



A STANDALONE DARK ROMANCE

Beneath your

BEAUTIFUL

RUTHLESS CREATURES

ADALINE WINTERS



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BENEATH YOUR BEAUTIFUL

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AUTHOR'S NOTE

Beneath Your Beautiful is a dark romance and contains themes some readers may find upsetting. This book is intended for readers over the age of eighteen. Please read responsibly.

For a detailed content list, please click on the button below.



PLAYLIST

Paint It Black - Ciara

Miss Me More - Kelsea Ballerini

Lose You To Love Me - Selena Gomez

You Should Be Sad - Halsey

She Wolf - David Guetta ft. Sia

You Put A Spell On Me - Austin Giorgio

Lose Control - Teddy Swims

Set Free the Devil - Nick Kingsley

Losing Hold - Esterlt (Feat. Austin Jenckes)

Nameless - Stevie Howie

Love Is A Weapon - Letdown.

Uprising - Muse

Like No One's Watching - Molly Sanden

Till The Stars Fall Down - Claire Guerreso

Ignorance is the greatest of crimes.

PROLOGUE

It started small. A comment about my body. Guilt trips into canceling plans with friends. New clothing bought one size too small. The gradual disappearance of the desserts I coveted. Lavish gifts for my parents.

Let me rewind.

Gideon Lowell swept me off my feet. A hot-shot lawyer, he was rich, handsome, and solely focused on me. That kind of attention is addictive, drugging, and makes you blind to the warning signs. It took him a mere six months to place a gold band on my finger and declare me as his. His wife, his trophy, his possession. A woman to mold and control.

It took another six months for the real Gideon to rear his head. That was the day I learned not to disagree with my husband. It was the first time I made an excuse about an injury to a medical professional, but not the last. I thought if I loved him harder, deeper, it would change. I would become worthy of the man I first met. I was wrong.

Now we stand on the precipice of our one-year anniversary, and I am a shell of the woman I once was. Gutted by his words, his hands, his emotions, and his control. But there's a place deep inside of me, one he cannot reach, that

clings to a thin ray of light. I just have to be brave enough to grasp it and jump, for there is no salvation in the vast darkness, and I am not ready to go without a fight.

CHAPTER 1

HONOR



NEW YEAR'S EVE

To love is to trust, which is why they hurt us the most.

My heart races in my chest, a galloping deer looking to escape the beast stalking it in the darkness. I don't run. It never ends well. Instead, I await Gideon on the edge of the enormous bed, with my eyes trained to the floor and my spine ramrod straight. He enjoys letting the fear build until my limbs shake. I pluck at a loose strand on the white silk dressing gown shielding my body and try working through the steps of meditation I learned as a teenager. Breathe. Funny how people make millions teaching us to do something we are naturally born to. My deep breaths are hindered, getting stuck part way down. Instead, I entertain myself with fantasies of stabbing Gideon with the steak knife he cut into his beef wellington with last night. My mouth waters. How long has it been since I tasted steak?

The door to our bedroom swings open, and all my clever breathing techniques evaporate as his shoes tap on the hardwood floor. They pause in front of me, and the hair on the nape of my neck lifts. I've become intimate with the many pairs of shoes he owns, given they are the first thing I see each day.

A finger curves under my chin and tilts my head back. My gaze locks onto the startling baby blues the city has declared their savior. Gideon Lowell is now the district attorney for

New York. Powerful, untouchable, and wicked. A dangerous combination.

His blonde hair is styled back, one lock seemingly escaping onto his forehead. But nothing about Gideon is accidental. He's disarming, dressed in a classic tailored black suit and white shirt. The bow tie hangs undone around his neck, a job he considers important for his wife.

I don't doubt that my husband covets me, but there is a difference between love and obsession. The beauticians did my makeup and styled my long ice-blonde hair into an elegant updo based on Gideon's instructions. His excuse for such control is him having a special dress made for me as a surprise, so only he would know what matches. They made noises of approval, like he was Prince Charming. It astounds me how people gloss over the obvious facts and cling to the fairytale. Anyone looking close enough would see the cracks covering my facade. I am breaking piece by piece.

"You look stunning," he utters.

My brain processes his relaxed shoulders, his steady breathing, and the calmness in his eyes. The beast he houses is not in control. I draw in a steady breath.

"Thank you. You look handsome." My words are clear. I learned early on to not whisper or stutter.

He hums in the back of his throat. "Stand, Honor."

I hide the wince as I comply. He tilts his head as he undoes the knot at my waist, and slides the gown off my shoulders. His fingers trail over my naked breasts, pebbling my nipples. His hands curve around the leather cinched around my abdomen.

His jaw ticks as his hands fail to touch as they circle the dip in my waist. "Almost there. Let's tighten this up a little. Turn around, hold the bedpost."

Ice inches down my spine as I spin and clutch the wooden post. "I think we can get this into its final position tonight, baby. Giving you the perfect body to show off."

“Thank you.” He’s training my body into what he considers ideal—all for my benefit, of course—and he expects me to be eternally grateful for it. Secretly, I dream of wearing sweats and hoodies while eating pizza.

His fingers sweep the length of my spine, following the cold sensation. He undoes the heavy-duty laces holding the steel-lined leather in place. “Deep breath in, baby, hold it, then release slowly.”

Ha. Deep breath, what a joke. I drag in the air, spiced with his expensive cologne. It’s woody, with hints of tobacco and vanilla. As I exhale, my grip tightens on the bedpost and he yanks. My body lifts in the air, but gravity doesn’t help his cause.

Bones click behind me as he snaps his neck, an action which always heralds suffering. Mine, not his. I glance over my shoulder as he lifts his foot and braces it against my bare ass.

“Again,” he snaps.

As I exhale, he yanks on the laces and pushes against my butt to keep me in place. The leather tightens, and bile rushes up my throat. I swallow the burning liquid.

“Once more.”

Tears spring in my eyes, but no sound leaves my throat as he pulls the waist trainer into its ultimate position. He breathes heavily behind me as he secures the laces with knots. He curves his body around mine, kissing along my shoulder as he tests out the new positioning. I glance down as his fingers touch over my stomach.

“Perfect,” he utters against my ear. For now. “Come look at yourself in the mirror, Honor.”

He guides me to the gilded full-length mirror hanging opposite the bed. My mismatched eyes blink at the body shape he’s created. If it keeps him happy, then the pain is worth it. He curves one hand around my throat and puts pressure against my lower stomach with the other, so his erection

presses between my ass. He towers over my five foot three height, at almost six foot.

“You’ll need to wear it continuously with only an hour or two breaks for the next month to ensure you maintain this shape. After that we can start reducing it. It also helps you maintain control over your diet.”

Diet? What a joke. My stomach is clamped inside a vise—that’s control. Anger burns for a second before I douse it. Luckily, he’s too busy examining my body to notice. “I can’t wait to fuck you like this later.”

“Me too.” Gideon’s expectation of a wife. If he loves me, then he has rights to my body at any time. These were his words the first time I woke to him moving inside of me. When I said I do, I gave up my right to consent. It’s bullshit. I know this deep down. But going against the city’s knight of virtue and warrior of justice isn’t an easy feat. It takes time, planning, and courage.

He drags his teeth over his bottom lip, and my stomach flops. That’s a bad sign. He has something else planned.

He turns and strides into the dressing room attached to our enormous bedroom. “Stay here.”

Where would I go? The only places I can escape are inside my mind, which makes him more violent. He doesn’t tolerate disconnection. I have to be aware of everything he does, every move he makes, and every demand he speaks.

He reappears with a large square black velvet box in one hand and a dress bag in the other. He hooks the bag on the top of the mirror and unzips it. A stunning black velvet floor-length gown spills out of the bag. He runs his hand along the material. The V in the neckline will plunge between my breasts, but not deep enough to reveal the trainer.

“It’s gorgeous, Gideon.”

“Only the best, as I show my wife off to the city’s elite tonight.”

He snaps open the box, revealing a complex set of rose gold chains and three clips. I swallow as my eyes rise to his.

He places the box on the floor and lifts the jewelry into the air between us. “This part goes around your throat.”

He unclips the gold heart locket he gifted me on my birthday and his arms brush my shoulders as he secures the snug thin chain around my neck. His eyes blaze with possessiveness. “Fold your hands behind your back.” I do so, weaving my fingers together and clenching them tight. His hands graze over my breasts, and he dips his head and sucks on my left nipple hard. I groan, a small concession I’m allowed and even expected to make noises of enjoyment. He lets it go with a pop, before he lifts one of the chains, ending in a small clip.

“These go here.” He pinches my erect nipple and snaps the metal clip onto the end, applying pressure until he’s happy with the tightness. My hands clench tighter to temper the scream in my throat. He repeats it with my other nipple, then he gives the chains a tug.

My breath stutters out. He glances at my face in warning. “Do they hurt?”

What do you think, asshole? I nod.

“Words, Honor.”

“Yes.”

He drops to his knees, and I squeeze my eyes closed. There’s a third clip. No prizes for guessing where that’s going. This is a new level of torture, even for him.

His mouth closes around my clit and he draws it into his mouth, manipulating the sensitive bundle to swelling before releasing me.

“Look at me,” he demands. My eyes fly open, and he grins at me. “Watch in the mirror.” He shifts to the side, giving me a full view of his actions. He scissors his fingers on either side of my clit, exposing it. “Brace yourself, baby.”

My hand cramps with how hard I squeeze my fingers. The last clip is attached to the central chain, and it tugs as he pulls it. He snaps it on, and I double over as sharp pain lances

between my legs. My hands land on his shoulders to stop me from falling over.

He places his hands over mine and rises to his feet, forcing me to stand straight. The position pulls the chains taught. He finishes fixing a few more decorative chains disguising the whole thing like sexy jewelry, not torture.

“These have little metal teeth that grip tighter the more you tug them.” He demonstrates by giving a small pull on the central chain. “This way, you’ll feel my touch every moment tonight. The longer they remain on, the more restricted your blood flow, and the more pain you’ll feel when they come off. Don’t worry, I’ll be inside of you when that happens.”

Of course, he can’t pass up feeling the evidence of my pain. He unhooks the gown from the hanger and helps me inside of it before zipping up the back. He grins over my shoulder at the result. The pretty chains look like they are part of the dress’s design, while the waist clings to my figure, showing off the shape he’s created.

He selects a pair of heels, completing the outfit. He stands behind me, once again trailing his hand between my breasts and catching the chains. My eyes prickle. The burning pressure is already too much, and the throbbing between my legs builds. How is this going to feel hours from now?

“Don’t ruin your makeup,” he snaps. I close my eyes and will away the tears. “Last thing. Your allowance for the night is three canapés of your choice and a glass of champagne. I don’t want you vomiting later when I take you.”

It’s more than some nights. I should be grateful. I guess we can’t have our guests suspicious of the fact that their golden boy is, in fact, the worst of monsters.

CHAPTER 2

HONOR



Beneath the glitter and gold lurks poison.

Nestled amongst the trees, tucked away at the end of a private road, is the thirteen million dollar mansion we call home. Gideon is from old money and it shows in the elegant, classy details embedded into every inch of our house. We descend the sweeping staircase decorated for the season with garlands and twinkling lights. People turn to watch us. Excited chatter dies down as the women skim over me with disdain and over Gideon with longing. If only they knew they wouldn't be on his bed screaming in ecstasy, but in agony.

Not to say he isn't capable of giving pleasure. He is. That's the absolute devastation he commands. I know what he could give, what he gave prior to our marriage, and yet he chooses pain. It's his love language. Rain taps on the windows, transporting me back to the day my life altered its course.

I shiver as the early evening air turns muggy. The first splash of cool rain against my overheated skin makes me giggle as I rush along the street back to my apartment. I'm high on the company of good friends and great food. My feet pause on the sidewalk as a town car races past and splashes me from head to toe, soaking my short flirty red summer dress. I curse the occupants with a grin on my face. My father would be proud, and my mother mortified.

The car skids to a halt, blurry red lights winking at me as it reverses. They couldn't have heard me, right? I dart my gaze up and down the street, getting ready to make a break for it.

This isn't like the smut books I love. If some masked dude exits this car, I am running.

Left or right? I turn right as the car door opens and a huge black umbrella snaps out. My feet freeze, and my heart pounds in my chest. My fingertips tingle as adrenaline floods my body. If they're after a fight when their driver gave me an impromptu shower, I'll damn well give it to them.

The umbrella lifts, and a real life Prince Charming steps forward, shielding us both under the umbrella.

"Are you okay?" His voice is cultured, smooth, lulling.

I blink the water off my eyelashes as his baby blues examine me from head to toe. Not in a slimy way, but assessing for any damage. Be still my beating heart. Did I stumble upon the rare breed of gentleman in New York? According to my best friend, they are the things of myth and legend. Sucks to be a nonbeliever right now, huh, Jen?

"You're shivering. Here, hold this." He hands me the handle of the umbrella and shrugs off his long dress coat before wrapping it around my shoulders. Damn, he smells good. What is that? Woodsy, smoky, with a hint of vanilla. I inhale again. I'm aware I look like I escaped from a locked room, but I don't care.

"Can I give you a lift home?" He wraps an arm around my waist and ushers me toward the car. My survival instincts kick in, and I dig my heels in.

"What? No. I'm good. Thank you. It's a little water. I'm not going to die."

"You'll catch a cold."

"It's a common misconception that being cold gives you a virus. It doesn't."

He laughs. "Beautiful and smart. You get more intriguing with every word, Miss...?"

"Honor." Wait, no. I shouldn't be giving out my name to gorgeous strangers. Did he call me beautiful and smart?

“Honor.” My name graces his lips, and it’s all I can do to not beg him to say it again so I can watch the way his mouth forms the syllables. “I insist.”

