorraine appears, and I swear I wonder sometimes if she's magical, the way she is always there when needed. "Let me show you where you can set up."

She takes them into the main living room, where all the furniture has been moved to one side. "If you want to set up your tables and chairs here, I'll fetch the refreshments."

I hover about stupidly, while the women get to work. Within ten minutes, there's a chair, which one of them

unfolded and it has a small stool by it. Then there's a large table that looks soft on top, with a hole near the top.

"We'll relax and enjoy your spa treatment first. Then you can have a shower to wash off any oils before you have your hair done." A beautiful redhead speaks. "First of all, Ellie, we have a full-body massage for you, to relax you and condition your skin. Then we have the waxing. That might hurt a little bit, but you'll soon get used to it."

"I'm having my legs waxed?" I ask in dismay. I know a girl at school who had her mustache waxed, and she said it was agony. My entire legs in the kind of burning pain she described doesn't sound like fun.

"Legs, armpits, and bikini area."

"Ahem, it's a full Brazilian. Just a landing strip left," one of the girls says.

I know what a Brazilian is. I didn't live under a rock before that bastard took me, and nope. I shake my head. "I think that will hurt."

"It won't." The redhead smiles, but there's a steely determination under it. "It's one of the services James requested. In fact, I'd say he was rather persistent."

"I'm the client," I argue. "I'd rather not have the Brazilian waxing." It takes a lot for me to assert myself, but I do it, even though I'm shaking inside.

The woman purses her lips and stares at me. "You're really going to make me go fetch him?"

I know who she means.

Her face softens as she looks at me. "I could get in an awful lot of trouble, if I don't do what he's requested."

"God, does everyone fear him?" I grumble.

She comes to me and leads me away from the other girls. "I'm not from around here, darling. Only Vicky, the nail technician, is because our girl is off sick. I'm from London, and I've done things like this for James' girls before."

My whole world stops, and my stomach churns. James' has had ladies before? Like me? Living with him? Ladies he made have Brazilians?

Why did I think I was the only one? Did he say so? I try to wrack my brains to remember what he did and didn't tell me.

"Excuse me," I say, trying to keep the shaking in my voice to a minimum. "I'll be back in a moment."

The lady sighs but nods. When I close the door, I hear one of the girls say, "Stupid cow. She doesn't get it, does she?"

The redhead replies, "It's none of our business. Shut up and continue setting up."

What don't I get? Does James have a harem of women? Oh, God, when he goes back to London, if he takes me will I simply be one of many?

I burst into the study without knocking, and James stares at me as he continues to talk on the phone. I pace, and my hands ball into fists.

"Yeah, Carrick, I'll have to call you back. Something has come up."

"What's up?" he asks nonchalantly. "You're not cutting your hair. I thought we agreed to that."

"Shut up, James," I yell. Clearly my words shock us both because I go silent, and he goes completely still.

"Excuse me," he says, his voice low and dangerous. "Keep this up, and I'll put you over my desk."

My laughter is defiant and bitter. "You said you'd never hit me in anger. I guess that was another lie."

"What other lies have I told you?"

"You didn't tell me you have other women. A harem in London."

"A what? I don't have other women. Not in London. Not fucking anywhere. Ellie, you're not making sense, and you sound half hysterical. Go get your beauty treatments and come back later, when you're calmer. You'll enjoy it."

“Oh, I’ll enjoy getting a Brazilian, will I?” I shriek. “It hurts, James, I know because I know girls who had it done. I wouldn’t have minded until I found out you do this to all your women.”

“What exactly did you find out, and from whom?” His voice is so cold now, it could turn water to ice.

“That red-haired lady said she’d done this for your girls before. I think she thought it would calm me down about all the waxing, but instead it made me feel horrible. Scared. Upset. *I’m upset, James,*” I state it clearly, so he understands.

I hope he knows what those words mean. He’s made me feel the panic. For the first time in ages, I want to go and get my pin army, and I don’t truly know if I want to use them on myself to take away this anxiety, or on him until *he* bleeds.

“You’re looking at me like you want to fucking tear me apart.” James makes the observation with interest, as if he’s studying a wild animal or a rare plant.

He’s used that tone before with me.

Am I nothing but an experiment to him?

Did he decide to take the wild girl home with him and see if he can make her a proper lady? There was a film about that, I’m sure. I saw it as a kid. Some rich guy takes a poor woman and turns her into a rich lady too, for fun and games. Is that what James is doing?

“How many other women do you have?” I screech. “Tell me!”

“There are no other women, Ellie.”

I frown confused. “But she said...”

“In the past, there were other women. They weren’t like you, though. And they are in the past for a reason.”

“Weird...” I state flatly.

“No,” he snaps. “Stop talking about yourself like that. They weren’t like you because they didn’t live with me.” He

steps close to me, and I automatically step back. “I didn’t buy them fucking puppy dogs, Ellie.”

I swallow.

“What did you do for them?” I ask.

“Why do you want to know about what happened before you?”

“Wouldn’t you? I feel angry. About those women. I don’t like them.”

He laughs. “You don’t know them.”

I square my jaw at him. “I let a boy feel my boobs once, for a tenner. Do *you* like *that*?”

“No,” he states angrily. “I don’t.”

“No. I bet you wouldn’t like it if I had a load of men hidden around who I made have Brazilians for me. Would you?”

He shakes his head, goes to the bureau in the corner, pulls down the wooden side of it and takes out a heavy, glass bottle and pours a drink for himself.

“Can I have one?” I ask.

“No.” He puts the drink back.

“You’re horrible.” I want to throw something at him. “I think I hate you.”

He doesn’t flinch.

“Are you done?” he asks coolly as he sips his drink.

“What?”

“This little tantrum of yours. Are. You. Done?”

I want to scream, but there’s something about the way his body has gone tight that makes me decide that holding myself in check might be the wiser option right now. We watched a wildlife program at school once that had a segment about snakes, and he reminds me of the moment before one strikes.

“Good girl,” he says when I keep myself restrained. “Now. There are no other women. Before you, I sometimes had partners I played with. Some of those partners liked spa days. You know the kind of shit you women like. I booked them for some of the women. They had their massages, their pool time, and their pussies waxed, okay?”

The idea of him looking at another woman makes me want to vomit. The idea of him paying for another woman to have all her intimate hair removed is like acid burning through my veins.

I don't care anymore that he's vibrating like an angry cobra. Everything turns white hot.

“Agggghh!” I scream, pick up a book from the shelf to my right, and throw it at him.

He dodges it, but his eyes widen.

“No, it's not okay, asshole!” My voice is loud, and I know those women might hear, but I don't care.

I grab another book. “You're like *him*.”

The book misses again, and James is moving now. He grabs my arms with ease and twists them behind my back, holding me immobile. “I'm nothing like him,” he bites out as he marches me backward until my ass hits something behind me.

“You're a hypocrite the way he was, so yes, you are like him.” I struggle to break free, but his hold only tightens. “I don't like it. I hate that you had other women.”

“Stop struggling, and listen to me.”

I don't listen. I don't stop struggling. Panic is setting in, blinding, awful panic.

“Slap my face,” I whisper.

“What?” James lets go of me as if I'm on fire and steps back.

“I feel... I can't breathe. Slap my face.”



The time he did it in the hovel it worked so well. Better than my pins even.

He doesn't slap my face. What he does do is pick me up and carry me with him as he sits behind his desk. I'm on his lap, and he holds me so close, so tight to him, he's all I can feel, see, and smell.

"Baby, I'm sorry," he says. The word sorry comes out scratchy and weird as if he never uses it. "This is all new for me."

"No, it's not. You do this all the time."

"Trust me, Ellie, I don't do this. Whatever the fuck this is, I don't do it. Ever. The women before you were nothing. Fucking nothing. There aren't and won't be any other women now. Do you understand? You're it for me. I don't want another woman. There's no one at my London home. When, *if*, we go back there, it will only be us."

"Why if?" I sniff as I let the tears fall and wash away the anxiety.

"Because I don't know what the fuck Nico is going to do long-term. Business wise. Us being up here was meant to be a short-term thing, but it has grown more complicated."

"Why?" I ask again.

"We're taking over a business here. A big one." His fingers trail through my hair softly, and I rest my head against his palm, hoping that will ease the panic like his touch always does. "There are opportunities too. Investments. It might mean one of us, most likely me, will stay here a good while longer."

"But London is your home," I say. "Won't you miss it?"

"Nowhere is my home, Ellie," he replies.

I pull away to look at him then. "You own a house, you said."

"Yes, I do. A house isn't always a home."

"Then you need to make it one," I say.

“It’s not always so simple, baby. We’re talking about you right now, though. Not me.” He uses his thumb to brush some of my tears away. “Do you want me to send the women away and tell them to come back another day?” he asks,

“No,” I sniffle. “Do I have to do the waxing?”

He laughs. “You don’t have to, but it will feel amazing.”

“I thought it hurt.”

“I mean after. When I lick your gorgeous pussy.”

I flush, and my heart kicks up speed. I glance away, still embarrassed at how openly he talks about these things.

“Give me your eyes, baby. Stop hiding.”

I do as he says, and he smiles.

“Good girl.” He strokes my cheek. “If you’re bare, it will feel insanely good when I lick your delicious pussy. A million times better.”

“So it’s for me?” I ask, confused.

“No, baby, it’s definitely for me. I want to see you all bare for me. I want to fuck you without anything between us and feel you all slick and smooth, but if you don’t want it then that’s fine.”

I huff out a grumpy breath. “I suppose I can try it once.”

He laughs. “Such generously given permission.”

“Well,” I say. “I’m the one having hot wax poured all over my most intimate places, not you. I’m sure men wouldn’t be so keen on their women doing it if they had to.”

He tips my chin up. “Baby, I do have it done.”

I frown. “You do?”

“Sack and crack, baby. Sack and crack.” He laughs as I frown.

“You’re doing the nose wrinkle thing. You don’t know what I’m talking about because you’ve not sucked my cock yet. Let me just say, when you do, your mouth isn’t going to be full of hair.”

“Suck your cock?” I say, feeling faint at the thought. It’s so heady to me, and I don’t know why.

“Yeah, you want to?”

“Yes,” I say. “I’d like to do it under this desk.” The damn desk thing again. I think I’m obsessed.

“Really. This one?” His eyes darken with uninhibited heat as he glances at the wooden desk.

“Yes. I will crawl under the desk and suck you while you work.” I think of what is surely by now my favorite spicy book scenes.

“You can do that, baby.” His smirk is dark and devilish, possibly my favorite look of his.

“And there really are no other women?”

“No, Ellie. There are no other women. Before you no one counts; now that I have you, no one else exists.”

“Because you love me,” I say, smiling.

His face tenses and he doesn’t answer.

“I’m obsessed with you,” he replies. “Now, go get yourself all waxed, preened, and oiled for me.”

“Okay.”

I leave his study, feeling in many ways so much better, but in some ways worse. He didn’t say he loved me. In fact, he avoided my gaze and sent me away.

James doesn’t love me. It hits me hard and painfully.

Then I stop, right there in the hallway as something occurs to me. Something pretty damn important. *Do I love him?*

Deciding that is far too huge a question to answer, instead I head back to the torture room to have hot wax dripped on my pussy.



# ELLIE

THE WAXING HURTS JUST like my friend said it did, but I find I don't mind it. The pain soothes me the same way as my pins, or when James tugs on my hair, or like the time he slapped me.

Once I'm waxed, I get a massage that is heavenly. I smell delicious, like lavender and other things I can't name. I almost fell asleep. The lady giving me the massage is a stunning lady, with the coolest pair of earrings I've ever seen. They are lion heads, made of gold and look incredible against her rich brown skin. I ask about them, and she tells me where they are from. Maybe one day I can go there and buy myself a pair.

She talks, but the scents and her skilled hands lull me until we fall into silence. When it's over, I'm like a noodle, all boneless and soft.

I take a shower to wash off all the oils and wash and condition my hair as instructed. When I get back downstairs, I'm seated in the chair, and the redhead takes over. I don't like her as she's the one who arranged for James' other women, his previous women, to get their pussies waxed.

When she says she's going to trim my hair, I like her even less.

"I want more than a trim," I say boldly.

"James said—"

"Please, Miss." I turn to meet her gaze.

"Call me Jo."

“Please, Jo. I hate this hair. I know I can’t have it all cut off, but please, can you take at least some of it off? And make it so it does something around my face the way yours does? I think once he sees it, he’ll like it. Leave it long, but make it do something. It’s just a long, boring, horrible mess right now.”

“Your hair is beautiful,” she says quietly. “I swear, the money I could make from it if you did have it all cut off. Virgin hair this thick and this color? Wow.”

“What is virgin hair?”

“Just means it hasn’t been colored or messed around with,” the dark-haired girl with the pink strands explains.

“Let me work my magic. I think with my skills, I can find a happy medium between what he wants and what you want.” Jo winks at me, and I decide she might not be so bad.

She cuts, combs, and cuts some more, and then she’s putting something in my hair and drying it.

“You want to see?” she asks when she’s done.

I nod.

“Do you have a full-length mirror?”

“In my room,” I say and lead her there.

She stands behind me with a handheld mirror as I stare at myself, and angles it so I can see the back.

I gasp. Instead of hanging in boring strands, my hair is like a sleek, weighty curtain. Around my face are some layers that frame my features but are still long. It looks shiny, thick, sexy.

“I have sexy hair,” I say, touching it in awe.

She smiles. “You have indeed. I can see why he doesn’t want it to be cut off. I gave you what we call a U-shaped cut. I’ve taken the length off to give you waist-length hair. It’s still almost to your hips, but you’re not going to be accidentally sitting on it now.”

“Are you going to get into trouble?” I ask, suddenly worried for her.

“When we’re done with you, he’s going to be so blown away, he’s not going to notice that I took a few more inches off your hair than requested.”

She glances at my clothes. I chose simple jeans and a t-shirt for today.

“Do you have sexier clothes? We might as well go the all the way and really knock him for six.”

I open my wardrobe and grin at her. “I have all these and can never choose.”

“Oh. My. God.” She breathes. Then she turns to me, her eyes alight. “Did James buy all these for you?”

I nod and bite my lip.

“Wow. Girl, you’ve got him wrapped around your little finger.”

I shake my head. “No, I really don’t. He’s the one doing all the wrapping.”

She glances behind her as if worried he’s in the room with us. “Listen to me,” she says, her voice low. “I don’t know who you are or what your story is...”

I start to speak, but she holds her hand up. “Please don’t tell me. I signed a non-disclosure agreement, and I really don’t want to know. That man scares me. Listen to me.”

I nod and give her my full attention. “I don’t know James well. I do know a friend in the scene who played with him in the past, before he left.”

“What scene?” I ask, remembering he’d mentioned it too.

“You know, the BDSM scene.”

I shake my head. She frowns, but shrugs. “Okay, it’s like a club for grownups to play naughty games. That’s the best way I can describe it. He used to be in that club, and then he left. Got bored by all accounts. The point being, my friend who played with him. She stopped because she found out he was involved with actual crime. Like organized crime.”

I nod because I'm not remotely surprised. I guessed Nico and James were very dangerous men the minute I saw them. Avenging angels need to be dangerous. You can't avenge someone if you're nice and soft.

"If you say a word of this to him, I could get myself found in a back alley; do you understand?"

I frown at that because she's going too far. "James wouldn't do that. Not to you. To a woman."

"He could, and he would. So please, don't say a word."

James would hurt this lady, when she's done nothing but be kind to me? The thought makes me shiver.

"Listen to me. No man sets a woman up in his house, buys her a wardrobe full of French and Italian couture, and pays to have a team of beauty estheticians driven up from London for her if he hasn't fallen, okay?"

"He got me a puppy," I say.

"Holy crap. There you go. You need to make him fall harder, and all along make sure you're protecting yourself. In case you need to leave."

"I don't know how. He doesn't love me," I say sadly. I won't want to leave either.

"How do you know?" she demands. "I think he might."

"I asked him, and he didn't say he did."

I'm surprised when her response to my tragic news is to laugh. "Oh, you're so cute. Whatever this is"—she twirls her finger around to indicate the clothes, shoes, and the room in general—"it's a man who has fallen hard. Love. Lust. Obsession. Take your pick. It doesn't matter which it is, don't you see?"

I shake my head.

"Ride the wave, Ellie. Take him for everything you can. Money. Jewels. Ask him for gold. Diamonds. Things you can use when it ends."

"When it ends? I don't want it to end. Ever."



“It always ends, Ellie. Always. With men like him, even more so. The thing is, if you’ve been smart, by the time it does, you could be a rich woman. Hell, get him to set you up in business. Or just be the ultimate stay-at-home girlfriend. You could be huge on social media. You’re so gorgeous, and I bet tons of people would love to see your glamorous lifestyle.” Then she frowns. “Then again, he probably wouldn’t want that.”

“I don’t go anywhere or do anything anyway,” I say with a soft laugh.

She’s got the wrong idea of things. Entirely.

“Fine, then. Tell him you want money to start a business. Syphon some of it off. Get jewels. Bags you can resell if you need to. Be smart, Ellie. Be smart. My friend wasn’t smart, and in the divorce, she got nothing. Bastard declared himself bankrupt, so he didn’t have to pay her half. My other friend, though. She was smart.” She taps her head. “She had so much jewelry, furs, designer bags, and art, that it didn’t matter that he still hasn’t paid out because she’s already a millionaire in gold alone.”

“We’re not married,” I say. “So, there won’t be any divorce. If he wants me gone, he can simply throw me out. I have nowhere to go.”

Her face drops a little, and she takes hold of my hands. “Ellie, I don’t want to know any more about you, for my own safety, but listen to me. You’ve got enough stuff in this wardrobe alone to fund a few months in a nice flat. Ask for more things. Well, don’t openly ask, you know, but drop hints. Tell him you like gold.”

“Just like that? Just say it.”

Jo laughs. “No, you’ve got to use tactics, the way those fuckers do once they’re done with us. Like, pick up a magazine and find a page where the model is draped in diamonds or gold and say something like”—she puts on a sad, trembling voice—“I’d love to look like her. I’ve never had nice things. No one’s ever bought jewelry for me.”

I swallow. Her advice sounds an awful lot like deception.

“Make your eyes big, hold his stare, and then suck his cock so hard you suck the brains out of his head. I bet you anything in two days, you’d get a diamond bracelet.”

She laughs loudly and shakes her head. “I’m a hypocrite, though. I can’t even take my own advice. Fell in love with and married a bricklayer. He earns fuck all. Still, he has a heart of gold, and for me and our little ones that is all that matters.”

“That’s all I want,” I say sadly. “Love and a happy family. I never had it.”

“Well, if you’re smart now, maybe you can have those things in the future, but use this time with James to set yourself up with some financial security.”

She hands something to me. “Hide this. Somewhere secret. It’s my card. Only use it if you’re really, *really* in trouble. If you ever find yourself in a bad place, call me. We have a sofa, and I wouldn’t see you on the streets or in danger. I have a daughter of my own.”

“You’re not old enough.” I say.

“Honey, I’m thirty-five.”

I gawp at her.

“Preventative Botox and great skin care,” she says with a smile. “Promise me, you won’t tell James about our talk?”

“I swear it.”

When we hit the living room, the girl with the pink strands of hair, Vicky, takes my hand. “My turn finally,” she grins. “Nails and then makeup.”

“I’ve never had my nails done,” I say excitedly. I used to wear nail polish. In the times before. The normal times, as I think of them in my mind. Before my father sold me to a scraggy, evil man in a tower.

“What color do you like?”

“Do I get to choose?” I ask.

“James didn’t go so far as to dictate what color nail polish you could wear,” Jo replies. “Go ahead and choose what you like, Ellie.”

I decide to keep my nails short, as I don’t want the false ones they offer. But my ragged cuticles are smoothed away, my nails are filed, buffed, and then polished with a variety of potions. They all smell horrible. Then I get the color. I chose red. Bright, shiny red, like my pin army leader.

“You’re going to look amazing when we’re done. You’re so pretty. You ought to come out and meet some of us for a few drinks this Saturday.”

“That isn’t a good idea,” Jo interjects smoothly.

“Why not?” Vicky says. “She’s cooped up here with that old dude. She’s only ... what? Nineteen, twenty?” Vicky asks.

“I’ll be twenty-two soon,” I say.

“Oh, you look a bit younger. I’m twenty.”

“What old dude?” I ask, confused and a little scared. Has she seen the ghost of Father-Husband too?

“The hot one. He might be hot, but he’s still old. You need a good night out, a few pints of lager, and a bag of crisps in the pub with people your age. He won’t mind you having some friends.”

“I had completely forgotten the insane propensity of people under the age of twenty-five to think that anyone over the age of twenty-five was old. James is in his early thirties for God’s sake.” Jo purses her lips and gives Vicky a pointed look. “I don’t think Ellie would like to go out to the pub.”

“No, I wouldn’t. I don’t like to go out at all.”

“What?” Vicky stops polishing my toes to stare up at me. “Are you agoraphobic?”

I remember that word. “Fear of the market place,” I say softly. I think I am agoraphobic. “Maybe,” I say. “A little bit.”

“So, you don’t have any friends?”

I frown, feeling weird and prickly in my skin. “Not here.” It’s a lie but also the truth. I don’t have friends anywhere, but none of these women need to know that.

“Really?” Vicky frowns. “That’s so sad. Can I come to see you here, instead? I can come and bring a coffee and some magazines. We can read all the celebrity gossip.”

I don’t know if James will like that, but if he might one day get rid of me like an old worn pair of socks, then won’t I need a life of my own? Making friends will be the first step toward that. The idea of going to see Vicky in the pub with her friends is scary, but her coming here isn’t.

“Okay,” I say with a smile. “That would be nice.”

“I don’t think,” Jo begins.

“All due respect, Ellie has said yes, and I don’t work for you.” Vicky smiles sweetly.

“You do today.”

“Yeah, but not tomorrow when I’m going to come around for a coffee and a girly chat.”

Jo sighs, and her lips disappear into a thin line, but she doesn’t say anything more.

Nails polished a bright, shiny red, Vicky gets to work on my makeup. When she’s finally finished, Jo adds a few last touches to my hair. Jo suggests we go pick out a dress for me to change into, and then I can see the full effect.

We head back up to my bedroom, and this time Vicky trails behind us. When she sees inside my wardrobe, she screams.

I jump out of my skin.

“Vicky,” Jo admonishes.

“But come on. Bestie, you’ve levelled up, girl. Look at this.”

Who is her bestie? Me? I don’t even know the girl. She’s giddily rummaging around in my wardrobe. “Oh. My. God. Look at this!” She holds up a gauzy dress shot through with sparkling silver thread. “Can I borrow this?” she asks.

It's a bit cheeky of her. I don't even know her.

Jo answers for me. "No, Vicky, you cannot. Leave now, please."

Vicky rolls her eyes, but does as she's told. At the door she mouths to me, "*tomorrow*," and winks.

"Be careful of her," Jo says. "I don't like her much."

"Why did you hire her then?"

"I didn't. Not directly. My nail technician got sick at the last minute, so I called a friend up here who said she could send a girl who works in her salon twice a week, and so hence I got Vicky."

"It might be nice to have a friend." I shrug. "Another girl to talk to."

"She's pushy and rude, and you're far too nice, so just be careful around her, okay? And, seriously, don't lend her any clothes. These things cost a fortune."

She touches one dress as if it's made of gold. "Which one do you want to wear?"

I have no idea. I don't know what I like or don't like particularly. I normally go for comfort when I'm dressing, except for the day I wore the silky dress. I pull that out now. "I put this on the other day. It suited me."

"Okay. Let's go for something similar, but hotter. Olive green is hardly going to set the world alight."

"I like green," I say simply. "It means spring, leaves on the trees, and fields of grass. Although my favorite color is red. For blood."

I realize what I've said and glance at Jo. She stares at me, a strange expression on her face. "Well, uhm, there's no red dresses in here, but there's a nice pink one. Do you want to try that?"

My cousin loved pink. I scrunch my nose.

Jo laughs. "Not a pink girly. Okay. Oh, wait." She pulls out a dress that is a beautiful, deep blue.

“Cobalt blue. Now this will look gorgeous on you.”

She helps me into it after I take my clothes off. It has three-quarter length sleeves, is fitted, with a zip up the back, and stops just below my knee.

“You definitely need heels with this,” Jo says.

“I can’t walk in them,” I reply.

“Let me see.” She rummages around and then stands holding a pair of shoes. “Tada.” She beams proudly.

They have a strap across the top and a low, square heel.

“You can walk in these, but they will give that little bit of length to your leg you need. You should learn to walk in heels.”

“Why?”

“They’re sexy. Powerful. In the right circumstances they can make you feel great.”

“How does something that by its very definition can stop you running or fighting make you feel powerful?” I ask, curious.

“Well, we don’t have to literally fight these days, Ellie.”

*Some of us do.*

“Well, there are different kinds of heels. You don’t have to wear stilettos. For example, one might wear a high platform heel and stomp into a meeting of arrogant money-men and those heels might make a girl feel taller, stronger somehow.”

I think she’s talking about herself, but I can’t be sure. I nod and pretend I agree. I don’t agree. I don’t like heels and never will, but I like Jo, so I pretend to agree with her and smile.

Jo then looks through some of the jewelry James has purchased. She turns to me, her eyes wide. “Do you know how much some of this stuff cost? You’re already halfway there with what I told you to do. Listen to me, Ellie, wear this, and tell James how much you like it. Tell him ... tell him it makes you feel sexy.”

She wraps a bracelet around my wrist. It's gold, in the shape of a snake, with shiny jewels for the eyes.

"This is worth about five thousand pounds. Do you know what that could mean? That's like five months rent up here, I'd imagine. It's not so expensive to get a place to live."

"I have a place to live." I throw my arms in a circle to indicate the room.

"I know but, Ellie, just in case. In case it goes wrong. Get James to buy you more of these things."

"Do you think it's going to go wrong?" She's scaring me now with her obsession about this.

She sighs. "Ellie. No, I don't. I don't know anything about your relationship, but I do see that you're young. Lonely maybe. I don't want to know the rest because it's not safe for me to do so. And I'm taking a huge risk in telling you this and in giving you my number. Your man, he could hurt me. He could hurt my family. So, I'm trusting you won't tell him about this conversation. All I'm trying to say to you is this. Anything can end. Any relationship. I have a lot of high-net-worth clients and some friends who married rich men, and I've seen how those relationships often fall apart. You're so young; you can start again. Get a job. Meet someone else. But make sure you have enough money or valuables to sell and start again. Okay?"

Then she brightens. "But also, it will be interesting to see if James responds in the way I think he might. Tell him how sexy you feel wearing the bracelet. And let's see if you get more? Think of it as an experiment."

She pulls my dress about a little and then gently leads me to the mirror. "Look at yourself, Ellie."

My mouth falls open in shock at the beauty looking back at me through the mirror. That isn't me. "I look like a movie star." I reach up and touch my hair and then my face. "What did you do to my face?"

My skin looks like it's made from glistening dewdrops, and my mouth is full and lush.

Jo laughs. “It’s only makeup, sweetie. You can learn to do it yourself. I’d teach you, but I have to get back. It’s a long drive. Watch YouTube videos. They have some great tutorials on there. You’ll get the hang of it quickly enough.”

“I wore makeup before...” I trail off. I nearly said too much.

“Oh, Ellie.” Jo pulls me into a hug. She lets me go, and stares back at me with bright eyes. “I’m glad you like it, and I’m glad we took some length off your hair, even if it means I get told off. We’ll be going now. Go find James when you’re ready and show him the new you.”

I smile and thank her, and then she’s gone, and I’m alone with this new version of myself.

A girl I don’t know.

A girl I’ve never met before.

Maybe this girl is the me I’d have become if my life hadn’t been interrupted.

I walk to the mirror again and meet the new me.





# ELLIE

I PEER CLOSER to the glass and look at my eyes, so big with all this makeup on them. The bracelet flashes on my wrist, and I wonder if Jo is wrong. I won't have to lie to James about this at least. The bracelet really does make me feel sexy. It makes me feel like the sort of woman a man would value enough to adorn with precious trinkets.

Wanting to show James the new me, but also nervous in case he doesn't like it, I decide to waste some time and look at the jewelry. I haven't really paid it any attention, but now that I've seen how pretty this bracelet is, I decide to look through the rest.

I gather up the boxes and place them on the bed and then slipping my shoes off, I climb onto the bed and get comfortable.

I'm still looking through it all when there's a soft knock at the door. James either marches straight in or knocks like he's breaking it down. So it's not him.

"Come in," I say.

Lorraine comes in, takes three steps and stops. Her mouth opens and she looks at me for a long moment. "*Ellie.*"

"Yes? Do you need me for anything? Do you want some help?"

"No. I came to see if you had any preferences for dinner tonight. James has said you're dining in the formal dining room, so I figured I'd make a meal of it, literally, and cook

something special.” She closes the door behind her and comes over to me. “You look absolutely stunning.”

“Thank you. James sent these women to give me a makeover, and I think it worked.” I laugh.

“He’s going to lose his mind when he sees you like this. You remind me of someone, but I can’t think who it is.” She glances down at the bed. “Counting your hoard?” She laughs.

“I’m just looking at them. I put this on, and it makes me feel pretty.” I hold my arm out to her.

Her face grows serious. “Do you know that some of this is costume jewelry, or fashion jewelry and some of it is fine jewelry?”

I shake my head.

“May I?”

She indicates the bed by where I’m sitting, my legs under me. I normally like to sit cross legged, and I can’t in this dress. There’s a reason I prefer my comfortable clothes.

“Yes, of course, come join me.”

She sits on the edge of the bed and starts to sort the boxes into two piles. “There. You have fine jewelry here, and fashion jewelry there. Some of the fashion jewelry still cost a fortune, but it doesn’t have intrinsic value.”