I shrug out of his coat. He shakes his head and tucks it around me tighter. “I can walk. It’s only a few blocks from here.”

He raises a brow. “Worried I’m going to kidnap you?”

My lips twitch. “And the murder. Let’s not forget the endgame.”

He runs a hand over his jaw. “If I was going to kidnap you, Honor, and have you at my mercy, you wouldn’t be screaming in fear.”

I raise a brow. Oh, he’s a little cocky under that smooth exterior. I kinda like it. “Really?”

“Alas, you are not on the menu tonight as I have a meeting to get to after I’ve dropped you safe and sound at home. Plus, you are the sort of woman who deserves to be wined, dined, and wooed.”

Who says wooed? I relent for a split second. Murderers don’t drive around in town cars, right? Don’t be stupid, Honor. You’ve never met a murderer, so how would you know? I shake my head and whip his coat off before handing it back to him. He sighs.

“Take the umbrella at least.”

I laugh as I spin in a circle in the pouring rain. “Why? The weather is glorious.”

I disappear into the night, a carefree soul, not knowing I’ve incited a monster to stalk my freedom I took for granted. To spin my confidence into subservience. The hunt is on, and I’m the ultimate prey.

“Honor.” My mother snaps her fingers in front of my face. I must have zoned out while we passed through the crowd offering pleasantries. It’s ingrained behavior now. Nobody is interested in Gideon’s pretty wife. I have nothing of value to

say or offer to these people, and I've long since stopped trying or caring.

I glance at my side. No Gideon. Odd.

My dad raises one of his bushy eyebrows at me. "You okay?"

No. I'll never be okay again. I should try to talk to them. They can't protect me, but they might be able to help me.

My gaze darts around the room and I grip my mother's arm. I don't like it when I can't see him. "No," I whisper. "I need help."

"What's wrong?" my father asks.

"I need help. Gideon is—"

My mother sighs and rolls her eyes. "Joseph, leave us for a minute. This is a mother-daughter conversation."

My father hesitates, but after receiving a glare from my mother, he steps away. She tugs me toward the window and behind a heavy curtain, away from keen ears.

"Men like Gideon need to be the alpha in a relationship. If he's had to be firm with you because of your sass and stubbornness, then that blame lies with you. Anticipate his needs and be a dutiful wife. So he won't have to correct you."

My mouth flops open. I'm rendered utterly speechless by the woman who is meant to love me unconditionally. I shake my head. "Mom—"

She cuts me off with a slice of her hand between us. "No, I won't tolerate you messing up this marriage."

My eyes drop to the new diamond necklace and expensive dress she's wearing. "You mean you won't tolerate me risking your newfound luxury?"

Her hand lands on the diamond teardrop hanging from her neck. "We don't believe in divorce, Honor. Learn how to please your husband. There is no out for you. You married the city's prince."

“He starves me, rapes me, and tortures me, yet you want me to learn how to please him?”

“He helps you have the figure women dream about. He’s a virile man with needs, and the rest is correction for your behavior.”

The blood in my veins turns to ice, and a lump of emotion clogs my throat. I take a step away, my bruised heart beating painfully in my chest. I resist the urge to fall to my knees and plead for her assistance. We’ve never been close, but I held the idea she would believe me and help. I stand corrected.

The curtain we are behind snaps open and Gideon’s scowling face comes into view. “There are my two favorite ladies. What are you plotting back here?”

My mother blushes. Wait, no. Jane. I think she gave up her parent card. She touches Gideon’s chest with her fingers. “A little girl talk, giving my daughter some pointers on being a successful wife.”

Gideon’s arm curls around my waist and presses against my stomach, tugging on the chains and bringing the pain flooding back. I hadn’t forgotten them, but I had compartmentalized the agony. One of the many mental skills I’ve honed over the last year.

“If she turns out like you, Jane, then I’m a lucky man.”

Enough with the nice guy act—now my fantasy involves a steak knife and some matricide. I want to peel back their skin so the rest of the world can see the rotten meat underneath.

“I’m stealing my wife for a dance,” he says with a grin, showcasing his perfect pearly white teeth. It reminds me of a lion about to tear into a meal. He steers me away from Jane with a curt nod to my father, who will follow his wife into the abyss if she demands it.

Gideon leads us to the middle of the room, which has been cleared of the twenty-seater dining table to make space for a dance floor. The sparkling chandelier hanging from the center of the coffered ceiling casts a warm glow over the dark

wooden floor. A live band plays their own version of popular music. I enjoy rock—or at least, I did. Gideon prefers silence.

He spins me to face him and wraps one hand around my back while clasping the other with mine. I grip his shoulder as he leads us around the dance floor, wondering if he can feel my traitorous heart beating double time. He leans in closer and presses his cheek against mine, the movement of our bodies making me wince.

“What were you really talking to your mother about?” he utters in my ear. I stiffen and he senses it. “Honor,” he drawls. “Better to tell me now.”

I swallow. “I wanted to know how to make you happier.”

“And?”

“She said I needed to reign in my sass and stubbornness.”

“I think we’ve managed that already.”

“I agree.”

“Obey me. That’s all I need from you, baby. You don’t need to overthink it.”

The song ends, and he steps back before kissing the back of my hand. “I have a quick meeting with the governor in my office. Don’t go far. It’s almost midnight.” He disappears into the crowd of fawning sycophants. My shoulders drop. I’m grateful for a reprieve, even a short one.

A server pauses to offer a glass of champagne. I’ve had one already, but as I will be expected to toast the new year, I take another before weaving between the rich and famous. I spot a well-known actress and a global superstar musician, and do my best to avoid my parents, now known as Jane and Tom.

I edge around the room, trying to disappear, but there’s no need. I’m only interesting if I’m on Gideon’s arm. I pause behind a pillar near a group of women.

“I bet he’s an animal in bed,” the one with her back to me says. Who? Do they even know what that means? I do. It’s not the fun time they seem to think.

“So sad he married that nobody bitch, such a waste,” another says with a sigh. “I could have ridden Gideon like the stallion he is.”

My jaw clenches. This is the Gideon effect. Everyone thinks he’s so fucking perfect. They covet his attention.

Another server pauses in front of me. “Canapé, ma’am?”

My stomach gurgles. I select three of the tiny bites and place them on a napkin. I nibble, without tasting the food, as I listen to the clueless females lament their great loss of the city’s most eligible bachelor. I feel like screaming ‘here, have him, take him back. He’s all yours.’ Maybe a stronger woman would make him happier?

Two more songs play before Gideon reappears. His gaze finds me immediately, like a heat-seeking missile. A small frown appears on his forehead as he gets closer. A few people try to speak to him, but he barrels past them. Oh shit. What did I do? I glance at my empty napkin. I had three, right?

He’s upon me before I can work out what put the look of thunder on his face. He plucks the glass from my hand. I blink. My empty glass.

“You drank another?” he whispers. Before his gaze drops to my napkin. “And ate more?”

I swallow the rising tide of panic clutching at my throat and trying to suffocate me. “I only had three,” I explain. Maybe I could try to play to his ego? “I’m sorry for the champagne. The girls were talking about you in vulgar terms, and I got jealous.” Jealous of their freedom.

He tilts his head, his sharp baby blues icing over as he plucks the empty glass and napkin from my hands and places it on the table beside us. “So you thought you’d defy me to get my attention?”

Dangerous ground, Honor. Blood whooshes in my ears, a storm drowning out the sounds of relaxed conversation and pretty music, focusing all my senses on the tightly coiled monster before me. “I was missing you.”

“You always have my attention, baby, and if it was simply the champagne, I’d let it go. But you already had your food earlier.”

I did? Fuck. When I zoned out? But if I confess to not being one hundred percent present, I’ll be in even worse trouble. “I’m sorry.”

“Don’t worry about it now. Let’s welcome in the new year with our guests.”

He tangles his hand with mine and tugs me over to the sweeping staircase, we pause halfway up before turning and casting an eye over the party. The band pauses and everyone turns to watch us. A tremor runs down my arm. I clench my fist at my side to prevent it from spreading like a disease.

Gideon starts a speech about being grateful to be chosen as their warrior of justice, defending the innocent and a load of drivel that means shit. They lap it up. Laughing at his well-placed jokes and cheering like they personally contributed to his successes.

The crowd starts to count back from ten. Gideon turns me and drops a screen-worthy kiss onto my mouth that I’m sure will be talked about in the press tomorrow. My mouth opens to let him in. His warm whiskey-tainted tongue tangles with mine.

Cheers ring out around us as he pulls away.

“Happy new year,” I tell him.

“Happy anniversary,” he replies with a smirk. “Now let’s see what we can do about your mishap this evening.”

My mouth goes dry as he guides me up the stairs, away from prying eyes and keen ears. He pushes open the bedroom door and I move toward the bed. He shakes his head and continues through the dressing room. “Not here.”

Fuck.

CHAPTER 3

HONOR



Some break, some endure.

What every discerning millionaire needs is a secret place hidden at the back of their dressing area for punishing their wayward wives. Gideon presses the code into the silver keypad and the back panel between his suit jackets and my day dresses swishes open. This is where souls go to die. It's Hell on Earth, designed specifically with me in mind. It's been eleven days since my last infraction, when my tone was inappropriate.

The door slides closed behind me, encasing us in darkness until he snaps on the single light bulb dangling from the center of the room over the cast iron single bed frame. The area is no bigger than twelve feet square. There's a storage cupboard on the back wall, and a sink next to it. The cold concrete floor and matching walls are a contrast to the rest of our home. It's meant to strip me back. No comfort, no warmth, and it succeeds.

Gideon doesn't break skin. There's no need for whips and blades—they leave marks others may notice. He prefers the devices that inflict the greatest pain and leave not a single bruise. He's had accidents when he's lost control. It's rare, but it's resulted in two broken ribs, a hairline fracture on my left wrist that still aches, and two concussions. There's more, but they didn't warrant being seen by a doctor. The first time I came home after clinical observation, the house was full of thousands of white roses and an apologetic Gideon, who promised he'd never do it again. I believed him. So stupid.

He points to the foot of the bed. I drag my bottom lip between my teeth as I hurry forward and keep my eyes trained on the floor.

He slides off his suit jacket and secures it on a metal hook attached to the wall.

“Shoes off.” He rolls up his shirt sleeves exposing his toned arms I once found so attractive.

I toe off the heels, shrinking me by a few inches. It doesn’t matter—I always feel small.

He reaches behind me, unzips the back of the dress, and lifts it over my head, leaving me in nothing but the chains and waist trainer. He folds the dress neatly and places it on the bed behind me.

His fingers wrap around my chin, tilting my head. His shocking icy gaze makes my heart thunder in my chest. The monster inside him needs satisfying, and that only comes from my punishment. Perhaps my mother is right. I deserve this. The inattentive wife.

“Why are you here?” he drawls.

Another test. One I learned long ago. “I ate and drank more than was allowed.”

“And why do I give you limits, Honor?”

“To help me be the best I can be.”

“Correct. So you are only hurting yourself. I do this because I love you.”

“I love you too.” The words give the correct inflection as they spill from my lips, even as my mind feeds me the opposite of love.

“Good girl. Now turn around.”

I comply as he moves to the cabinet containing a multitude of restraints. “We’ve not used this in a while, baby, not since you last needed throat training.”

My eyes flutter closed as he secures a cool thick leather posture collar around my neck. It prevents me from twisting

my head away. “Arms,” he reminds me. I fold them behind my back as he secures them in leather restraints attached to the collar. I spin back to face him. He puts a hand on my shoulder, and I fold myself onto my knees at his silent instruction. I keep my breathing steady and resist the urge to give into the swelling panic. Gideon won’t kill me—that would ruin his fun. But I’ve learned there are things worse than death.

He narrows his gaze in consideration before spinning away and grabbing something from the open cabinet. He secures a clip over my nose and winks at me. “Don’t want any oxygen getting in by accident.”

“Of course,” I agree. *Maybe he can stop breathing with me?* The dangerous thought flitters through my mind.

He unzips his pants and pulls out his heavy cock. “We need to get that food out of you before it stores on your body as extra fat.” He palms his angry length. There’s no pre-cum, which means this will not be quick. His hands fall around the collar and he yanks on a buckle, tightening the leather like a noose. His eyes glitter with excitement as he steps back to examine me. He runs two fingers over my lips, then thrusts them over my tongue and holds them in the back of my throat. I work through the relaxation technique I’ve honed, but it doesn’t work.

“You feel that, baby? You have gotten so good at relaxing your throat and not gagging. I’ve had to tighten it so we can achieve what we need.” My eyes water as he massages his fingers in my throat. “Don’t worry, we will keep going until it’s all out.”

He withdraws his fingers and wipes my saliva on the head of his cock. One of his hands slides into my hair, and he fists it, making my scalp sting. “Open wide, no teeth.”

My mouth widens, and he slides in, hitting the back of my throat on his first thrust. Gideon Lowell isn’t a small man. In fact, I’d say he’s larger than average. He grunts as he tries to push harder and the normal give doesn’t happen. He uses the hand in my hair to tip my head back at a different angle. This time, he sinks deeper.

“That’s it, baby, take it all.” He stares at me as he powers in and out. Tiny bits of air escape into my body between his thrusts. He retreats a little, making the head push against my gag reflex. My chest contracts, and he grins. “There it is.”

He alternates between staying deep in my throat so I can’t breathe and rubbing against my gag reflex. My throat is raw, and my chest and jaw aches. Suddenly, my entire stomach spasms and hot liquid rushes up. He shoves his cock in so deep his balls press against my chin.

“Swallow.”

My body argues with the instruction. It’s decided something needs to come out and now I’m telling it the opposite. Tears stream from my eyes and leak down my cheeks as I struggle to obey. There, one painful swallow.

“We need to make sure the lesson sticks, Honor. It being over too early won’t make for a lasting impression on your psyche.”

He gets lost in the pleasure. His back arches as he enjoys breaching my tight throat. He makes me swallow the bile twice more before he yanks his cock free and it spills out onto the floor.

“Again,” he grunts. “That’s not enough.” He’s back, punishing me, teaching me. *Obey.*

I vomit twice more before he pushes inside a last time and releases his cum into my throat. This, I’m allowed to swallow.

He steps back, panting from his orgasm, before he tucks himself away and zips up his pants. He retrieves a wet cloth from the sink and wipes up the small amount of vomit on the floor before me, then helps me to my feet. He pushes a strand of sweaty hair behind my ear. “That wasn’t so bad. See how I look after you?”

“Thank you, Gideon.”

“You are most welcome, Honor.”

He unsnaps the collar and restraints before hanging them back in the cabinet and closing it. He shrugs on his jacket and

clasps my hand. “Come on, you need to get showered before bed.”

He leads me out the secret door, through the dressing room, and into our en-suite. “Don’t forget to brush your teeth.”

“Are you staying?”

“No, I have guests to attend to. I’ll make excuses for you. Get washed up and go to bed. I’ll not be too long.”

I catch sight of myself in the mirror, the sparkling chains a contrast against my pale skin. “Should I remove these?” I ask tentatively.

He arches a brow. “No, Honor, I said I would be inside you when that happens. Am I inside of you?”

“No.”

He shoves his foot between my feet and kicks them apart. His left hand cups me, before pressing two fingers inside of my unprepared channel. With his other hand, he fingers the central chain and gives it a sharp yank. I cry out as pain lances between my legs and fire blazes across my breasts. “Fuck, you are strangling my fingers. I can’t wait to feel you around my cock.” His blue eyes catch mine. He smirks as he slowly withdraws his fingers, applying pressure on my engorged clit before he sucks them into his mouth. “If you dare remove these, I will know, and what we did in our correction room will seem tame in comparison.”

He turns and stalks out of the bathroom, leaving me staring at my pained expression and, for once in my life, wishing for him to hurry back so this torture can reach its conclusion.

I’M DREAMING of pasta in rich creamy sauce and garlic bread. I miss bread. I miss carbs. But as I reach out for the pasta, it dissolves into a fluttering of lettuce leaves. I swipe at the slice of garlic bread, and my fingers go straight through it. I turn my hand over. My skin is translucent, like I’m disappearing from the world. What on earth? Pain lashes between my legs. I cry out and hunch over, my hand moving to protect myself.

“Don’t you dare stop me from touching you,” a wicked voice snaps.

I glance around the room full of judgemental eyes. They sneer at me. I’m not one of them. I don’t belong here. I’m not worthy.

The pain moves inside of my body, not as sharp, but so much deeper. My breath catches in my throat as my eyes flutter open to find Gideon moving above me, inside of me. “There she is,” he utters hoarsely as his hand tightens around my wrists, that he’s pinned above my head. I glance down, hoping I’ve missed the grand finale of this evening. Everything is still attached. Gideon grinds his pelvis against mine, putting pressure on the clamp. I suck the inside of my cheek between my teeth and bite to prevent myself from screaming.

“Every time I press, you contract around me. I think these are my new favorite toys.” He pulls out of me and taps my outer thigh. “Turn around to face the mirror, and get on your hands and knees.”

I twist onto my stomach, before raising and turning the other way to face the mirror. My ass dips and my spine raises to stop the tightening on the chains. Gideon tsks and presses a hand into the middle of my back. “Arch your spine and put your ass up for me.”

Blood pools in my mouth as I do as he says. “You can go lower,” he coaxes. I dip, and fire engulfs my breasts. He lines himself up behind me, then slams inside. His hands circle my waist, and he groans as his fingers touch. “So fucking beautiful.”

He wraps my loose hair in his fist and yanks my head back. He pumps inside of me, his hips jerking against my ass. Every single thrust is a punishing blow.

“Ready, baby?” he utters hoarsely as I watch his hand on my waist circle to my front in the mirror.

“Yes.” *No*. I squeeze my eyes closed and brace myself for the pain.

“Eyes open and on me.”

My eyes snap open, and his crazed gaze collides with mine. His fingers loop around the central chain and he smirks as he holds himself still, deep inside of me. “You are about to milk me dry, baby.” He yanks the clips and they give way. Agonizing pain tears through me, lighting up my nerves. An unholy scream punches out of my mouth, and my hands fist the sheets as black dots dance across my vision. Gideon groans as he releases inside of me. He collapses over my back, panting in my ear. “That was...” I miss whatever he mumbles next as I fight to remain conscious.

He pulls me up against him and tilts his head as he watches the blood dribbling down my breasts. “The one on your clit didn’t have the teeth. Don’t want that damaged.”

“Thank you.” Not sure why, the last time I experienced actual pleasure from sex was months ago.

“You’re welcome, Honor. Stay here.”

He slides off the bed and disappears into the en-suite. I study myself in the mirror. The crimson against my pale skin is a startling contrast. My eyes, however, are flat and devoid of emotion. To survive, I have to place all the pain in a box and lock it securely in my mind.

Gideon appears with a washcloth. It’s warm as he swipes at the blood on my chest. He throws it in the trash, turns off the lights, and coaxes me beneath the sheets next to him.

“Happy anniversary, Honor.”

“Happy anniversary.”

“Did you enjoy your gift?”

“Yes.” Tears prick at my eyes. Most wives get chocolates, flowers, perhaps a meal or a romantic getaway. I get pain.

“Good, because I have so much more planned once we wake up. You are going to love it.”

I highly doubt that. But what more could he do? Stupid, stupid question. The answer is so much more.

CHAPTER 4

HONOR



Don't taunt the universe. It knows better than you or I and isn't afraid to show it.

Gideon squeezes my shoulder as he passes my chair at the dining table and takes a seat at the head next to me. I sip my sparkling water as we wait for the server to bring in our breakfast.

“How are you feeling this morning?” I ask.

He smiles at me as he scrolls on his iPad next to his plate. “Excellent. Are you excited about your present today?”

My heart flip-flops in my chest, and I put the glass down before I drop it. “Yes.”

The door opens, and Marrisa enters carrying two plates. “Good morning Mr. and Mrs. Lowell, and happy anniversary.”

She places my plate in front of me as I smile at her. “Thank you.”

Gideon rewards her with his photoshoot-worthy grin. “Am I paying you double time today, Marrisa?”

She smirks. “Triple.”

“Fair.”

After she leaves, his gaze drops to my plate, and he reaches out to remove half of my scrambled eggs and a quarter of the avocado. That's unusual. He normally takes more.

“Eat up,” he says, picking up his fork and slicing into his bacon.

I select the correct fork and force myself to eat slowly. If I go too quick, I’ll bring it back up with this trainer suffocating my organs. Gideon returns to his iPad, looking over court documents in preparation for a big trial next week.

He pours us both a small glass of orange juice, making saliva pool in my mouth. This is cruel. He arches a brow. “Drink up.”

My free hand reaches out and wraps around the cool glass. The first sip has me suppressing a groan. Damn, it’s the simple things in life. Fresh orange juice being one of them.

The rest of breakfast passes in silence. My nerves pull taut in my body. When Gideon acts unusually, expect the unusual.

“Finished?” he checks as I dab my mouth on the white linen napkin.

“Yes.”

He checks his watch. “Good. Come on, I can’t wait to give you your present.”

He guides me out of the room and to the front door where Montgomery, Gideon’s personal driver, waits for us. He takes my long camel coat from Montgomery and helps me into it. We are going out? Maybe this is a pleasant surprise. What terrifying things could he possibly have in store for me if we aren’t staying home? Gideon’s public image is everything to him. He would never hurt me outside of these walls.

We climb into the back of the town car and Gideon clasps my hand in his. The smile on his face is genuine, and I feel my lips pull up as I return it. “Are you going to tell me?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “No, but I know you are going to love it. It will bring us closer together. I know I’m not always easy to live with, Honor, but we are made for each other, and this gift will reinforce how we fit together like two jigsaw pieces.”

The scenery races by as we ride further into the city. He squeezes my hand, drawing my attention back to him. “Let’s

take off the trainer for a few hours.” I blink at him. “Unless you don’t want to?”

I lower my eyes. “If you think it’s for the best.”

“I do. Take your coat off and lift your dress.” I do as he asks, then shift on the seat so my back is to him. He undoes the laces, loosening the leather. Breath rushes into my lungs. Pain and relief swarm inside me, mixed with trepidation. I lift my butt and he slides the leather off my body. I push my dress down and spin to face him. Without thinking, I drop a kiss on his lips, grateful for the reprieve. His hand slides around the back of my head, and he kisses me hungrily. The car jolts to a stop, breaking us apart. I dip my head to look out of the window. We are outside of a large brownstone, a silver plaque on the wall the only hint of what it contains. The Clinic. I frown and glance at Gideon.

“Where are we?”

He smiles. “So impatient. I want you to feel as beautiful inside as you are outside.”

Like a shrink? He’s brought me to a psychiatrist who I won’t be able to tell ninety-nine percent of my issues to because they are on his payroll. What’s the point? The door jerks open and Gideon slides out before offering me his hand. I swallow. There’s a small voice in my head telling me to leap out of the opposite door and make a break for it. Nothing bad can come from a therapy appointment though, right? And Gideon won’t have me committed. Too embarrassing for him.

I step outside next to him and he nods at Montgomery. “We will be about an hour.”

Standard time for a therapy appointment. I vaguely wonder if he’s taking us to couple’s therapy. How would that work?

Honor, what do you see as the problem in your marriage?

My husband.

And the solution?

Murder.

Gideon rings the doorbell. We wait a minute, which stretches into an eternity before the door opens and a gray-haired woman, wearing cat-eye spectacles and expensive perfume, greets us.

She widens the door and nods. “Welcome Mr. Lowell, he’s in his consultation room. Last door on the left.” Okay, maybe the universe is laughing at me and we are, in fact, about to spill the beans about our relationship.

Gideon leads the way, but doesn’t release my hand. He doesn’t knock on the closed door, just walks in like he has every right. A slim guy with a full head of dark hair peppered with gray at the sides stands from behind his heavy wooden desk. He strides out and offers Gideon his hand. “Mr. Lowell, lovely to meet you in person.” He smiles at me. “Mrs. Lowell, I’m Dr. Michael Stevens.” He offers me his hand, which I shake. Then he waves us to the two high-backed leather chairs on the visitors’ side of his desk. Gideon clasps my hand again. My gaze skitters around the room, looking for the customary certificates declaring him a doctor of psychiatry. There aren’t any. Only deep blue painted walls and hundreds of books on shelves behind him. I tilt my head, trying to read some of the spines for a sign of what kind of doctor he is.

“There are a few options to discuss before the procedure. Any vaginal births?” Dr. Stevens asks.

Gideon’s hand tightens. I swallow. “No.”

“Any plans for children soon?”

“No,” Gideon answers. I can’t imagine bringing a child into this shitshow.

“General health? Any concerns? Hypertension, diabetes, any medication?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Very good,” Dr. Stevens says with a nod. “Before we proceed, I want to take you through the risks.”

“Risks?”

“Yes.”

My gaze darts to Gideon. His baby blues ice over in warning. “Of course,” I say, like I have a fucking clue what he’s talking about.

“Risks are minimal, as I can perform it under local anesthetic, with sedation if you are nervous.”

He raises a brow at me. “No sedation.” Considering I need to be cognisant of whatever is being done here.

Dr. Stevens smiles like he’s comforting me. “There will be a small amount of bleeding and pain, not during but afterwards, some tightness which is to be expected given the nature of this procedure.” What in the fuck has Gideon brought me to have done? “We will give you a short course of antibiotics to ensure no infection and some painkillers. No sex for at least four weeks, more likely six, but at that point I’ll have brought you back for a checkup. Don’t use tampons either, or menstrual cups. Any questions?”

“I don’t have periods,” I blurt. Hoping he will expand further on why the hell those instructions are necessary.

“She has an implant,” Gideon adds.

Dr. Stevens nods. “That’s good. Did you discuss if you wanted the add-on?”

I want to scream, *add on to what?*

Gideon’s hand tightens around mine, making my bones creak. It’s a silent demand. I nod. “Yes, I’d like the add-on.”

“Very good. The risks and recovery are similar, but a longer abstinence period may be required, depending upon how much repair is needed. The stitches will dissolve on their own. I’m sure you’ll be satisfied with the result.” He opens a leather binder and slides it toward me. “Sign here, and here.” He points to two dotted lines. My signature swirls across them as I scan the tiny lettering for a hint of what is about to happen to me.

He snaps the binder closed, making me flinch as he slides it back toward him. My racing heartbeat falters and grows sluggish as my stomach flips. “Very good. If you’ll follow me,

Mrs. Lowell, we should be no longer than an hour. Mr. Lowell—”

“Gideon, please.”

Dr. Stevens smiles as he rises from his chair and walks toward the door. “You are welcome to wait in my office or in the waiting room. My assistant will be along with refreshments.”

Good, maybe once I’m alone I can explain how clueless I am about this and the doctor will see reason, or at least find an excuse to not go ahead. Maybe I have high blood pressure? Or something? Anything.

“Actually, I’d like to be with my wife.” My eyes squeeze closed as my hope goes up in ashes and scatters out of the door onto the cold New York streets.

The doctor freezes, and his gaze turns to Gideon. “That’s not possible.”