“What do you mean?” I ask.

“This ring.” She holds up a sparkly ring. “It costs a lot of money to buy new, probably about a thousand pounds, but it won’t sell for anything like that. Whereas this pile here, it’s all gold, platinum, real diamonds, and the like. It means it has intrinsic value.”

The ones in the pile she’s pointing to now are the ones I need more of, according to Jo.

“What is this one?” I hold up my wrist.

“That’s fine jewelry but by a very well-known designer, so I suppose you could argue it’s both fashion and high jewelry in one.”

“I love it.” I sigh, staring at it.

I brush my hair to one side, and she gasps. “I know who you remind me of now with that makeup on and wearing that dress.”

“Who?”

“Veronica Lake.”

“*Who?*”

“She was a movie star, way back in the day. Utterly gorgeous. You have similar features to her.”

“Can I see her?”

She takes out her phone and messes about on it for a moment before holding a picture up to me. I don’t see the resemblance really, other than we have long blonde hair.

“I tell you what, why don’t you keep on looking through this. Try some on, have fun, and I’ll get things ready downstairs. Don’t let him see you until he’s seated at the table this evening. Let’s make it dramatic.” She giggles.

“Okay. I might read some too. Do you think I can have a phone?”

Her face tightens, and the smile disappears. “I’m not sure, Ellie. I’ll have to ask James. I don’t know if he’d want you having a phone.”

“Why not? I’m not a prisoner here, he says.”

“Who would you call?”

“I have a friend now, Vicky. She’s coming over tomorrow.”

“She is?” Lorraine looks panicked now. “When did you meet her?”

“Today. She did my nails for me. If I don’t have a phone, it will look very strange.”

“Let me talk to James.”

She leaves me, and I continue looking through the jewelry. I try a few rings on but don’t really like them; they feel strange and heavy on my hand. I’m not used to wearing any jewelry. I

do have my ears pierced. Mum let me get it done when I was ten and my best friend got hers done, but I expect they're closed up by now and will need redoing.

My door opens and Lorraine comes back in. "James said to give you this. It's an iPad and you can get online with it. He's disabled the email. But you can read on it, look on Google; do all those things."

"What about a phone?" I ask again.

"He'll talk to you about that tonight. And about the girl coming."

Nerves flutter in my belly. "Is he angry about it?" I ask.

"He's not happy."

"But I'm not a prisoner."

She sighs. "No, you're not, but you are a secret. Kind of."

She hands me the iPad. "You know how to use it?"

I nod. "We used them in school."

"Okay. Good. Don't contact anyone from your old life. Please, Ellie. It could be dangerous for you, and for James. He killed to save you."

I flinch. "He told you that?"

"Of course. He had to call a clean-up crew in. If your father is still alive, who is to say he won't make trouble for you? For James? For Nico even and their entire operation."

Her words make perfect sense, but something is niggling at me, eating away at me like a vicious little piranha enjoying lunching on me. "But I can't remain a secret forever, Lorraine."

She sighs and nods.

"If I do, it means I have no life."

"I agree. James does too. He'll talk to you about it, I'm sure. You need a whole new identity, Ellie. If you want to go out into the world, to be safe, you need to become someone else. James hasn't simply brought you back here and then done

nothing. He's trying to find out who your captor was working with. Who he was talking to in Sweden and Norway. James and Nico are trying to get information on them and how many there are. These are all things that he needs to do to ensure your safety."

I hadn't thought of all these things. I know Father-Husband had friends he spoke to. Friends who shared his beliefs.

"Let James do what he does best, and give him time. You won't be living like this forever, but until he's ensured your safety, you shouldn't invite people you don't know to this house."

I swallow hard, feeling stupid. "I can try to get a message to her and cancel."

Lorraine smiles and pats my hand. "James has already run a background check on her. She's nothing more than she appears. A young girl who works in the nearest town. He says she can come tomorrow. You, however, need a backstory in case she asks about you. This is your story, okay?"

She begins to tell me what I need to remember.

Once Lorraine has left, I go over my story again to make sure I can remember it. Lorraine said be vague anyway if Vicky asks about my life. The less said the better.

*Lies, lies, and more lies.*

Lies to James so he buys me more trinkets. Lies to Vicky about who I am. Lies to everyone it seems.



BY THE TIME Lorraine comes to get me for the evening meal, I'm a nervous wreck once more. I hope James likes how I look. Xander has been with me for the past couple of hours, but Lorraine calls him to go with her when she shows me to the formal dining room.

"I'll feed him and take him for a little walk in the grounds. I hope you enjoy the meal."

“What is it?” I ask.

“Herb roasted beef with creamy garlic mashed potatoes, and pan seared vegetables.”

“Thank you, Lorraine, for all that you do.”

She pats my cheek and then takes Xander into the kitchen, and I suck in a breath.

I walk into the formal dining room and falter at the doorway. It looks like something out of one of my romance novels. There’s no lighting except for the candelabras placed around the room and the center of the large table. The light from the flickering candles dances around the space and plays over the ceiling.

Crystal glasses sparkle, and James sits at the head of the table in a deep purple shirt, resembling a dark, brooding god.

He looks up at me and his gaze rakes me in from head to toe. It burns hot everywhere it touches my skin. “You look exquisite. Come here,” he demands.

I walk over to him, taking care with every step in my heels. Even though they’re only an inch or so tall, I’m not used to wearing them. I stop a few feet away, but he crooks his finger.

“Closer, baby.”

I step right up to him, and he stares at me. “This dress looks incredible on you.”

“Thank you,” I murmur.

“Your hair is gorgeous.”

I swallow. He hasn’t complained about the length being shorter than we’d agreed.

He lifts my wrist and brushes his thumb over the bracelet. “You like this?” he asks.

My heart picks up speed.

“I love it,” I say.

I like that it's not a lie because I really do love it. I think it's my favorite thing out of all the things he bought for me. "It makes me feel sexy."

"Sexy?" His brows raise.

"Yes. It's decadent, and that makes me feel sexy." I touch my neck absentmindedly.

"Would you like it in a necklace as well?" James asks.

I stare at him. "I wasn't asking—"

He holds his hand up, cutting me off. His fingers trail up my thigh, under the hem of the dress, and he pushes my panties to one side and then thrusts his finger inside me.

I gasp and grab ahold of the table.

"You're soaked," he says.

Answering him is almost impossible as he adds a second finger. I glance at the open door nervously. Lorraine could come by and see me like this. Depraved.

"You feel bare, let me see."

"What?"

"Lift your dress for me."

I swallow hard. "I don't think... The door," I say weakly.

He stands so abruptly his chair rocks back. He walks to the door, closes it, and turns to me.

"Lift. Your. Dress."

I do as he says. Nothing feels quite real. This is all as if I'm in some strange, erotic dream. The candles, the dress, the flickering light, and how insanely handsome James looks in his silky purple shirt and those dark trousers; it all makes this surreal.

Holding my dress up, the material bunched in my hands, I look at him, my face burning.

He walks over to me and smoothly drops to his knees.



Reaching up, he pushes my panties to one side and stares at me. “Fuck me, you’re perfect,” he says.

Then he stands, lifts me, and places me on the hard edge of the table on my back.

“James. What about the food? Lorraine worked hard on it. It will go cold.”

“She can heat it up,” he growls. “I need to taste you. Now.”



# JAMES

SHE LOOKED like a goddess when she strode into the room. I wanted Jo to make her shine, but I hadn't realized just what a rare gem I had. Ellie is fucking beautiful in no makeup, and grey sweatpants, but like this? She's fucking exquisite.

Wearing that bracelet, the dress, with her hair shining, and her nails blood red, she resembles a top model, or a movie star from days gone by. In short, she looks like what she is. One of the rare true, perfect beauties, and *I* unearthed her.

*I* found her.

*I* claimed her.

Fighting the urge to take her back to that fucking tower and lock her in myself, I throw her onto the table and tear the panties that are in my way from her.

She squeals, and I clap my hand over her mouth as I suck on her ripe, bare, shiny pussy. It's as if she oiled herself up just for me, but she hasn't. This is how wet she is. My Ellie is one hot and needy creature, and I will gladly spend my days satisfying her every desire.

Within minutes she's panting and squirming. I push one and then two fingers in her, wanting her ready, and then I unzip myself.

I don't need a condom tonight, and I can't wait to get inside her bare. There have been enough days since she got the injection from the doctor to ensure she's protected. Bracing my arms on either side of her, I stare down at her flushed

cheeks and smudged lipstick. We haven't kissed, but she's been biting her lips and must have smudged it that way. I remedy that now by taking her in a passionate, hard kiss. Her lipstick tastes of strawberry, and her soft moans fill my soul with a deep, dark greed.

I fist my cock and, letting go of the table, I spread her open for me and rub my head around her swollen clit. I take my time, wanting to make this last. I stimulate her clit with my cock and then dip the head into her tight entrance. Only the head because I know if I go any further, I'll lose it.

Withdrawing, I once more rub her clit with my weeping cock.

"James," she begs.

I don't know what she's begging for, but she's about to get my cock, deep inside her.

Kissing her once more, hard and quick, I break it off and push into her, my teeth gritted as insane pleasure washes over me.

Fuck me, I have iron control, but I must stop for a moment. She's so tight, so wet, so hot, and perfect, I know if I move another inch, I'll come.

"What's wrong. It doesn't hurt," she says.

I want to laugh at the irony. I'm not stopping for her, but for me. Lazily, I brush my thumb over her plump lower lip and smear her lipstick around her mouth. I want to devour her the way a sane man would want to devour that roast. I want to feast on her. Own her. Claim every damn inch of her.

The thoughts aren't helping my control to return. Christ, I need to get a grip about this woman. I need to fuck her out of my system and then maybe I can be sane again.

Going achingly slow, I push into her, deeper and deeper.

"Oh, James, yes, James. Please." She wraps her legs around me, and the sound of tearing material rings out in the room.

"Oh, no," she wails. "I've ripped the dress!"

I laugh, fist my hands in the material at the front, and tear it right down the middle. I can't tear it off completely because of how we're positioned, so I leave it in tattered shreds of delicate silk around her. It gives me access to her tits, which is all I care about.

"I'll buy you another one, baby. Don't worry about it."

Her breasts look incredible in the bra she's wearing. It's a balconette style, and I've never seen her in one before. It pushes them up like a feast for the taking.

I push it down a little so her hard nipples peak over the edge of the stiff lacy material. Then I smear my thumb over her mouth again and take the redness on my thumb, I spread it onto her nipples. First the left one, and then the right one. I pinch them and pull them, and she cries out, her arms falling to the sides where she grabs ahold of the tablecloth.

Sucking one nipple into my mouth, I thrust deep into her, and her scream is music to my depravity.

I bite her breasts and slap her thigh, as I fuck her hard, lost now to my own darkness.

"James," her voice is a ragged sob, and it reaches a part of me that is still human.

I make myself stop. I've gone too far, but then she shocks me.

"Don't stop. Slap my thigh again, bite me. Don't stop."

I want to roar in triumph.

I've found someone as fucked up and dark as me.

All that time playing in the clubs, the thing that bored me in the end was just that. It was *play*. This isn't play. This is something much more elemental.

More dangerous too.

Neither of us really know what the game is, though, there is only one rule I can ensure we both keep at the forefront of our minds.

"What's your word?" I demand.

“Petrichor,” she says immediately.

“You swear to me if anything ever becomes too much, you’ll say it?”

“Yes. I swear. Please, James, I need... I want...”

I don’t wait for her to articulate it. I slam into her and grab her hair, pulling it hard in my fist and making her throat arch beautifully.

Ellie cries out and convulses as she shatters beneath me, coming so hard that my own release takes me over, blindsiding me. I come, and come, and come. I fill her up with all I have, and only when the last drop is in her do I feel anything remotely like sanity return.

She laughs softly. “I think I’m broken. I can’t move.”

I kiss her once and then step back, put myself away, and look down at her. She’s flushed. Her clothes are torn. She’s a mess. A gorgeous, perfect mess.

Taking hold of the tattered ends of the dress, I continue to rip it open. Then I push her knees up, so she’s totally exposed to me.

My moment of sanity didn’t last long. I stare at her pussy, at my juices and hers mingling as they slowly drip out of her.

“James.” There’s caution in her tone, but she’s using the wrong word if she’s asking me to stop.

She tries to close her legs, but I keep them open and take my time admiring her. Christ, I’m hard again, but I must remind myself she’s new to all this. I don’t want to break my favorite new toy.

“Come on,” I say gruffly, standing straight. “Let’s eat.”

We fucked hard and fast, so the food should still be warm. It’s covered in silver trays with silver lids. That should have kept the heat in.

“I need to change,” she says.

“No, you don’t. I want to eat with you by my side dressed like that so I can look at you whenever I want.”

“James, I’m *not* dressed. I’m mostly naked. If Lorraine comes in, I’ll die of mortification.”

“I’ll text her and tell her to take the rest of the night off and leave us alone.” I take my phone out and send the message. “There.” I smile at my delicious morsel. “Done.”

I help her sit upright and then lift her from the table, placing her in the chair to my right. Then I take my seat and calmly serve food. I glance at her and swallow hard. She’s sitting with her dress torn from her body, her tits pushed up in her bra, and the tattered material pulled around her lower half.

“It feels so wrong,” she says softly.

“Does it make you wet?” I ask her casually, as I serve her a plate groaning with succulent roast, crisp vegetables, and soft, buttery, garlic potatoes.

“Yes,” she whispers.

I change my mind about how we’re going to eat, and leaning back in my seat, I beckon her to come to me. She does, in small, faltering steps. I lift her onto my knee and kiss her neck, and then I pass her some wine to drink.

She sips the red wine and hums around the glass in appreciation. I watch her throat work in fascination. Every tiny thing about her makes me want to do nothing but stare at her for the rest of my days.

“Here.” I take a piece of roast from my plate and feed it to her with my fingers.

She takes it like the good girl she is and chews slowly, politely before swallowing. I feed her an entire meal that way, bit by bit, eating some for myself in between but mostly fascinated with feeding her.

“No more,” she says when I offer her some asparagus. “I’m too full.”

“Here, drink.”

“Are you trying to get me drunk?” she asks with a laugh.

“I don’t have to get you drunk to have my wicked way with you, so no.”

Once she’s taken a few sips, I push my fingers into her mouth. “Suck them clean,” I order.

She does as I say, her cheeks hollowing.

“Good girl. Are you all needy again, baby?”

“Yes, James,” she says softly.

If I had a moment of clarity, I’d stop this now and send her away. This isn’t normal. It’s not okay. She was kept in a fucking tower, and now I’m turning her into my perfect plaything, but I can’t seem to stop.

I part her folds and stroke her clit, her head falling back on my shoulder. I stroke her until she comes weakly, and then I hold her until she falls asleep.

Carrying her upstairs, I place her in the bed and take all her ruined clothing off. I call up that damn dog she’s so attached to and tell him to go in his basket in the corner of the room, and then I head down to my study.

I have work to do, but I’ll let Ellie sleep for a few hours as she’ll need her energy for when I take her again.





# ELLIE

THE NEXT FEW days pass in a blur. I have so much sex with James I ache. Yet, I still want more. It's as if no matter how much we take from one another, it's never enough. There's a darkness to our interactions. Something I can't name. He doesn't hurt me, but there's an undercurrent of something feral, and I'm not sure if I want it to come out into the open or not.

Vicky never came, but Lorraine said she'd called the house and explained she was sick, and she'd try to come the following week. James has said she's welcome to visit, but there are strict rules I must follow. No talk at all about what happened to me. I'm to say I was working in London with James, and we fell for one another, so on a whim he brought me here with him.

He says he's creating an identity and a backstory for me to keep me safe. Once he has it all ready, I need to memorize it.

He's talking on the phone in his study as I walk by on my way to the kitchen. It's a bright day, and I've decided to try to be brave and venture farther afield with Xander, but I want company. I'll ask Lorraine if she wants to take a walk in the grounds.

James' words stop me in my tracks, and I hover outside the door out of sight as I listen.

“Put him in the basement. Handcuff and shackle him to the chair. Cover his head with the burlap sack, and play the tape of the baby screaming until he talks. If you want to up the ante,

connect the cuffs to the jumper cables, and once he appears to have let his guard down, give him a nice, little shock. But keep your footsteps light so he doesn't know when it's coming. You could batter him with a rod all day, but the goal isn't to break bones. This torture will break his spirit and his mind, and eventually he'll talk."

There's a pause, and then James laughs, and it's a chilling sound. "Yeah, you can try that too. Creative, I like it. Give it a few hours; if you can't break him, call me and I'll come in. I'd rather not, though. I don't think it's a two-man job. It won't take that long. He's not strong enough. You're trained, Adam, you know what you're doing. You've got this."

My legs have turned to jelly. I knew that James was a violent man. A dangerous man. Of course, I did. But this?

He's coldly talking about *breaking* someone, in the worst way too, by breaking their mind. Like Father-Husband did to me. And he's laughing about it.

Nausea swirls in my stomach, and I turn and take the long way around to the kitchen, so I don't have to see him. More now than ever, I understand that I must venture outside, further than the short perimeter of which I play with Xander; I need to adapt to the frightening world, whether I want to or not. The James I just heard on the phone is both terrifying and some might even say evil.

Is this the darkness I sense in him?

What if one day he turns that cold, hard indifference on me?

I wish I hadn't heard that conversation, but in some ways, I should be grateful I have. It's made me see staying here in a whole new light. Perhaps, one day, I will have to leave. Urgently.

What if James decides to break *me*?

Then, a horrible thought hits me. Perhaps, he already is. Only he's using sex as the weapon to do it. My constant sick craving for him is his sword in this battle.

I've known for days now that he isn't showing me love or affection when he takes me, but control, dominance, and sometimes there is something I fear borders on cruelty.

"Oh, there you are. Great timing. Some packages came for you." Lorraine grins at me.

"They did?"

"Yes. Have you been online shopping?"

"No, Lorraine. I don't have any money."

She frowns then. "Damn, you don't, do you? I hadn't even thought about it. I'll talk to James and get him to open an account for you ASAP."

I shrug. Right now, James isn't my favorite person, and opening an account for me just gives him more control over me.

"After I've opened these packages, will you come outside with me? Take Xander for a walk, maybe down the lane?"

"Down the lane?"

Lorraine knows something of my fears.

"Yes. I want to get over my phobias if I can. My therapist says to take it slowly and push a little each day."

"I'd love to. We can't go too far from the house, James' orders, but the lane is still within sight of it. That is a great idea, Ellie. You open those packages and I'll go get changed, and then we'll head out."

I nod and smile at her. The first package is a stack of books. They're all by Jane Austen and in fancy, pretty covers with gilt edges. They are beautiful. The note with them reads:

*For you, so you can read all of her books now. James.*

It softens me a little, but I remind myself this is a man who just ordered another human being to be tortured until their mind breaks. He tortures me too. It might be with pleasure, but he's still turning me into something new. Something only he is molding.

I push the dark thoughts away and focus on the delivery.

The next two packages are smaller. The first one is a bottle of perfume. This note says:

*This is one of the world's rarest scents. It is said to be so addictive it can drive a man half insane. I think it is fitting for you to wear it, my darling.*

He called me his darling. He never calls me that. *Ellie, baby, beautiful*, but never *darling*.

The final package is gift wrapped beautifully once I open the plain brown paper envelope it is secured in. A sumptuous, deep red, velvet pouch holds three boxes. Two are the same red as the pouch, and one is a plain black box.

Greedily, I take the pretty red ones first. I open them and gasp. There is a necklace in one, and a ring in the other. They match my serpent bracelet.

I stare in total shock. The bracelet he gave me cost over five thousand pounds. I looked it up and then—remembering what Jo said—I looked up how much they sell for on the resale market. They still fetch around three to four thousand pounds. The necklace goes for much more. I think it was something like eighteen thousand pounds. Oh. My. God.

If I did need to leave, this jewelry alone would give me enough money if I sold it to get myself a flat for about a year. I looked up rental prices too. Thank God we're not in London. The cost of even a tiny space there is extortionate, but here, in the Scottish Highlands, it's much more reasonable. Of course, I'd have to use my time wisely and find a way to earn some money.

How does a girl who never finished school, who is scared of being outdoors, and has no skills earn a living? Hating the thought of how vulnerable I am, I push it all aside to focus on the last box.

With shaking fingers, I open the final one. The black box. It's another bracelet. Thick, gold, and with a disc on it. The disc simply says:

*O, that I were a glove upon that hand*

*That I might touch that cheek.*

There's a final note.

*My Ellie,*

*These gifts are yours. Serpent charms to ward off dark forces. Wear them as you wish. The bracelet with the inscription bears a quote from Shakespeare that makes me think of you and the way you lay your cheek in my hand. Wear it always. At all times. Sleep in it. Shower in it. I want it always next to your skin. My words, against your skin. Forever.*

*James.*

I put the bracelet on, struggling to fasten it on my own, but I manage it eventually. I stare at it, heavy, thick, and beautiful against my skin. I won't put the serpent bracelet on my other wrist. That is an evening bracelet. Something to wear around the table with James. Or maybe, if he takes me out, I can wear it. Would he take me out? Would I even want to go out? I think I'd panic.

“Okay, I'm ready, we can to the— ” Lorraine stops and stares at the haul on the table. “Oh, wow.” She runs her fingers over the red boxes and then opens one, and her eyes bug. “Ellie, do you know how much this costs?”

I nod. “I think so. A lot.”

“This is extortionate jewelry. Oh my. This is... You ... Ellie, be careful.”

I swallow hard. Is this the bit where she tells me James likes to break people? Instead, she shocks me.

“You could hurt him.”

“Me? Hurt *him*?” I want to laugh at the absurdity.

“James doesn't let people in. Ever. He got you the bracelet, and I didn't think too much of it. But this? The set? The note! Let me look at the other bracelet.”

She takes hold of my wrist. “My words against your skin. Forever.” Her face is tight. “Ellie, tread carefully. Are you sure

you understand what you might be unleashing here? What James is capable of?”

“He could break my mind,” I say simply.

She blanches as if I’ve struck her. “What? Why would he do that? Ellie, I think you’re focusing on entirely the wrong worry here. Do you want to be his? Truly his? You’re young. Not only young, but you haven’t lived yet.”

“I don’t know.” What does *truly his* mean?

Living here with him forever? I like the sound of that so long as he doesn’t turn that coldness I’ve seen toward others onto me. But eventually he’ll get tired of me. Who wants to live with a woman who has a pin army and is nothing but a bag of phobias wrapped in skin? He’d never marry a woman like that. Or make a family with her. I’m defective now. Father-Husband made sure of that.

Lorraine’s tone is dark when she speaks next. “Young lady, you better know because if this carries on, you might not get a choice.”

“What do you mean?”

Heavy footsteps have her turning, flushed cheeks giving away her guilt, as James walks into the kitchen. “Ladies.” He nods at each of us in turn.

“Ah, they came. Do you like them?” he asks me.

“James, these gifts are beautiful, but they’re too much. You can’t spend this much on me.” I’m torn between wanting to keep them in case I need to run away and wanting him to send them back, so I don’t make whatever this is that Lorraine is warning me about worse.

“Nonsense. They’re yours.” He looks at Lorraine. “You look like you’ve been in a sauna. Why are you so red faced? What the hell are you two up to?”

She swallows and laughs. “Nothing. God, James. Paranoid much?”

I don’t know him half as well as she does, but as soon as she says it, I know it was the wrong thing.

His smile tightens, and his eyes narrow. A muscle tics along his jaw.

“I wasn’t, but I am now. What the fuck is going on?”

“Nothing. I just... This is all a bit much, James.” Lorraine gestures at the gifts.

The air in the room turns frigid. The way James looks at Lorraine is cold enough to turn her to ice. “Is that any of your fucking business?”

“No.” She wrings her hands. “No, it’s not. I just, I care about you, and—”

“Lorraine, I suggest you stop talking now. Or you’ll find yourself out of a job.”

“*James.*” Her use of his name is a pained gasp. “You wouldn’t. We’re friends.”

“I would. Change the subject, and we can remain friends. Ellie. Take your gifts to your room. I wish to talk with Lorraine.”

I frown. “We were about to go for a walk.”

He glances at me briefly. “You can go for a walk in five minutes. Go and put your gifts away, and then come back to find Lorraine.”

“Okay,” I mutter.

“Good girl.” The words don’t thrill me this time. I’m scared for Lorraine and don’t want to leave her, but I’m more scared of James, so I go.

He is so cold. So final. They have been friends for years, but the way he said he could simply fire her was horrible. If he got angry that same way with me, then he’d probably just throw me out and slam the door behind me. Would he let me keep Xander? Nausea swirls in my stomach.

I don’t know if I’m overreacting or underreacting. I don’t know how normal people behave or react to things because for years now, I’ve been trapped, held prisoner.



I return to the kitchen almost ten minutes later, after putting my gifts away and changing into something warmer to go outside, Lorraine is wiping down the counter.

“Uhm, we don’t have to go for a walk,” I say to her.

She turns to me and gives me a bright smile. Too bright. “No. It will be nice to get some fresh air, and if it helps you get more used to being outside, then all the better.”

I call Xander and attach his lead. Then we grab our coats, push on our rain boots, and head out the door.

Once we are away from the house, I turn to Lorraine. “I’m so sorry. You got in trouble for me. Please, now he can’t hear us, tell me what you mean when you say I might not be able to leave?”

She shakes her head. “Ellie, I can’t talk about it anymore. It’s more than my job is worth.”

“But you’ve been with James for years. He saved you; that’s what you said. He wouldn’t send you away.”

She turns to me. “I fear that James is not quite himself. That’s all I will say on the matter. I want to be your friend, Ellie. You need one. I’m happy to come for walks with you and help you get used to being outdoors. That is quite important for your recovery, and I’m kind of like an unofficial bodyguard, I suppose while you’re outside. James doesn’t want you to be alone. I can’t gossip or talk about him, though,.”

There is strong emphasis on her words as if she’s trying to tell me something deeper than the surface meaning.

“Please, don’t ask me to discuss James with you again. I’ve made a promise.”

“To James?”

“Yes. To James.”

We reach the edge of the large garden where a gate leads to a footpath and some fields beyond. She turns to me and smiles. “Are you ready?”

Not sure if I'll ever feel ready but needing to do this, I swallow and nod. "Let's go."

As the house recedes from view and the open field stretches in front of us, I feel the old anxiety build. The same panic I used to feel when I tried to even think of leaving Father-Husband, but I have Xander by me, and his presence is reassuring.

Lorraine glances down at him. "You know, Xander will need a lot of training. He's your responsibility. Maybe whenever you're outside, you ought to focus on him? His needs. He's going to require socialization now that he can explore more. That could be your project. Perhaps, if James gives us permission, tomorrow we can drive ten minutes to the nearby village and have a coffee? There are a few stores there, and tomorrow is market day."

*Fear of the market.* The literal translation of agoraphobia comes back to me. Maybe if I can deal with the market, then I can do anything?

I decide there and then to focus on Xander and try to make him the only thing my stupid mind thinks about when I'm out of the house from now on.

I glance down at him and want to squeeze him to me tight. He's so chunky and cute the way he trots around, a little awkward still. He sniffs everything we pass by and stops a lot to take little pees.

"You should get him fixed so he doesn't pee as much." Lorraine laughs.

"But if I do that, then he can't be a daddy. Maybe I'll want him to have puppies."

She laughs. "You've only just gotten him. Let us get him trained first, before we start planning a whole brood."

"I can't believe James bought him for me," I say. I could pinch myself. No one has ever shown me such consideration.

I'm so conflicted; it's as if I'm being torn in half. The truth is that no matter how bad of a person James might be, if I thought he'd truly love me and stay with me, I could turn a

blind eye to the darker side of him. I want someone to love me. Protect me. My fear is that he'll one day grow sick of me and then simply decide he must get rid of me. It's why I keep thinking of running. Getting away.

We walk for at least ten minutes, and I watch Xander as he frolics about. Now and again, the familiar tightness in my chest builds and my stomach dipping, but I do as Lorraine suggested and focus on Xander, and the anxiety recedes again.

“Shall we head back?” Lorraine suggests. “We can do this again daily, and go farther each time. So long as we don't go too far from the house. James wants to be able to see us from the windows.”

“Okay. And the market? Will he let us go there?”

“Yes, of course. It's busier, but there are people around, so it should be safe. He doesn't think there's a direct threat anyway, but he's being cautious. We'll go there too. Maybe first a coffee shop? Baby steps.”

I smile at her and feel sad I've caused an issue between her and James. My presence is interfering with their lives. If I wasn't selfish, I'd leave for that reason alone. I am selfish, though, and I don't want to be out here alone.

When we get back to the house, things seem to go back to normal. James is friendly with Lorraine once more, and she appears comfortable and happy enough.

A familiar cramping pain hits me late evening time, and I excuse myself from the den where the three of us are watching a movie.

I head to the toilet that is downstairs and check and yep, my period has arrived. Father-Husband used to buy me pads when he ordered things online, and I wonder if there are any here. It's a bit embarrassing to talk to James about. I poke my head around the door.

“Lorraine, can I talk to you for a moment?”

She glances at James who gives a subtle dip of his head.

“What is it?” she asks when she joins me in the hallway.

“I’ve got my period. Do you have any pads?”

She shakes her head. “I’ve only got tampons.”

I frown. “I haven’t used them before.”

She purses her lips and glances back at James. “Come on; I’ll show you.”

I follow her upstairs, and she lets me into her room, and she rummages around in a drawer. Taking out a box, she passes me the white paper wrapped cylinder.

After she’s explained to me how to use it, I go to my room and insert it. I wince at the dryness of it. I’m light right now, and the tampon is thick and uncomfortable, but I don’t have any other options.