Gideon raises a brow. “I paid you handsomely to have this done on our anniversary. I doubt you have a chaperone available while operating on my wife in such a vulnerable way. I will be present.”

My gaze darts between the two. The doctor’s jaw ticks, and I wonder if I’m about to witness someone refusing my husband. There’s a first time for everything, right?

“Fine. But you’ll need to be gowned and stay at the head of the bed, out of the operating field.”

Gideon’s hand loosens around mine. He relaxes as he once again gets his way. He tugs me up to stand, and we follow the doctor out of the door. Time seems to slow down. Each step I take is exaggerated as I walk toward my doom. The doctor guides us into a white sterile room. My eyes fix on the gynecological chair, complete with the terrifying leg braces. My vision blurs as my heart rate speeds up and my chest tingles.

Gideon’s mouth touches my ear. “Going to make you bleed for me, baby, and so much tighter. Happy anniversary.”

CHAPTER 5

HONOR



No one can touch your soul unless you permit them. No one can take your light. Not a thousand armies nor a prince with eyes the color of the ocean.

Gideon strokes my hair as the doctor prepares his tools of torture. Metal clangs and plastic packaging rustles. The stinging smell of antiseptic lingers in the air. “Talk her through it. My wife finds comfort in knowing exactly what is happening.”

Nope, I don’t, I’d rather not know. I glance around the room, hoping to find something to focus on. Something other than the fact that I am physically restricted and feeling vulnerable.

“Of course,” Dr. Stevens says as he wheels a stool between my spread legs before scrubbing his hands in the sink. He snaps on a pair of surgical gloves, the sound making me flinch. With a warm smile aimed in my direction, he disappears at the foot of the bed.

“Like a pap smear, I’ll use the speculum to visualize the area and make a plan. Try to relax.”

I bite the inside of my cheek, already torn to shreds, and force myself to relax. “Well done,” he praises as the cool metal slides in and he cranks it open. He hums to himself as he decides exactly what needs to be done.

“You are already quite tight. I think a few well-placed incisions and sutures will improve your overall experience,

shrink the width of your channel, increasing friction for you both. Your hymen will need to be reconstructed from the vaginal membrane. I can do a double layer to ensure bleeding on your next penetration. How does that sound?”

“Good,” I whisper. This isn’t happening.

Gideon smiles at me as his hand finds mine. “Beautiful inside and out. You said you wanted it tight, right, baby?”

He increases the pressure around my fingers. “Yes, as tight as you can make it, Dr. Stevens.” Gideon beams at me.

“Well, we want to avoid the need for a vaginal dilator. So not too tight,” the doctor says. Gideon’s smile falters and is replaced with a frown.

I swallow the blood seeping onto my tongue. “That’s okay, Dr. Stevens. We want to recreate the magic of my virginity.” A little bile burns my throat.

The doctor’s head pokes around the side of my legs. “This procedure will not make you a virgin, Mrs. Lowell.”

“I’m aware. But it is something Gideon and I wish to recreate and share.”

His eyes narrow like he’s trying to see beneath the exterior of my mind. *Don’t, doctor, you won’t like it there.* He nods and disappears back between my legs. “First, I’m going to apply a little topical numbing cream to the area. Following that, I’ll add some local anesthetic.” I wonder if he has a cream capable of numbing the mind?

His words filter into the room as I focus on a black dot on the ceiling. It moves. A spider is bearing witness to my degradation. I wonder what else it has seen in this healing room? How many women have ended up here by force? What safety measures are in place for the likes of the rich and the powerful like Gideon? I blink and turn my head slightly to face my husband. He places a kiss on my forehead.

“You are doing great, Honor.”

Am I? If I was doing great, he wouldn’t feel the need to change my appearance inside and out. If I’m so unattractive,

why marry me? What's the point? There are women who could have given him all of this without the pain and torment. He could have left me on that sidewalk in the rain, a stranger who offered a kindness, but no. He saw my light and had to own it. Covet it. Possess it. Perhaps that's why I try to shine less. Maybe he'll leave me in peace. A dull, dutiful wife wheeled out for events. I study the excited glimmer in his eyes as he peeks at whatever the doctor is doing. No, Gideon Lowell won't ever stop. Not while there's breath in my lungs. He finds new and more inventive methods of control. He senses deep down that while I'm obedient, I'm not broken. Not yet. Broken people don't have murderous thoughts. Broken people don't make plans to escape. Broken people don't envisage a future free of pain.

“The difficult part is completed. Moving on to reconstructing your hymen now.” The doctor's words penetrate my inner ramblings. Some conversation happens between the men. I'm not needed, and I'm grateful as my gaze returns to the spider who has shifted to directly above my head. I imagine it's many eyes observing everything in this room. The two powerful men, the seemingly meek woman, and the torrent of pain that exists within her. Perhaps it sees my cracks, my fractures, my swirling darkness—but knows my soul can't be touched. Not unless I allow it. Gideon can't get to my soul, and that is why he pushes. It fascinates him to find alternative routes in. Like a complex maze with my soul as the prize burning bright in the center, yet his paths keep taking him to dead ends.

The doctor stands and walks around to stand on my other side. There's blood on his gloved hands. I've already shed so much for Gideon, why not some more? The doctor's mouth moves, but it's like we are underwater. I can barely hear him. I tilt my head, trying to understand his words. They stretch out before me like he's been put in slow motion mode. I blink. Nope, still stuck.

The head of the chair suddenly angles down and once again I'm looking at my spider friend on the ceiling. Something tightens around my arm. Is Gideon squeezing it?

What am I meant to be doing? Did I say the wrong thing? I hope not. There's been enough pain and shock for today.

Water touches my lips, and I'm thirsty beyond all belief. Like I've been baking in the sun all day long. The buzzing in my head is deafening. I guzzle the cool water like my life depends on it.

Slowly the world refocuses and Dr. Stevens' concerned face hovers over me. "Back with us, Mrs. Lowell?"

I nod. He sighs. "Good. For future reference, it's always recommended eating and drinking enough to keep your sugars up during procedures such as these."

He tilts the chair, bringing me back to a sitting position. My legs are free from the loops, and they have pulled my gown down. "I'm sorry. I was so excited."

He pats my shoulder. "Understandable. I've given your husband the painkillers and antibiotics. He has my number. Any strange smells or noticeable discharge, call me. There's a sanitary pad there on the side for you. My assistant will see you out. Mrs. Stevens has a roast dinner waiting and a dozen of our family and friends to entertain. I best get back to her."

He waltzes out of the room with a final nod at Gideon.

"Drink the rest of the water, Honor," Gideon snaps. My gaze flies to him. Why is he mad at me? I consume what he allows. No more, no less.

My bottom lip wobbles. I don't think I can take any more today. Gideon's hard gaze softens. "It's okay. You didn't know."

He helps me to my feet and pulls off the surgical gown. It flutters to the floor. A trickle of sweat runs down my spine. The urge to curl into a ball and rock in the corner is overwhelming. "Let's get you dressed."

He opens my white cotton panties, and feeds my legs into them. "Here." He hands me the sanitary towel. I stick it to my underwear, then he pulls my cream sheath dress over my head. He eyeballs the heels, before his fingers loop into them and he scoops me up bridal style. I hang onto his neck and snuggle

into him. He might be the devil, but I have zero other options for comfort, and the steady throb between my legs is already starting.

He smiles at me as we pass the startled gray-haired woman. She rushes to open the front door, and the cool winter air kisses my heated skin. It's a welcome reprieve before I'm bundled into the car, and we are on our way home. Gideon keeps me in his lap, stroking my back. I sigh. It's nice. To have his hands on me, to soothe me, not hurt me. It stokes a yearning I long thought dead, for something more, something warm and loving. No, not something. Someone, I realize, someone safe. I lift my hand and cup Gideon's clean-shaven jaw so I can gaze at his eyes the color of a tropical sky. He is not that someone, and I will never find that something while I stay here and let him continue to quash my light. It's time. No more of my blood will be shed in the name of making this impossible man happy. I gave him a year of my life. Time for Operation Bangs.

CHAPTER 6

HONOR



A cornered animal is a dangerous one.

Gideon hands me an ice pack as I lay back on our bed. “The doctor advised putting it between your legs for swelling and pain relief.”

I clutch it and place it over my throbbing vagina. No ice pack is going to help that deep aching. That is going to hurt like a bitch for some time.

The bed dips as Gideon sits on the edge. His fingers skim over the hair on my forehead. “You need time to heal, baby, but you’ll be mine. Made new inside for me. It will be special.” He produces two pill pots and shakes a tablet out of each. “Antibiotic and painkiller.” He drops them in my hand, then gives me a glass of water. I swallow the pills and drink the water. He shakes his head and drags it away from my parched lips. “You can have the rest in a moment, Honor.”

He places the glass on the bedside table, grips my hands and pulls me up to my feet. The ice pack hits the floor with a dull thud. He retrieves a familiar band of black leather from the foot of the bed. I swallow the denial. A sour taste lingers on my tongue as my throat tightens. He’s got to be joking. “We can’t let our hard work go to waste. We would have to start again.”

“I’m too sore.” The words tumble out of my mouth before I can stop them. His nostrils flare and his jaw tightens. I want to stuff my stupid rebuttal back inside my chest. Gideon might not have access to my vagina, but he has other places and

ways to hurt me. I dip my eyes to the floor. “I’m sorry, Gideon, the excitement of the day and the pain made me speak out of turn. Forgive me.”

Silence stretches between us as I await his decision on how to handle my disobedience. “You are forgiven, Honor. Don’t let it happen again.” My shoulders sag. “Arms up. Let’s get this back on you. I can already see a widening.”

My hands raise into the air and he slides on the waist trainer. I turn around. “Lie on your stomach. I think it will be easier to get traction.”

I obey. My face buries into the expensive Egyptian cotton. I suck in the clean washing powder scent as I intertwine my fingers and hold them behind my head. His shoe braces against my butt and he yanks, the trainer finds its place a little easier this time, and before I know it, I’m beneath the sheets, with the ice pack between my legs and have been given permission to drink the rest of the water and sleep.

My hand lands on his arm before he rises. “May I have my hair done tomorrow?”

He shakes his head. “You need rest, Honor, not preening.”

“It relaxes me.”

His lips twist to the side as his gaze narrows. I work to keep my heartbeat steady. “The doctor said I have to refrain from exercise and heavy lifting for a few weeks, but he encouraged me to resume other normal activities. Wasting away in this bed won’t allow me to be my best for you.”

Come on, Gideon. You don’t have the patience to dote on a sick wife. I had the flu a few months ago and was promptly moved into a guest bedroom and given a nurse to look after me. Gideon graced me with his presence twice a day—never entering the room as he got an update on my progress. That lasted three days, before I was punished for not healing fast enough. This current state had been inflicted on his wishes, however, and the ultimate prize at the end of it is likely to hold his beast at bay.

“Fine. I’ll book you an appointment with Anthony. I have meetings tomorrow, so we’ll drop you off on the way to the office, and I’ll have Mike stay with you.”

Shit. Mike is a focused bodyguard and misses little. I hoped it was going to be Montgomery. “Thank you.”

He nods and turns to leave, the door snicking closed behind him. The click of his expensive shoes disappears down the hallway. I let out a pained breath and stare at the ceiling. I tilt my head as a black dot moves. Another spider. Gideon hates them, and for that reason, I love them. They stand sentinel in rooms and bear witness to atrocities, whispered secrets, and the games played between lovers.

Minutes tick by. The door remains closed and my courage burns inside my heart. *Come on, Honor, get up, prepare.*

I pull the ice pack off my throbbing core and leave it on the pillow as I slide my legs off the bed. My head spins from the shock and lack of oxygen, no doubt. My teeth dig into my bottom lip until blood pools in my mouth as I stumble into the dressing room. I flick the light on and go for the top drawer in my half of the room. I remove a black silk nightgown and place it over my shoulder, in case Gideon catches me in here and I need an excuse. Next, I open the cupboard containing a multitude of designer purses. My hand grazes over them, and I select the tan leather bag that costs more than I used to make in a year. A stylist updates my wardrobe monthly to ensure Gideon’s wife is dressed appropriately and on trend. But it’s not the brand, the price, or the style that draws me to this accessory. It’s the lining I’ve unpicked at the base. I lift the flap and gaze at the neat stack of bills.

The rich rarely carry physical cash, and when they do, they easily lose track of it. Their loss is my gain. I have painstakingly gathered this “loose change” over months.

I slide open the drawer the dress fitters use and gather a needle and cotton reel. My hand shakes as I try to thread it. I huff, my hands collapsing at my sides. “Get it together, Honor,” I admonish.

My teeth hurt as I grind them and retry. The thread feeds through the tiny metal opening, and I snap the cotton and tie a quick knot in the end. My hand steadies as I work to close the small hole in the lining. I remind myself that staying will result in my demise. Whether my mind or body breaks, Gideon won't stop until he shatters me into irreparable pieces.

I gaze at my handiwork. You can't tell. With a few items in here, he won't notice the hundreds of dollars buried beneath the satin. My tongue runs over my teeth. I wish I was brave enough to enter Gideon's office and retrieve my passport and driving license. I shake my head. What would be the point? He would use them to track me. No, I need to disappear into the bustling streets of New York like a ghost.

A spasm of pain tugs inside my core. My hand slaps against the wall as I groan, while the other clutches my stomach. "Fuck." I can't be found here. I have to get back to bed. Nothing can seem out of the ordinary.

I replace the sewing equipment in the drawer and slip the nightdress over my head. My gaze lands on the panel at the end of the dressing room. A small smile pulls at my lips. Never again. I'll die before I'm taken inside the room of pain. *He'll make you wish you were dead if you get caught.* There's that insidious voice. The one that has seen me trapped inside this house for too long. My legs wobble as I stumble out of the dressing room and back into bed.