“Everything okay?” James asks.

“Girl things,” Lorraine says smoothly.

He accepts it, whereas I thought he might question her more.

By the time the movie is over, my cramps are really hitting hard. I always get bad pain the first two days. Sometimes it’s so bad all I want to do is lie curled in a ball and wait for it to pass. Father-Husband refused to give me painkillers as he said the cramps were punishment for the wickedness of being a woman.

We say goodnight to Lorraine and head to bed. I quickly change into a pair of sweatpants and then get into bed and curl up on my side, with my back to James.

“Are you trying to show me you’re angry at me?” James asks, fingering the material at my waist.

“No,” I say. “I got my period.”

“Oh.”

I suck in a breath at a particularly intense cramp.

“Are you in pain?” he asks.

“Yes. It will pass by the next day. I curl up on my side, and it helps.”

“Do you want some painkillers?”

“Am I allowed?” I ask.

The light clicks on, and I roll over and meet his gaze staring down at me. “Are you allowed?” He repeats my words back to me, a note of incredulity in his tone.

“I wasn’t allowed to have them,” I explain. “Before.”

“Ever? Not even when...” James points to my wrist.

“Oh, yes, he did let me have them then. Or if I had a headache. Just not for women’s pain.”

His brow crinkles. “Why the fuck not?”

I still can’t get used to the way James curses so liberally. “Because women’s pains are the punishment for women’s sins.”

That muscle tics along his jaw. Oh lord, I’ve made him angry. “Don’t be angry, James. I’m sorry.”

“I’m not angry at you. That despicable old fucker wouldn’t give you painkillers when you had period pain?”

“No.”

“Christ, I want to kill him all over again.”

He gets out of the bed, naked, and I might be in too much pain to do anything about it, but I still enjoy looking at the muscles of his arms and legs as he pads to the door and throws the robe hanging on the back of it over himself. “I’ll be one minute.”

He comes back with a mug, steaming, and a glass filled with water.

“What’s this?” I ask.

“Water to take the meds with. Here.” He hands me two tablets. “These should help. The drink is chamomile tea; it’s supposed to be soothing.”

He leaves me swallowing the tablets and heads into the bathroom. Five minutes later, he comes out, pulls the covers back and picks me up.

“What are you doing?” I ask.

“I ran you a warm bath. That should help. Lorraine is going to heat up one of those heat pad things too.”

He ran me a bath? I stare at the water, full of bubbles and for some inexplicable reason, my eyes fill with tears.

Maybe it’s just my hormones, but this small kindness has me wanting to cry like a baby.

“It’s only a bath, Ellie. Don’t go looking at me like I hung the moon and stars for you.” He kisses my forehead.

This kiss is new. I catalogue our kisses. The passionate ones. The demanding ones. The careful ones. The controlling ones. The ones he uses to build my passion and make me yearn. This one is gentle.

Sweet.

This kiss is sweet.

He shucks his robe off.

“What are you doing?”

“Getting in with you.” He shrugs.

I get undressed, nervous for some reason. We’ve had sex so many times now I think I might have actually lost count, but this seems oddly intimate.

He picks me up and lifts me into the bath and gets in behind me. His legs bracket me, a safety barrier from the world as he pulls me back to his chest. The water laps at my collarbone. The bath is huge and deep.

I sigh in contentment. “The water feels so good,” I say. “I don’t think I’ll ever get used to having a bath.”

“Ellie.”

One word. He says it the way he did once before. A little broken. As if in pain.

“What?”

He doesn’t answer, but he kisses my shoulder.

We lie together in comfortable silence for a long while, and then he grabs a bottle from the side of the tub and pours something into his hands. He lathers it and begins to wash me.

His motions are slow, careful, and like his kiss, gentle. When he's like this, when it's like this between us, I could melt with happiness.

“Oh no. I'm wearing my bracelet. It will get ruined.”

He takes hold of my wrist and holds it firmly. “It's okay. It's solid gold. It won't tarnish. Remember, keep it on always. I want that quote always next to your skin.”

“Okay.”

“Good girl.” His hands sweep down my breasts, and I shiver as the praise is murmured against my ear as his hands caress my skin.

He doesn't linger, though, or pinch my nipples the way he enjoys. He simply washes me carefully, as if I'm made of fine china.

Once he has washed me from head to toe, he lifts me out of the water and wraps me in a towel. He dries me and then takes another bottle and applies lotion to me, sweeping it over my skin. He begins to pull my clothes on, but I gasp suddenly.

“What?” He pauses.

“I forgot to take my tampon out.”

“Wait there,” he orders.

He comes back with a new tampon and takes it out of the packet, before handing it to me, and turning his back as he clears away the damp towels. It feels so intimate and strange to do this with him in the room, and my cheeks burn. He's not looking, though, and so I make quick work of it. I wash my hands and clear my throat. James turns back to me and puts fresh, comfortable clothes on my body. Carrying me to bed, James places me on the soft mattress and pulls the covers over me.

The bed dips and warm arms wrap around me as he pulls me into him and kisses my head.

“Rest, baby.”

I do. My eyes drift closed, and I smile contentedly as he holds me in his arms.





# JAMES

DAYS DRIFT TOGETHER, and for the first time in forever I feel something akin to contentment. If only we could spend our days locked in this strange, dreamlike fog that seems to have wrapped itself around Ellie and me.

We've been secluded for weeks. Nico would normally be having a shit fit by now, but he's distracted with his woman. He emailed me this morning and asked me to investigate whether there is any role for Renata, his sister, in the company that would keep her occupied. The issue is, their father is against her working in any position of real importance. Italian family hierarchy, such bullshit.

Knowing Renata, if she gets one foot in the door, she'll be running the place within a few months, and with Nico's head so in the cloud with his Cinders, he might damn well let her.

For now, I get to drift along with Ellie, wrapped in our unreality.

Sooner or later reality will surely intrude. Until then, I'm going to enjoy this strange interlude in my routine.

Ellie looks healthier by the day. She's still seeing her therapist regularly and going outside daily for walks with Xander and Lorraine. Lorraine tells me they even went for coffee a couple of days ago and that Ellie managed it well. She had some anxiety but because she focuses on Xander, he helps her get through it. I've had an idea and need to talk with Ellie's therapist, but I think having Xander trained as a therapy

dog would be a great idea. If he has the aptitude. He seems bombproof, though, so far.

On a not so positive note, Ellie's new friend, Vicky, came over one night. I said yes, begrudgingly. I don't want to let my grip on Ellie loosen because there's a part of me that fears if she starts to do normal twenty-something young woman things, she'll decide that's the life she wants.

I understand that she needs some normalcy. I've done some terrible things in my time. I've ended lives on nothing more than an order, but I can't keep Ellie a prisoner when she was one for so long. So, I let the annoying Vicky visit, even though it goes against my every dark desire to keep Ellie with me, close to me, and only me.

I don't believe Ellie understands how much control I have over her life. Not really.

I feed her, often literally. It makes me so fucking hard when she takes tiny bites from me and then licks my fingers clean. I've stocked the library with books for her to read. I've bought her clothes. Her jewels. Everything she eats, wears, reads, and watches even, is provided by, and vetted by, me.

She's not exactly my prisoner, but she certainly isn't free either. Then it hits me. I'm making her my little pet. My pampered, adored, but obedient pet. Well, I say obedient, but Ellie has glorious flashes of bratty insolence and luckily for her, *they* make me hard too.

Ellie seems different with Vicky. I recognized the change in her almost instantly. She talked more loudly, the way Vicky does. She laughed loudly too, and it sounded fake as fuck to me. I like her soft giggle and the shocked laugh that she gives when I say something that scandalizes her.

They stayed in the kitchen for most of the night, eating ice cream and talking. Then they went to Ellie's room, and Lorraine reported that they were trying on clothes. Yes, I sent her up to check. I wanted to be a fly on the wall, watching them. I even considered putting a camera in her room, but I'll only go insane if I do something like that. The morals of it

aren't what stop me. It's the fact that I'd spend all of my time watching Ellie.

I've reached out to Nico's contact, a man called Konstantin Silvanov, as he works with people who can create a cast iron new life for Ellie. They will create both a paper trail and a fake online life too. It will mean she should be safe from anyone who may be looking for her. Do I want her to be safe? It's a question I ask myself daily. After all, if my little pet isn't safe, then she needs me.

Part of me does believe that she'll never be truly safe.

That fucker who held her captive had deep ties to a cultish group of people who have communes in Norway, Sweden, Iceland, Ireland, Finland, and one in Northern Spain. They live a life where the women are domestic serfs to all intents and purposes, and they shun society. They do use modern technology, though. That might be their downfall as Silvanov has people who can hack even the dark web users.

The group is much larger than we first believed.

They are like a fungus, growing in the dark, spreading underground, and hiding from plain sight. Who knows where they might surface.

Silvanov's man, Reece, has been looking into them and tracing links, retracing steps, and old emails and communications. Maurice had very close ties with them. His plan was always to join them one day. I'm glad he never got to see that day because he'd have taken Ellie with him, and then she'd have never been mine.

Still, I worry she'll never be safe from them. It's a bittersweet worry because if she's never going to be safe then I have an excuse to keep her, but it also fills me with fear that they'll somehow get to her.

She'd be safer if I married her. Made her mine in every way. Kept her with me at all times. After all, if she has a new identity, and then marries me and takes my name, that's two identities away from her old one.

Her appearance is morphing too. She's gained weight, and it suits her. Her curves are delicious now. Her hair is shinier and thick. She still talks about wanting to cut more of the length, and while the idea isn't one I like, the more I think about it, with new hair she'll be safer still. If I let her cut it, color it even, dressed her in Gucci and Dior. Gave her my fucking name. Would anyone ever believe she could have been little Ellie from the tower?

Something fierce has been building in me these past few weeks, a burning in my chest that is totally new.

My body and soul scream *mine* when I look at her. When I hold her. My heart, though, is starting to tell me something too. Something I've never experienced with a woman before.

I care.

For Ellie, I care.

It's ... dangerous. I'm a controlled, calculating man. I don't fuck up. Ever.

The one time I let myself remotely care, someone died.

Now, though? I'm not thinking straight.

My control slipped when I took her. Kept her. Every day since it has slipped a little more.

Sighing and rubbing my eyes, I try to focus on the email in front of me.

*Focus on work, James, I chide myself. Find something for Renata.* That will mean scouring the company for a role she thinks is important but is really more title than substance.

The front door opens and closes, and I hear Lorraine welcome Dr. Denham.

Here is a perfect example of how I'm not in control. The way I overreacted to Lorraine talking to Ellie. I've forbidden her from talking about our relationship again. I know she'll do as I have said because she's terrified to disobey.

In some ways, my slip of control has worked out for the best. Lorraine was getting too comfortable. I might have saved

her ass and given her a home, but I'm still the one in charge. That's something Lorraine won't forget now. Not again.

Our conversation in private made certain of it.

*Ellie. Ellie. Ellie. What do I do with you?*

An hour later, I stand and stretch and walk to the window looking out across the lawn. This place is nice. I've already had it valued because I'm seriously thinking about buying it. I can't see Nico spending the majority of his time in London anymore.

He's mentioned a couple of times now about expanding our portfolio in Scotland. I've been thinking about it too. It makes sense. There is a lot of land here; much of it is owned by a few wealthy gentries. Scotland is rumored to have one of the most inequitable land ownership distributions in the developed world. It is a playground for the wealthy, and somewhere we could make a fuck ton of money in property.

Nico and I investigated one area where the local council are nicely corruptible. A few stuffed brown envelopes and we'll be able to buy up land and turn it into a playground for city bankers on their days off.

The only problem is Cindy. Nico's wife keeps filling his head with talk of how awful it is that Scotland's wild areas are being ruined by golf courses, and that its castles are being turned into modern day theme parks for millionaires. Cry me a fucking river. That's life. The rich are going to live the way the rich do, and you're either one of them, or you're one of the vast majority whose lives are out of their control and reliant on their employer, or their government, or their family, to make their lives bearable.

Fuck that.

I don't want to rely on anyone. I'm making my own fortune and fuck anyone else. If that makes me a bad person, so be it. Nico needs to stop listening to Cindy's shit.

There's just too much money to be made up here. It has led me to look into either breaking away and setting something up

for myself, or proposing to Nico that I stay up here no matter what and run a new division. A Scottish division.

I've worked for him with utter loyalty for years, and we're now at a place where much of the time I'm more his partner than employee. It makes things awkward on occasion as some days I don't know what damn hat to wear.

If I set up operations here, it can be a new venture and a partnership. Of course, I'll still be there for him if he needs me to deal with wider problems. You never really stop being someone's enforcer. Adam, however, may be new, but he is growing nicely into the role. He's trustworthy too. He's ex-Special Forces, like me. Let down by his own government, like me. Worked as a private contractor, like me.

Then found himself drifting, like me.

It's how I found him, through a contact. I reached out and offered him work; thank God too, after the shitshow with Pawel. He's with us now and training a small number of men. The more Nico moves everything into legitimate areas, the less he needs muscle anyway.

To be completely sure Adam is going to fit in with us, I currently have Silvanov's man looking into him. A nice deep dive into his background, and so far, nothing that would make me think twice about giving him more and more responsibility over that side of things.

It makes sense for me to run something up here. Nico is married now. He's distracted. The board is still an issue he needs to take control of, so the main business is going to take up more of his time. He has Renata breathing down his neck.

If we start something here, just the two of us, it frees him from the yoke of his family. It also gives him a backstop if things don't go as planned with the family business. Plus, I think we could eventually make even more money from this than his main business.

The place is ripe for development. In areas there are fairly lax laws about foreign investment and opaque land ownership. It's damn well perfect.

The knock at the door brings me out of my deep thoughts.  
“Come in.”

Sandra enters the room. She smiles at me and takes a seat without being offered. Nice power play.

“Take a seat,” I say with a smile.

She laughs. “Got a moment?”

“If it’s about Ellie, then of course.”

“Yes, it’s about Ellie.”

She straightens her skirt and crosses long legs. Her heels are high and pointed. The sort of heels that are supposed to be sexy but I’d hate for Ellie to wear. She’s not high heels and pencil skirts; Ellie is floaty dresses and long, wavy hair. An innocent wrapping with a deliciously decadent center.

“What about her?”

“She has been invited out this Saturday night by her friend, Vicky. She really wants to go but thinks you won’t let her.” Sandra fixes me with a straight, no-nonsense stare. “I told her that can’t be correct. You wouldn’t stop her from going out, surely. That would be far too controlling, and so far as I’m aware, you two don’t have any kind of formal power-exchange going on here.”

*Ellie, you sly little mouse.*

I smile at Sandra, all laid back, as if she hasn’t basically accused me of being an abusive asshole. “Ellie hasn’t mentioned it to me. Why she’d think I wouldn’t let her go for a night out, I have no idea. I’ve been encouraging her to spread her wings. Take walks. Go to the market. Have a coffee.”

“Hhmm ... okay. Well, she seemed fairly convinced you’d say no.”

“I do have my concerns.”

“Such as?”

“Safety.”



*“Safety?”*

I frown at her. Is she being obtuse on purpose? “You know what she’s been through.”

“Yes, I do, but he’s dead.”

I flinch at her stating it so boldly. Ellie said she’d never discuss that. Maybe she didn’t say how it happened. Maybe she said something else. Fuck me.

A horrible thought hits me. “You can’t talk about that with anyone, right? Doctor-patient privilege.”

“No, I can’t discuss patients with anyone.”

“What did she tell you?”

“I can’t discuss patients with anyone.” She smiles at me, all sharp and pointy.

“Oh, you can discuss it with me. Trust me.”

She stares at me, and I hold her gaze and put so much meaning into mine; only a person who didn’t understand body language would fail to see the threat. She blows out a breath. “That he died by accident.”

“Have you investigated it? Been curious? Gone digging?”

She shifts in her chair and taps her chin. She wants to lie to me. I wait, intrigued as to whether she will or not. Then she blows out a breath. “Yes, I looked into it. None of it adds up. His death hasn’t been reported.”

“I need you to sign this.” I should have done this shit with her from day one, but I assumed that doctor-patient privilege would protect Ellie. I slide the non-disclosure agreement over to Sandra.

“Oh, no. I can’t sign that. If I ever feel that Ellie is a danger to herself or to others, I have the right to talk with the authorities. The same goes if I believe her to be in danger.”

I tap my fingers together, lean forward, and hold Sandra’s gaze. “Okay. Fair enough. I’ll simply have to trust you then. In my world, trust is very hard earned, and the breaking of it is most severely punished.”

She sits ramrod straight and clasps her hands together. “James, are you threatening me?”

“No, I’m not. I’m *warning* you. It’s an entirely different thing, Sandra. The man who took Ellie was fucking scum, but he wasn’t alone.”

She frowns. “Ellie has never mentioned anyone else.”

“He was part of a huge pan-European network.”

“Of kidnappers?”

“Of cultish weirdos. I’m looking into them. I have no idea if others in their groups have done what Maurice did, but they treat women like serfs, and they are armed and dangerous. I have certain connections. Bad men, but not in the same way. They’re looking into these groups. I do believe they could still present a threat to Ellie.”

She swallows and glances at the window as if she wants to run and jump out of it. I bet she regrets taking Ellie on as a patient right about now.

“Maybe this is something the authorities need to look into.” Her voice is wobbly.

“That’s just the thing, Sandra. I’m not able to do that. My employers would not be conducive *at all* to the authorities being alerted and digging into this. Anyone who did such a thing would put themselves at great risk.”

She swallows again, and her throat works as if she can’t quite get the saliva down. I walk around to the front of the desk, perch on it, and take one of her hands between mine.

“You’re perfectly safe, Sandra. You don’t have any reason or need to talk to the authorities. You won’t go around gossiping about any of this because you know that it will get back to me, and that will displease both me and my employers. Rest assured, I am looking for these men, tracking them and their networks. There are people involved in this now, who if they believe these men present an ongoing threat to innocent women, they will deal with them.”

That's not a lie. I can't see Konstantin's partner, Andrius, turning a blind eye if these fuckers turn out to be regularly trafficking women to their communes. I let go of her hand but watch her closely.

"I understand. I would never discuss this. Nothing Ellie tells me is gist for the rumor mill."

"I'm glad to hear it," I say smoothly.

"However, Ellie is my priority, James. I would put her wellbeing over and above my own safety, if I thought you were a danger to her. This whole setup is weird. You're still vanilla, right? You and her? Despite her own seeming interests in certain elements of the lifestyle. I think that's for the best, by the way, but then the way she seems to think she must run everything by you suggests something else. She craves your approval. It's like you're her god, James."

I want to grin in triumph at those words. *Her god*, I like that. I don't smile because I know it will make Sandra get more worked up.

"She was held captive by an unstable person. And other crazy people might be looking for her. I'm keeping her as safe as I can, but still giving her freedom." It hits me then that I can allay some of my fears if I do as Nico has. He paid for protection for Cindy. Why don't I do the same for Ellie?

This situation has developed rather quickly. My feelings have developed so fast. She's come into my life like a whirlwind, and as much as I've tried to deny it to myself, I've fallen. I've been making decisions on the hoof, but now, once I've thought of it, a protection detail seems the right way to go. Mind made up; I look at Sandra.

"She can go out with Vicky; of course, she can. I'll talk to her and let her know she is free to do as she wishes. But I will be getting her a close protection detail. Female officers. It will be above board and legit. Accredited close protection, to ensure her safety."

A call to Silvanov will put that in place easily enough.

Sandra sighs. “I still worry. You’re a very commanding man. You have a powerful presence. She’s a young, naïve girl, and I think she’s utterly overwhelmed by you. Starstruck almost.”

I shrug and smile. “I will confess, Sandra, to being a little overwhelmed myself.”

Her brows raise. She doesn’t know me well, but she knows my reputation. Cold. Closed off. Dominant, but never interested in anything deep or meaningful. What was it Nico called me? The Tin Man. Funnily enough, he’s not the first to have thrown that insult at me.

It’s as surprising to me as it will be to everyone around me, but it seems the Tin Man has a heart after all.

“Really?” She can’t hide her disbelief.

“Yes, really.” Then I think I might as well tell her my truth because Sandra isn’t going to talk about this with anyone. After all, it’s more than her pretty little head is worth, and she understands that now.

“I’m in love with her.”



# JAMES

ELLIE IS ON EDGE. Fidgety and unable to settle, She keeps on moving objects around the living room, and then sitting and trying to read for a bit, before walking around the room again.

Move an ornament, sit, read, and repeat.

She does this for a while until I sigh.

“Do you hate the way this room is decorated, or is there something bothering you?” I glance up from the newspaper I’m reading.

“I feel weird,” she blurts out.

“Weird how?”

“Like I used to do when I needed to use the pins.”

“Why?”

“I was bad. I should be punished.”

She’s talking about trying to use her therapist to manipulate me.

“I’m not angry.” I can’t help my smile. “It amused me, to be honest. I find your games quite ... sexy.”

“Sexy?”

“Yes, Ellie. Sexy.”

“Why?”

“I don’t know. I think almost everything you do is sexy.”

Ellie takes a seat and smooths her hands down her dress like a proper young lady. “But shouldn’t I be punished, at least, a little? You obviously know what I did. I was manipulative. That is bad behavior.”

My smile turns into a full laugh. “Ellie. I don’t think it’s a punishment if you’re gagging for it.” I lower my voice an octave. “Do you need a spanking, baby?”

She squirms in her seat and presses her thighs together. Then she nods. “I think so. Yes.”

“Bend over that table.” I point to the heavy, antique table in the corner.

She does as I say, walking to the table and then letting her upper body fall over it. Ellie bends over so beautifully. She has a grace to her body when she submits to me that I adore. Other times, she can be clumsy. Cumbersome. But in this, she always seems to hold the grace of a ballet dancer.

Walking to her, I sweep her long skirt up over her thighs, taking my time, building the anticipation for both myself and her. As I move the material over her backside, I can’t help letting out the soft groan. She’s wearing high cut silk panties with a lace trim around the edge. The soft garments reveal the creamy white flesh of her upper thighs and the edges of her enticing globes of firm skin just waiting for my palm.

“I’m only going to give you five strokes on each cheek because frankly these games of yours amuse me. This won’t be your only punishment, though. When I’ve done with this, you’re going to do something for me.”

“What?” she asks breathily.

“You’ll find out soon enough.” I raise my hand. “Count.”

She counts each slap. I keep them light. Ellie likes sharp bites of pain, and I like to give it to her. I have no desire to do anything that would remind her of that evil fucker who took her.

I hit the side of her left ass cheek on the last strike and watch her flesh jiggle deliciously. She’s so fucking mouthwatering.

I reach down and slide my finger along her folds, feeling the dampness on the silk. Stepping back, I walk over to the sofa and sit down. "Pull your clothing into place," I order, "then come to me."

She straightens and pushes her skirt down. She turns around, her cheeks pink, and her collarbone carries a nice flush. Hit by a devilish notion, I put my hand up to stop her. "Get on your hands and knees and crawl over to me."

She frowns. "What? Why?"

"Do you get to ask why, Ellie? I don't think so. You have your safe word. Use it or get on the fucking floor and crawl to me."

She considers my words and then slowly, ungainly, she drops to her knees. She crawls to me over the thick, soft carpet and as she watches, I slowly spread my legs and pull down my zipper.

I pull my cock free as Ellie reaches me, and her mouth parts. "Come closer, Ellie."

She moves nearer to me, her face now right in front of my cock. "You said you wanted to do this under my desk, but I think this is a more enticing proposition."

She stares at my cock like it's an eighth wonder of the world. Licking her lips, Ellie comes closer still. "Can I lick it?"

Holy fuck. Her words almost have me coming all over her face. "Yeah." I seem to have lost the ability to speak properly.

She wraps her hand around me, guiding the tip toward her mouth. She flicks out her pink tongue and runs it around my rim, swirling it through the pre-cum beading there. Her face tilts up to me. "Salty," she says. "Vicky said it tasted disgusting, but I don't think so."

Fucking Vicky. I put her out of my mind because thinking about her is going to put me off.

Ellie kisses the head of my cock like I'm a king offering her my ring, and it goes straight to my balls. I twitch in her



hand, and I really need her to put those lips around me.

“Do you know what to do?” I ask.

She nods. “I think so. I’ve read about it in my books and seen some porn.”

“Porn?”

“Yes. You gave me the iPad, so I looked some things up.”

“What things?” I’m intrigued now.

“Uhm, things.”

“Ellie.” I take her chin between my fingers and lift her face. “What. Things?”

“This. How to do it.”

She’s been watching porn. I don’t know how I feel about it. Hot. It’s hot, but also weirdly I feel jealous, which is so fucked up. I watch porn. Every guy does. Why do I think Ellie shouldn’t?

“Don’t be angry. I don’t want to disappoint you or do anything wrong.”

Sandra’s words come back to me. This isn’t the ideal time for me to give Ellie a pep talk. I want to shove my dick down her throat. Instead of doing that, I dig deep for my legendary control.

“Ellie, you don’t ever have to worry about disappointing me in bed. You couldn’t. I swear to God you could kneel there and look up at me, and I could jerk myself and come on that angelic fucking face, and it would be hotter than anything else I’ve ever done.”

“Come on my face?” Her cheeks turn that shade of pink that means she’s either embarrassed or she likes the idea.

“Yeah. All over it. I want to mark every bit of you. You make me feel like an animal.”

“I do?”

Mind made up, I rub her lips with my thumb. “Suck me, sweetheart, but do it at your own pace. Then I’m going to

come all over your face.”

“Yes, James.”

It’s as if everything she says is designed to turn me on more. The way she says it too. If she’s being bratty, I find it hot. If she’s being manipulative, I find it hot. When she’s being submissive like this, I find it hot.

It ought to worry me. I’m like some obsessed animal around her.

“Open up, baby.”

She parts her lips, and I take hold of my cock and push it into her warm, wet mouth. I moan at the feel of her lips wrapped around me. She’s heaven and sin and all the nice things. Ellie moves her head up and down, and I watch her intently. I don’t close my eyes because I don’t want to miss a minute of this.

Her technique could use some finessing, but I don’t care. Knowing that she’s never done this before and that she has been fantasizing about having my dick in her mouth is all I need.

It doesn’t take long before I’m gently gripping her face and tapping her cheek, letting her know I need her to stop.

She lets go of my cock and lifts her face to me, her lips swollen and red, and her lipstick smeared.

I fist my dick and focus on her glittering eyes as I feel my orgasm rushing over me. I come with a curse as I spurt all over her face, covering her in my seed. Marking her. Claiming her.

Mesmerized by the sight, I rub my thumb through some of it and push it into her mouth. She moans around my thumb and sucks. “God, yes.” I do it again, and bit by bit I feed her my cum.

She swallows most of it, and I take out my silk handkerchief and wipe her pretty face gently.

Then I kiss her, loving the taste of myself on her. She’s not come yet, and I toy with the idea of not letting her as part of

this punishment, but I can't bring myself to do that. I want to hear her cries and whimpers far too much.

Pushing her down onto the floor, I climb over her and push her skirt up, pulling her panties to one side. I eat her pussy, loving her taste, until she's moaning, then I stop and use my fingers to bring her to the brink. I want to watch as she falls over the edge.

She comes with a strangled cry, and I pump my fingers in and out of her, fucking her through it until she closes her eyes, a small smile on her lips.

"What are you smirking at?" I demand.

"I like my punishments," she says, laughing.

"Don't push me too far, Ellie," I warn seriously. "Up to now, your games have been amusing, but if you push me too far, you won't like the results."

"Will you spank me harder?" she asks lazily.

"Oh, no, baby. You really fuck up, and you won't get a spanking. You won't like what you get."

"What will it be?" Her eyes snap open.

"Depends on what you do."

"What if I ... kiss another boy?"

My blood freezes. "*What?*" My tone is ice.

"Vicky said I should pretend to like another boy to make you jealous. She does it all the time. She said if I kissed another boy, you'd get angry and possessive."

I grab her shoulders and haul her into a sitting position. "Ellie, if you kiss another boy, you won't fucking like what happens."

"What will happen?"

"He'll get hurt, and that will be on you."

"*He* will? I'd be the one in the wrong, though."

"Well then, think about that. You already got Lorraine into trouble, didn't you?"

Her face falls, and she pales.

Fuck, I'm a bastard. I push on, though. Some sadistic, possessive part of me needs to make sure she never does what that little bitch, Vicky, has suggested. I think I'm going to have a word with the girl.

"You mess around with other people and bring them into your games, and they could get very badly hurt, Ellie. I can't hurt you, but don't think that means I won't hurt other people. It's what I do these days, and I'm awfully good at it."

She swallows, and tears form in her eyes. "Did Sandra get hurt? I tried to use her."

"I know you did. No, she didn't get hurt, but she got a warning. Ellie, you're an adult, but in a lot of ways, you behave like you're a child. I get it. You were kept away from society for so long you forgot how to interact with others, but using other people to achieve your means isn't nice. You fucking want something, you should come and ask *me*."

One pretty tear falls onto her face. It's so perfect as it slides down and I lean forward and kiss it, tasting the salt.

"What if I know you'll say no?"

"If I say no, there must be a good reason."

"There's no reason I can't go out with Vicky," she shouts.

"The girl is an idiot." I roll my eyes.

"No, she's my friend."

"You've met her twice. She's not your friend, Ellie. Lorraine is your friend. Vicky is not."

"Lorraine is paid by you, she works for you, so she can't really be my friend." Ellie stands abruptly. I grab her wrist, but she jerks it free, and I let go. Her wrist is damaged. Fragile.

"No. I don't want to talk to you." She's genuinely livid and I can see her struggle to hold in her temper and bite back a grim smile. "I'm going to my room. Don't come in there. I want some privacy."

I give her three hours of “privacy” and then knock and walk into her room. Ellie is on the bed reading.

“I told you to leave me alone,” she snaps.

“Ellie, drop the mood. It’s petulant.”

“No.” She shakes her head. “I want to be in this mood, so I am. You said I wasn’t a prisoner; therefore, I am making decisions for myself. I’d like for you to leave my room.”

“It’s my room. I paid for it.”

“Oh, well, excuse me then. I will leave.”

She gets up and storms past me, but I stop her and pull her to me. “What’s wrong, Ellie?” I murmur against her hair.

“I want to be normal.” She sags in my arms. “I want the normal things other girls my age have. I want to go out for a few drinks with the girls on a Friday night. I might want to study or get a job. I’ve talked with Sandra, and I think I’d be good at working with animals.”

Everything she’s saying is reasonable, but it’s all putting a stake into my heart because her being normal, as she puts it, could mean leaving me.

“Do you want to leave here?” I ask.

She pulls back and stares at me. “No. God, no. James, I can’t imagine not being with you, but I’m trying to be brave. To do ordinary things. I know you don’t like Vicky, but she asked me out, and it’s not a big deal.”

“I’m sorry, but her telling you to go around kissing other guys is a big deal to me.”

“I wouldn’t do it. I don’t think I’d ever meet a boy I wanted to kiss more than you.”

She hasn’t met many guys, so how the fuck would she know?

I walk back inside the room and gently pull her with me, then close the door. “Why did you say it then? To push my buttons? Why do you keep pushing boundaries.”

“I don’t know.” She shrugs forlornly as she sits on the edge of the bed. “I keep thinking you’re a bad man and I ought to leave before you turn the wickedness on me, but the idea of leaving you makes me cry. I know one day you’ll leave me, or send me away, and when I think about that I hate you.”

“Hate is a powerful word, Ellie.”

“Okay, maybe not hate. I get mad, though, when I think of the day when you’ll make me go.”

I frown at her. “Why would I make you go?”

“You’ve said it yourself enough times, you should let me go.”

She’s right. I did. At the start, at least. “Just because I know I should do something, doesn’t mean I will.” I stroke her cheek, and unable to resist, I kiss her once, soft and quick. “Ellie, I’m not going to let you go.”

“I’m scared that one day you’ll want me to go. Then if I resist you will break me if I won’t leave. You’ll just smash me to bits. After all, it’s what you’re trained in.”

I stare at Ellie and realize I have no idea what’s been going on in her head these past few weeks. “Ellie, I won’t ever want you to go, and even if I did, I would never want to break you. Where the fuck did that come from?”

“I heard you. On the phone. You said to break someone. You said it so easily, James. Like it was nothing.”

I rack my brains and recall the conversation she must have heard. Me talking to Adam. Shit. I’m fucking offended she thinks I’d do that to her. No matter what happens between us, but then I remind myself her whole life has been utterly fucked up beyond anyone’s imagination and for the first time in many years, I temper my own wants and needs and put someone else first.

Taking her hands in mine, I stroke my thumb over her soft skin. “Ellie, I swear to you, I’d never break you. I couldn’t do that and wouldn’t do that. Perhaps I will try to mold you because I’m sick like that, and I love twisting you into what I want. But break you ... never.”

She sniffs. “I daydream sometimes, about going to my job, maybe at an animal shelter, and then I come home ... to you. Always to you. I’m scared if I don’t stay your perfect prisoner, you won’t want me, and you’ll make me leave. Let me go.”

I kneel in front of her, so that I’m in her line of sight. “Ellie, I admit that I’m controlling; it’s who I am and part of the package. Some of it, though, isn’t that. Some of it is genuinely me worrying about your safety.”

“Why?” she asks. “He’s dead.”

“He is, but he talked to others like him.” I pause, torn between not wanting to scare her and ruin her joy at being free of Maurice, but also needing her to understand that some of my control isn’t about being an asshole but about her safety. “I worry that one day those others might find you.”

Her face falls.

“I doubt it will happen,” I try to reassure. “I’m working with people to ensure it never does. I think... I want you to have a protection detail. Bodyguards. Until they’re in place then, yes, we must be careful. You don’t need to work, but if you want to, of course you can. All I want you to understand, baby, is that I’m not going to leave you or make you leave. Okay?”

“Why not?” She’s struggling not to cry. I can see it in the twist of her mouth and the glassiness of her gaze. “I’m weird. You might meet a woman who is normal and pretty and better at sex.”

“Ellie, I wouldn’t trade you for any woman in the entire world, okay?”

“Why not?”

She asks the question again. She’s not pushing but genuinely puzzled.

“Because, Ellie. I love you. If anything should scare you, it’s that. I fucking love you and trust me, letting you go is the last thing I am going to do.”





# ELLIE

*I LOVE YOU.*

Three simple words, but they have so much meaning. No one else has said that to me since my mother died. Maurice called me his bride, his property, but he never said he loved me. My father never said it. No one did.

Now James has.

I hold it close like the most precious gift in the entire world. More precious than the bracelets or the necklaces. More precious than rubies and the gold and platinum and diamonds. His love warms me inside and out.

“What are you smiling at? You’ve been grinning like the Cheshire Cat all day.” Lorraine nudges me with her elbow.

It’s market day. I’m in the small local town with her, and I’m doing okay. Even more astonishing is the fact that I don’t have Xander with me. Lorraine thought market day might be too much for him. She says if I get freaked out, we can leave immediately. It’s busy, but I’m fine with her by me.

With James’ love inside me, glowing at the center of me like a shield, it makes me feel untouchable. Invincible.

He loves me.

“James is a catch. Vicky said that to me the other day. She said he’s rich, handsome, and fit. She said he has big dick energy. Does he?”

Lorraine splutters on the takeout coffee she's taken a sip of. "Vicky has a lot of opinions it seems. But yes, James most definitely has big dick energy." Then she laughs. "He doesn't swagger about, but he most certainly has a ton of charisma."

"Vicky says men like him get bored, and you have to play games to keep them interested. I don't know if she's right."

"I'm not supposed to talk to you about your relationship anymore, Ellie. I'll give you one bit of advice, though. Don't listen to a word Vicky says. She's young and immature."

I snort at that. "Not as immature as me. I'm a freak. She said that. I'm a freak."

Lorraine stops walking and turns to me. "She called you a freak?"

"Yes. In a nice way. She said that I'm a freak because I don't behave like normal girls. I told her I'd been to an exclusive private school abroad. I didn't know what else to say."

She sighs and shakes her head. "James is getting a cover story for you. I'll ask him to move it along."

I have to tell her. I'm going to burst if I don't get it out. "He loves me," I say with a huge smile.

Lorraine's face tightens. "Ellie, be careful. I think you're right to believe that. I believe he does too. My fear is a man like James will never admit it. Not even to himself, never mind to you or other people."

"Oh, he's already told me." I smile even wider. "He told me. I love you, Ellie. He said it."

Her mouth drops open. "He did? *When?*"

"A couple of days ago. He said it to me. It makes me feel all warm inside."

"Oh, God." She sounds like this is a bad thing, not the best thing to ever happen to me.

"What?"

“This is going to be crazy. You two are a wild ride, and it’s only going to get wilder. I’m so pleased, though. I’m happy for you, Ellie. Truly. And oh wow, imagine if you get married. You’ll be the new lady of the manor. Not that we have a manor, but you know.”

“I think our house is like a manor.”

“It’s not his, though. He only rents it.”

“I wish he owned it,” I say wistfully. “I like it. It’s perfect for me. Near enough to a few places that we can come and do this, but far enough away that I don’t have to see people every day.”

“I agree. It’s a lovely house. If it were his, I could decorate it.”

“Could I help?”

She turns to me. “Ellie, if things go as I think they will, you’ll be the one letting me help. You’ll be in charge.”

“Ooh, look.” We are walking by an old store, with thick windows and a low roof. Some of the buildings in this town are a few hundred years old. This one seems to be. In the window display, which is mostly filled with old plates and jugs, there’s a shiny, beautiful pin. Like my pins, but much bigger and with an ornate, rounded head. “Look at that pin.”

“That’s a hat pin,” Lorraine says. “Ladies used to wear them in their hats. It’s a bit shorter than most of them.”

“I have some money with me. Can we go inside and see how much it is?”

Lorraine touches my cheek, and it’s so like something my mother would have done it makes my heart ache a little.

“What?” I ask.

“Just you, Ellie. Come on. Let’s go ask.”

I follow Lorraine into the shop, and a gentleman greets us.

“How much is the hat pin in the window?” I ask.

“It is two hundred pounds,” he replies. “From 1855, and made of solid sterling silver. It’s a little wider and shorter than most hat pins. Some of them were very long. But it’s definitely a hat pin, as it is still too long to be a stick pin.”

“Can we see it?” Lorraine asks.

“Certainly.” He leans into the window display and retrieves the pin, handing it to me.

I hold it and love it immediately. This is the leader my pin army needs. What a general she is. I imagine myself having a collection of these beauties instead of my plain old sewing pins.

“I’d like to get it,” I say to Lorraine. “I only have fifty pounds in my purse.”

“I’ll buy it,” she says. “I have a card for the house.”

“Will James be okay with me having it?”

She smiles at me. “Darling, I do believe James would take the moon out of the sky for you, so yes, he will be happy with you having a hat pin.”

She pays for it and the shop owner wraps it beautifully in tissue and puts it in a box, and then in a thick shiny, paper bag with rope handles.

“I like this bag,” I say to Lorraine as we leave the store.

“That’s my favorite part of shopping in nice places.” She laughs. “The way they package your purchases.”

We purchase some food items that Lorraine needs to make the evening meal, and then we return home.

I rush off to find James to show him my hat pin, and I burst into his study. “James, look what I found.” I look up and stop dead. There are three huge men in there, and they are so scary looking I automatically shrink back against the door.

“Ellie, there you are. Come in.” James ushers me in, but I’m nervous as hell.

One of the men is huge. Like the biggest man I’ve ever seen, and he has blond hair. He might be massive, but he gives

me a very friendly, warm smile. The other is dark haired with deep blue eyes. He has a rugged face and is wearing a very smart suit. He sizes me up and then holds his hand out.

“Ellie, lovely to meet you. I’m Konstantin Silvanov.”

He has a heavy accent. I take his hand to shake it, and the rough callouses on his palm feel abrasive against my soft skin.

“Hi,” I say, nervously.

The final man gives me a wave and a devastating grin. He’s so handsome. Dark hair and hazel eyes, and that smile. I wonder if he’s single because Vicky would think he is gorgeous.

“Hey there, Ellie. I’m Carrick,” he says.

His accent is as gorgeous as he is. If I wasn’t in love with James, I could be in danger of a crush on Carrick.

“This is Reece,” Konstantin says and points to the massive blond man.

He grins again. Warm, friendly, and so reassuring. I bet he gives great hugs. I decide that Reece is like a big bear, but a soft one. Carrick is a scoundrel for sure, but gorgeous. And Konstantin is terrifying.

“Konstantin and Reece are here to talk some business with Carrick and me,” James says. “But Konstantin is also going to provide you with security. For now, I think it’s for the best.”

“Really?” I ask. It takes a lot of courage to speak up in this room full of intimidating men. “I don’t know if I like the idea of having a strange man following me around. Won’t it draw attention to me even more?”

“Smart cookie,” Reece says. “That’s why it isn’t going to be a man, but two women. The same as Nico’s wife has. They’ll sometimes work together, if we think the threat level warrants it, or if you were to go somewhere we thought the risk was higher but mostly, you’ll only have one of them with you, and they’ll take shifts. You won’t look like anything but two friends out together.”

“What if they don’t like me?” I ask. I’m always so aware of how odd I am compared to most people.

“They’ll work for you.” Konstantin scratches his cheek. “You will be treated with the utmost respect at all times by them. They’re not there to be your friends. They are there to protect you, and they will do so with their lives if need be.”

Their lives. Good Lord.

“How could anyone not like you?” Carrick asks. “I’ve only met you for a minute, and I can tell you’re a lovely person.”

“You can? How?”

“It’s in the eyes. Always in the eyes.”

“Yes, alright.” James gives Carrick a glare, and I bite back a laugh. “Enough of the charm, Carrick.”

“I’ll go and get changed for tonight.”

James’ expression darkens. He hates that I’m going out with Vicky. Truth be told, the closer the event has drawn near, the less I want to go myself. I’ve spoken to Vicky a few more times and now and again she says things which seem bitchy. They’re not blatant enough for me to know for sure, though. James is right—I don’t know her, not really. But I don’t want to admit this or back out now as I feel like that’s letting him win.

“What did you want to show me?” James asks.

“Oh, I uhm, I bought a hat pin.” I feel so stupid. I wish the ground would open up and swallow me.

“A hat pin?” he says. “Do you own a hat?” He’s not being shitty with me; he genuinely seems confused.

“No, uhm, it’s silly but—”

“Some of them are very collectable,” Konstantin says in his gravelly voice.

“What the fuck do you know about hat pins?” Reece asks with a laugh.

“I know about a lot of antiques.” Konstantin shrugs. “May I see?”

I nod and shyly take it out of the box. Then I carefully open the tissue to show him it nestled in the box. All the men gather around to look, and I want to shrink back from their presence as they’re all-consuming, but I stand my ground. They don’t want to hurt me, and I need to get over this fear of people.

“That’s nice,” Konstantin says. “Cassie would love it.”

“Who is Cassie?”

“My wife. She likes antiques too. Now. She didn’t used to, but I corrupted her.”

“I thought it was beautiful. I might try to find more to go with it.”

“You’ll end up being a collector before you know it.” Konstantin grins.

“Do you like it?” I ask James.

He smiles at me, and it’s open and warm despite everyone else in the room watching us. “Darling, I know fuck all about hat pins, but if something can make you smile like you were when you burst in here, then I fucking love it.”

I want to kiss him, but I don’t know if he’d like it in front of everyone, so I satisfy myself with shooting him a smile. “I’ll go put it away and get ready.”

Folding the hat pin back in the box, I exit the room but linger for a second outside the door.

“She’s fucking adorable,” one of the men says.

I’m pretty sure it’s the handsome one.

“She reminds me in some ways of Violet. Quiet and a bit shy. I bet they’d get alone.” That is Konstantin; I can tell by the accent.

“It would be nice for her to meet some friends.” James is speaking now. “She’s met a girl here, but she’s a fucking nasty

little bitch if my instincts are correct. Maybe we'll come over there for a holiday.”

“Bring her, and I swear Maya will adopt her if she visits.” It's Konstantin again. “She has a thing for waifs and strays.”

*Ouch*, waifs and strays. That hits hard.

When James speaks next, though, my heart soars. “She's not a waif or a stray.”

“No?” Carrick asks. “What is she then?”

“*Mine.*”





# ELLIE

I'M READY, and I feel sick. This is my first ever night out since I was sold into captivity by my father. I've been out before, of course. I went to dances at the youth club sometimes, and to the cinema with friends. This, though, is my first ever night out as an adult.

I'm going to be careful not to drink too much. I don't want to be sick. I've told James I will call him when I want a lift home, and he's dropping me off too.

Once it's time to set off, I go find him in the living room, but he's not there. I look in the study, but he's not there either. I find him in the den, petting Xander. For a moment I stop and watch them. James might grouse sometimes about the dog, but he loves him; I can tell.

"I'm ready," I say finally.

He turns and gives me a onceover, then nods.

"Do I meet your approval?" I ask cheekily.

He chuckles. "Yes, you do. You look lovely."

I'm wearing jeans, a camel-colored soft jumper, and some brown low heel boots, and have a brown bag. It's boring really, but the clothes, shoes and bag, are all beautiful materials. Everything James buys for me is.

The front and sides of my hair is pulled back into a low half ponytail. My makeup is simple with mascara and lip gloss. I look smart and I feel pretty, and I guess that's what matters the most.

“I have something for you,” James says.

He offers me a small box and smiles as I open it. I gasp. “A phone. Is this for me?”

“Yes, of course. It has my number, the house number, Lorraine’s number, Nico’s, and Konstantin’s numbers programmed into it. As well as Nikolai Volkov.”

“I don’t know most of those people,” I point out.

“No, but if you’re ever in trouble, you can call them.”

“Can I put Vicky’s number in?”

“Of course.”

“I’ll do it later. I’ll be late, otherwise.”

“Come on then. Remember to call me to pick you up before midnight, or your ride might turn into a pumpkin.”

I don’t really get the reference, but nod anyway as I’m too nervous to make sensible conversation and to question it. James drops me off outside the pub where I’m meeting Vicky, and my nerves jump tenfold. I turn to look at the car.

James rolls the window down. “You don’t have to go in,” he says.

“I do. I need to know I can do it.”

“They’ll love you.” He smiles at me. “Go on before I change my mind and make you come home with me.”

I smile at that and quickly find the courage to head inside. Once I’m in the pub, I relax a little bit. It’s not busy at all, and it has a friendly, homely feeling.

“Yo, Elle’s Belles. Over here.”

I glance in the direction of the shout and see Vicky waving madly at me. I smile, wave, and head over to her. She’s with two girls and four guys. The guys all look to be in their early to mid-twenties, and the girls look a bit younger. Maybe late teens or early twenties. Vicky is twenty-two.

“Hey, doll, you came.” Vicky pulls me in for a hug. “I thought you’d chicken out to be honest.”

“No. Here I am.”

“Liam, go grab her a drink.” Vicky pushes one of the men on the shoulder, and he ambles off to the bar, shouting at me when he gets there. “What do you want?”

“Uhm ... a glass of wine please.”

“Red, white?”

“White please.”

“Get me a Southern Comfort and lemonade too,” Vicky orders.

He rolls his eyes but comes back a few minutes later with both drinks.

“What time is the mini van coming to take us to town?” one of the girls asks.

“Town?” I thought we were staying in the pub.

“Yeah, Ange here wants to party.” Vicky points to a girl with white-blonde hair. “So, we’re going into town in thirty minutes.”

My anxiety clears as I realize I’ll have this drink. Get to know them all a little, and then go home when they go into town. “I’ll go home then,” I say.

“What?” Ange turns to me, her brows raised almost to her hairline. “No one gets to go home yet. Rule number one. You’re with us now, bestie. Night out with the gang. So ... I hear your fella is a catch. Rich. Gorgeous. Older man vibes.”

“He’s not that old,” I say.

“He’s pretty old,” Vicky replies laughing. “What is he? Forty?”

I almost choke on my wine. “No, he’s not forty. He’s in his early thirties.”

“Oh, well. Anyone over about twenty-five looks old to me,” Vicky says. “I think our generation will be the first not to age. We’re all on preventative Botox, so we’re going to look amazing when we hit forty.”

“You have gorgeous skin,” Ange says. “What have you had done?”

“Nothing.”

“God, not even your lips?”

“No.”

“You can tell she’s not had filler if you know what you’re looking for. That pout is all natural.” Vicky stares at my lips with her own pursed in concentration.

All the girls have amazing eyelashes, and I suddenly feel dowdy and stupid in my boring clothes and with little makeup on.

The time passes in a blur and then we all leave. I didn’t get to say much and mostly stood around listening and trying to learn how they all talked to one another so I can emulate it if I’m ever invited out again. I haven’t had friends for so long. I’d really like to form a few friendships.

A girl passes by us, and I notice her because she has a book in her hand. She orders half a pint of lager at the bar and goes to sit in a nook.

“God, Sally Denison is so boring. What a freak. Who sits in a stuffy old pub reading on their own at our age?” Ange laughs.

“She is the town librarian, Ange,” one of the men speaks.

He’s the one with the nicest face and he’s caught my eye and smiled at me a few times. He seems friendly. Kind.

“Right? A librarian. Who the fuck wants to do that for a living, Kevin?”

Kevin just rolls his eyes.

I can’t imagine anything better, other than working with animals. Maybe. Although, that would be sad at times. You’d probably lose animals sometimes despite your best attempts. Working with books, though. Wow. I watch the girl as she reads in her corner, oblivious to being the topic of conversation.

“Right, come on,” a red-haired girl says. “Time to move on.”

“I’ll stay here and call James for a lift,” I say.

“No need.” Ange smiles kindly at me. “We’ll drop you off.”

That would save James a drive. “Really?”

“Of course. Come on.”

I trot outside after them and wrap my jacket around myself, shivering. It’s a cold night, and there’s a biting wind. It claws at the skin of my cheeks as I wait for the minivan to arrive. When it pulls up, we all pile inside, and I clap my hands together to get some warmth back into my fingers.

Kevin takes hold of my hands, brings them to his mouth, and blows on them. I feel my cheeks heating and pull my hands away as soon as possible. James wouldn’t like that at all. I know because if James did that to some woman, I’d want to punch her.

I look around and frown. We’re not going in the right direction. “Erm, sorry, can you ask the driver to turn around?”

“Oh, we can’t,” Ange says breezily. “We’re late. You can have a drink at the bar with us this way. Then your hot rich man can always come pick you up later.”

“Liked being picked up by her daddy,” says the redhead with a smirk.

“The kind of daddy you could only dream about,” Vicky retorts icily. “Don’t hate on Ellie just because you’re a jealous bitch.”

“Isn’t your father very nice?” I ask the redhead.

She stares at me for a long moment, then they all burst out laughing. “Sugar daddy, Ellie. We’re talking about sugar daddies.”

“What’s that?”

“An older guy who takes a hot young woman and makes her his sugar baby. I bet he pays you well, huh?” The redhead

tosses her fiery mane.

“She’s not his sugar baby.” Vicky nudges the redhead. “Stop being a bitch.”

“So, if you’ve got this rich, gorgeous guy, why aren’t you more bougie?” one of the guys asks. “I mean, where’s the designer stuff?”

“Oh, she has every designer you can think of,” Vicky says proudly.

It’s weird because she’s talking as if my things are *her* things. Anyway, they’re only things. You can’t be proud of things. They don’t matter.

“She has the quiet luxury aesthetic, don’t you, Elles?”

I nod but have no idea what Vicky is talking about.

“Actually, that is a great luxury outfit,” Ange says.

“God, you’re all boring.” The redhead pouts and stares out the window.

When we reach the bar, I let Kevin buy me a wine, but I only sip at it, pretending to drink it. I’ll give it ten minutes, and then I’ll call James.

“Hey, drink this.” The redhead hands me a shot glass.

“What is it?” I scrunch my nose. I hate vodka and things like that.

“It’s a mild drink. Barely any alcohol. Mostly sugar really.” She smiles at me. “Sorry I was a cow earlier. It’s a peace offering.”

I take it and sip it, expecting it to be disgusting, but it’s delicious. Kind of sweet and fresh too, plus icy cold. I drink at it in little sips.

“Don’t do it like that,” the redhead says. “Like this.” She downs the shot, smoothly, and then licks her lips before placing the small glass back on the bar.

I hesitate for a moment, but they’re all watching me, so I do as she did. My stomach burns, but it’s not unpleasant.

“Thank you.” I smile at her.

Not long after, we all do another shot. I swear to myself this is the last one I will do. But my mouth feels strange and tingly, almost numb, and the world seems fuzzy and bright.

A strange feeling of happiness, but as if unmoored from reality floats over me, and I want to giggle.

“Let’s do another one,” Vicky says.

“Hey, come outside for a minute, I want to show you something.”

It’s Kevin, the one with the nice face. I notice him smile at the redhead, and she gives me a friendly smile also. Not sure I should go outside with him, I hesitate.

“It’s only outside the front door; there’s people about.”

“You’ll love it, go on,” the redhead says.

“What’s your name?” I ask. Wow, I sound all slurred.

“Billie.” The redhead smiles at me.

“Billie, thanks but I should stay inside.”

“I’ll go too.”

She takes hold of my arm by the elbow and leads me outside. Kevin follows us.

“What are we looking at?” I ask.

“Just around here,” she says, leading me around the corner.

We’re in an alleyway now, by the side of the bar, and it’s dark. I swallow hard. Oh, no. Are they going to beat me up? That’s the kind of thing that would happen in some of the thrillers I read. I was so stupid to come out here.

A bright light distracts me, and I turn to see Kevin has his phone flashlight on and he aims it at the wall. “Look.”

I do as he says and a wide smile tugs at my mouth. Oh, wow.

The wall is covered in the most beautiful art. It is an ethereal painting of a woman in a long dress with tall blades of



grass around her, right up to shoulder height. Then I see she has wings on her back, and there's a butterfly the same size as her, fluttering past. Toadstools, and other things add pops of color.

"It's called Fairy Grove, and the artist who painted it is now well known," Kevin says. "Thought you might like to see it."

"It is amazing; thank you."

"Want a picture against it? I can use your flash."

"Yes, okay; great. Thank you." I can show it to James later. It will be the first picture on my phone.

I access the camera and pass it to Kevin. He takes it from me and frowns. "There's nothing on here," he says.

"What do you mean? There's a camera."

"Well, yeah, but there are no apps. You don't have Whatsapp?"

"No."

"Where is the email?"

I shake my head. "It's just a simple phone. It doesn't have those things."

"No, it's not. It's an up-to-date Android, and it should have it all. This is weird."

"Hey, just take the picture. I'm getting cold." I say it lightly, so he won't get offended, but I don't want everyone knowing that as well as dressing weirdly, that I have a strange phone too.

God, why won't James let me have normal things on it? I won't use them if he says it isn't safe.

Kevin shrugs and takes the picture as I stand against the painted wall. Walking to me, he hands me the phone as I stare down at the first picture of myself that I've seen since I was fourteen.

Something touches my hair distracting me, and I try brush it away, thinking something has fallen into it. But Kevin is right against me, running his hand through my hair at the side.

“You look amazing in that picture,” he murmurs. “So beautiful. I’d like to kiss you right now.”

He bends down, and before I can say a word, his lips are on mine. For a moment, I simply freeze. My mind is slow from the drinks, and I’m stunned at what he’s doing.

As if I’ve suddenly come back online, I react. I push at him and make a sound of protest in the back of my throat. If I ever wondered what kissing someone other than James would be like, I have my answer. Kevin is a good-looking guy with a nice face, but his lips feel alien. They’re cold and wet, and when he pushes his tongue in, I want to spit it out, but I can’t because he pushed it in farther.

He makes a moan as if I’m into this too, and we’re enjoying it together. I push him again and try to turn my head.

“Don’t be that way,” he says as he grips my chin in his hand so hard it hurts a bit. “I just want to kiss you. Maybe feel those amazing tits.”

Panic hits, and I try to shove him harder, but he still doesn’t move, so I kick his shin and at least his mouth leaves mine. “Get off me,” I demand.

He doesn’t move, though. He leans his head in, and I twist my head away from him, and he licks my throat. Oh, God, I’m going to be sick.

His weight against me feels like a threat, and I try again to push him off but he’s so much bigger than me.

Then he’s gone. One moment he was there, and the next there’s nothing but cold air caressing me. Dazed, it takes me a moment to realize what is happening. James has Kevin against the other wall and he punches him three times in the side in rapid succession.

Kevin bends over wheezing.

How did James get here? I didn't call him. Did Vicky call him? I'll have to thank her.

"James, thank God you came. It's not what it looked like. Come on; leave it. Can we go home?"

I need to get out of here. Panic is starting, and I don't want James to get into trouble for beating Kevin up. I just want to go home.

James ignores me. He hits Kevin one more time and then pulls him up with his fist in Kevin's short hair. Kevin squeals as his head is slammed back against the wall.

James grabs his throat and presses his thumb into one side and his fingers into the other. Kevin's eyes widen, and he grasps at James' forearms.

He makes a choking sound and tries to kick at James. I race over to them and grab James' arm. "The police will come. Please let him go."

James shakes me off as if I'm nothing more than a gnat.

"Listen to me," James says, and his voice is so hard and cold, it makes my skin pebble as if icy rain has touched it. "You fucking touch her, or any other girl, like that again, and I'll kill you. Understood?"

Kevin makes a strange squeaking sound in response.

"I can't hear you," James says nastily.

"He can't speak," I sob. "You'll kill him."

I don't care about Kevin. Truth be told, I must be a dark and twisted person because I'd quite like James to hurt him, but I don't want James to be arrested and go to prison and leave me all alone.

"Please, James," I beg.

He lets go of Kevin's throat, and I send up a prayer of thanks.

"Do. You. Understand?" James asks again.

“Y-y-y-es.” Kevin nods frantically. He bends over and coughs, sucking in much needed air.

“Good.” James hauls him up by his hair once more. He slaps his face twice, so hard Kevin’s head whips back and forth, and then he gets him by the throat again.

Kevin’s eyes bug as James squeezes. “Go inside that fucking bar and tell your friends that Ellie has left. They won’t see her again. They aren’t fit to lick her fucking shoes. As for you, I’ll be keeping an eye on you. One wrong foot, and you’re dead. I can fucking do it and make it look like an accident. Go to the police, and you’re dead. I’m not fucking playing. Understood?”

James lets go, and Kevin crumples to the ground, a puppet with its strings cut.

“Come on.” James takes my hand and drags me to the car.

“I didn’t want him to kiss me,” I say stupidly.

“I know.”

He opens the door and gently pushes me inside.

Stalking around the hood, he gets in and sits beside me in the driver’s seat.

“I’m sorry,” I choke on a raspy sob.

“Ellie.” He sighs and turns to me. Gently, he wipes my tears. “Stop it, okay? You’re safe.”

“You’re so angry.”

“Yes, I am.”

“At me?”

“No. Not at you.”

“Who then? Kevin?”

“The world, baby. I’m angry at the world. Listen, sorry to upset you more, but you’re not seeing Vicky again.”

“I don’t want to,” I say quickly.

“Her friends aren’t nice people.”

“I know.” Then as he guns the engine, I ask. “How did you know where I was?”