My heart thunders in my chest. This is the final night I will lie in bed next to Gideon. I have to leave, my heart can't take any more. I need to protect my light, shield it from the darkness he brings. He once told me if I ever ran, he would never stop looking for me, and when—not if—he caught me, I would regret the day I defied Gideon Lowell.

Get ready to hunt, husband. I'm about to test your resolve.

CHAPTER 7

HONOR



Change is terrifying, but to remain is deadly.

Gideon hands me two pills, which I swallow with the sparkling water on the dining table. His gaze passes over me, assessing me, but he's made me a master at shielding my real thoughts. All he will find is a dutiful wife, who wouldn't dare to dream of a future without him. My pulse stays steady, and I force myself to relax.

He pockets the two medicine pots into his expensive black slacks. I have to get those pills. I won't be able to seek medical help, and I don't want to risk infection as my escape would be over so fast it would make my head spin. But timing is important, and if I asked now, he would only supply me with the one tablet I technically need. Better to wait until the last moment so he has less time to think it through.

"I'll drop you off and return for you at lunchtime. We can eat at that little Italian bistro you love."

Used to love. Before Gideon. My favorite is their secret recipe lasagne, but that rich explosion of flavor hasn't graced my tongue in over eight months. Gideon's change in behavior after we were married was subtle at first, a shift in perspective that you don't even realize is happening. A few well-placed comments about weight and body image. Planting the fear that my husband would find me unattractive, slowly wearing away my independence. Like a creeping disease where you don't know it is terminal, and by the time you do, it's too late.

I swipe my tan purse from the sideboard as we leave the house. Gideon grabs an umbrella and opens it to shield us from the misty rain. The mirror image of our fateful meeting isn't lost on me. While I once found it an endearing 'how we met story,' now it makes my chest hurt. It's been a long time since I danced in the rain. I vow to the stormy clouds gathering above I will find my way back beneath them, welcoming them with open arms.

We duck into the town car. Mike climbs into the front with Montgomery, the vigilant bodyguard. He might be a problem, but I have a plan.

Gideon works on his iPad while I gaze out of the window, watching the familiar streets of New York pass by as we drive through the city that never sleeps. After today, it's unlikely I will ever step foot in the place I fell in love with. It's too dangerous, even with the millions of people here.

We pull up outside a building. The frosted glass declares this simply as Anthony's. He is the best hairdresser in New York and has become a dear friend over the last year. Hairdressers are the perfect spies; they see beneath your beautiful to the darkness. They observe the dynamics of your nearest and dearest and accurately assess the relationship. Most of them say nothing. Anthony isn't most.

The car door swings open, and Gideon expands the umbrella and takes my hand to guide me up the few steps and through the heavy-set wooden entrance.

Anthony looks up from the reception desk with a megawatt smile. As always, he has everyone cleared out for my appointment. No extra staff, no other customers. I hate the power Gideon has and how he uses it to manipulate others into doing exactly what he wants.

"Happy New Year," Anthony exclaims as he rushes over and shakes Gideon's hand, before laying a kiss on the back of mine. "Did you do anything nice? It was a double celebration for you both, right? Henry and I spent the afternoon lounging around, playing *Mario Kart* and watching *Lord of the Rings*."

Henry is Anthony's husband, and the only reason Gideon isn't losing his mind about the kiss on my hand. "We had the perfect day. Spent our time celebrating our first year together and looking to the future," Gideon answers. He's right, I am looking to the future.

Anthony wiggles his eyebrows. "Do I smell babies this year?"

I chuckle. "If you smell babies, I would be concerned."

The door opens again, and Mike's imposing form enters. He takes the typical stance at the window. Anthony looks Mike up and down like he's a delicious snack. "Ooh, you brought eye candy."

Gideon raises a brow before kissing my temple. "Be good." He turns to leave.

I clear my throat. Here goes. "Gideon, I'll need my medication in four hours."

He freezes, his shoulders stiffening before he spins back around. His baby blues are like ice chips as he narrows them.

"Are you unwell?" Anthony asks.

"Kidney infection," Gideon answers smoothly. It always astonishes me how a warrior of the truth can lie so easily.

He darts his gaze to Mike and pulls the two bottles out of his pocket before handing them to the burly bodyguard. "She's due one of each of these at twelve. Ensure she takes them. She gets a little forgetful."

Mike clutches them in his hand before nodding. "Yes, sir."

Gideon faces me with a frown wrinkling his forehead. My gut twists as our eyes meet. Can he see the resolve in mine? I hope not. This is the final time we will be in the same room, and in a few hours, the last time we shall be in the same city. Even though I know I have to run before he breaks me completely, there's a melancholy sense of loss. Loss for my innocence, loss for my marriage, loss for my eroded trust in humanity. Anyone in this situation will tell you the complex emotions are confusing and debilitating. You've been taught

and fed the lie that you can't survive without them for so long, and you believe it. Taking your choices, free will, and independence means you rely on another to decide your everyday life, from the clothes that you wear to the food you eat. Faced suddenly with no guidance, it makes your mind rebel.

"Enjoy your pampering, Honor. Anthony, she enjoys the head massage you offer. Don't over lighten her hair, she doesn't like it." No, he doesn't like it.

Anthony gives a quick nod, his eyes tightening. There you go—he sees everything. Then Gideon is gone, the door sweeping closed behind him. I watch his shadowy figure through the frosted glass as he climbs into the car. A minute later and that, too, is gone.

Anthony clutches my shoulders and ushers me up the step to his personal workstation at the rear of the salon. I glance over my shoulder at Mike. He doesn't move, but his steely gaze watches us.

I fold myself into the leather chair, wincing as the pain deep inside my core pulses. Anthony's mouth tightens as he fluffs my hair and pushes it forward.

"What are you feeling like today, Honor?"

"A touch up of my highlights, small trim off the ends. I'm thinking of trying something a little different."

His warm brown gaze finds mine in the mirror. "Like?"

My heart thunders in my chest. "Bangs."

He sucks in a sharp breath. "Great. That, I can do." My shoulders drop. Phase one. He picks up my handbag from the floor. "I'll put this in the back." He nods at the magazines laid out before me. "Entertain yourself for a few minutes while I prepare everything."

I pick up one of the glossy brochures and flick through. My gaze lands on a picture of myself and Gideon sharing a kiss on New Year's Eve. The caption reads, "District Attorney Lowell, still very much in love one year after he took himself off the market."

I snort. If only they knew. *Good news, ladies, he's about to be unexpectedly on the market.* Anthony appears from the back room with his chin tilted into the air as his gaze darts to Mike. His lips press into a thin line. He puts the pot of red paste on the small trolley next to my chair, and retrieves a stack of foil strips from a drawer. It's on.

We fall into seemingly careless chatter as he paints the color onto my strands. The chemical smell of colorant stings my nostrils. He selects massive chunks of hair. I've never been a redhead, only ever blonde by Gideon's stipulation. I suppose it is one thing he's never tried to change.

Anthony pats my shoulder. "I'll let you cook for thirty before I work my magic hands on your scalp."

"Sounds good."

Mike has barely moved an inch. It amazes me how these bodyguards are trained to stay alert for hours at a time. I would fall asleep out of boredom. Watching his boss's wife have her hair done as she chitchats to her hairdresser about the latest gossip in New York is hardly riveting. This next part is going to take a little finesse and a lot of luck. My eyes watch the oversized clock on the wall. Fourteen minutes past ten. Anthony peeks inside one foil and hums.

"Looks like you are done. You want a coffee?" He raises a brow. Unspoken communication flies between us.

"After you get these foils off, please."

"No problem, Honor."

I follow him deeper into the salon, around the corner to the sinks. As expected, Mike shifts his position so he can keep me in his line of sight. Ugh.

I sit and tip my head back into the cool sink. Anthony sings along to some country song in the background as he drags the foils from my hair. I blink up at him and he winks at me. We got this. Right? My stomach clenches as my hands fall to my waist. The trainer is a reminder of what I'm playing for—the free will God graced us with. Gideon Lowell is not a

god—despite how highly he thinks of himself—so he has no rights to my free will.

Anthony shampoos my hair, digging into my scalp, and giving me the massage I dream of. It's a small comfort and something I treasure. He rinses the shampoo once, twice. Time speeds up, like my future is racing toward me at a crossroads, and I have to choose before I'm torn in half.

“Leave in treatment. I'll wrap you up and get you that coffee.” He winks at me, but I spot the tremble in his hands.

“Thank you,” I whisper. I know what he's risking today. He jerks his head and disappears through a doorway into the kitchen. A minute passes and a string of curses erupts from the room, before a harassed-looking Anthony reappears with a glass of water. He juts his chin at Mike. “She needs her medication.”

Mike's head swings to the clock. Eleven twenty eight. He digs in his pockets for the pill bottles as he approaches me. “Also, the coffee machine is broken. Be a doll and run down the street to get Mrs. Lowell a hazelnut latte with a shot of caramel. I'll have an almond milk cappuccino—make sure they put fresh milk into the machine. Tell them Anthony sent you and to add it to my account.”

My lips twitch at the burly guy being called *doll*. Mike narrows his eyes as Anthony snatches the pill bottles from his hands. He makes a shoo motion. “Get something for yourself. Go on.”

Mike frowns. “Don't leave the salon,” he grinds out.

“Of course not.”

Mike nods and spins on his heel. He pauses. “Lock the door behind me.”

Anthony sighs and follows him to the front door. The catch snicks closed. My breathing picks up speed as I rise from the chair. Anthony's gaze collides with mine. “If we are doing this, it needs to be now. We have fifteen minutes max until he's back.” He ushers me into the kitchen.

“Fifteen minutes for coffee?”

“I messaged Sarah. She will keep Mike busy.”

Anthony points at a pile of clothing on the marble worktop. “Change.”

I bite my lip. “For goodness sake, Honor, I’m not interested in your girl bits.”

I pull the bottle green dress shift over my head and toe off my designer heels. He sucks in a breath. “Are you fucking kidding me?” he snarls as he takes in the leather clinching my torso. He moves around the back. “He deserves to be fucked in the ass by an enormous spiky dildo covered in syphilis.”

I laugh as I shake my head and grab the plain white T-shirt. “Leave it. We don’t have time. I’ll remove it later.”

I yank on the blue denim jeans and pull on the plain white sneakers. He drags the towel off my hair and curls the damp strands into a bun before securing it at the nape of my neck with an elastic band. I dig into my handbag and tear the seam to free the money hidden at the bottom. I collect my phone and drop the bag on the floor with a thud. Next, he hands me a plain navy baseball cap. I secure it on my head. He drags a black waterproof coat around my shoulders and I slip my arms inside.

He checks his watch. “Eleven minutes left.” He snatches a rucksack from a cupboard and hands it to me. I unzip it and suck in a breath.

“That’s every bit of money he’s paid me to do your hair over the last year, and some extra.”

I shake my head, hot tears dripping down my cheeks. “It’s too much. I can’t take this.”

“Poppycock. You can, and you will.” He unzips the small flap on the inside. “Tickets to Times Square. From there, hot foot it to Penn Station. The rest of the items are stored in a locker. Show the clerk the confirmation on this phone.” He slides an expensive phone out of his back pocket and hands it to me. “Then destroy it. There’s another one in the locker as well as a further change of clothes. After that, follow the plan you made. If you buy tickets, get at least three to different

places to confuse the fuck out of them. But get out of the city as soon as you can.”

I drag in a breath and try to relax my shoulders. He wraps me in a hug. “We planned this, Honor. Run, and don’t look back.”

I pull away as my bottom lip wobbles. “I can never repay you or thank you enough.”

He pinches my chin between his fingers and tilts up my head. “You can repay me by living your life free of this pain I see on your face. I can’t watch as he chips away at your light and smothers it.”

He hands me the two pill bottles, which I slide into my coat pocket. His gaze scans my body, looking for the cause of the medication. “Do I want to know?”

My eyes squeeze closed as shame washes over me. “No,” I whisper.

“Fuck,” he growls, hammering his fist into the concrete. I flinch.

He drags in a breath. “I’m sorry. He will get his karma one of these days, Honor, and we will dance on his fucking grave together.”

That’s unlikely. I’ll just be glad to be free.

He checks his watch, then angles his face to the side before tapping his chin. “Seven minutes, let’s go. Now the hard bit. Make it hurt.”

I pull back my fist like my father taught me and hammer it into Anthony’s jaw. He sways. “Fuck me, girl, you got a mean left hook.”

I smile. “Damn right.”

I’m out of the rear door and disappearing into the streets of New York. The rain falls on my face as I dart left toward the subway station. My gaze flicks up and my heart climbs into my throat when I see Mike storming toward me, carrying two takeaway cups. *Shit, shit, shit.* Do I cross over? I angle my head down and jostle my rucksack higher on my shoulder. He

breezes past, not suspecting for a second his charge has evaded him. I let out the long breath and force myself to keep moving.

Change hurts. It's scary, terrifying, even. There's no turning back now. Gideon will break me if he finds me. I have to run faster and be smarter than the lion stalking me. *Eyes on the prize, Honor, I will dance in the rain once again.*

CHAPTER 8

HONOR



Treat others as you wish to be treated.

The heart is a remarkable piece of engineering. Give a tennis ball a firm squeeze. That is approximately the same amount of force it uses to pump your life-giving blood around your body. At an average heart rate, it beats about 100,000 times a day, and 35 million times a year, meaning your heart will contract 2.5 billion times during your lifetime. My worry is, if we are born with a finite number of heartbeats, and my current heart rate is double what it should be—am I working my way to an early grave? Because it has not stopped racing, not since I slipped into the station and caught the first subway train to Times Square. I eyeball the crowd pressing in around me. I'm waiting for Gideon to spring out of the sea of faces and drag me back home.