“Your bracelet.”

“What?”

“Your bracelet. It has a tracker.”

Then, as if he hasn't said the most deranged thing, James calmly drives us home.



# JAMES

I DON'T LET Ellie out of my sight for the next few days. I'm worried about her. She stumbles about in the world like a newborn foal trying to find its footing.

I said to her that I wouldn't make her a prisoner, but maybe I'm going to have to. She's upset about the bracelet and tried to take it off. I stare out the window as male voices wash over us.

"Are you with us, James, or daydreaming about your new pet?" Nico snaps.

I turn to him and scowl. We're in a meeting with Carrick, Konstantin, and the Volkov brothers. Well, two of them, at least. There's a third, but he's not here. Maxim. The black sheep. He's out on Corfu, which seems to have become a veritable playground for ex-gangsters. Maybe I should flee there too with Ellie.

"What gives?" Nico stares at me. "Not all perfect in your garden of Eden with your little Rapunzel?"

"I put a tracker in her bracelet, and it upset her, and now she keeps taking it off. I've basically had to lock her in the house because if she's not wearing the bracelet, I can't let her out."

Nikolai Volkov laughs softly. I turn and glare at him. "You got something to add?"

"Don't lock her in the house," he says softly. "Lock her in the bracelet."

I stare at him for a long beat. Damn, he's onto something here.

"My Sienna, her bracelet is locked and only I have the key."

"That's actually not a bad idea," I say grudgingly.

"The men who Maurice was in conversation with don't buy that Ellie is dead. Luckily, their theories are wildly inaccurate. They believe she probably killed him and ran away and is hiding somewhere on her own. They have no idea she's with you. So far as the chatter we can see tells us." Konstantin shrugs. "You have the report. There is no immediate danger, but also, I believe you're correct to order a protection detail for her. They will be here within days."

Something cold washes over me at the thought of those fuckers still talking about Ellie. We're not that far from where Maurice lived. What if they have men already looking for her? Asking about her? They could be visiting all the towns and villages in this part of Scotland. I know Konstantin and Andrius are putting a rush on the protection detail. Sorting me two women who are willing to stay with Ellie twenty-four-seven, and a third for backup for when either one of those women takes leave, or gets sick, but I wish they were here now.

"I need to go," I say to Nico. At least if she has a bracelet I know where she is.

He raises a brow but then sighs. There's no point in trying to stop me. Hell, he'd do anything to keep his Cinders safe, so he can't begrudge me for doing the same.

"Listen. I'm in. I have the cash." I shake hands with the Volkov brothers and then Konstantin. "You will have my deposit by noon tomorrow."

We're buying a plot of land that has planning permission for a golf course. It will be a perfect place to open a swanky hotel, and it won't be used to wash any money. Clean cash only.



Konstantin isn't coming in on it. He's here to discuss more men for personal protection for Nico's family. Nico is worried that as he shakes off the shadier side of the business, people might think his loved ones are more exposed. Cindy is covered well, but his parents, not so much.

"Sure you don't want in on this, K?" Sasha Volkov asks with a grin.

Konstantin shrugs. "More than my life is worth, gentlemen. Literally. My business partner would not take kindly to me dipping my toes back in your world for any other reason than providing legitimate protection."

He's referring to Andrius, and yeah, from the little I've heard, I wouldn't cross him either. The man is one of the deadliest enforcers the Bratva ever saw, and he singlehandedly took out hundreds of people who crossed him and his loved ones. They say he's like a ghost. He can slip into your room in the dead of night, bypassing any security you may have, and take you out. He doesn't travel the same way Konstantin does. I heard it was because he's so paranoid about his wife, Violet, that he hates leaving her side. Whether that is true, or he's just glad to be out of this world of endless shit, who knows? Konstantin doesn't gossip, so the only snippets we hear are from people too far down the hierarchy to truly know.

Carrick crosses one ankle over the other as he leans back in his seat. "I'll send you details of the land we own in Ireland." He's talking to Sasha Volkov, and I'm done; they don't need me for this part. I close the door behind me and stalk to my car.

I take the damn bracelet that Ellie keeps taking off in an act of defiance and find a jeweler who can modify it. It costs me a fuck ton of money to get them to do it immediately. Money can buy almost anything, if you pay enough, and a few hours later, I have the same bracelet back in my possession with a little lock on it, and a tiny, handmade key that only I will have. Before I go home, I grab some fresh bread, a bottle of wine, and some tiny cakes baked in a local store, which Ellie loves.

I arrive at the house to find Ellie in a worse mood than before.

“Are you going to sulk for weeks because frankly it’s boring,” I say as I put the bags on the table in the hallway. “You should be damn well grateful I haven’t turned your ass fuchsia for the stunt you pulled.”

“I didn’t pull a stunt,” she argues. “He did, and he won’t be doing it again. You put the fear of God in him, and I’m grateful for that.” Her shoulders slump. “I’m bored. I want to get out of the house.”

I stare at her as a slow smile spreads over my face.

“Oh my God, why are you laughing at me?” She shakes her head and starts to walk away. “You’re insufferable.”

“Ellie.” I take her elbow gently. “I’m not laughing. I’m happy. Did you hear what you just said? You want to get out of the house. You’re doing so much better.”

Her face drops the sulky expression she’s been wearing for the past few days, and a slow smile spreads across her face.

“Come on.” I grab my car keys on a whim. “Where do you want to go? Do you need to bring Xander, or do you want to try without him?”

“Can we go to the library? There is one in town. I’d love to see it.”

“Of course, we can go to the library.”

“I don’t have my ID yet, do I? I can’t sign up.”

“It should be here soon. I talked with Konstantin about it today, and he is doing the best he can. It’s not just a paper ID, Ellie. They’re creating a whole life for you. I’ll message him and see how much longer it will be. In the meantime, I can join, and then you can use my card.”

“Oh, okay. That would work for now.”

She grabs her coat and then pauses and runs upstairs, coming down two minutes later with her chosen bag. I’ve filled the girl’s closet with designer bags, and the one she uses

the most is a simple, brown leather crossbody bag. It's also designer, but it has no logos or emblems.

"You like that bag?" I nod at it.

"Yes. It's comfortable to wear," she replies.

I pull her to me and drop a kiss on her forehead. I've told her I love her, but the unsettling thing is, she hasn't said it back yet.

Wouldn't it be ironic if she melted my heart only to leave me and break it? I'm not sure I'd let her leave, and the thought scares me because I genuinely think I'd chain her to my basement and never let her go if she tried, which makes me as bad as Maurice.

We park in the lot across the road from the library, and Ellie is almost vibrating with excitement beside me. "I've decided that working in a library is what I'd like to do the most of all," she says.

I turn to her. "Really? I thought you wanted to work with animals."

"I did, but then I thought about how many of them might die, no matter how much care you give them, and I don't think my heart could take that. Books don't die. Books live forever, up here." She taps her head. "Plus, you can live a thousand different lives through books. Maurice held me prisoner, but he gave me books. Sure, he limited them, but I had enough to have lived many lives, and traveled to many continents."

She has this faraway look in her beautiful blue eyes. That sense of raging protectiveness I get around her roars within, fierce and deadly. I'd kill for her. I'd burn the world for her. I'd cut my own fucking limbs off for her. This feeling in me is so big, that I have to lock it down, so I don't terrify her.

"Come on," I say, my voice gruff. "Let's go find some new lives for you to live."

I take her hand and guide her into the library. There's a girl behind the single desk, quiet, reading, and Ellie goes over to her. "We'd like to join please. Well, he would." She points to me. "I don't have my ID with me. I left it at home."

The girl looks up and smiles at Ellie. Then the smile tightens a little as she looks at her. “I saw you the other night. You’re fiends with Vicky, right?”

“No. Not anymore,” Ellie says softly.

“Oh. Uhm, sorry.”

“Don’t be. I don’t know anyone around here. I’m new here. So I thought it would be nice to get a drink with some people. It didn’t work out.”

“Did you move here for work?”

I step forward. “She moved here with me, for my work.”

The girl looks up at me and her eyes widen. Do I look that much older? Her name badge says Sally.

“Sally, can you sign me up?” I ask.

“Yes, of course. I need some identification.”

I take my driver’s license out of my wallet and a folded letter I always carry with me for a utilities bill with my home address on it.

“This isn’t a local address,” she says.

“I know. I rent up here, but we will be staying hopefully.” I smile smoothly at her. “I can promise you, I won’t be stealing library books.”

She gives a small, forced laugh. “Of course not, sir. We just normally require a local address, for the database.”

I reel off where I’m renting, and she fills it into her computer. “I’ll get your card printed off. Do you want to look around and choose some books while I do so? You can borrow up to fifteen at any one time, normally. We ask the first-time people only take six. Then once you’ve returned those your limit goes up to fifteen.”

“Fifteen books?” Ellie breathes the words as if Sally has just told her she can take pure gold from the library.

“Yes.” Sally smiles at her.

“Do you ... do you have any recommendations?”

Sally thinks for a moment. “Well, what do you like to read?”

“Romance. Jane Austen. Nice books. Books with travel in them. Far away places.”

Sally comes out from behind her desk and joins us. “If you like Jane Austen, I can point you to some more classics.”

“Books where nice things happen. Or books where people defeat evil.”

Sally laughs. “There are a lot of books where people defeat evil. I’d say avoid crime fiction and horror but maybe fantasy? Young adult. In fact, the young adult fantasy section might be right up your alley.”

“Oh, I’m fully grown now,” Ellie says, and I bite back my laugh.

“Of course, but young adult is popular with all ages. I read it. It’s a huge genre.” She stops by a shelf. “Here. This is our selection. This one is really popular.”

Sally takes out a book, and Ellie gasps. “Ooh, look at the pages.”

The edges are gilt sprayed, and Ellie looks at that goddamn book the same way she looked at the serpent necklace which costs hundreds times more.

“Yes, we were lucky to get that as it’s the special edition.”

“Can we borrow this one?” Ellie asks.

“Of course.” Sally tucks it under her arm. “I’ll take it to the desk for you. It’s not one I’ve read but as I say it’s very popular. Oh, I have read this, and I loved it.” She pulls out another book, this one much plainer.

“I’ll take that one too. Thank you.”

“Feel free to browse this section. Then romance is just over there.” Sally points to two long shelves. “And the classics, which include Austen are over there. I like the Brontes myself, but they are a bit more tragic.”

“Do they end happily?” Ellie asks.

Sally thinks for a moment. “Some do, but definitely not Wuthering Heights, which in my opinion is one of the greatest books of all time, but not happy. Not happy at all.”

“I only want happy endings,” Ellie says firmly.

“It might be hard to ensure you get a happy ending unless you stick to romance.”

“Do those two have happy endings?” Ellie points to the two books Sally is holding. “Yeah, these do, but not all the fantasy does, and some are trilogies so they have sad bits before the last book, which might end happily.”

“Okay, thank you. I will read those two, but I’ll take the rest from romance.”

Ellie walks over to the romance shelves and begins browsing them. Sally watches her for a moment, a small frown on her face, and then she looks back at me.

“Thank you,” I say firmly.

She gives a faltering smile and walks back to her desk.

Thirty minutes later, we leave the library, with Ellie having a haul of six books. I dread to think how long she’ll take to pick when she can have fifteen. “Thank you, James,” she says softly as I place the books in the car.

“Do you want to get a coffee? Go for a walk?”

“No. I’d like to go home and start reading. Oh, maybe some cakes?”

I laugh. “I already bought you some, baby.”

“Thank you.” She reaches on her tiptoes and kisses me.

Ellie had what I hope was a happy day, and that night, as she sleeps deeply after I fucked her senseless and fed her wine, I reach under the bed and take out the bag from the jeweler.

I unlock the bracelet and carefully, so as not to wake her up, I wrap it around Ellie’s wrist.

I fasten it and lock the key in the small travel safe I carry with me. It nestles in next to the gold bars and my gun. I lock

the safe and enter the combination.

I slide back between the sheets and pull Ellie to me. I hold her tight in the dark, my thumb brushing over the bracelet.





# ELLIE

I AWAKE SUDDENLY, something making me aware of my surroundings. For a moment, panic fills me until meaty breath hits my cheek, and a warm, very wet tongue licks my mouth.

“Ugh, Xander.” I sit up and sleepily wipe my mouth as I glance at the bed next to me. James is not here. What time is it? I smile at Xander and want to laugh at how happy I am right now. I have my puppy, and James loves me, and I have all my books to read.

I reach out to pet Xander and stop, my hand hovering in midair. The gold of the bracelet glints in the sun creeping through a gap in the curtains. I frown. I didn't wear this yesterday. I haven't worn this since James upset me the other night.

He put this on me.

A rush of anger fills me. That's a dick move as Vicky would have said. I don't like her and can see she and her friends weren't for me, but I like that saying. *A dick move.* That's what this is.

I try to undo it, but I can't. What the hell? I look closer and an icy chill washes over me. There's something new on this bracelet. A lock.

James has locked this around my wrist, while I slept.

“That... He's ...” I struggle for the words, and then I find it. I find the right word. Red like my reddest pin. “That *fucker*,” I yell.

Xander flinches away from me.

“Not you baby. Not you.”

I say the swear word again, liking how it sounds on my tongue. “Fucker.”

“You called?”

I turn to see James leaning in the doorway.

“What is this?” I hold my wrist up.

“Your bracelet. With the tracker. The one I told you never to take off. I’ve made sure it doesn’t come off again. It’s locked.”

“I know. Take it off.”

“No.”

“James.”

“No, Ellie.”

“Fucker.” I shout.

He grins, sauntering into the room. “I like you with a dirty mouth. Maybe you can call me that the next time you’re shaking from coming so hard.”

“This”—I hold the bracelet close to him—“is a dick move. You did a dick move, James. A *double dick move*.”

I throw the covers off and storm into the bathroom, slamming the door behind me and starting the shower.

I’m halfway through washing my hair when he comes in. The door slides open, and I turn away from him, facing the wall. His hands snake around me, cupping my breasts and kneading them, flicking my nipples then pinching. I moan but shake my head.

“Baby. Say it again,” he murmurs.

“Say what?”

“Dick move.”

“No. Fuck you.”

“God,” he groans. “You with a filthy mouth is such a turn on, baby.”

I’m trying my hardest not to be turned on, but James slides one hand down over my stomach and then through my folds and strokes me there. He kisses my neck and presses his warm body against my back as he caresses me until my head falls back against him, and I sigh in pleasure at his touch.

One finger dips inside me, and he kisses my shoulder. “Put your hands up on the wall, baby.”

I do as he says, hands on the tiles, beyond caring now that I’m supposed to be angry with him. The bracelet sparkles as water rushes over it, reminding me of his betrayal, his control, his arrogance.

The thick length of him presses into me, and I shiver at the sensation, my nerve endings taut, all of me on edge.

Once he’s deep inside me, he moves slow and languid as if he’s torturing us both, drawing this out.

His finger works my clit while his cock stretches me and hits that place inside me that drives me wild, making me moan and gasp as I lose my mind.

I feel the orgasm building, despite fighting to contain my resolve. I’ll give into him again in this, the way I always do. He controls me with pleasure. Muddles my mind with ecstasy.

When I’m right on the edge, he wraps his other hand around my wrist, over the bracelet. “This is to keep you safe. I’ve tried to do all I can to make you happy, Ellie. My fucking beautiful, perfect, Ellie. I’d take the moon out of the sky and hang it in the corner of the room for you if you asked me to.”

I cry silently. His words hit so deep inside, and his thrusts make me insane with the need to come. As if he wants me on the edge a little longer, he stills deep inside me, pressing against that spot and making my head spin.

“This, though, is not up for negotiation.” His grip on my wrist tightens.

He's not holding hard enough to hurt but enough that I can feel the strength in his grip. If he wanted to, he could break my bones. The bracelet is on my good wrist. Not the one Maurice stamped on and injured.

"This is to keep you safe, and you will not take it off again. Anything else is up for discussion, but not this. I put it on while you were sleeping because I knew you'd fight me on it, and I didn't want to hurt you. I never want to hurt you, but you must wear this."

"To keep me safe," I repeat his reasoning.

He slides out and thrusts in again, and I press my cheek against the tiles, letting out a broken moan.

"Yes, Ellie. To keep you safe because if anything happens to you, I'll lose my fucking mind. You can hate me; I can deal with that. You can call me every name under the sun. Hit me if you want. I can take it all. If anything happens to you, though, it will tear me apart."

His next thrust is harder.

"You. Are. Mine. My everything. You don't get to put yourself at risk. Do you understand?"

There's a desperation to his voice. I nod against the tiles.

He fucks me with hard, deep thrusts, and he hits me so deep inside right where I need it. My fingers grip uselessly at the tiles, trying to find a purchase.

"I will always protect you."

The orgasm hits me so hard my legs turn to jelly. I cry out my release as wave after wave hits me. I'm dimly aware of him coming too.

And then I'm crumple to the floor. I try to sit so I'm not on my knees, but James has me. He lifts me in his arms and carries me out of the shower. He wraps me in a warm, fluffy towel and holds me against him, letting me cry.

"I love you." The words are out of me before I can stop myself.

I've tried not to say it, scared of what it means if I admit it aloud. Scared of how vulnerable it makes me.

"I fucking adore you," he says back. "I worship you, Ellie."

He carries me to the bed, both of us still wet, and rips the towel from me.

"What are you doing?" I squeak.

"I need you again," he says.

Then he slides into me. Hard all over again somehow. He doesn't fuck me this time. This is something else entirely.

It's slow.

Intense.

Overwhelming.

At one point, I close my eyes, scared of the bombardment of feelings.

"Don't hide from me," he commands. "Eyes on me."

I look at him, and I come in deep, rolling waves as he kisses me all over my face.

I turn over in his arms and drift toward sleep, and the glint of the bracelet isn't offensive anymore.

This bracelet embodies his love for me. It might be twisted the way he shows it, but he's going to care for me. Keep me safe.

Instead of being angry at the bracelet, I smile as I look at it, drifting into oblivion.



# ELLIE

TIME PASSES IN A FOG. I receive my forged identification from Konstantin Silvanov, and in three days, I will get two female close protection officers.

James says once they are here, I can go wherever I want, so long as they're with me. For now, I can only walk Xander with James. He tells me tramping through the woods on my own or only with Lorraine by my side isn't safe enough anymore. There's no direct threat, he says, but the fact the men Maurice knew have been discussing me at all has him worried. I have so many rules to follow. Don't answer the door; only let Lorraine do so. Don't go outside. Don't call anyone other than people programmed into my phone.

I might see all this as overbearing, but I think James is overly worried.

I'm not worried. They can't have any idea where I am. How would they? Maurice is dead. The crime scene was cleaned as per James' instructions. No one will know who was with me or where I went after.

We've been back to the library, and I chatted a little bit more to Sally. She seems nice, and I think she might become my friend. Maybe one day, Sally will be a contact in my phone. In the meantime, I have Lorraine, and James, and of course, Xander.

Most of all it's James and his love which keeps me warm. He loves me. Me. A man like him. I never thought in my wildest dreams as a teenager that I would ever meet a man like

James. My ambitions were to leave school at sixteen and get a job in a shop or an office so I could leave home. I might have liked to have gone to university, but it would have meant staying at home until aged eighteen to get my A-levels, and I already knew I couldn't bear that.

Then my father made the decision for me and sold me. Is he still alive? Is he with my cousin? Are they married? It's so sick.

"Lorraine," I call. "Hey, Lorraine." I race into the kitchen where she's baking.

"Yes, lovely?" She wipes her hands and glances at me.

"Do you have Facebook? On your phone?"

"Yes, why?"

"I want to see if my father is on there. Or my cousin. I want to know if they're still together. I should tell the authorities about them."

She frowns. "Ellie, I don't think you should. It might alert them to your presence."

"It's not right, though. Him and her. It's sick. What he did to me is so wrong too. I hate that he's gotten away with it all these years."

"Who got away with what?" James saunters into the room, and his presence takes my breath away. He looks so devilish in his three-piece suit.

"Where are you going dressed up like that?" Lorraine asks. "You look very smart."

"I always look smart," he replies. "And it's none of your business." His smile takes the edge off his words, though.

She laughs. "Well, that told me."

I want to know where he's going now. I don't ask, though, because I have something more pressing I want to talk about. "It's not fair that my father got away with what he did to me."

James closes the distance between us and grabs my hands. "Your father isn't going to get away with it," he says.



“How do you know? The authorities don’t know. I think we should tell them. We can do it anonymously.”

“They’ll likely do jack shit,” James says. “Unlike my contacts.” He sits on one of the stools, spreads his thighs, and pulls me between them. Hands on my hips, he brushes his thumbs over my waist. “I was going to talk to you about this when I had confirmation from my contacts that they could do the job, but now that you’ve mentioned it... Your father is alive. He doesn’t live with your cousin anymore. She’s now living with his best friend.”

“Barry?” I say in shock. Barry is horrible. I always hated him and his creepy laugh. He smells too, of nicotine and stale lager.

“Yeah, that’s him. Barry Milton.”

“Oh my God, that’s disgusting.” I wrinkle my nose.

James laughs and kisses me on the end of my nose. “It is. Your father is now with a woman named Sheila, and she’s a care worker. I don’t think she’s a kind one. She’s left a fair few placements, and there seems to be some accusations of things having gone missing when she was around, but nothing has been proven.”

I feel dirty hearing this. Tainted. I’m from these awful people, so surely, deep down, I must be like them? I rub at my skin absentmindedly as if I can rub their filth from me.

James stills the motion gently. “You’re not like them,” he says softly.

How does he know what I’m thinking?

“Your mother was a good person. Kind. You’ve said so. You’re all her, Ellie.”

I nod; I can’t speak because my throat feels tight, like a lump is there blocking the words. He doesn’t know that my mother might have been kind, but she was so fragile, and she drank too much to cope.

“Your father will be dealt with.” James looks right into my eyes. “I suggest you don’t ask me what that means. For your

own piece of mind. He won't be a danger to you any longer." He moves a tendril of hair from my forehead and smiles. "Ellie, is that the hat pin in your hair?"

I swallow the lump and nod.

Lorraine turns to look too. I know it's meant to keep a hat on your head, but I have it woven in between strands of my hair, which is twisted loosely on top of my head with some bits falling down.

"It looks good like that," Lorraine says appreciatively. "You're lucky you have such magnificently thick hair to hold it in place."

James strokes my cheek then takes hold of my bent wrist. "I also have an appointment for you, next week, with an orthopedic surgeon. He wants to see you in person, but he thinks there might be something they can do for your wrist. The danger is if it is left like this, you might have pain and problems with it when you get older."

"Would it require surgery?" I ask.

"Maybe, but it's very safe, Ellie." He glances at his watch. "I have to go." He kisses me once more, nods at Lorraine, and then he's gone.

I stare at my bent wrist and move it around. It doesn't hurt that much anymore, but some days it does ache. If I move it suddenly a certain way, I get a sharp bolt of pain.

Lorraine carries on with her baking, and liking her company, I go fetch my book and read in the kitchen as I sip a cup of tea.

"Okay. I'm done," Lorraine announces. "Phew that was a marathon session."

I look up and grin at the rows of cakes, scones, and cookies cooling on racks on top of the stove.

"I need a shower. I'm going to go get cleaned up and change into some comfy clothes. I have the evening free. How about we watch a movie together?" She wipes her forehead and leaves a smudge of flour.

I realize I don't know when James will be back. He normally tells me. He was dressed so smartly too. It's strange because although he does sometimes wear suits when he's working with Nico, he's not normally quite so formal.

I smile. "That would be nice."

Lorraine leaves the kitchen but not before she warns me not to give any of her baking to Xander. I glance down at him, curled in his basket by the door sleeping, and my heart melts. He's perfection. He does sleep a lot, though.

A puppy's life seems to be one big swing between frenetic activity and craziness, and then long periods of sleep.

I try to call James because without Lorraine in the room, it feels lonely. I don't like that he sometimes doesn't say where he's going. It makes me paranoid. He says he loves me, but maybe he has women all over the place he says these things to.

Chiding myself internally, I decide to grow the hell up for once and read. Self-soothing, my therapist calls it. An important skill, she says.

I'm deep in my book when the doorbell chimes loudly. I jump and put my hand to my heart, taking in a breath and shaking my head at my skittishness. I wait for Lorraine to answer it, but then recall she's in the shower and probably hasn't heard it.

Yawning, I amble to the front door and peer through the peephole, prepared to tell the delivery person to drop the package on the porch. James says I can't answer the door, so I'll get Lorraine to retrieve it.

Instead of a delivery person, it's Vicky.

"You can't be here," I say immediately, and guilt hits me hard as soon as the words are out. She's crying, and her eyes are a mess of streaked makeup. Is she okay? Has someone hurt her?

Vicky holds her hand up. "Babe. I swear I didn't know what Kevin would do. I'm so sorry. Did you know that he was beaten up? I think it was your fella. I mean, I can't prove it,

but I think he's violent, Ellie. I've been worried. I came to see if you are okay."

"You have to go," I say firmly. "You can't be here."

I open the door a crack and point for her to go. "You need to leave. If James returns and you're here, Vicky, he'll be very angry."

"Is he hitting you?" she asks in all seriousness.

"What? No. Don't be ridiculous."

"Then, why are you scared of me being here? You didn't say *you* didn't want me here. You said I *can't* be here. Because of him. His orders. Bestie, I think you're being abused, and you don't even know it."

"Vicky, I am not being abused. Trust me; I know what abuse is, and James would never hurt me. Now please, leave."

"So, because of Kevin being a dick, we can't be friends?" she asks. "I am your friend, Ellie, I swear it. I care about you. It's why I'm here. God, this is so hard because I don't want to hurt you."

"Vicky. I need to get back inside," I say.

"Ellie." She takes hold of my wrist, and her grip causes a flare of pain. She pulls me out onto the porch, and I close the door softly.

I dare not pull out of her grasp in case it does some damage to the already mangled ligaments there.

"Vicky. Let go of me."

"I will. I want to show you this first, though. I'm sorry. I hate to do this to you. Do you know where James is now?"

"In a meeting," I lie. He probably is, but I don't know for sure where he is, and he isn't answering his phone.

"He's with a woman." Vicky holds my gaze.

My heart stops before it starts again in a chaotic rhythm.

"No, he's not." I shake my head as if I can dislodge those awful words and the terrible images they provoke.

*He loves me. He loves me. He loves me.*

I repeat the mantra internally. A shield against her dreadful words.

“He is.”

“He’s in a meeting, Vicky. I need to go.” I try again to pull away. I step back against the house, and she holds her phone up to me.

“Look. He’s with *her*. This is him and her last week.”

I blink and try to look away, but then I turn back as if my neck isn’t under my own control anymore. It’s definitely James. He has his arm around the woman, and they’re laughing. They look like they are in love. Happy. Normal. She looks like exactly the sort of woman a man like James would be with. Beautiful. Elegant. Sexy.

All the things I’m not.

“He goes to see her. Why do you think he gets so dressed up? He’s with her right now, in a bar having a fancy lunch. Making you look like a fool in front of everyone.” She starts to cry, and that is what does it.

These fresh tears break the damn in me and crack my heart wide open until it’s a bloody, torn mess.

Vicky’s tears are the most horrifying thing I’ve ever seen because how can she be crying so badly if this isn’t real? She’s crying because she’s telling me the worst thing ever, and she is my friend. It’s killing her to do this, but she’s only being honest with me to protect me from any further heartache.

She flicks through her phone, showing me four more pictures of James with the woman. One of them is clearly outside the local bar in town and his hand is on her bottom. I feel sick. The world tilts and spins.

“Listen. I’ll drive you to him right now,” she says as she pulls me onto the gravel.

I follow her dazedly. I can’t make my mind catch up with all this. Do I want to go and see this for myself? No, I realize.

I don't. I wouldn't get over it. Ever. Would he laugh at me?  
Pretend he doesn't know me?

I pull away.

I can't do this.

I need my room.

*My pins.* I need my pins.

All I can think about is scratching and letting the pain find an outlet. I swore I wouldn't do it anymore, and I haven't, but this is too much. I can't process it.

*No*, I tell myself firmly. You can't use the pins that way. My therapist. *Sandra*. I can ring her. She gave me her number and said I could call in an emergency. She said it's not normally something she does, but in my case, she made an exception.

She thinks James is bad for me; I know it. Now, I see she feels that way. I need her.

"Vicky," I say. "I need to talk to my therapist."

"Let me show you where he is first." She pulls again, and the pain radiating through my wrist is too much to bear.

"You're hurting me; let go."

"For fuck's sake; come and get her," she yells.

Who is she talking to?

The sound of a door sliding has me turning to look in the direction of the noise. A van door opens, and two men clamber out.

Oh, no. *No. No. No.*

I stare at Vicky. "What did you do?" I whisper.

"Serves you right, bitch. Kevin is fucked up because of your sick boyfriend. Anyway, they paid me too much to say no."

The men grab me, and before I can scream for help, a hand clamps over my mouth.

I'm hauled backward over the gravel. I'm only wearing slippers, and one comes off. The tiny stones shred the skin of my heel like shards of glass.

Pain rushes through me, taking my breath away as I'm thrown into the back of the van. One of the men pats me down. He grabs my necklace and rips it from my throat, throwing it onto the gravel. Then he continues to search me.

He takes my phone from my pocket and throws it to the other man, who smashes it under his boot.

His hand glides over my bracelet, then he fumbles with the clasp in his thick hands. "Fucking thing is locked in place."

"Has to be a tracker. Here." He hands the man something and they hold my wrist down and out. I fight against the oafs, scared they'll hurt me.

A sharp slap to the side of my head causes me to cry out as I wince and attempt to cover my head, but I'm so dizzy it's overwhelming. They get the tool around the bracelet and cut, once, twice, then they reposition it and cut it a third time, and the chain falls apart. They kick it out of the van door and then bang on the ceiling.