A big guy stands behind me with his grocery bag on the floor between his feet while he chats to another guy. He smiles at me, and a pang of guilt tugs at my chest. *Sorry, dude.* I crouch like I'm retying my shoelace. My throat tightens as I slide my personal phone from my pocket and drop it between his bananas and rice. The train stops and I climb off. I spin to check he didn't follow me. He didn't.

My breath puffs out. No time for relief. I move quickly, without running, like I have somewhere to be, and not like I'm being chased by the devil coming for my damned soul. I'm out into Times Square and speed walking to Penn Station. Half a mile, that's all it is.

Nobody stops me. I burst into the station and join the small line of people waiting to retrieve their luggage. My fists clench as I force myself not to fidget. A guy no older than twenty greets me with zero inflection in his voice.

“I need to see your confirmation.”

I fumble in my rucksack for the phone Anthony placed in there. A brief panic freezes my chest as I wonder what the passcode is. Fuck. I swipe up, and my shoulders sag. No passcode. I pull up the confirmation and wave it at the guy.

He squints at it, before disappearing into the room behind him. He shuffles back out with a black duffel bag before sliding it to me.

“Thanks,” I mumble before spinning and disappearing into the crowd once more. I glance around at the signs hanging from the ceiling. General Information, Ticket Desk, no, no, wait—yes. I follow the universal sign for the restroom, dive inside the cold tiled room, and into a tiny cubicle. I hook the duffel bag onto the back of the door, bury my face in my hands and silently scream into my palm. Once my freak out is over, I unzip the new bag to find a different outfit inside. Black V-neck sweater, black jeans, and kick-ass black boots. A white wooly hat completes the outfit. I take the phone Anthony gave me, drop it in the yellow water, and flush it. It floats on the top, but the screen goes black. Good enough. Green contact lenses come next to combat my unusual eyes that people take notice of.

I grab the small cross-body purse and stuff the new phone and a few hundred dollars inside. Then I drop the rucksack and my discarded clothing back into the duffel and zip it up. *Stick to the plan. Go south, then west. Get out of the city.*

I emerge from the restroom and keep my head down. Everywhere has CCTV, and with Gideon’s deep pockets, a little facial recognition is nothing. So I have to keep my face hidden, but not look suspicious—a fine balancing act. I make it to the ticket desk and purchase a one-way ticket to Newark Airport. I weave my way onto the platform and hop on the train at one end before moving through the carriages. I swap

my hat for my cap and shrug on my coat before exiting the train at the other end, the whistle blows and the doors lock.

Next, I exit the station and make the short walk to the Port Authority Bus Terminal before eyeballing the buses due to leave. Washington D.C., I think, which will stop in Philadelphia for a break where I'll get off and move in a different direction. I'm trying to leave false trails for every move I make. That way, if he's tracking me, he will have to split his resources into so many directions it will spread them thin, and I'm more likely to lose them. I climb onto the bus and take a seat in the middle. My foot taps against the floor as I watch everyone who passes for signs they are searching for me. No alarm bells, and when the bus pulls away, I lean my head back in my seat and let myself feel.

I'm free. Sadness washes over me for the marriage I spent an entire year trying to make work. I mourn the loss of the girl I was before Gideon fucked with my psyche. I could have stayed, lied down, and accepted my fate at the hands of a monster. It might have even been the easier route.

A woman in the seat across from mine waves a packet of M&M's between us. "You want one?"

I lift my gaze to examine her. Tanned, mid-fifties, laughter lines around her green eyes as she smiles like she's never met evil. My hand falls to my constricted torso. I have to eat something. Fainting will halt my escape before I've even begun. I hold my hand out and she tips some into my palm.

"I'm Mel," she says as she quirks an eyebrow.

"Joanna." My first name change. "Thank you."

I eyeball the chocolate. When was the last time I ate something sweet? I frown. I can't even remember. How sad.

I pop one of the treats in my mouth and let the sugary coating melt on my tongue. I stifle a groan. Damn, that's good. "I have plenty. No need to eat them like it's your last meal."

The kindness of this complete stranger overwhelms me. My eyes sting and tears fall unbidden. Mel mutters a curse, as she shoves a pack of tissues onto my lap. She tries to take the

M&M's out of my palm. I close my fist tight. *Sorry, lady, these are now mine.* I slide a tissue from the pack and swipe at my cheeks.

"Thank you," I whisper as I wrestle my emotions back under control.

"Where are you headed?"

"Umm, D.C."

She tilts her head and smiles. "Sweets, you are running scared. You don't have to tell me the truth, but let me try to help you. Are you traveling to visit family?"

I squash the damp tissue in my hand and shake my head. A flare of rage burns in my chest at my mother's attitude toward my plea for help. "No, no family."

"A friend?"

"I don't have any."

"Wrong, you have me."

A wobbly smile pulls at my lips. My hand unclenches; the M&M's have stained my palm. My core clenches in pain as I pop another of the small chocolates in my mouth. Must be time for a painkiller. I pull out the two bottles from my pocket and stare at them. Can I dry swallow these pills? I almost laugh. I've swallowed worse. But I've been so consumed with escape I forgot the basics like food and drink. I'm an idiot.

Mel sighs and rummages around in her bag before handing me a fresh bottle of water. I take a deep breath and stuff the rising panic back at another offering of kindness. My head is screwed up. I know her actions aren't a sign of something horrific about to happen to me, but pain always followed kindness from Gideon. Like he was trying to balance it.

My hand wraps around the bottle, and I swallow the two pills.

"I'm on my way to see my daughter. She's about your age, just gifted me with my first grandson."

"That's amazing. Is this your first time visiting them?"

She grins. “Yes, I’m so proud of her.”

My heart squeezes. I have never heard my mother say she was proud of anything I did, except marrying Gideon. “What did she name him?”

“William. He’s going to be a heartbreaker, but she will teach him how to treat someone with respect. My girl didn’t grow up in the easiest household.”

I blink at her. This seems like a super personal conversation between two strangers. “Oh?”

She narrows her gaze at me. “My husband wasn’t a forgiving or easy man to live with. I am proud of her because she found her way to a happy, healthy relationship. She was stronger than I.”

I swallow the lump in my throat, afraid to ask the next question, but unable to stop myself. “Are you still together?”

Her lips twitch. “No. He liked a little too much salt with his food and died of a heart attack five years ago.” The way she says this suggests she helped him with that salt. Pity for me, Gideon is a health freak who has a tightly controlled diet prepared by chefs, not his wife.

A rectangular package wrapped in wax paper lands on my lap. “You’ll need to eat more than a few bits of chocolate with those. They will make you sick otherwise,” Mel advises.

I unwrap the wax, finding a homemade cheese and ham sandwich. I can’t cry anymore. Mel will think I’ve totally lost it.

Was it only yesterday that I lamented how much I missed bread? This simple food made with loving care is the most precious gift for reasons she’ll never comprehend.

She is what a mother should look like. Observing that someone’s in distress and not prying, not controlling, but being present in the moment.

Perhaps if I’d had a mother like Mel, I would have recognised the dark lurking beneath Gideon’s charm. Maybe, I would have never fallen for it. But you can’t change the past,

nor linger in it. If you do, you never escaped and this will have all been for nothing.

The first bite of the bread elicits a groan from my throat. Mel chuckles as she tucks into her own identical sandwich. I manage one half before my stomach twists.

This damn waist trainer needs to come off as soon as possible.

But I can hardly strip in the middle of the bus and beg her to undo the laces. She'd have the authorities waiting for me at the next stop. I'd try to explain, and if I was lucky, I might get a kind officer who believes me. But I'd be taken to the station, deeper into the legal system, where all roads inevitably lead back to Gideon. And this time, he wouldn't give me the room to run.

I wrap the other half of the sandwich and try returning it to her.

She pushes it back and shakes her head. "Save it for later. This isn't a short journey."

I don't argue. Kindness like this shouldn't be rejected. It diminishes the precious gift.

I sip some water before capping it and placing it on the seat next to me. My eyes flutter closed, the painkiller beginning to take effect. I pry them open. I can't sleep. It's not safe yet.

"Close your eyes, Joanna," Mel coaxes. "Tell me where you want to wake up, and I'll ensure that you do."

"Philly."

"I thought so. Now sleep."

I sigh and my head lolls as I get dragged under.

CHAINS ATTACHED to my limbs spread me across the four corners of the iron frame in the secret room. The damp cold creeps along my naked flesh and sinks deep into my bones. I'm not sure I will ever be warm again.

A shadow moves across the wall, eyes of blue flames gliding over my vulnerable body. Gideon tsks. "You have been disobedient, Honor. This hurts me more than it hurts you." Not fucking likely. "I have been too lenient. But you have to learn."

I close my eyes. I can't be here. It's not possible. I'm on a bus going to Philly with a kind woman called Mel who makes the best cheese and ham sandwiches. Did someone drug me and bring me back here? I wouldn't put it past Gideon.

The walls shift and close in, shrinking the room as my husband steps out of the shadows. His nostrils flare as he clenches his jaw and tilts his head, popping the bones in his neck. He narrows his gaze over my naked body.

"Gideon, please," I whisper, knowing it's pointless to beg the monster for mercy.

"At least you didn't remove the trainer. That's one less thing we have to redo. No more respite for you. You lost that right when you ran. It'll stay on for at least a month."

That's not the end of the world. He stalks to the bottom of the bed and braces his hands on the frame as he leans forward to look between my open thighs.

His lips twitch. "I had the doctor check you over while you were out of it. He confirmed you are still intact but with some gentle persuasion, he added a few more stitches to make you extra tight. It didn't have to be this way, baby. I was going to take my time with you, ensure you enjoyed it as much as me. Now, all that awaits you is pain. But it's no less than you deserve for trying to run."

I shake my head in horror at what he's done to my body while I've been unconscious. "Gideon, I can't—"

He smashes his hand against the metal, the vibration rattling through my prone body. "You gave up your rights to pleasure. I warned you, Honor, never run from me. You took the risk, and now you are dealing with the consequences."

"I want to be free."

“You will never be free of me, Honor. I am in your heart, your mind, and your soul. Wherever you go, I will shadow your every waking thought and haunt your nightmares. There is no escape. No freedom.”

He grows larger, his head almost touching the ceiling, or is the ceiling moving closer? “Oh my God,” I whisper.

“That’s right. I’m your god, Honor.”

“Wake up,” a female voice whispers. “Come on, lovely, open your eyes for me.”

I gasp. My eyes fly open and collide with Mel’s concerned gaze. “That is a hell of a demon you are running from,” she says as her eyebrows draw together.

“Not a demon, the devil,” I whisper. “And I have to hope he never catches me.”

She pulls me into a hug. I freeze. I don’t get hugged. It’s never been a feature of my life as a child or an adult. My arms come up, and I hook them around her as I draw in a whiff of her lavender-scented hair.

Mel releases me and swipes at a tear from her cheek. She waves a hand in front of her face and drags in a breath before handing me a piece of paper. I glance at the block lettering and numbers.

“Top one is my cell phone. If you need me, if you need help, call me, no matter the time of day, I will pick up. Only those closest to me have that number.”

I press my lips together and swallow a sob. Mel is the ray of hope I needed.

She points at the next number under an address. “That’s the details of a bed & breakfast my friend owns in a town outside of Knoxville. Head there, then call her. She will come and collect you. Her name is Louise. She’ll take cash and won’t ask you for ID. I called ahead to let her know you’ll be dropping in within the next few days. When you get there, take a breath. She won’t pry, but she has been through something similar. You have friends, Joanna, you just have to find them. I put an extra sandwich and two bottles of water next to you.

Take them, because I doubt you are going to stop long enough to eat.”

“I don’t know how to repay you.”

She shakes her head with a sad smile. “Life isn’t about repaying people, it’s about paying kindness and compassion forward. One day you might be in a position to help someone, and that’s how you move forward. Put out into the world what you want to receive.”

CHAPTER 9

HONOR



You have misjudged my resolve, and that shall be your undoing.

After two days, six bus journeys, and a perilous few hours in a shady station waiting room, I give in to the need to stop for a night to rest. One night, then I will continue to put distance between myself and New York. That's how I end up in a motel on the outskirts of Lexington. I eyeball the cameras secured everywhere you look. Perhaps Gideon will track me here eventually, but by the time he views the footage, I will be long gone.

I push open the sticky smeared glass door and stride up to the chipped wood reception desk. A girl with greasy brown hair slapped back into a ponytail glares at me, but offers no greeting. Customer service is clearly not a priority here.

“One room, for one night please,” I say as I drag some cash from my back pocket. I'm not stupid enough to take it from my bag, as it would alert them to the fact I have enough on me to warrant a mugging.

She quirks a brow. “I need identification and a bank card.”

For a place like this? Seriously? I pull some extra bills out of my pocket and slap them on the counter. “ID and bank card.”

Her hand snatches the money, and she pulls it under the counter, exchanging it for a single key with a fob and the number thirteen on it. “Thanks,” I mutter, snatching the key

and hurrying to the matching door. I have to jiggle the key a little before the flimsy door gives way. The door closes behind me, and I lean my back against it as I drop the duffle to the floor and close my eyes. My limbs jerk, but I can't fall asleep yet. Not until I've made sure everything is as secure as can be in a place like this.

The room looks like a set from a 1970s horror movie, complete with orange and brown bedding and an avocado bathroom suite. I secure the small chain on the door. It's not enough to keep someone out, but it will give me a warning. The window has tiny latches on it that will pop off with a little force, so there is nothing I can do there. I stand in front of the mirror and peel off my sweater to reveal the waist trainer. Time to get this fucking thing off so I can breathe. I turn and look over my shoulder as I try to negotiate the laces. Wait—what the actual fuck? There are two thick straps buckled into place and from each dangles a gold-colored padlock. My hand slaps over my mouth, and I scream into my palm. When did he do this? I feel like I'm suffocating. It's that sensation when you try on something that's too tight, and you panic in the changing room, thinking it will never come off, that you will be stuck this way for eternity. There's no point in crying, that won't result in it miraculously falling away from me.

Focus, Honor. Do something constructive like take a damn shower. You stink. I switch on the water, which gives a pathetic spurt before dribbling lukewarm water. I strip the rest of my clothes off and use the tiny bar of soap to wash my hair and body. I have no hair brush, so I do my best to comb the tangled mess with my fingers before giving up and wrapping it into a tight bun.

After dressing in a clean pair of leggings and a baggy sweater, I dig around in the duffle bag to take stock of what Anthony packed for me. Money, clothing, a small first aid kit—nothing that will cure the pain between my legs. A pocket knife. That could work. I rip the sweater off and try to twist my arms to get the knife under the straps to release them, but they are too tight. My shoulders sag as I tip my head back, tears wobbling on my lashes.

I got this. It's just another hurdle. I jerk my head as I try to digest my own pep talk and drag the sweater back on. I twitch the yellowed net curtain at the window to see who is lurking out in the dark. The vending machines are on the other side of the parking lot near the reception area. I need painkillers, which means I need food. I'll be a few minutes at most. My hands shake as I grab some money and the key. I drag in a steadying breath, open the door, and rush over the parking lot, covering the distance in less than a minute. I keep my gaze angled to the ground and away from the cameras as I select as much food and drink as I can carry in one go. Arms laden with goodies, I race back and dump them on the bed before sliding the chain back into place. Next, I switch on the TV and select a national news channel. Let's see the damage Gideon is causing. Does he have the nation's finest searching for me? How recognizable am I going to be?

I tuck into the chocolate bar and guzzle a full sugar soda before popping a couple of the pain meds. Nothing. There's not one mention of my disappearance on the news. *What game are you playing Gideon?*

The medication teams up with my exhaustion, and I lean back on the bed, lowering the volume of the TV. I need an hour or two of sleep, before I run again. I tuck the pen knife under my pillow and curl my hand around the cool hilt as my eyes flutter closed, my exhausted mind slips into darkness.

“WAKEY, wakey, Honor. You've been a disobedient wife.”

My body stiffens as my eyes try to open, but there's pressure against them. My jaw aches as I try to scream, but there's no give.

“Shush,” Gideon whispers. “I couldn't have you screaming for help while we wait for Mike to clear out the motel.” My hands fly up to my face. “Don't panic, baby, it's just the hood. You remember it, right? It's been a while since I had to use it. You can breathe—your nose is free.”

My fingers skim the buckles across my eyes and under my chin. It's a nightmare; he can't have found me this quickly. It's

not possible. My brain tries to close down and drag me back to the time when Gideon decided he'd caught me admiring another man. Following that was a month of pure hell. He'd deprived me of sight for an entire month. When I needed to shower, he'd remove the hood in the dark, wash my hair, before replacing it and guiding me to the bed. The entire time he made me wear earbuds that canceled out everything but his voice, which he fed to me twenty-four-seven. When I tried to disconnect, he'd turn up the volume. I was reduced to an hour of sleep at a time, a torture technique used in interrogation. I remember once reading about a study of sleep deprivation that had to be abandoned only days in because of the severe psychological effects.

A sob catches in my throat. I can't feel those earbuds now, but I might be wrong as all I can hear is the roaring of my pulse as panic chases away any lingering sleep.

"You changed your hair, but we can fix it. Your little temper tantrum will bring you nothing but pain. You do, however, still have the trainer on, and I can't tell you how happy that makes me," he utters as his hand trails down my chest. He cups me between my legs, making me groan. "I'm assuming you are still intact, Honor, because God help you if you gave someone what is rightfully mine."

"Sir, we are clearing out the last few occupants and should be on our way in the next fifteen. I paid off the owner and have retrieved the surveillance tapes."

It's Mike. How can he stand there and watch Gideon do this? Not only watch, but help.

A door clicks closed. "He's mad at you," Gideon says. "You made him look incompetent. He would have me do worse than what's coming your way, Honor. Be grateful I still want your body intact. He would carve you to pieces and feed you to the wolves. Mike, I've realized, has a temper, so now he's your personal bodyguard. Not that you'll be leaving the house for some time."

This can't be happening. I'd rather die. Going back is not an option.

My hand curls under the pillow, and I wrap my finger around the hilt. Before I second guess my actions, I whip out the knife and blindly plunge it where I think he's lying. A shocked groan leaves his lips. My hand releases the knife, and I scoot backward. I drop off the end of the bed and smack the back of my head against the dresser. *Fuck*. My hands frantically pull at the buckles of the hood and the zip at the back. I tear it off and suck in a long breath before pulling myself to my feet. Gideon's eyes are wide as he stares at the knife protruding from his chest as crimson blooms on his white dress shirt. Only Gideon would go hunting in designer clothing.

A small smile pulls at his lips as I snatch my bag from the floor. He tries to move but more blood spills from the wound, making him lie back down.

"You better run, Honor, because when I catch you, death will be a mercy I will never grant you." I glance at the knife. If I was smart, I'd kill him now. He grins like he can hear my thoughts. "Try it."

He's not as injured as I think. No way I'm going near him. I shake my head as I drag my boots on. "No, Gideon, you get to live with the fact I could have loved you like no other—until the ends of the earth. You had my devotion and twisted it into something ugly. Now you get to live with the memory of me shadowing your dreams. This will be the last time you see me. You have forgotten that when we met, I was not the weak woman you have tried to mold me into."

"You are exactly who I desire you to be."

I knot my laces and stand tall. "No, I'm not. I never was. Let me go."

"Never," he snarls.

"How did you find me?" I ask. It's a long shot asking a monster his tricks for the hunt.

His gaze falls to the heart-shaped locket around my neck. I rarely take it off. "I've known exactly where you are the entire

time, Honor. I waited until you stopped running so I could collect you in the manner you deserve. Like an animal.”

In other words, he wanted to make it hurt, but in his pained state, he’s shown his hand. I resist the urge to tear the necklace from my throat. It’s better if he thinks I’m still wearing it.

“My patience is running out, Honor,” he snaps.

Icy fingers skitter along my spine as my hand grips the handle of the door. “You wouldn’t know patience if it slapped you in the face, Gideon.”

Then I’m out of the door and running in the opposite direction of the reception area. I don’t spot Mike and make it to the bus station in under five minutes. I buy a ticket to Cincinnati which leaves in a few minutes, and make my way to the bus, launching myself onto it. I tug on the necklace and drop it down the side of a chair before racing back off the bus and disappearing into the darkened streets of Lexington. I have to hope Gideon is arrogant enough to follow that false trail, unless he’s dead. Then I’ll be free of his control, but wanted for murder.

CHAPTER 10

HONOR



Kindness is found in the smallest of acts and in the most unassuming of people.

Three days later, I arrive in Knoxville with Louise's number in my hand. My resolution to not leave any trail is wearing down. I need help. But is this the right decision? To call or not to call. If anyone caught up to Mel and questioned her, she would be the only one to know where I might be heading. But I'm exhausted and the pain inside my body is getting worse. I left the bottles of pills on the bedside table at the motel. So I've been in pain and a growing worry that something is seriously wrong is gnawing at my insides. If I keep going like this, I'll fuck up and make a mistake. I have to take some risks to avoid creating even bigger ones. Like Gideon tracking me down again.

I drag my dry bottom lip between my teeth and press the number into my phone. My heart races inside my chest as the call connects and starts to ring. I glance at the sky, then at the clock on my phone. It's 11 p.m. Like normal folks, she's probably fast asleep. I eyeball the hard plastic bench. I can wait until morning.

"Hello?" a sleepy voice draws.

"I'm so sorry, I didn't realize the time."

"Joanna?"

I squeeze my eyes closed. "Yes."

“Hold on, honey, are you at the station in Knoxville? I’m coming to get you. Don’t bolt, okay, I’m forty minutes away.”

“Okay.”

“See the man at the ticket counter?”

My gaze flicks to the heavy-set bald guy covered in tattoos. He looks like he moonlights in a biker gang. “Yes.”

“His name is Tony. Go to the desk. Tell him Louise is coming for you.”

My gaze flicks to the cameras in the corners of the waiting room. “There are cameras. I can’t risk it.” I release a breath, and my shoulders droop. “I’ll wait for you out here.”

The rumble of an engine echoes down the phone, and her voice becomes tinny as she swaps to the speakerphone. “The camera feed isn’t live, and he will wipe it.”

I chew my bottom lip as I study the street. There are plenty of people hanging around. I need to not be out in such a busy public place, and it’s pretty cold out here. “You’re sure?”

“One hundred percent. Go on, I’ll wait on the line.”

I drag in a small breath, making my ribs creak. I’ve not had the tools, the help, nor the privacy to get rid of the damn trainer. I tried at the last station and ended up crying for twenty minutes.

I push open the glass door and walk up to the ticket desk. Tony raises his gray bushy eyebrows at me, and his ice-blue eyes almost have me bolting out of the door. “Where to?” he growls.

“Louise is coming for me.”

His eyes crinkle, and his mouth pulls up in a genuine smile. At least, I think he’s smiling. He rises out of his cracked leather seat. Jesus, he’s tall. I shuffle back a step as he unbolts the heavy door between us.

“Come on in. Joanna, right?” Well, my hiding is going so well. Everyone who sees me knows who I am, or at least my

alias. Ugh, no turning back now. He tilts his head. “I don’t bite.”

“He doesn’t.” I blink at my phone. I forgot Louise was still there. “Deep breath, you got this. I’m thirty minutes out. Go sit with Tony.”

Tony doesn’t force me inside, he simply waits. My bullshit radar is oddly quiet. I take a step forward, another, and then I’m behind the door. He clicks it closed and nods to a small fake leather sofa at the back of the room. “Take a seat.”

I fold myself onto the creaky piece of furniture with my duffel bag on my lap. He taps on a computer screen with multiple angles of the waiting area and bus station. “Watch,” he instructs.

He rewinds the feed to an hour ago when I arrived, before erasing everything after that point in time. He navigates to recently deleted and permanently destroys them.

He spins around to face me. “We good?”

I nod.

“I’ll see you soon, Joanna, I’m going to hang up now and concentrate on driving, okay?”

“Okay.”

The phone goes silent. I unzip a tiny pocket on the inside of my bag and slip the phone inside. Tony shuffles around the small space. He opens something perched on the floor before turning toward me and stretching his hand out. In it is a can of soda, and a bar of chocolate.

“The sugar helps with the shock.”

As if my body has just realized how hungry I am, a wave of dizziness comes over me. The snacks I’d gotten from the vending machine were left in the room with Gideon, and I’ve avoided going into any stores with cameras. I take the items. “Thank you,” I whisper.

He huffs before taking his own can and returning to his seat. At this angle, no one can see me from the outside. My

shoulders slump, and I tear into the chocolate with relish. Tony hums and jerks his chin at my soda.

“Drink too.”

“Do you do this often?” I wonder.

“More than I like.”

I frown. “Sorry.”

“That’s not what I meant. I wish there weren’t so many souls running for their lives, is all.”

I pop the tab. “Me too.”

We drink our sodas. He says little and leaves me to gather my thoughts. As soon as my can is empty, he takes it from my hands and drops it in the recycling bin. He tilts his head.

“You are sitting funny. Are you hurt?”

I blink. “I’m okay.”

“No, you are not okay. But that’s not what I’m asking. I need to know if you need medical help so I can call the doc, and she will meet you at Louise’s. So I’ll ask again. Are you hurt?”

I roll my lips together and suck in a breath. The gnawing, stabbing pain between my legs is getting worse, not better. Not bathing for two days won’t have helped, I’m sure. Maybe it will improve after a shower.

Tony grabs a box from under his work station and retrieves one of those head thermometers. He waves it over my forehead and frowns as it beeps. “Fuck sake. You’re burning up.”

I am? Someone taps on the window, making me jump. A slim woman with blonde bobbed hair and a tanned complexion waves at him.

“Come on, Tony, I’m freezing my tits off out here.”

He unbolts the door, and she bustles into the room, her gaze landing on me as she smiles, but keeps her distance. “I’m Louise.”

“Hi.”

“She’s hurt,” Tony blurts out. “She needs the doc.”

I shake my head. “No medical centers. I can’t risk it.”

Louise crouches so she’s eye level with me. “No, honey, she would come to us. How urgent is it? Can it wait until morning?”

My cheeks burn as shame washes over me at the thought of explaining what is wrong. “Yes.”

“No,” Tony says. “Her temp is one hundred and three.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, shielding myself from Louise’s kind gaze. “No one is going to force you to do anything you don’t want to do, Joanna. But if we can help by reducing physical pain straight away, that’s worth starting the healing process.”

“Okay.” I whisper.

LOUISE’S HOME is a gorgeous three-story detached Queen Anne style house. Even in the dark, I can see the love and care Louise lavishes on the home.

She ushers me through the back door and leads the way up the stairs. “You’ll be staying with me in the top floor apartment. There are two bedrooms, so you’ll have your space. I’ll show you around tomorrow.”

She opens a door on the top floor and we enter a clean and light room. The open-plan living space is separated by a kitchen island and a round dining table surrounded by four chairs. The sitting room holds a U-shaped gray sectional sofa. Louise points at it. “Take a seat. Doc will be here soon.”