The door slides closed, leaving me in darkness as we begin to move, and I start to scream.





# JAMES

MY PHONE RINGS for the third time. It's on silent, but it vibrates in my pocket. This call follows straight on from the preceding one. After a moment it stops dancing in my pocket.

Annoyed, I focus on what the lawyer is saying. "The property is yours to purchase subject to these conditions. If they are amenable, I would say we have ourselves a deal. Your offer was simply too good for the owner to refuse."

I smile with satisfaction. Soon I will own that house. I have Ellie. I will be running the business for Nico and me up here. I will have everything I want for the first time in my life.

My phone goes again, and concern creeps in. "Give me a second, will you?" I ask the lawyer.

I take the phone out of my pocket. There's one missed call from Ellie, and then three consecutive calls from Lorraine. My heart lurches. I snap a sharp, *what*, as I leave the office and close the door.

"She's gone," Lorraine cries.

*Ice.*

Freezing cold ice replaces my blood. I put my arm out to steady myself against the wall as the world stops being a solid entity and turns into a tumbling nightmare of insanity. She can't be. The tracker would have alerted me.

"The alarm hasn't gone off to say the tracker is moving."

"I found it on the gravel outside of the house."

Holy fuck. It's as if my insides are about to explode and leave nothing but bloody debris all over these pristine walls.

"When?" I manage to focus on the main thing.

"I don't know."

"How? How the fuck did you let this happen?"

She's dead. Lorraine is as good as dead.

"I went for a shower. I came down and the front door was open, Xander was in the garden, and she was gone."

Fuck. Fuck. Fuck.

I should have had security in place from the moment I took her. I've never been as paranoid as Nico. I don't have the Andretti name. I don't have enemies from centuries back in the old country as he does, simply waiting for a time to strike. None of that applies to me. Even my work for Nico is discreet. I'm his lawyer to all intents and purposes. Although, I ceased being that a long time ago. The much dirtier work I do for him is mostly under the radar, and anyone who is aware of it would be wary of crossing me.

I might not have the reputation of someone like Andrius, but people who know about me, tend to fear me. I've never needed security, but the moment I took her, I should have had it in place.

I've been keeping an eye on the group through Konstantin's intel, and there's been no chatter between them about having found Ellie. No one has been asking around in the village either. I've kept an eye on that. No strange men loitering. No one asking about a blonde girl. So how the hell did they find her?

How did I not know they were so damn close?

Hubris. That's what has led me to this moment. Belief in my own ability to keep Ellie safe blinded me to reality.

Hands shaking, I access the house security feed. When I rented the place, I made sure to only rent somewhere with good security. The house is full of antiques, and so the owner

always has it covered. I paid extra to have access to the feed myself. Now, I rewind the footage and watch.

A vehicle drives up the track to the house and stops a little away from the door. Vicky gets out and walks right up to the door.

That fucking bitch is dead. I'll wring the life from her with my bare hands.

Ellie opens the door, and they talk. Vicky shows Ellie something. What is she showing her? Then Ellie leaves the porch and walks out onto the gravel driveway in front of the house. She starts to pull away, seemingly wanting to get back to the house, but Vicky tugs her toward the van. Vicky turns to the van. I think she's saying something, and the doors slide open. Two big men jump out. Ball caps are pulled low on their heads, so I can't see their features at all. They grab Ellie and bundle her into the back of the van.

Vicky leaps into the front, and the vehicle roars down the drive. I can't make out the registration clearly, but I can send the footage to Konstantin Silvanov and his men and see if they can clean it up. I wonder if their hacker can get into Vicky's phone. I doubt the girl has state of the art security on there.

If it's an iPhone, it will be difficult unless I can get to it, but an Android might be easier to hack. Then again, if she has an email address she uses across devices, I bet Silvanov's man can get into that.

I have a certain level of ability myself, but right now I don't have the time to be doing that, not when I need to be actively going after Ellie.

Poking my head back into the lawyer's office, I tell him to proceed and that I need to leave. I'm running out of the building and dialing at the same time.

Nico picks up on the second ring.

"Yes?" His tone is annoyed, but also sleep-coated.

A throaty laugh next to him lets me know he's in bed with his Cinders.

“They’ve taken Ellie.”

“What the fuck? I’ll be there in thirty minutes.”

“No.” I reach my car. “I don’t know where they might be taking her or why.” I don’t add that I don’t need Nico’s impulsivity and hot headedness right now, so I think fast. “Don’t leave Cindy unprotected with this going down. Can I take Adam?”

“Yes, of course. Whoever you need.”

“Konstantin is still here, and I need him to ask his guy back at their base, the one who is a good hacker, to see if he can find her.”

“Let me at least do that for you. Do you have any idea where to begin?”

“Yes. A local girl, fucking piece of shit called Vicky was in on it. I can send you her full name, national insurance number, date of birth, and address, plus her phone number. If you can get all that to Konstantin, I’ll forward you the footage I have from the security feed. Send it all to him and ask him to get his guy to investigate for me.” I sigh. “Although, I’m not sure how fucking good Silvanov’s man is since we had no sign of this coming from them.”

There’s a long beat, and Nico says, “I’ll go straight to the Greek guy, Damen, that they use sometimes. Reece is good, but I’ve heard that Damen is the best at hacking and getting into people’s information. I don’t know him personally, but if I say that we are working with Konstantin and also the Volkovs, I can’t see him refusing to help. Send me the info, and I’ll get Damen’s number and call now. I’ll give him your details and tell him to send any updates to you. I’ll get Adam to you now. Where shall I tell him to go?”

“Tell him to meet me at the house as soon as he can. Can you give him five guys? Armed.”

“Yes. If you need more just let me know. I’ll let London know so they can get a plane ready in case you need more men in a hurry.”

“I’m hoping it’s a small group who’ve taken her. I have no idea where they will be going. I don’t even know what they want with her, Nico.” My voice catches, and I swallow hard.

What if they want to break her? Rape her?

My mind is close to shattering at the thought, and I push it aggressively away.

“They’re fucking fundamentalist weirdos, right?”

“Yes,” I manage to grind out.

“Might work in our favor. Whatever it is they want to do, I doubt it is going to be sudden or violent. I see no other reason for them to take her than to make her someone’s bride, the way Maurice wanted to do.”

It makes sense. In some of the correspondence that Reece had read through, they’d told Maurice more than once that if he didn’t do things correctly, they’d look at taking Ellie. I knew they were talking about her recently. I thought they had no idea where she was, though. Still, I should have acted sooner. I thought we were safe. I had cameras. She had instructions not to answer the door. I was only going to be out of the house for an hour, and in three days she would have started with twenty-four-seven protection.

I know she’s been chomping at the bit and wanting to get out, but why did she answer the door?

I’m ricocheting between blaming myself, and blaming her, and neither are useful.

“I’m going,” I say.

“James, just drive fucking carefully. If you wrap yourself around a lamppost, you’re no use to her. I’ll get Adam and some men on their way right now.”

“Thank you.”

He hangs up, and I peel out into the traffic. I’m only five minutes away from home when my phone goes. I don’t recognize the number, and I punch the button on the steering wheel that lets me answer while driving. Is this them?

The voice that greets me has an accent, and it doesn't sound Northern European. So not likely to be the men who took Ellie.

“James?”

“Yes, who is this?”

“Damen. I got your details from Nico Andretti. Konstantin Silvanov vouched for you, and so I've done a little digging.”

“And?”

“So far, all I've found out is that Vicky received some emails with fake pictures of you and another woman two days ago. I can only assume she used those to get Ellie out of the house. This is all assumption so far, but I presume they waited until you were out, and then Vicky used those pictures to get Ellie to step outside. I've seen the footage; they grabbed her easily once she was outside. You don't have security?”

His words are a damning accusation. “Arriving in a matter of damn days. She had strict instructions not to open the fucking door.”

“I have armed guards, dogs, security cameras, floodlights, and drones.”

Jesus fuck. “Thanks for the tips.”

“And it still wouldn't mean my wife was safe,” he finishes.

“What?”

“Don't beat yourself up. Get better security, but remember it doesn't make us secure. Not if someone really wants to get to us. I have a friend. Did everything I have done. They cut the electricity supply which disabled his security systems and landed a fucking chopper on the roof. Took his wife and kid.”

“What happened?” I grind out.

“They were killed.”

“Holy fuck. Have you called to give me a heart attack?”

“No. I'm advising better security but also saying not to beat yourself up about it because it might not have made any

difference anyway. Look at it this way. They took her without any violence, which means less risk of harm to her. So far, I don't know where they're taking her. They seem to have purposefully muddied the waters; their messages are at times contradictory. I think they know people have been monitoring their conversations, and that means it's hard to tell what is and isn't real. I do know they think she's special. That's one thread that has been there from their earliest communications with Maurice. That means they are unlikely to hurt her."

"Special how?"

"They think she's been sent to them. That the way she was given to Maurice was a sign. They were going to have Maurice marry her and come stay with them. The idea was that they'd have kids, and those kids would be blessed. Apparently, they believe this fucking crazy ass shit that so far as I can tell they've entirely made up themselves. They have written that a woman would be gifted to them, one with fair hair, and eyes of blue, blah blah. This woman would birth the child who would become their leader, and eventually take over the world in a glorious new dawn." He laughs. "That's the cliff notes, and be fucking grateful, my friend, you didn't have to speed read through the pile of bilge they believe."

I want to shout at him to get on with it, and as if he hears my thoughts, he does.

"Then you killed Maurice and took their golden-haired Wonder Woman, and now they need her back because if they don't have her marry someone and become part of one of their groups, the new world leader can't be born. The bad thing is, they're crazier than a box of frogs. The good news is, if they really believe this shit, then they aren't going to hurt her, and I assume they'll want to prepare for a wedding, which buys us time. I'll try to get a fix on who took her, where they are, and where they are headed, but so far, I'm stumbling about in the dark. It might take me some time." He sighs. "Reece has sent me everything he has, and Reece is good, but I'm better. He didn't have their entire lunatic manifesto, which I already do. I'm going to focus on this solely for as long as it takes, and as soon as I have news, you'll be the first to know."

“Okay. You do that, and I’ll try my own methods.”

I turn the car and steer into the village instead of home. I need to find Vicky. I doubt she’s at home, and of course, when I get there her mother tells me she’s going away for a couple of weeks with friends.

Where will she go? Will she take a taxi? I call the cab companies and pretend to be the police, using all the right language to get each dispatcher to talk to me, and none have a case for Vicky booked in. Doesn’t mean she didn’t use a false name, but she’s a nail technician not an agent for MI5, so I’m not sure she’ll be using much subterfuge. Maybe they gave her a ride somewhere?

My phone rings again. Same number. I answer immediately.

“Yes.”

“Got an ID on the van.”

Holy shit, this man really is good.

“Give me a minute.” I pull in and park, then open the glove compartment and take out a note pad, using my teeth to pull the top off a pen, I jot the registration and van model down.

“Even better,” Damen says. “I got a ping from a traffic camera; they’ll be getting a speeding ticket.”

“Where are they?”

“Heading west.”

“West?”

Then it clicks. Their groups. They have one in southern Ireland. There are no ferry crossings to Ireland from Scotland, only to Northern Ireland, but they probably won’t be using a public ferry.

“They’re taking a boat,” I say. “I bet to Ireland.”

“Same conclusion as I reached.”

“What road were they speeding on?”



He tells me, and I note it.

“Okay. Let me know if you have any more info as the intel is discovered. Thank you again, Damen. If you ever need anything, then I’m in your fucking debt.”

“Nah, you’re all good. Konstantin is in my debt, which means you’re in his. And good luck with that.” He chuckles and hangs up.

I reach into the back of the car, behind my seat. I still have an old school roadmap in here, and I pull it out and open it, staring at the roads from here to the west coast. I mark the road they’ve been stopped on and then trace the route back to here.

I follow the route Konstantin gave me and smile. There is a train station on that route.

I pause for a moment, sidetracked by a thought. Holy fuck, how good is Damen to have hacked into UK speed cameras? Or ... does he have contacts here? Either way, that’s seriously high-level shit to be getting information from. Christ, who the hell are these guys?

That’s a question for another day, though. I circle the train station with my pen, send a message to Adam, and turn the car around. I can be there in fifteen minutes. I hope that my hunch is correct. I also pray that whatever train Vicky needs doesn’t arrive before I get there.



# JAMES

THE TRAIN STATION is one of those uniquely British village stations. One platform on either side. The old building and archway leading through to the first platform has the date 1843 on it. It is surrounded by hills and beautiful scenery, and if I wasn't focused on other things, I might take the time to appreciate the history it is steeped in.

I pull the ball cap I took from my car down to cover my face and turn right.

I step onto the platform and see her immediately. A lone girl, sitting on a bench, wrapped against the cold in a thick coat, sipping at a coffee from a paper cup.

She scuffs her ankle against the concrete platform repeatedly. She's nervous. On edge. She alternates from scuffing to foot tapping, and she blows out white breath into the cold air.

There's no one else around. The station loudspeaker crackles to life, and a robotic announcement commences. I take my chance.

Slowly, and oh-so-quietly, I walk toward the bench, making sure to stay out of her line of sight.

I bend over, and as if I'm her lover, gently caress her throat from behind. She gasps and jerks. Slowly, but surely, I tighten my grip, my fingers splaying around the expanse of her throat. I lean down and whisper, "If you scream, I'll snap your fucking neck." There are cameras hidden in plain sight, so I ensure to make this appear affectionate. "You will get up and

put your arm around my back as if we're a couple, and then we're walking out of the station together. The alternative is not something you'll enjoy. Understood?"

"Yes," she says.

"Good. Come on. Get up and give me a hug. Make it look realistic for the cameras, and we'll walk calmly out of here and have a little chat. That way I won't have to hurt you."

She stands and turns to me. I see the moment the panic flashes in her eyes. She's going to bolt. I can catch her in seconds, but it means I might have an issue with creating a situation with the authorities. Fuck.

Vicky pivots and tears off down the platform. The girl can run fast. I wonder idly if she did sports at school. I walk after her, not wanting to be filmed running too. I shrug as if she's playing a game. My face can't be seen, but I hardly want to be on CrimeStoppers with the presenter asking if anyone has seen this man. After all, there might be someone who recognizes me despite the ball cap, my sloped shoulders, and the way I'm walking with an entirely different gait than usual.

The moment I'm off the platform, and out through the passage, I see her racing down the road. There isn't anything around other than houses.

Is she going to go and hammer on a door? Beg for help? I think fucking not. The moment I'm out of range of the station cameras, I sprint after her. In the military we trained to do long haul running. Jogging at a slow pace for miles with heavy backpacks. Back in the day, though, I was a sprinter at school and for a few years after, I broke the regional record for the one hundred meters.

It takes me less than a minute to catch up with Vicky. I grab her and spin her around, pushing her up against the wall of the nearby building.

"Don't fucking scream," I growl at her. "I only want to talk."

"I don't know anything!" she protests.

"Well, then, you'll be fine, won't you?"

“I’m not going with you.”

Sick of her shit, I pick her up and throw her over my shoulder and jog back to the car. I had taken care to park outside of the view of the station cameras, and I’ve not seen any others on the streets. Unlike most British cities, which are full of CCTV, tiny places like this don’t tend to have, or need, security.

“Put me down, you arsewipe, bastard, piece of shit,” she screeches, and her swearing gets more creative as I near the car. “I’m not going with you dickwipe, fuckface.”

Placing her unsteady feet on the ground, I yank open the back door, and shove her into the car.

She tries to crawl across the seat and grab the other door. I reach into the console between the two front seats and take out the device. Then I deliver enough voltage to make her piss her panties.

Throwing the taser onto the front seat of the car, I grab the zip ties and tie her hands and ankles while she’s defenseless and moaning in agony. I slam the door closed, climb into the driver’s seat, and pull out of the car park.

Vicky struggles to sit.

“If you sit up, or start fucking screaming, I’ll pull over and gag you too. Or knock you out. Your choice. I’m not going to hurt you. I need to ask you some questions is all.”

It’s a lie. I’m going to do whatever it takes to get my answers. Then I might just kill her anyway for putting my angel through this hell.

I don’t park at the front of the house as per usual, but pull into the garage around the side, and from there, enter the house via the internal garage door. Vicky is slung over my shoulder, and we intersect Lorraine who walks out of the kitchen. She raises her brows.

“James, we don’t have anywhere set up here for this.”

“You are lucky you’re still breathing. Be grateful this piece of shit is my current priority. There’s no time for me to take

her to Nico's house and use the cellar. There's a cellar here, right?"

"Yes, but it's damp, no lighting. Full of spiders." She ignores what I say about her being lucky to be alive. Right now, she's all business, but she knows there's going to be a reckoning.

I laugh. "That's perfect. Big cellar spiders, dark and damp. Just what I need."

"Spiders?" Vicky shrieks.

"Massive ones," Lorraine replies, winking at me. "Really big."

I ignore the wink because if she thinks it's that easy, she's sorely mistaken.

"No. Don't you dare take me down there." Vicky bucks and jerks to break free of my grasp.

This is going to be easier than I thought. "I'm taking you down there and leaving you in the dark until you tell me where she is."

"I don't know where she is." Vicky kicks her feet and thrashes her head like a wild boar, tied up and ready for the slaughter. Her animalistic instincts are driving her fear, and that's good. A tragic death during ramped up adrenaline only intensifies the onslaught of suffering.

"Okay, even if that is true, you can tell me more information. How did you get the pictures? Who contacted you? Names? Numbers."

"Put me down, and I'll talk. I promise. Just don't take me down there."

I let her slide to the ground and watch her for a beat. "Don't play games with me, Vicky. I'm not a good man, and I'll hurt you if I must in order to get the information I need. I'd rather get it without hurting you." The lie slides so easily from my tongue.

She juts her chin and narrows her eyes. "I know you're not a good person. You beat Kevin up. You're not going to beat a

girl up, though. If you do that, and I go the police, you'll serve a long sentence. You've probably been seen on some cameras taking me."

"Guess what?" I lean in close until my nose is almost touching her forehead. "I don't give a shit. Do you know what I do for a living?"

She shakes her head.

"I make people talk. It's what I do. You're not innocent, Vicky. If you go to the police, how will you explain what you did? I mean, I have you on camera enticing Ellie out of the house and getting her bundled into a van. Do you know the sentence for kidnapping?"

She pales. "I didn't kidnap Ellie."

"You were part of a conspiracy to kidnap Ellie. An innocent girl who has already been abused for years by a man who is part of the same group you've led to her. Do you know what they do to people like you? In prison? Women who sell other women out? Imagine how popular you'll be when your fellow inmates find out you led human traffickers to an innocent young woman."

She gasps. "They're not human traffickers. They're Irish lads, and my cousin, Finley, knows one of them. It's how they got in touch with me. Said they'd heard that I lived here and asked me if I'd seen a girl and sent me a picture. They said they needed to find her because she'd run away. They told me that *you* were the one who took her."

I grab her wrist and forcefully drag her into the kitchen. Pulling out a chair, I roughly shove her into it. "Even if you're stupid enough to have believed all of that, I think the bubble must have burst about the time they bundled her into the van." Grabbing a pen and paper, I viciously grasp the back of her neck, causing her to cry out in pain. I tilt her head until she's staring down at the paper. "Names, phone numbers, everything you can think of. Write it all down."

I undo her wrists from the binds and shove the pen into her hand.

There's a long pause, and then with shaky hands she starts to scribble some names down. "I'm scared," she whispers. "They might come after me. What if they hurt me?"

"Darling, that's the least of your worries. If you don't give me the information I want, you're dead."

Her head whips around, and she stares at me, utter panic bleeds from her eyes, and I hold her gaze, putting all the cold, disgusted revulsion I hold for her in mine. I don't feel white hot anger for Vicky. Instead, there's nothing but a frigid disdain and disgust. I'd gut her like a pig right this minute and let her bleed out if it weren't for the fact I want her to talk.

As the last bit of color leeches from her cheeks, and she realizes I'm not making idle threats, tears dribble down her cheeks and drip from the tip of her nose. I tap the paper with one finger. "Names. Numbers. Anything you can think of. Where they are from in Ireland? Then when you're done, you're going to call your fucking cousin."

She continues writing and snuffles, occasionally wiping her nose on her sleeve.

"That's all that I know; I swear it." She pushes the paper toward me and wipes her snotty face again.

"Call your cousin."

She takes out her phone, pulls up a number, and presses the green dial button.

"On speaker," I order.

She does as I say. It rings three times, and then a deep male voice answers.

"Yo, cuz."

I roll my eyes.

"Finley?" I say.

"Who is this?"

"I'm with Vicky."

"Is she okay?"



“She is for now. She won’t be if you don’t help me. How do you know the men you put in contact with Vicky? The ones asking about a young woman.”

“The Jamesons?” he asks.

I glance at the names Vicky has written down. Two have the surname Jameson. “Yes,” I say. “How do you know them?”

“They’re a family. Lives on a commune five miles from here.”

“Where is here, exactly?”

“I’m a few miles out of the Black Valley. They live there. It’s pretty remote.”

“Why did you give them Vicky’s number? Are you in the habit of giving strange men your cousin’s number?”

He scoffs, “Who the fuck are you, mate?”

“Finley, please just answer him,” Vicky sobs.

“What the fuck are you doing to her?” he shouts.

“I haven’t touched a hair on her ugly head, but if you don’t start talking that will change.”

“Fuck you.”

I fist Vicky’s hair and jerk her head back harshly. She screams as I knew she would. I didn’t even do it that hard, but she’s terrified now. On edge. Her body is primed to react to everything as if it’s a threat to her life.

“Please, Finley,” she pleads on a strangled breath. God, she’s pathetic.

“What the fuck, man? Okay, listen. I only know them vaguely. As I say, they have their own little community. Religious folk they are. God fearing.”

I bite back the sarcastic retort to that pile of shit.

“They’ve known me a long while, and I’ve talked before of maybe heading over there for work, where Vicky lives. It’s not much bigger than here, of course, but there’s much more

construction happening over in Scotland than here, and I'm a roofer by trade."

"Yeah, don't need your life story. Just the pertinent details. What did they ask you?"

"They said that they knew I had a cousin over this way, and they'd heard that a girl who was missing from their commune was over there. Some man had taken her. They showed me a picture of her. I contacted Vicky and asked if some blonde girl had turned up recently and she said yes. She told me she seemed strange. As if she'd been locked away for years from normal people. Vicky felt sorry for her and had tried to befriend her, but it went wrong when the man she was staying with beat up one of her friends. I knew then that it added up that the lads were telling the truth. I gave them Vicky's details."

"You know the rest, now please let me go," Vicky begs.

"How many are in this commune?" I ask Finley, ignoring Vicky.

"It's got to be around one hundred, I think."

Shit.

"Mostly women and children."

Okay, better.

"How many men?"

"Oh, around twenty, maybe."

"Twenty men to eighty women and children? You don't think that's strange?" I ask.

"They have their own ways. Some of the men take more than one wife. Sounds like more strife than is worth it, but who am I to judge? The women aren't really seen about much, but the men do odd jobs now and again for money. Garden work, some brick laying, road crew work; that kind of thing."

He sighs. "They've never caused any trouble for anyone."

"Well, the woman they took isn't from their compound. She's not theirs."

“Who is she?” He sounds confused.

“She’s mine, Finley. And anyone who stands between me and her is a dead man, or woman, walking.”

Vicky shivers.

“Are you going to let my cousin go?” he asks softly. “She didn’t know. She thought she was doing the right thing.”

“Oh,” I say with a laugh. “I’m not sure about that. I think Vicky knew all along what she was doing wasn’t quite right, but she didn’t like Ellie, so it didn’t matter. Luckily for your cousin, I want Ellie back more than I want to punish Vicky for being a scheming little bitch. You’ve also gone a long way toward helping keep her intact with your helpful answers. One more thing. One word of our conversation gets to those fuckers in that commune, and Vicky won’t be intact any longer. Understood?”

He coughs. “Listen, man, I don’t know who you are, but I’m not down with anyone taking a woman against her will. If what you say is true, then you don’t have to threaten Vicky. I’ll help get her back anyway. I mean it. If you need any help on this end, call me. But don’t hurt Vicky, or I’ll have to come after you.”

“You and whose army?” I ask childishly.

“Oh, I have an army alright, friend.” His voice is calm and purposeful.

I take a pause and reassess, “What army?” I ask, curious.

“Let me just say that we have our own way of doing things around here, and if anyone hurts family, you are in trouble with all of us, and we’re a large clan.” He clears his throat again. “As I say, I’m glad to help. I understand why you’re upset with Vicky, but you touch a hair on her head, and you’ll not find it easy to get your girl back if you’re up against them and us.”

“Who the fuck is us?”

“The Cahills. Ask anyone around here, and they’ll tell you. Our clan puts the fear of God in folk. I want Vicky back at

home, every damn hair in place. Okay? And any help you need getting your girlie back, I'm available."

"Right."

I hang up.

"You didn't promise him you wouldn't hurt me," Vicky whispers.

"I don't make promises I can't keep."

Something is niggling at the back of my mind. How the fuck did they know where she was? They went to Vicky via her cousin who lives near them. It makes sense, but what doesn't make sense is how they knew Ellie was here. So far as I know they haven't been asking around.

I turn to Vicky. "Have you or any of your friends had men asking after Ellie? Asking after a girl with blonde hair?"

She frowns. "No. I mean not until I had the call from the men Finley passed my details onto."

"How did they know she was here?" Lorraine voices the question in my mind.

I swipe my hand over my mouth and shake my head. "I've no fucking idea. Pour me a bourbon." I don't ask—I demand.

As I watch Lorraine making the drink, my gaze falls on the broken remains of Ellie's bracelet with the tracker lying glistening on the counter. Those fuckers. They must have used bolt cutters to get it off. She must be terrified. Alone. Scared.

"When they took her, did you go in the van with them?"

"Only to my house. They dropped me there. Gave me the money. Then they told me to get out of town for a while. They said it was best because you were going to be angry and might come after anyone who had helped them. I had enough cash to get away for a while, and I was going to go to London to see my friend. Have a few weeks partying."

I take the drink Lorraine passes to me and down half of it. The fire of the alcohol does little to calm the ice inside of me. "Let me get this straight. You saw a woman being taken

against her will and then you simply decided to go and have a few weeks partying with your friends?”

She shakes her head. “They said they were taking her home. My cousin said there was a woman who had gone missing from their community. It made sense. Suddenly, you turn up here, renting this house with some woman no one has seen before. The minute we came and did her hair and nails, I knew it was weird.” She shrugs. “I had no reason to disbelieve what they told me.”

I add Jo to the list of people to kill. If she hadn’t brought Vicky in to replace her girl who was sick at the last minute, then none of this would have unfolded this way. As I’m ruminating and building myself into a worse and worse mood, I fire a text off to Nico, letting him know where I think she is. I also copy Konstantin and Damen in. Any extra information to be passed around between sources is only going to help.

“They still would have known where she was, somehow.” Lorraine’s voice cuts through the silence. “They’d have taken her eventually, James.”

“In two days, she’d have had round the clock security. I should have had it in place sooner. You never should have let her answer the door. She knew not to. Why did she open the fucking door?” My head swivels in the direction of Vicky. “Because she saw someone she thought was a fucking friend on the other side.”

“James, they might have used much more violent means to attempt to take her if you’d had security in place.”

“So?” I shout at Lorraine.

The huge lump of ice in my stomach is starting to crack. Like a great iceberg approaching warm waters, it’s starting to splinter and shear.

“She was taken without violence. It might work out for the best.”

“Say it might be for the best one more time.” I barely recognize my own voice.

Lorraine snaps her mouth shut. Wise woman.

My phone rings, shattering through the coldness of the moment. It's Nico. "Guess who is back in Ireland visiting family?"

"I don't have time for guessing games, Andretti."

He chuckles as if this is funny. "Carrick."

"He is?"

"Yes, he is. Ask me where his family live?"

"Is it near the Black Valley?"

"It sure is, fucker. Call him. He's waiting."

I want to kiss that ugly bastard Andretti, but he's not here, so I mumble a hurried thanks and hang up.

Carrick picks up immediately. "Hear those freaks in the valley have your lass."

"Yes. They're not there yet, though. They're traveling. I think they'll be taking a boat."

"Ultimately, though, they're bringing her back here, right? That's what the intel suggests?"

"It's not certain, but they seem to think she's special and chosen, so I presume so. I fucking hope so."

"I bet they are bringing her here. They have women there. None are local."

"I heard they were all happy to be there."

"From whom?" He sounds curious.

"A kid who tells me his family is a big name around there. Not to be messed with. The Cahills."

He barks out a laugh. "The Cahills? Sure, they're an annoyance. Petty thievery. A little bit of fighting now and again. Anti-social behavior. You know the score."

"So, your average problem family." I rub my aching eyes.

"Exactly. They know jack shite about the stuff that really matters."

“He says there’s only about twenty men there at the compound, but eighty women and children?”

“Bullshite. There’s twenty-five men, and thirty women, and last we checked twenty kids. Some of the men have more than one wife. Four men have none. They have a leader. He only has one wife. So far. Rumor is that he thinks he has another one on the way.”

“You heard this when?”

“Two days ago. Didn’t think anything of it, until your partner called. Don’t you think it’s odd?” he says.

“What is?”

“The Gordian Knot tying us all together. What are the odds? The coincidence of it all. It must mean something. I’m destined to be doing business with you guys.” He laughs. “Don’t be undercutting me now with anyone else. Not when I’m about to go save your lass.”

Hope fills me, but caution overrides it. “She’s not there yet, and I don’t want to risk her being hurt.”

“Oh, she won’t be. They get supplies from some in my family.”

“They supply those fuckers?”

There’s a moment of silence. “It’s not our place to ask the whys and wherefores of how other men live.”

“You think all those women are there consensually?”

“Seems that way. My cousin, who takes them medicines and drugs they need, says the commune seems happy enough. Says they’re fuckin’ weird, and as he puts it, a filling short of a sandwich, but harmless. Or, at least, he thought so. We now know different. Just because they’ve taken your girl, doesn’t mean they took every girl there.”

“One is too fucking many,” I growl.

“James. I’m offering to help get your woman back. I’m not offering to take on a crusade. You want to do so, that’s on you. If you want Ellie back, let me help.”

“How?”

“I’ll get my cousin to call them tomorrow. Offer them some meds he has. New supply. They’re always short because they can’t exactly go to the local doctor if they need anything. They shun most of the outside world. They don’t pay taxes. They can’t access what the state offers. They do cash in hand work. Grow their own food. They have weapons. And the drugs they get are all black market. Which is where I come in.”

“I would have thought they’d have taken her to Northern Ireland. No passport needed.”

He laughs. “Yeah, they would be if they were using a ferry company, but I doubt they are doing so. She’ll be on cargo boat somewhere, or even a boat they’ve rented. I bet she’ll be here in Southern Ireland in a day or so. We’ll contact them tomorrow and offer to bring some meds the next day; I’ll see the lay of the land. Report back to ye.”

“I want to be there,” I say.

“You’re welcome anytime, lad. Will ye be bringing Nico?”

I shake my head and then realize he can’t fucking well see me. “No. I won’t. He needs to be here with Cindy. She’s still going through some shit after everything that went down. I have men, though. They’re all trained.”

“Okay. I’ll see you soon. This might be the start of a beautiful friendship.” He hangs up.

Once more my gaze is drawn to the shining bracelet, and my mind whirs. *They knew she was here.* There’s been no evidence of them asking around. No increased activity in any of the towns or villages in this area. I’d have been on high alert if there had been. We all would have been. They have waited, bided their time, muddied the waters, as Damen said, and then they struck when I wasn’t here.

“There has to be a tracking device in her things,” I say to Lorraine.

“Can I go now?” Vicky whines.



I turn to her. “Do you know what will happen to you and your cousin if you talk?”

She nods.

“Just in case you don’t quite understand the severity, that was Carrick Donovan I was talking to, and if you don’t know who that is, your cousin will. If those fuckers find out we’re coming, then I’ll make sure your cousin and his entire family are wiped out, and then I’m coming for you.”

She swallows hard. “I won’t say anything to anyone,” she whispers.

“If I were you, I’d come down with the flu and need to spend a few days in bed,” Lorraine advises. “It’s going to be easier that way. Friends will pick up on something being up and will ask you all sorts of questions. You don’t want to be in a position where you’re trying to be evasive and failing.”

“Yes, because if you fail, I will come for you.” I grab her chin roughly, and she snaps her head back. “And when I find you, your suffering will not be quick.”

Banging at the door has me striding to answer it, and I almost sag in relief when I see Adam standing there with five men. “Perfect timing,” I say. “Get in here. I want two of you to take someone home for me while we go over strategy, and then I want us in Ireland as soon as possible.”

I fire off a text to Nico, asking him to get the helicopter fueled and ready for me and the men.

I stalk into the kitchen, as a visibly shaken Vicky leaves with two armed men. She’s shrunk in on herself and looks like she’s lost height in the time she’s been here. It’s something I’ve seen before in people who suddenly realize how much trouble they’re in.

Good. I don’t have time to facilitate it at this moment, but Vicky staying here if Ellie and I do is untenable. The vicious creature will find herself relocating whether she wants to or not. No choices given.

Once Vicky is gone, I storm upstairs. Lorraine follows me as I enter Ellie’s room. I toss it, taking the drawers out,

shaking the contents loose, and throwing around the room.

“James, what are you doing?” Lorraine asks.

“I’m looking for the things she brought with her. From that tower.”

“James.” Lorraine puts a hand on my forearm, and I whirl round to face her.

“Lorraine, all due respect, fuck off right now before I strangle you and watch the life flicker right out of your bloodshot eyes.”

She ignores my threat. “She brought hardly anything with her. Some horrible clothes, which I threw out once you purchased her new ones. Books. Those pins of hers, and her doll.”

I freeze.

“The doll, where is it?”

Lorraine opens the wardrobe, reaches to the shelf above where the clothes hang, and pulls the doll out. I stare at it, then I tear it open. Lorraine gasps.

“She loves it, James.”

I search through the stuffing, a frenzy overtaking me, and then I feel it. Small. Hard. I pull it out and hold it in front of Lorraine’s face.

Her face blanches stark white. “A tracker,” she whispers.

“Yes, and they’ve probably been biding their time. They couldn’t simply grab her out on the streets the few times you’ve been out with her. If they took her while I was here, they risked being hurt, so they waited until I was gone. They said they had no idea where she was. Those fuckers fed us fake intel. Gave us a false sense of security.”

“Oh my God.”

“I’m going to kill them all,” I say and push her out of my way as I leave Ellie’s room.

Heading to my room, I open the large safe that was one of the perks of the house and take out my weapons.

I've lost something precious, and I'm about to get it back.



# ELLIE

THE MOTION of the boat made me feel so nauseous, and it still hasn't worn off, even though we're now on dry land.

I can't believe this has happened.

James always said he only told me what to do to keep me safe, and I disobeyed him, and look what happened. How could Vicky have betrayed me that way? My life had slowly become filled with color and hope, but now it's reduced to nothing but despair again. I don't even have my little pin army or my rag doll.

I have nothing that is mine. They cut the bracelet from me. They took me, and now they will make me theirs. I know they are the men Maurice was talking with. They'll force me to marry one of them, whether I want to or not, and then my life will be over.

The van I'm in bumps along country roads. They haven't covered my face, and although the windows in the back of the van are tiny and dirty, I can see out some. All that surrounds us is damp grass and wind-blown moors.

Where are we? We traveled by boat, so we must be in Ireland. Northern Ireland, or the Republic of Ireland?

We finally crawl to a stop, and I hug my knees to my chest. Should I refuse to cooperate? Make them work for this terrible thing they are going to do? Or would that be stupid? Dangerous. I don't know what to do.

If I get the chance, I can run, but I doubt they'll let me out of their sight. At least not at first.

"You are here." A man steps forward as I'm dragged out of the van.

He's older, much older, with grey hair, but he's tall and powerfully built. His sleeves are rolled up despite the biting wind, and his forearms are corded with muscles and ropes of sinew.

"Welcome, Ellie. We have been waiting a long time for you."

They have?

A few women are gathered nearby. They all wear long skirts, shirts, scratchy looking wool sweaters, and scarves around their hair. They cast furtive glances at me and the men.

"Go on back to your chores." The man flicks his fingers at the women as if shooing a dog, and they scuttle off, heads down.

"Nosy creatures," he says with a laugh.

He turns bright green eyes to me. "Now then, Ellie. You are here for a very special reason. We have long thought you were the one to bring into our world the chosen child. We thought so because of things Maurice shared with us about you. About how special you are."

I'm not remotely special. I want to laugh at their presumption that I can be the one to bring them their chosen child. I'm on birth control now, thanks to James. The injection too, which means it's not a simple case of stop taking a pill.

"Freddy, take her to her quarters and call Hazel to come and help her get settled."

A large, slightly overweight red-haired man steps forward and takes my arm. "Come along, Miss."

He leads me to a small, ramshackle building and pushes open the door. I want to cry. The place is like the tower inside. Bare. Lots of dust and webs. There's a basic, plain stove, and I

can guess just by looking at it, that it will be hell to clean and tedious to use.

“This will be your home here,” he says proudly. It’s as if he’s showing me a palace. He leans in close and whispers, “You’re the only female to get her own house. You are also the only one who gets to choose her husband.”

Husband. The word makes me sick to my stomach. I put my hand out to grasp for the wall and reassure myself of the basic laws of physics. My world feels so unreal right now.

“There will be a tournament, and I will hope to be one of the men you would consider. I am a strong worker and a kind man. I don’t believe in beating wives, unless they are extremely bad. I don’t think you’d ever be bad like that. You’re so pretty.”

“Being pretty doesn’t mean someone is nice.” I say the words without thinking and realize too late I shouldn’t have spoken. Not until I know more. I need to keep my wits about me and be so very careful right now.

The man gives me an appraising stare. “You speak your opinions freely. Perhaps you need to be a little less bold.”

I don’t reply and clasp my hands nervously.

The door opens, and a woman who appears to be in her sixties, or maybe older, walks in. “Oh, child, you are here. This is a great day.” She turns to the big man. “You may leave us now. It’s time for womanly things.”

What womanly things?

She closes the door firmly behind the man and turns back to me with a smile. “Oh, come now, girly. Don’t look so glum. It’s not so bad. You’ve got your own house here. And you get to choose. That is a rare honor.”

“I don’t want to choose anyone.” I blurt the words out, the presence of another female seemingly freeing my tongue. “I have a man. I love him.”

“Oh, my dear Lord. Have you been violated?”

I shake my head, confused. What is she talking about, violated? James loves me. He'd never do me harm.

“Thank the Lord.”

“It wasn't a violation; I wanted it.”

She claps her hand over her mouth and gasps. “Do not say that in front of any of the men. Ever. You will be whipped.”

She smooths her skirt down with reddened hands and bustles about the room, touching things as she does so. “We have appropriate clothes for you. These are not.” She indicates my jeans and top.

On the bed at the back of the room are clothes laid out with care. They are nothing like the clothes James purchased for me. These are plain. The material looks thick and scratchy.

Hazel smiles at me and holds the skirt against my hips. “'Tis a little long, but I do believe I can hem it if needs be. Why don't we get you washed and cleaned and into these clothes?”

“I had a shower this morning.” I grit my teeth as I stare at the obnoxiously plain clothing.

“To wash the sin away, child.”

She takes my hand and leads me into a small but spotless bathroom. I glance around and smile. “No spiders.”

“No. We cleaned it well. You are to be very welcomed and prized by all here. I promise you.”

I suppose a clean, spider-less bathroom is a start. I miss James so badly my bones ache for him, but I must for now go along with this charade for now. Keeping myself safe is the main priority. I'm starting to feel something akin to hope. If they want to do a contest and let me choose, I can take my time. Spin it out. Until, either I escape, or James finds me because one thing I know? He's looking for me.

She runs water into a small, metal bath. “We have hot running water,” she says. “Eric made sure we have all the mod cons.”



“Do you have phones? Computers?” I ask hopefully. If I can get ahold of a phone, I can call James.

“Of course, but only the men have access to the learning center.”

“Don’t girls learn?”

“They do, but in the big house. They learn to read, cook, sew, and how to be a good wife. The boys learn practical things and wider schooling, hence the learning center. We keep boys and girls as separate as we can, the way we do when they are grown.”

It sounds horrendous to me, but I say nothing.

“Right.”

“Come on then, Dilly-Dally. Clothes off.”

I frown at her. “Not with you in here.”

“Yes, with me in here.”

She pulls at my clothes and the itchy, burning panic fills my chest. “No,” I shout. “Don’t do that; let me. I will do it.”

“Fine.” She stands back and clasps her hands in front of her as I undress.

Once I’m naked, she walks around me, appraising my body. “Good,” she says firmly. “Nice, childbearing hips, but slender. You are hopefully very fertile.”

I hope I’m not if it means I can deny these awful people what they want. Will James find me in time?

I step gingerly into the water and sink in when I realize it is the perfect temperature and that the warmth is a welcome balm to the chills skittering up and down my spine.

“When will I have to choose a husband?” I ask.

“In a week or so. You will have time to settle in. One of the men will be sent in to ensure you understand what to do ... with a husband.” Her face colors.

“Will he have sex with me?” I whisper the words, terrified of the idea.

“No. Of course not. That is for your husband. He will inspect you, nude, and then show you some things and leave.”

She laughs then. “He can’t have sex with you. His three wives would make his life a misery for doing so. If he had sex with you, then he’d have to take you as his fourth wife, and I think they feel their family is just right as it is.”

“You said I choose, right? When the time comes. In a week?”

“Yes.”

*One week.* I have one week to either escape or somehow get word to James of where I am. If only they hadn’t cut free my bracelet, he’d be on his way right now. I know he would. He’d always keep me safe. He said so. Now, though, without my bracelet, I’m lost to the wind. A nowhere girl, never to be found.

After my bath, I’m given the awful clothes to dress in and a wrap to put over my head. I’m grateful for the wrap as I realize I still have my beautiful hat pin in my hair. That’s one thing they didn’t take from me. One thing that is mine. The cloth hides it.

I’m brought some food to eat. It’s simple. Soup with potatoes, carrots, and a few tough lumps of meat. There is bread too, and water.

I only eat because I need to keep my strength up. When it’s time I change into the long, white night dress I’m given and pretend to go to bed until, finally, Hazel leaves. The door closes softly behind her, and I lie in the dark for what feels like hours. As the night falls silent, I climb out of bed and tiptoe to the door.

I gently push it open and am startled at how lax these fools are. What the heck?

I sneak through the small gap in the door, peering around and making sure no one is about. Keeping my footsteps light, I head to the right of the door, remembering that there is a track around the back of the house. It might lead me out of here.

“Going somewhere?” The deep voice makes me stumble over my clumsy feet, and I almost fall.

I whip around to see a tall, dark-haired man standing at the left corner of the house, watching me. “You’re under guard. You didn’t think we’d leave you unattended, did you?”

“I wanted a walk,” I lie.

“Yes, of course you did. You do know it is a sin to lie, don’t you?”

My gaze darts around me, desperately trying to see a place to run to.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you. As things stand, you can go back inside and go to bed, and no one will have to know. If you do anything more stupid, I’m afraid I’ll have to alert my brothers. You won’t like the punishment.”

His voice is low, serious, but not angry. This man isn’t lying; in fact, he’s almost nonchalant in his threat. Gulping down the raw sandpiper dry in my throat, I nod once and slip inside my new prison.

It isn’t a hovel, not quite, but it isn’t anything like the luxury I had with James. Not that it’s the luxury I miss—it’s James himself. And Xander. I think of the gorgeous pup, and how warm he is, how soft, how much he likes cuddles at night on the bed before James comes upstairs.

As soon as those heavy footsteps resound, Xander jumps off that bed as if he knows he’ll be shouted at otherwise. I laugh, and it turns into a broken sob.

I don’t stop crying all night.



# ELLIE

DESPITE MY TERROR AND GRIEF, I must have cried myself into a state of exhaustion and managed some sleep because I awake groggy, with my eyes all swollen and sore.

I glance at the old-fashioned clock ticking on the bedside table and rub my eyes. It's not even seven am. Why are people up so early? The light is only struggling to make itself known, against the velvet heaviness of the dark.

The wooden blinds are open, and I go to peer out. There are people outside, bustling about. Women gathering in some groups, and a few men in another. A vehicle approaches, lights cutting through the misty gloom like lasers.

No sure if I'm supposed to, but curious as to what's happening, I leave the cabin. I don't go anywhere, terrified I'll be accused of running off again, but I linger at the edge of my door, watching.

The air is crisp but damp, and there's a slight moldy smell to it. Not entirely unpleasant. It isn't like mold in a house, more like the scent of the woods outside my tower window in late autumn. I kick at the ground and wonder if they grow all their own food here or if they need deliveries like Father-Husband did.

I shudder at the thought of him. His ghost never did come back. Will it now? I'm amongst his people once more, and maybe that will mean he begins haunting me again.

A dust cloud kicks up as a deep, steady roar approaches, and soon a black SUV rolls to a stop in front of my new home,

and four men clamber out. One of them blows on his hands as if to warm himself. The men from the compound gather around the visiting group, and I gasp when I see some of them have weapons. Some carry heavy bats, and a couple have long knives.

One of the men from the vehicle steps into the light, and I gasp again. A woman nearby narrows her eyes at me suspiciously, and I school my features.

What is *he* doing here?

My heart thuds painfully, as I continue glancing his way.

Is he in on this? It can't be a coincidence.

Dark hair. Striking, bold green eyes. Beautiful smile. That charm spilling out of him in waves.

*Carrick.*

He's talking to the men in a low reassuring voice. Another man joins him, and as he takes over the conversation, Carrick moves to the edge of the group.

They seem to be reassuring the community that nothing will change.

"I know you don't trust people easily," the man with Carrick is saying. "But neither do we. Carrick is trustworthy, though. The fact is he is family. A cousin, and he's going to be working with us now. He can get more meds. From the Brits."

Carrick glances around him, as do I. No one is paying us any attention. Staring right at me, Carrick brings his index finger to his lips.

I don't have to be told twice. I don't make a sound.

There are only two options here.

He helped sell me to these men and was complicit in my being in captivity, in which case he poses a grave danger to me.

Or, and I can barely let myself feel the elation and hope this option provides—he's here to help me.

“How about the calves?” one of the villagers asks.

“You want to see them?” One of Carrick’s men says to the commune group. “They’re beauties, and you would pay triple for them in an honest market.”

“Go ahead. Let’s take a look, lad.” The big man who greeted me yesterday goes to the back of the truck and peers inside. “Nice.”

“Told you.” Carrick’s man laughs. “We’ll bring the pigs next time and more medicines. Make a list and email us.”

“Fine. You have a deal. We will pay in cash and some gold. Does that work for you?”

“Gold works just fine.”

“Good.” They walk off together, and Carrick edges closer to me, slowly and casually.

When he nears me, he makes eye contact, but I can’t tell what he’s trying to say. One of the women in the group watches him warily, and I drop my gaze, not wanting her to think I know him.

“Right, lads, we’re done here,” the man with Carrick shouts.

My head jerks up as Carrick blows out a long breath and nods. “Happen we’ll be back soon enough,” he says to no one, but his eyes lock with mine.

He’s telling me he’s coming back. I’m certain of it.

“Don’t look at her,” a snappish toned woman pokes at Carrick as if he’s not tall and muscular and able to knock her over like a feather. “Our women aren’t for the likes of you.”

“Well, isn’t that a shame,” Carrick drawls. “You’re a fine-looking creature yourself.”

“Be gone with you. Go on. Get.” She lifts her broom and shoos him away.

He walks off, shaking his head, smiling. “Alright, my darling, but we’ll be back soon. You don’t want those fine hogs going to waste.”

He winks at me as he says those words, and that wink cements something powerful in me. I have to survive the next few hours, days, or weeks because I know that Carrick being here means James is coming.



THE NEXT DAY and I'm repeating:

*James is coming*, as a silent mantra to get me through the terror I'm feeling.

A new man has entered the cabin I've been given. His presence is a sharp darkness against the light thrown by the lamps and the weak sunlight filtering through the blinds.

He's been sitting in a rocking chair watching me, a deafening silence rending the air between us.

"My name is Gordon," he says eventually. "I'm here to inspect you. Then you will learn how to please a man, in all the ways except the final one."

*Oh, no.* Nausea fills me. This is the man who is going to look at me, naked. The shame that makes me feel along with the terror and revulsion is almost overwhelming.

"You better do as I say, or I'll slit your fucking throat."

I gasp and stagger back.

Barking out a deep, rough laugh, he stands and follows me. "You don't have me fooled like the others. I won't go against our leaders, but I don't believe you're the chosen one. I don't believe it for one minute. You're evil. You're our Lilith."

"I'm not evil," I protest.

"Oh, no? Where is Maurice then? What happened to him? I talked to him sometimes. Yet here we are—he's gone, and you're here. They found you with some man, living in his house." He narrows his eyes and hisses, "In *sin*." His s sounds like a snake, elongated and high pitched.

"I want you to go," I say firmly.



He laughs. “Oh, Lilith, you have no rights here. Now, *strip.*”

I shake my head and back up two steps. For such a big man, he moves quickly. He pushes the chair back and races toward me, grabbing me so hard by the shoulders my teeth slam together. He rips the clothing from me, and I stand naked before him, save the cloth still around my hair, a pair of panties, and the band wrapped around my breasts instead of a bra.

“Nice.” He grins. “Whoever wins you will think they’ve won the lottery. I know, though, what you are.”

*Lilith*, he said. This deranged man thinks *I’m* Lilith.

Now, though, he uses another word.

“*Witch*,” he spits at me.

“If you hurt me, they will punish you.” I jut my chin at him to try to show strength. “You think I’m a witch, but they think I’m special. Precious.”

“I’m only going to do what they’ve asked me to, Lilith. But I’ll enjoy it so much, knowing you will hate it.”

“What did they ask you to do?” My voice is shaking.

“I’m going to defile you. Only in the ways they have ordered, but you and I will both know that is what this is. A defilement. I will tell those out there, truthfully, that I didn’t put my penis in your dirty vagina, and I’ll stick to that, but I’ll put it elsewhere. In places where it will hurt.”

No.

No.

*No. No. No.*

This can’t be happening to me again. Taken ... again.

What did I do in this life to deserve this? Why me? I’ve never hurt a soul.

I had promised myself that I’d stay safe until James came, but I can’t let this happen.

No man will get to take anything from me that I don't want to give ever again.

I see red.

The red of my nails that Vicky polished for me that day.

The red of my pin leader.

The red of the blood I bleed once a month, which Father-Husband used to shame me for.

Most of all I see the red I wrote *help* in. The red which led me to James.

That red washes over me, and instead of shame it fills me with power.

“Get on your knees, witch,” Gordon orders. He pushes me down and grins as I'm forced toward the ground. Laughing, he undoes his buckle and drops his pants.

He's not wearing underwear, and my first random thought is that the scratchy clothing must be uncomfortable on his skin. Then his massive penis drops in front of my face. Half hard. Red at the end. I can smell him, and I want to retch.

There's no way I can do whatever it is he's about to order.

I turn and crawl away from him, but he grabs me by the ankle and pulls me back. I scream, “*Help.*”

He laughs again. “No one will come. They know I will only go as far as they've instructed me to. They also know you will, at first, resist. The way they always do. Except we know, don't we, *Lilith*, that you're dark inside. Wicked. A whore.”

He coughs and spits, and it lands on the floor near my hand. “You're disgusting and marked with evil. Wanton. Wicked creature. We both know that, and we both know that I am doing this in disgust as a punishment to you. This is not done the way it normally is here, with love. I do this in sick hatred, and I hope you feel it in every single touch. If you tell them outside any of that, I'll declare you insane. Do you know what happens to insane people here, *Lilith*?”

He leans in closer to me, yanking my ankle. “We lock them in a cage, in the back of a cave, and they stay there. Until they die.”

His words are the worst thing he could have said. Does he know my fear of the asylum? My terror of being declared insane?

He continues talking, spouting insane hatred at me, and I stop crawling because his words have rendered me helpless.

No. I won't be that girl again. The one who stayed because she was too scared to fight.

I remember something. The hat pin.

I need him off guard to use it. Red fills me once more with its powerful fury, but I must let the ice cold that James uses so well in too. The space the coldness gives me will allow me to think.

So, I do. I think. Then, plucking all my courage, I stop crawling and turn to face him. I sit on my haunches and fall back onto my elbows, knees up. He stares, as I knew he would, right between my legs, and his eyes widen as I let them fall apart.

“I knew it,” he says in a roar of triumph. “You want me to touch you? *Whore.*”

“Yes.” I nod. “Are you allowed to?”

“I can do anything but be inside you.”

“You can touch it then.” I part my legs more.

One moment he was threatening me, calling me names, and now he's transfixed. Of course, if I didn't have my pin, I'd still be in the same danger as before. I do have my pin, though, and he doesn't know it. It's a *sharp* pin. A *long* one. A *dangerous* one.

*Stupid man*, I think. Silly, stupid, pathetic man. You are calling me names. Saying I'm the wicked one, yet look at you. He's staring between my legs as if he can will away the material stopping him from his prize.

He has made me very angry this man. At first, he made me scared, then sickened, but now there is nothing but pure rage.

As he crawls up over me, his hands trailing up my thigh, I sit up fully, and he stares now at my breasts. They are almost falling out of their binding and tempting him.

It's as if I don't have a face. I'm nothing but parts to this fool. I'm glad he has no interest in my eyes, though, because if he looked at them, he'd see the murder there.

I casually reach for my hat pin under the cloth at the exact same time he extends one big paw for my breast. Before he can touch me, I yank the pin free and, screaming, I stab him. I stab him in the neck as hard as I can.

The cloth falls from my hair, setting it free. A rhyme from my childhood enters my crazed mind. "Rapunzel, Rapunzel, let down your hair," I yell with a fierce laugh, as I thrust the pin harder.

He yells, and his hand moves to his neck, but I pull the pin out and shout in triumph as I stab it into the front of his throat where it meets his collarbone.

A wheezing sound rushes from him, and I scabble back and kick him as hard as I can in the chest. He collapses to the floor, and I leap onto him onto his broad chest and attack.

Everything I hated about Father-Husband pours out of me, filling me with blinding fury and strength I never knew I had. I stab, and stab, and stab at the man, screaming the whole time as the rage overtakes me, obliterating all else.

I don't even notice hands grabbing at me, pulling me from the man, or care about the wails as two women rush into the cabin. One collapses on the ground by the man, moaning.

"Oh, dear God; what is this? What did you do?" Hazel shakes me, and I laugh at the terror and confusion on her face.

"He tried to make me touch him." I point at his pathetic, shriveled junk sticking out of his pants. "Look."

"He was supposed to, child. To train you."

“No one fucking touches me without my permission,” I yell at her. “Do you understand that, you stupid old cow?”

She staggers back, and the big ginger man pushes her out of the way. “Take her,” he orders two young men. “Put her in the stocks. As she is. No more clothing for her. We need to convene the council, but I think she’ll burn.”

“She can’t burn,” Hazel says. “She’s the chosen one.”

“She’s insane,” one of the women screams. “He wouldn’t have chosen someone insane.”

“He works in mysterious ways. Perhaps she’s an imperfect vessel. We must tread very carefully here.” The older, grey haired man has entered the fray. “Take her to the stocks indeed, but we cannot let emotions rule our minds. We must wait until we are calm, and then debate. And, Hazel, women have no say. Remember your place.”

“Burn her,” the woman who was moaning screams.

Burn. Like the witch Gordon claimed I was?

They’re going to kill me. I know it as sure as I know the sky is blue and the grass is green.

My feet and ankles hurt as the men drag me out of the cabin by my arms and over rough ground. People are coming out of their homes, and everyone is staring. I’m practically naked and covered in blood. One woman gasps and covers her son’s face with her hand as I’m dragged by.

Where are they taking me?

The terror is back now. I realize I don’t even have my hat pin anymore. No clothes. No pin. No dignity.

The men will surely kill me before James can get here. What did Hazel say? I am special, but why? I can’t recall all the things she told me that first night as I bathed. I thought much of it was the rantings of a mad woman.

“Wait,” I say as the men reach an awful, wooden contraption. They force me to kneel before it and then open it and push my head and arms through the holes before fastening the top part of the wood back in place.

I'm trapped. My arms are the same height as my head, and my wrists and neck are held in place tightly by the wood. I can breathe and swallow, but I'm trapped here. Only in my underwear.

Cold.

I only just realize how cold it is.

"I need some clothing," I cry out. "I'll die of the cold."

"Oh, child." It's Hazel approaching me. "That would be the least terrible way for this to now play out. You've done such an evil thing. You brought terror to our land. To our community."

"You said I was special. The chosen one. I had to defend myself." I stare at Hazel, and I lie. I tell the biggest lie I've ever told, and I say it with so much emotion, I can only hope she believes me. "He was going to rape me."

"Child, he was told to train you. It's not rape. It's educational."

She shakes her head at me and turns to walk away. "No, wait. He wasn't only going to do those things. The ones you mean. He said ... he was going to put it in me. He said he had to do so because you were all fooled, and I wasn't the special one. He said your prophets were wrong, and I was evil."

She continues walking away. "He called me Lilith," I sob. "He said he'd rape me then kill me to save the community because you were all blind. But I couldn't let him do it because ... I'm with child."

She stops walking.

Oh, crap. They can tell easily enough it's a lie, but it buys me time. They don't look as if they'll have modern medicine here. I can lie about this until they get me to a place that can test me. They want me to marry one of them, and it doesn't seem to matter to them which one. They said I had the choice. It's not the man who matters in this. Not even me. It's the child they think I will have. I realize it now. An empty vessel for their future leader, that's all these unhinged people want.

Hazel turns to me. “You are pregnant?”

This could either kill me quicker or save me. I must try, though.

I nod as tears spill down my face.

“Oh, no. It should have been with one of our men.” She shakes her head.

“I saw a vision,” I whisper fiercely. When did I become such an accomplished liar? “I saw my child growing up in a beautiful place full of greenery and free people. I dreamed it. If you kill me, you kill my child. Your child. The commune’s child.”

“The chosen one.” She comes closer and closer, and then she creeps me the fuck out because she reaches out and touches my stomach.

I force myself to smile. “Yes. Inside me.”

Her eyes focus on mine. “I must go. There is a meeting of the men. I must tell them this. I do not know if this will save you. Long term, I doubt it very much. Perhaps, though, until the bairn is born, you will be safe.”

She scurries away, and I hang my head, letting my tears fall.

I had it all.

Everything.

A man who loved me.

A home.

Xander.

Now, I have nothing.

These people have taken it all from me, and if I get one more chance at freedom, I will take everything from them, in return.





# JAMES

“STAY HIDDEN until we give you the signal,” Carrick tells me again.

“You don’t have to repeat yourself,” I say.

“I do because you’re so on edge you’re about to combust. If they see you before we are in position, you could blow the whole fucking thing.”

“I’ll stay in place, hidden away behind the fucking pigs.”

Carrick laughs.

“I’m sure you’ve organized it this way on purpose.” I shoot him an angry glare. “You said you traded meds with them, and now I’ve got to hide in a pig pen?”

His laughs grows deeper, and soon the others join in. Not Adam, or my four men, but all of Carrick’s bastards; they’re laughing so much, tears shine in their eyes.

We reach the point where we’re picking the swine up, and I wait as three massive, stinking pigs are loaded up a ramp and into the back of the large van.

There’s a rudimentary pen that looks like it was built in an hour, probably because it was. My men and I are to hide behind that once we drive onto the compound. There are so many ways this could go wrong. So many.

The pigs snuffle and grunt and Adam keeps shooting them and the rickety pen worried glances.

“We have to hide behind that, boss. What if it breaks? We might get trampled by pigs.”

“It won’t break,” Carrick says with a laugh. “No one is going to look beyond the pigs, and you’ll be under the tarp back there. It’s perfect.”

“Fuck my life,” Adam mutters.

My heart picks up speed with every mile. *Soon. Soon. Soon.*

My arms ache to hold her again. *Soon. Soon. Soon.*

I want to smell her sweet, seductive scent once more. *Soon. Soon. Soon.*

It’s a mantra I keep repeating so that I don’t go nuclear and tear apart everyone in this van who is helping me because that won’t get her back to me any quicker.

When I get her back, no one will ever take her from me again. I’ll marry her, put a ring on her, and fucking make sure she’s followed twenty-four-seven by armed women. I’ve told Konstantin I want four on her detail so there are at least two on duty at all times.

I’ve also put in motion other things. The man I’m renting the house from, who agreed to sell it to me, has said I can go ahead and make any adjustments I want, so I have a fence being installed. New security systems too, and I have ten guard dogs being delivered next week. They’re already highly trained.

*Don’t blame yourself*, Damen had said, but I do. I fell for the ruse. I didn’t have enough security, so now I’ll have more than enough. More than the fucking Prime Minister gets.

Her father is being dealt with as we speak. He’s not going to be alive for long. Every person who hurt her is dead. I made a deal with Carrick. I won’t kill the women and children of this fucked up society. Only the men. The women and children will be sent to one of the other communities across the sea. I’d take them all out. Scorched earth. Leaving even one of them alive leaves a threat to my woman, but those were Carrick’s terms, and Silvanov also told me if I killed the women and the

children, he and Andrius would have issues with me. Major issues, is how he put it. He's still pissed he swallowed their false information, and he's been in a rage ever since. I don't want to start a war with those guys. So the women and children will live, but not one of their men will.

“Okay, we're getting close. Get under that fucking tarp.” Carrick's easy-going demeanor is gone, and I can see the hard man inside that the charm hides. “Don't you dare come out until you get the signal, no matter what you hear. Understood?”

I nod once. I'm not good at taking orders, more used to giving them, but this man and his crew are helping me, so I have to do as he demands.

Under the tarp is hot and dark. My men are muttering, and I order them to shut the fuck up. I need to hear everything.

The wheels slow, and then we come to a halt.

We're here.

My Ellie is close by. Only feet perhaps away from me.

The van doors open, and Carrick and his men clamber out. I hear talking but can't make out the words. Carrick is gone for what seems like ages. I don't hear the signal, which is him whistling a famous Irish folk song.

My palms sweat, my heart pounds, and my head aches. Where is the fucker?

The whistling when it comes is like cocaine injected straight into my veins. It charges me with an adrenaline rush like nothing I've felt before. I grab my weapon and throw off the tarp, followed by Adam and the other men. We pour out of the van, guns raised to see that Carrick and his men have done what they promised, and got the men folk in a group, around the van.

I count fifteen or so, which means there are roughly five unaccounted for.

“What in God in heaven?” a big, ginger man bellows.

“Get your fucking hands up,” I shout.

He steps toward me, and I shoot him right in the knee. He screams and crashes to the ground, rolling around and holding his knee, his screams only getting louder.

Carrick reaches under his jacket and takes out his gun.

“I knew not to trust ye,” a grey-haired man says to Carrick.

“Should have listened to ye intuition.” Carrick shrugs. “Now, we’re here for the lass.”

The man scowls, and his face turns thunderous. “The witch?”

One of the women crosses herself.

What the hell has Ellie done? Their faces are pale, scared almost.

“Yeah, the witch. We want her back.” Carrick is calm, but I’m not. He comes to me, leans in close, and whispers, “Fucker, don’t lose your shit. Stay focused. Men only. Let’s do this quick and clean.”

What the hell have they done to her? My hand is clammy against my weapon.

“Up on the rise,” Carrick says.

I look up toward the hill and in the gloom, I see it. A moan escapes me. It’s the softest, most tortured sound I’ve ever made. Even when I had my bones broken to make me talk such a sound didn’t escape me. Then I made loud screams. This sound, though, is full of pain like nothing else.

“Go to her. We will do as we agreed.”

I glance around me quickly. Adam and the men are in position, guns raised. Carrick’s men too. Three are missing, and I realize they’ll be rounding up the other men.

I don’t wait to be told again. I race up the hill, my legs shaking as if I’ve run a marathon.

“Holy fuck. Baby. Ellie.” I reach her and fall uselessly to my knees in front of her.

Her head is hanging from the hole in the wooden contraption and her hands are limp. It's so cold, and she's naked except for some underwear. Is she dead?

"Ellie?" God, please don't do this to me. Please no. I'll do anything. Is this punishment for Gabina? I failed her and so now he's taking Ellie from me?

*Take me instead*, I say on a silent scream. *Take me.*

"James?" The soft, cracked voice has me lifting tear-stained cheeks to look at the vision in front of me. Ellie with her eyes open. The most beautiful thing I've ever seen.

"Oh, God. You're alive. Baby. What did they do to you?"

I see they've had her in the device kneeling, which means her back will be agony. I wonder if she can even walk. I stare at the wood surrounding her. Dimly, I become aware of a woman to my right.

"I covered her last night. In a blanket and put socks on her feet. I didn't want her to freeze." The woman shifts from one foot to another. "Today, it has been cold, but we lit a fire nearby and said it was for cooking."

"Who are you?" I ask.

"My name is Ruth." She glances at Ellie. "I don't believe she's Lilith. I was married to the man who she killed, and he was cruel. Not to his first wife, but to me."

I nod. "Thank you, Ruth, for helping her. Do you have the keys to this thing?"

"Only the men have the keys to the stocks," an imperious voice behind us barks.

I turn around. "It's actually a pillory, and you're not supposed to fucking have people kneeling at them. You could have damaged her spine. This is torture."

I notice it then. The blood on her chest. "What the fuck?" I wipe it. "Where are you bleeding?"

"It's not her blood," the imperious bitch sniffs. "It's his. Gordon's. She stabbed him, with a hat pin."

I stare at Ellie, and profound pride and love light me up from the inside out. I always knew she had something in her, didn't I? A wildness I one day believed would come to the fore, and it has.

“What’s your name?” I demand of the bitch.

“Hazel.”

“Well, Hazel, if you don’t find me the fucking key for these things, I’m going to turn into the angel of death. Do you understand me?”

She swallows and glances around, wildly. “I don’t know...”

“Find. It.” I push her roughly, and she stumbles down the hill.

“You have five minutes before I start shooting shit up.”

She rushes off, and I stroke Ellie’s beautiful face as we wait, talking nonsense to her.

It starts to drizzle and I try to keep Ellie as dry as I can, shielding her with my body.

Hazel returns four minutes later, with the key. The grey-haired man is watching from down the hill. There’s an odd look of resignation on his face. He knows. This man knows he’s going to die.

I unlock the pillory and Ellie drops to the ground with an agonized sigh of defeat. I gingerly pick her up, not wanting to cause additional pain, and carry her in my arms past the women. I turn to Ruth. “You might want to gather the children and the women and go inside.”

“Why should we?” Hazel demands.

“I don’t think you want to be out here when the killing begins,” I say.

We walk down the hill and Ellie breathes in. “Petrichor,” she says.

My heart burns so much it hurts. This woman. She’s been through hell and she still notices something beautiful. “Well, I

did promise to take you out in the rain,” I say, trying to keep my gruff, emotion wracked voice, light.

I climb into the van with Ellie. I don’t notice the smell of pigs. I don’t pay much attention when the gunfire begins. The screams wash over me. All I focus on is Ellie. I have her. *She’s with me.*

“Are you in a lot of pain?” I ask.

“My hands are numb, and my neck is painful,” she croaks.

“We’ll get you straight to a doctor,” I tell her.

“I’m so sorry I answered the door,” she says softly.

“Baby, you have nothing to be sorry for. I’m the one to blame. You should have had bodyguards, and then you’d have been safe.”

“You came for me.” She cries into my shirt, the sound heartbreaking. This woman has had so much pain in her life, and now she’s been put through more because of my inability to fucking protect people.

I won’t have a pity party, though. I won’t decide to send her away because I couldn’t keep her safe. No, I’ve learned my lesson. Ellie will be guarded like the crown fucking jewels moving forward. Wherever I go, she will go. If I have a meeting, she’ll be there. Fuck anyone who has anything to say about it.

“I’m never letting you out of my sight again,” I tell her.

“Good.” She snuggles in closer.

“I thought you might have objected,” I observe.

“No, James. I just want to go home. With you. Is Xander okay?”

God, her and the damn dog. I laugh. “He’s fine. Lorraine, on the other hand, not so much.”

“Did you fire her, James? I hope not. That would upset me.”

“No, I didn’t fire her. I almost killed her, but she’s safe and sound.”

“Why didn’t you kill her?” she yawns, and a tremor runs through her.

She’s cold. Will she be okay? I kick the van walls. “Hurry up, fuckers,” I shout.

“I didn’t kill her because I saw your face when I had my gun to her head, and I knew you’d hate it if I did.”

She lifts her head a little at that, her gorgeous eyes locking with mine. “You put a gun to her head? Oh, James. Has she left?”

“No.” I’m amazed myself that she hasn’t, but Lorraine has stayed. I don’t think it’s for me. “She stayed for you, you little witch.” I laugh.

Her body shivers again. “Don’t call me that,” she says, her tone deadpan.

I frown down at her. “It was a compliment. You’re magical.”

“They called me a witch here. Said I was Lilith. I don’t want to be evil.”

“Baby, you’re not evil. You’re magical. It’s a very different thing.”

“I’m so tired. Everything hurts.”

“Sleep.” I tell her, kissing the top of her head.

My heart is so full I think it might burst.

Carrick and his men, along with Adam and his team, fill the van and the wheels start rolling, and raucous conversation fills the air. All I can focus on, though, is the woman in my arms.

We reach the airstrip, and I see the lights of the helicopter. I know we’re going to make it. All the way here, I kept thinking the Irish police would come for us. Either none of the women called them, or if they did, the police are sorting through the bloodbath crime scene we left behind.



There's a private jet on the airstrip too. I raise my brows and glance at Carrick.

"Well, I need to get out of the place for a while. Might be a bit too much heat." He laughs.

"Where are you heading?"

"Savannah, Georgia, where I was supposed to be all along."

What the fuck is a fourth generation Donovan doing in the South of the US? Boston seems more likely, as I know his family has many businesses there, but fucking Georgia? There's a story there I'm sure.

"What did you do with the women?"

"We gave them enough money to each start over. We told them to take the ferry to Zeebrugge and from there to take themselves to Norway where they would find a community like theirs."

"We also told them if they didn't want to live that way anymore, then they were free to use the money to start over." Adam yawns and rubs his eyes.

"Did you give it to a bitch called Hazel?" I ask.

"No, we gave it to a young woman called Ruth. Asked her to share it out. To ensure the women got to do as they chose. No one has to do anything they don't want, moving forward."

"And the men?" I ask.

"All dead, except for one. Turns out he was only eighteen. I couldn't do it," Adam says. "We told him to leave with the women. The rest of them are dead, and we threw them on a pyre. Told the eighteen-year-old to light it once the women were out of the way and they and the children wouldn't be traumatized."

"They'll be traumatized just from having lived there," Ellie says.

Her voice is so quiet, but it rings out in the van, and the men go silent.

“I don’t know you, Ellie, but if you ever want a job as an enforcer, give me a call,” Carrick says with a cheeky grin. “That was some Tarantino shit you pulled back there.”

“What’s Tarantino?” she asks.

“Oh, baby. That’s a whole load of education you need,” I tell her.

She smiles up at me.

“Are you warming up?”

She nods.

“Come on. Time to get our flight.” I carry her out of the van and across the tarmac.

Once we’re airborne, I call Nico and let him know we have her.

She’s going to need some serious TLC, but my baby is coming home.



# ELLIE

I'VE BEEN HOME ALMOST two weeks now. I still ache when I walk. It's as if they broke something like the ligaments in my back when they put me in that wooden torture device. The village and the commune haunt me. I wake up at night screaming. James is always there, ready to hold me and soothe me. Sometimes I get out of bed and lie on the floor, holding Xander. His warm chunky body is a balm to my soul.

One night James wakes up and finds us on the floor and carries us both back to bed. He grumbles that Xander has stinky breath, but he still lets me sleep with him in my arms when I want to.

He lets me do pretty much anything I want. Except go anywhere without my bodyguards.

The four women he hired are bad-ass. They've shown me some self-defense moves, and I've decided I want them to train me. The head guard, Jada, asked James for permission to train me, and he says once I've healed then I can start a program.

"I want to go out today," I say that morning over breakfast.

He's reading the paper, wearing a soft, wool sweater, with a high neck, and he looks so handsome. I want to laugh at the absurdity of how hot he looks in that outfit. We haven't had sex since I got back, but he did make me come with his mouth last night. He wouldn't let me do anything in return, though. He says I need time.

I don't think I need time. I know what I need. *Him*. I also want more tastes of the life I had here before Vicky took it all away from me a second time.

"What do you want to do?" James looks at me over the top of the paper as he lowers it.

"I'd like to go to the coffee shop and eat cake, and then I need to take my library books back, and I'd like to get some more."

"You've read them all?" He seems surprised.

"I haven't had much else to do, James."

"I suppose not."

He shouts for Jada.

"Does she need to come if you are?" I ask. Not that I mind, but I would like some time alone with him.

"She can follow us at a distance. But yes. You're never to leave home without at least one, and if I am not there, two of your protection detail. Do you understand?"

I nod in understanding.

"Good girl," he says, and I grin.

It's the first time he's talked to me the way he used to since I've been back, and I love it.

I have an idea. "I'll go get changed," I say.

When I get to our bedroom, I grab my new phone from the nightstand. We moved my things into James' room the second day I was back here.

It's our space now, not his alone. He has explained to me where he was when I went missing. At the solicitors putting things in place to buy this house.

Now, this will be our home. I love it. This house is beautiful, and it is now very well guarded too.

I glance out the window and down to the sweeping lawn, where three big dogs are on patrol. There are four more around the back, and three of them are resting in the state-of-the-art

kennels. They are all gorgeous, but I've been sternly warned by James that they are not pets, and I am not to spoil them. They've been trained to do an important job. I still sneak them treats and go sit with them. I like to talk to them as I pet them. They aren't a danger to me, or anyone they've been told to accept, but woe betide a stranger who scales the fence around our home. They'll be ripped to shreds.

I undress quickly, and then rummage around in my drawer until I find the panties I want. Then I send the text.

*I need your help for a moment.*

Two minutes later, I hear James taking the stairs two at a time.

Flushing, a bit embarrassed but more turned on than ashamed, I shove the pillow between my legs and rub against it as he opens the door.

“What the fuck?” He is shocked; I can tell by his tone.

“What does it look like?” I say cheekily. “I need your help. It's all achy down there, and you can make it go away.”

He pulls his sweater over his head and is kicking his shoes off before he reaches the bed. I almost laugh at how eager he is, but then he pushes his boxers down and his massive erection slaps against his stomach, and I swallow hard instead.

He pulls my silk panties down and pushes my legs apart. He feasts on me as if I'm ice cream and he's a starving man.

When he moves up my body, peppering kisses along my soft flesh me as he goes, I whisper my secret.

“I want the pain, James. Just a little. I want you to mark me. I want to see us on my skin in the mirror tomorrow.”

His eyes are dark and glittering as he holds my gaze. “And that's why you were made for me, Ellie.”

He turns me over and pulls my hips up so my ass is in the air, and he bites me. He bites my ass, my thighs, my hips. He spans me too, in quick brutal strokes.

When he turns me over and thrusts into me, I mark his shoulder with my teeth and claw at his back as the pain and pleasure of him taking me pushes me over the edge into a blinding hot orgasm.

He pushes my breasts together and bites the sides of those; more gently than he did my ass, but I hope there'll still be some little marks there.

I don't *need* this pain. I'm not feeling anxious or panicky right now; I just *crave* it. It turns me on, and he never gives me more than I can handle. He likes me to give it right back too. He likes when I claw at his skin until he looks like a wildcat has mangled him.

I claw at his shoulders, and he grunts as he fucks me harder. "That's it, scratch me up, my lioness. Mark me the fuck up, all over."

Lioness?

I'm about to ask him what he means when he pulls out of me and flips me over again. I hear the drawer open and then the pop of a cap. The drizzle of something cool runs over my most secret place.

Oh, no. *There?*

"James, I don't think..."

"You're not required to think, Ellie," he says darkly. "Simply feel, and if it becomes too much, you know your word, right?"

"Petrichor."

"Good girl."

I'm not his good girl when he pushes inside my most secret place, slowly at first, and then faster and harder, and all the while he does things to my pussy that make me weep with pleasure.

I'm not his good girl when I come so hard, I scream loud enough I know the security will hear.

I'm not his good girl when after we've both rested for five minutes, he pulls me onto his face and holds me in place while he makes me come again.

I'm not his good girl while we are in the shower, and I kneel and take him deep down my throat while the water rains down on us.

When we've finally satiated ourselves, I get dressed. I choose a smart but casual outfit. I want to go to the library today.

"I want to make a friend today."

James raises his brows.

"I know it didn't go well last time, but I think Sally is a nicer girl than Vicky."

"You can make friends with Sally. So long as you only see her when you have your security detail with you," James says.

I narrow my eyes at him.

"You seem awfully relaxed about it," I point out.

"I did a thorough background check. She's about as nice a girl as you can get. You can be her friend if you wish."

"Oh, thank you," I say sarcastically.

"Come on, nerd girl. Let's go choose some books."

I punch his arm playfully and follow him out of the room.



TWO DAYS LATER, James must go out. He always tells me where he's going now. This time he doesn't, and I feel overcome with insecurities and worry. It's not fair that he keeps tabs on me, but I can't on him. I know, of course, those pictures were fakes but still, I get scared when I don't know where he is.

In the end I text him.

*Where are you?*



His reply is immediate. *It's a surprise.*

I sit back and wonder what he could be doing.

Two hours later, he returns home.

"I got you something," he says, carrying a fancy bag into the kitchen, and I follow him.

He removes two boxes. "They're both for you. Open this one first," he says, pushing the smaller one at me.

I do as he says, and I stare at the ring with the huge sparkling gem in the center.

I look up, and James is on one knee on the cold, hard tiles of the kitchen floor.

"Marry me, Ellie." He smiles at me. "Make me whole. I love you. I need you. Say yes."

"Yes." I collapse into his arms.

He laughs and catches me in an earth-shattering kiss. When we break for air, he kisses my forehead, and I remember the second box. "What's in the other box?"

"Open it, baby." He stands, and I go back to the counter and tap the box.

"It's not booby-trapped, Ellie; open it." He laughs at me.

I do as he says and stare at the bracelet. It's the same as before, with the same words inscribed, but it has a scattering of diamonds embedded in the gold.

"My words on your skin," he says softly.

"Yes," I whisper.

"I had something done for you," he says.

"You did?"

He takes another box out of his pocket. "This box has a ring in it. The ring has a tracker in it. If you want me to wear it, I will. Then we're equal."

Tears fill my eyes. *He gets me.* He understands. I have trust issues and it's not because I don't trust him; it's because I

don't trust the world. It has hurt me far too many times for me to think I will be safe or those I love will be safe. This way, I'll always know where he is.

"James, I love you so much I could burst." I wipe at the tears threatening, as he puts the ring on.

"Technically, I don't think I should wear this until we're married, but who is going to have anything to say about it, huh?" He kisses me softly, and I smile, so happy I might melt into a puddle on the floor. "There's one more thing," he says.

He comes closer and moves the collar of his shirt to one side. There's something plasticky over his skin.

"Did you get hurt?"

"No, baby."

He pulls the wrap to one side, and I stare.

There, right at his heart, on the left-hand side, is one word. *Petrichor.*

"Your word on my skin," he says seriously.

I let the tears fall as I hug him, and his lips chase them away as we hold one another tight.

# EPILOGUE

JAMES

THEY USED to say I was made of steel. Cold, unfeeling. The Tin Man, someone once said.

I'm not made of steel. Not anymore. I'm hot, molten lava. A girl entered my life with a bloodstained cry for help and turned it upside down. She defrosted my insides and melted my steely interior and now it burns for her, an endless furnace of desire and love.

Ellie. My Ellie.

She's laughing as she runs along the beach. Seeing her healthy and happy is wonderful. Her wrist is mending well from the surgery, and she glows. The day is hot for late May, and the waves are crashing against the shoreline. Surfers dot the ocean, and gulls cry overhead.

It's perfect. Farther back up the beach, sitting on a bench are two young women. They look normal, but they are not. They are Ellie's guards. If anything were to happen to me, these women will continue to guard Ellie with their lives.

She comes running up the beach to me, followed by Xander. Ellie loves that dog beyond belief. She also loves me beyond belief.

She professes to love Lorraine too. And her new friend, Sally. I think Ellie has a heart so big she needs to fill it with people and animals to love.

One day, I want to put a baby in her belly and give her someone else to love, but first, I want to let her live life to

make up for all those years she was held captive. I asked her what she wanted, right now, the most in the world, and she said she wanted to travel. To see places. For a girl who is scared still to leave the boundaries of our property, it's a brave request.

Ice cold water drips on my legs as Ellie reaches me and bends over, her long hair hanging down.

"You seem lost in thought," she says as she sits by me.

"I'm just thinking about where I can take you on this epic trip we're planning."

"Italy for sure," she says. "Also France. Paris, I'd like to see Paris. I'd like to go to Florence, and to Rome. I want to see the Vatican. I've been reading about places and the art and history they hold. I have a list."

I laugh softly. "A list? Like a shopping list of places you want to see?"

"Yes, do you want to see it?"

I frown. "You have it on you now?"

"Of course. I take it everywhere so I can add to it if a new place occurs to me, or I read about something particularly interesting that I wish to see."

Ellie has a private tutor. She's decided she doesn't want to study formally, but she did want to learn. Twice a week, a retired Oxford professor of history and literature, comes to see her and teach her. She loves all she is learning. It has also given her a wanderlust strong enough to counter her fears.

She rummages around in her beach bag and pulls out a pouch. Unzipping it, she takes out a small notebook with a tiny pen attached. My heart tugs. Trust Ellie to use paper and pen and not write the list on her phone or iPad. She opens the notepad and shows me a pageful of places she wants to see. Then she flips it over. The second page is halfway full.

"I think this might take us about a year of traveling."

She giggles. "We can break it up. We don't need to do it all in one go."

“Good thing, or Nico would have a rage attack.” I kiss the top of her head and pull her into me. “You’re brave,” I say. “I know you still find being in new places scary.”

“Not if I’m with you, I don’t.”

“Really?”

She nods. “If we’re together, I feel okay. I feel okay with Lorraine too. Sally as well. Plus, I’m getting braver about going places on my own. Last week, I walked all the way to the village.”

My blood turns to ice in my veins.

“What? You’re not supposed to go anywhere without your guards.”

She rolls her eyes at me. “Of course not, James. I wouldn’t, not after what happened. I don’t count them, though. They walk far enough behind that it’s not really like having people with you. They keep me safe physically, but they don’t make me feel safe mentally or emotionally the way you or Lorraine do.”

A shadow falls over me before someone flops down on the sand beside me. I turn to see Nico. He’s wearing shades and loose swim shorts. Cindy is holding his hand, and he pulls her down between his bent legs. She leans back into him, and he wraps his arms around her shoulders.

“Is all okay?” I ask.

He got a call and stalked off to take it, his face clouding over with signs of stress.

“No, it’s fucking not. Renata is being a pain in my ass. I can’t even come away for a week without her trying to make moves on the board.” He shakes his head. “Does that stupid bitch really think she can take over my company?”

“Babe, don’t call her a bitch; it’s not nice.”

“Cindy, my love, I’ve modified my language there, so take the win. I’d like to call her a much worse name.”

Cindy glances at Ellie, and a conspiratorial smile passes between them. It's something they do when they think we are being ridiculous or, as Cindy put it one day, *too macho*.

Then she started singing some song about macho men which made Ellie giggle and Nico scowl.

I like that Ellie and Cindy seem to genuinely be growing fond of one another. Nico had been unsure about us taking some time away together, the four of us, but he seems to have realized that our two women are in dire need of friends, and if they like one another, then it's good for us. Anyone from outside of our circle will always need to be vetted and investigated before we can let them get close to our women.

Ellie sighs happily next to me, and I glance at her only for my gaze to linger. She's lying on her large beach towel, her bikini-clad body soaking up the sun's rays. Her breasts look amazing in the push-up bikini top she's wearing. I've seen the way other men ogle her as she walks down the beach. I don't care. They can look but only I get to touch. The fact that such a stunning woman is mine makes my heart roar in satisfaction.

Cindy kisses Nico and wriggles out of his arms before she goes to lie next to Ellie. They start talking about Xander and Cindy's horses, which Ellie has told me she wants to go see when we get back.

I thought she only had one, but apparently Nico purchased her two more recently.

As the women talk, I turn to my boss, partner, and friend, and lower my voice. "Is Renata going to become a real problem?"

He sighs. "Could be. I don't fucking know. I'll kill her before I let her take my company."

"She's your sister, man." I sigh and brush some sand from my leg.

"Yeah, but the company matters to me more than she does. I can't stand her, never could."

And people say I'm cold. The man next to me is at times terrifyingly dark, even when it comes to his own flesh and

blood.

“Anyway, she hates me too,” he says sulkily.

“Does she? Hate is a strong word.”

“Yeah, I think she does.” He nods. “My father too. In a way, it’s our own fault. The family’s, I mean; not mine personally. She’s been treated like shit just because she’s a woman, but that’s on my father, and the way of life back home. I didn’t invent the rules or the ways of our world. She can fuck off if she thinks I’m going to carry a burden of guilt simply because I lived by rules invented before I was born.”

I sigh. “Listen, Nico, I’ve said it before. Give her an important sounding position, but clip her wings. Make her something with kudos in the title but no real power.”

“Our father doesn’t want her having any position. He thinks it makes the entire company look weak.”

Sounds a bit Victorian to me, but I don’t say that. “Maybe letting her have a role would give the company a modern appearance?”

Nico’s jaw tenses. “She’s a screw up, James. Renata isn’t the most business minded person.”

I don’t know her all that well, but she comes across as pretty damn intelligent to me. “Well, it’s your family,” I say.

“Yes, it is. So let’s drop it. I’m bored of talking about her anyway.”

Ellie’s soft laugh snags my attention, and I turn away from Nico to watch as she and Cindy chat. Ellie fascinates me endlessly. I could sit and simply watch her all day long. I don’t because I have shit to do, and it would also be unhinged, but honestly those are the only things stopping me.

She runs a hand through her hair, my ring glinting on her finger.

The fierce thrill of possession I get each time I see her wearing my ring runs through me. This amazing woman is mine. And I am hers.



We belong to one another, and nothing has ever felt more perfect.

The sun sinks lower in the sky, and I look forward to the evening ahead. We'll find somewhere nice to eat. Drink wine, have gorgeous food, and easy conversation, and then we will head back to the house we're renting, where I will take her and make her mine all over again in the way I crave constantly.

My Ellie.

My love.

# EPILOGUE | PART TWO

RENATA

FUCK THEM ALL. That fucker Nico. He's bad enough, but our father? I stare at Daddy Dearest as he lectures me about my responsibilities.

"You divorced and made our family a laughingstock. Your brother married a girl he didn't love in order to restore our reputation, and you dare ask me for a senior role in the company?" he demands.

I scoff. "You think Nico doesn't love Cindy?"

He's utterly obsessed.

"He might now, but at first, no; he simply did what was right for the family."

"That's not how it went down at all, Father. You always put him on a pedestal and pull me through the mud."

He sighs and rubs the back of his neck, a sure sign he's growing seriously bored and pissed off with this conversation. "Renata, if you want to help this family, why don't you find a suitable husband, and this time stay married and provide us with heirs."

"I'm not a fucking brood mare, Daddy," I yell.

"Darling," Mother admonishes softly.

Fuck her too.

I ought to take Nico's darling Cindy from him. Fuck his life up the way they all fucked up mine. I wouldn't do that,

though, because that would hurt Cindy, and I don't want to see another female chewed up and spat out by this vile family.

I storm out of the room.

"She's such a handful," I hear Mother say.

God, the double standards are pathetic. If I were a man, I'd be strong, powerful, direct, ambitious.

Because I'm a woman, I'm called troublesome, pushy, unhinged, greedy.

I'm seething with pent-up anger as I stalk across the upstairs landing to the room I slept in as a child. It's still decked out in the same shade of sickly pink my mother chose so many years ago. I hate it. If I wear pink now it's neon, or fuchsia not that this cotton candy, insipid concoction.

I'm not sugar and spice and all things nice.

I'm anger, and ambition, and vengeance.

I'm not pink, or frills, and flowers.

I'm trapped in a cage of thorns and blood.

This family has treated me terribly my entire life, and if it is the last thing I do, I'm going to make them pay.

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