I take a seat on the section furthest away so I can see everything that’s happening. Louise sits opposite me and folds her hands into her lap.

“Why do you do this?” I ask the burning question. It’s clear with how she’s handling me that this is not the first time she’s helped someone running scared.

Louise smiles, but it's full of sadness. "I've been in your position. Through some miracle, I met Mel, who saw a broken soul and offered me sanctuary. There's an epidemic, and no one is paying attention. The law is fucked, so we have to fight by learning how to survive. There's a network of us across the country."

"It was blind luck that I bumped into Mel?"

"Yes, but she has a sixth sense for these things. All of us do. You will too, once you are healed and can stop running."

I glance at my hands twisted together on my lap. "I can never stop running."

"One step at a time. Let me grab you a couple of Tylenol while we wait for the doc."

She disappears into the kitchen and my gaze tracks her carefully as she moves around and opens cupboard doors, before striding toward me and offering a sealed bottle of orange juice and a packet of pills. I take the offerings, pop two pills and take a drink of the fresh juice. With the chocolate and the soda, my stomach protests. I slam my mouth closed and swallow the bile.

I dart my gaze to Louise. "I need your help."

"Doc is on the way."

I shake my head. "No, not that. It's something else."

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip and stand. "Can you help me get this off?"

I lift my sweater, revealing the trainer. Her eyes glaze over, not in judgment, but in sympathy. "Of course. How does it work?"

I spin, showing her my back and the laces that I haven't been able to reach. She moves closer. "We will get this off, okay?"

I nod. She fiddles for a minute with the laces, utters a colorful string of curses as she tugs on them. She puts a small hand on my shoulder. "Joanna, do you have the key?"

My head twists to look at her. “Key?”

Her forehead crumples. “There are a few straps and a padlock.”

Fuck I forgot about them. I glance at the white ceiling. Red hot rage burns in my chest. Fucking Gideon. I tremble with the sense of doom that I am going to be stuck in this, buried in it even. Unless I lose enough weight for it to fall off me. “No, I don’t have the key.”

“Don’t panic. I need to grab a pair of scissors and we can cut the straps off, okay?”

My nostrils flare as I expel a breath. I jerk my head, not able to speak.

There’s a gentle knock at the door. I flinch and drop my sweater into place. “Relax, it’s Diana, the doc.”

I spin to face the door as Louise opens it. Her head jerks back and my body freezes. He’s found me again. “Where’s Diana?” Louise whispers. Oh my God, did he hurt someone to get to me?

“Visiting her mother in L.A. She sent me instead.”

I round the back of the sofa, moving further away from the door and the male voice. Not Gideon, but also not the doctor Louise asked for.

She moves back and a guy who could be Tony’s younger brother enters. He has a similar build, with tattoos on his chest and neck peeking out from his fitted black T-shirt. A full and colorful sleeve covers his left arm, one that I could spend hours studying and still miss details. A silver hoop loops through his right eyebrow, and his messy dark hair frames a square jaw and those same startling blue eyes.

“Tony’s my brother,” he confirms. Did I say that out loud? “I’m Derek.”

“You’re a doctor?” My face must betray my disbelief.

His lips twitch. “I didn’t have time to don my stuffy alter ego in the middle of the night, so you are getting the real me.”

“I prefer that.”

“Diana is my wife. She’s sorry she can’t come, but my mother-in-law is unwell. I know this must already be hard for you and seeing a male doctor is often more difficult. But please be reassured I’ll only do what you consent to. There is no judgment from me or Louise.”

There’s no mask he’s wearing, no charm on show. He’s real, and it’s refreshing and reassuring.

Louise stands next to him with a pair of scissors. His gaze flicks to them and back to me. “What’s happening?” he wonders.

Louise sighs. “I need to help get something off her first. We’ll make a plan for the rest.” She jerks her head at a door behind me. “That’s your room. Let’s go inside and get this off you.”

I grab my duffle bag and back up before opening the door and entering the bedroom. I drop the bag on the pristine white comforter and track Louise as she follows me inside. She partially closes the door, leaving a small crack.

“Can you turn around for me?” she asks.

I must stand there for at least a minute battling with the urge to run. I clench my fists and spin, giving her my back before raising the sweater. “I’m going to touch your back now, is that okay?”

I jerk my head in agreement as I spy a black dot in the corner of the room. *Hello, friend.* I focus on it as I feel her trying to get the scissors under the straps and failing. She huffs.

“I need a little help. Is it okay for Derek to come in?”

I jerk my head as my mind detaches from the reality of my situation.

“Fuck,” he utters as he enters the room. I press my lips together and will the tears away as I stare at the ceiling. I like the fact they aren’t hiding their reactions. “Do you have mini bolt cutters?”

“Toolbox under the sink in the kitchen.”

Louise moves around and sits on the bed in front of me. She gathers my hands in hers and gives them a squeeze. The black dot moves. Did it follow me? Is it part of the same secret network helping victims of controlling men? I think my temperature is making me delirious.

“I’m going to cut off the padlocks,” Derek says. The leather tightens briefly, then returns to normal. “Now, I’m going to cut through these laces to get you out of this quickly, okay?”

“Do it.” My voice is surprisingly clear.

Louise squeezes my hands tighter. I drag in a breath as the bindings loosen, before they fall away. My abdomen cramps and I cry out as I bend over and nearly crush Louise. Derek pulls my sweater down from behind me.

“I’ll burn this,” he growls.

I shake my head. “No. Put it on top of my bag, please.”

“Joanna,” Louise says.

I shake my head as I straighten. “It’s evidence and a symbol of the control I’ve escaped. I’m not ready.”

Derek places it on the bag with a sigh as Louise pats the bed next to her. “Come, sit. I’ll be staying, if that’s okay? Most people find it helpful to have a woman here,” Louise adds.

“Plus, she will be looking after you,” Derek adds. “So she will need to know your care plan.”

I’m not stupid. He’s a man, and I’m a terrified woman. He’s protecting himself too. I don’t blame him. He’s already risking so much by seeing me; he doesn’t realize it yet.

“I’m going to put these back and get my bag, okay?” Derek says as he exits the room.

Where to start? My mind drags me back to that clinic. My heart races. I jerk to my feet and I clutch my hair. What am I thinking? This isn’t the plan. Dragging others into this

dangerous hunt. If Gideon finds them, he'll hurt them. How is that repaying their kindness? Louise hops off the bed with me.

"Joanna, take a breath," she coaxes. I yank the door open. I have to leave, disappear into the night before they become collateral. My thoughts collide like mini bombs in my head, feeding the adrenaline. I dart out of the door and run straight into a solid wall. No wait, it's Derek. He grabs the tops of my arms, firmly but not hurting.

"Breathe, Joanna. Follow me." I stare at his mouth as he drags in a slow breath. "That's right, hold it, now out to the count of four. Four, three, two, one." My chest expands and my fried nerves settle. "Again."

I don't know how long we stand there just breathing, but eventually, the need to run settles. My forehead collapses against him, and a sob clutches my chest, and a low sound of despair escapes my throat. A warm hand rubs my back.

"I got you. Nobody is going to hurt you here. Nothing happens unless you agree to it. Understand?"

I jerk my head before pulling away. His T-shirt is damp from my tears. "I'm sorry," I utter.

"It's water, Joanna, there's no need for apologies. But now I need you to be brave and tell me what's going on. You can't be strong if your body is failing you."

"Okay."

He turns me back around to the bedroom. A deep frown mars Louise's face, but she quickly schools her features into a blank mask when I meet her eyes. "Please don't do that," I whisper. "Don't hide what you are thinking—I can't stand it. I lived with that for too long. If you are angry, say so. If you're upset, cry. Just don't hide it."

Louise swallows. "Okay." She runs a shaky hand through her hair. "You got it. Whatever you need."

Louise sits on the end of the bed, and I slide next to her so our shoulders are brushing. It's like her silent strength is passing from her to me, giving me courage. Derek leans against the wall with his arms folded.

“Tony said you have a high temp. Is it viral or something else?” Derek asks.

My throat tightens. “Something else.”

“Are you in pain?”

“Yes.”

Spit it out, Honor. Stop dodging the questions. “Where is the pain?”

My hand ghosts over my lower abdomen. “Here.”

“From the waist trainer?” Louise asks.

I shake my head and place my hand between my legs. “And here.”

They share a look over my head. “Do you consent to an examination?” Derek asks.

I jerk my head. *Come on, Honor; dig for that girl that dances in the rain like she can rule the world.* “I’ve had surgery.”

“What kind?” Derek asks.

My gaze collides with his. “My hymen has been reconstructed and my vagina tightened.”

“Fuck,” Louise utters.

Derek’s mouth presses into a thin line. “Was it consensual?” I shake my head. “Have you had sex since?”

“No, it was only days ago.”

“Were you given any meds?”

“Antibiotics and a short course of painkillers.”

“Have you stayed on top of the antibiotics?”

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. “No. I had to leave them behind when he caught up to me at a motel.”

“I still need to examine you to see how bad the infection is. Then we can come up with a treatment plan.”

I swallow the rising panic. Louise's hand curls around mine. "Breathe," she instructs. "Take your time—there's no rush." She's wrong. I need to get better and leave. There's every need to rush. "I'll grab a couple of towels," she says, sliding off the bed. She returns with two big fluffy gray towels.

"I'll step out. Everything on your bottom half needs to come off," Derek instructs before going into the living room. Louise helps me out of my boots and then I slide my jeans and panties off before laying back on the bed. She places one of the big towels over my stomach and thighs.

"Ready?" she checks. I nod as she sits next to my head and clasps my hand in hers. "I'll be here the entire time."

Derek reappears in the room and moves to the opposite side of my head with a white plastic tray, which he lowers to show me. His hands are gloved up. "Antibiotic ointment, anti-inflammatory treatment, numbing gel, a swab in case I need to send something to the lab. Nothing sharp. I'm going to examine you. Nothing is going inside, okay?"

"Okay." Louise yelps as I squeeze her hand tighter. "Sorry."

How is this my life? I'm in a strange bedroom with unknown people. My vagina is on show and I'm holding the hand of a strange woman. The panic swells again.

"Can you open for me, Joanna?" Derek asks. I widen my legs.

Louise taps my forehead. "Talk to me."

I blink. "About what?"

"Tell me something interesting about yourself."

"I'm not interesting," I mutter.

"I will be the judge of that. What was your favorite subject at school? I bet you were an artist."

My lips twitch. "I can't draw a stick person. Math was my favorite."

She quirks a brow. “Why?”

“It’s definite. There’s beauty in its rules while we develop things every day to bend those laws, testing the boundaries of the universe. People find it miraculous to stare at the stars in the sky on a clear night. I find it astounding that we have used math to not only reach those stars, but to travel beyond them.”

“You’re a trekky, aren’t you?”

“Nothing wrong with that.”

“Which captain? Rate them in order.”

“Jean-Luc, obviously, then Janeway, followed by Kirk.”

“Favorite supporting character?”

“A tie between Riker and Seven of Nine.”

Louise huffs. “What about Data?”

“And the doctor,” Derek adds. “They’d all be goners without him.”

How did I find myself surrounded by people who enjoy Star Trek? That’s got to be a statistical miracle.

Derek gently applies pressure to my opening. I cry out and arch my back. He retreats immediately. He puts his hands on my knees and urges them closed before ensuring I’m covered with the towel.

He snaps his gloves off and places them on the tray. “Let’s get you dressed, and then we can discuss your treatment. Don’t worry, Joanna, it’s manageable. You’ll be in less pain within twenty-four hours, okay?” He glances at Louise. “She needs a set of clean underwear and soft clothing. Sweats, ideally.”

“I have those,” she declares, moving to a dresser and pulling out a sealed bag of clothing. Derek leaves the room and she helps me to change. I already feel better; the surface pain has receded a little.

We spill out into the living area and take a seat on the sofa. Derek points at the coffee table in the middle of us. “I’ve provided a two-week course of pain meds. They’re non-

addictive, anti-inflammatory, and non-drowsy. Next to those, you'll find a one-week course of antibiotics. Take those four times a day with food. The red tube is an antibiotic cream to complement the tablets. Apply it externally three times a day. It also contains an anesthetic, which will help relieve the pain. Make sure you put it on before sleep so the pain doesn't keep you awake."

I'm speechless. I had worked myself up with the thought I would have to go to the pharmacy, which would put my name in the system.

"I can pay you," I offer.

"No," Louise says. "That's not how this works."

"When you pee, take a jug of warm—not hot—water with you and pour it over you as you urinate. It will help it not to sting. Or pee in the shower and use the head."

Now that he's mentioned peeing, it's all I can think about. The soda and orange juice have worked their way through me.

"Ideally, I'd like to get your abdomen scanned with the restriction you've had. There might be damage."

I shake my head and move back against the sofa. "No."

He presses his lips into a thin line. "Eat small but regular meals and snacks. Call me immediately if you experience any new pain or can't stop vomiting."

"Can I have a jug?" I whisper.

Louise stalks to the kitchen and returns to hand me a glass jug. I wrap my hands around it. She points to another door. "Bathroom. We will be right here."

I retreat to the bathroom. It's clean, warm, and spacious. No bath, but a large walk-in shower. All white tiles and gleaming surfaces. I run the tap and fill the jug with lukewarm water before pulling down my sweats and new cotton underwear. My bladder releases and my eyes water at the sting before the warm water from the jug joins in and dilutes it. I sigh. When I ran, I never in my wildest dreams thought I

would stumble into a network of caring individuals. *No more tears, Honor.*

I finish up and wash my hands before I open the door. Their heads swivel to me, shock plastered on their features. I blink. Why are they—

My gaze lands on the large flatscreen hung on the wall. A recent photo of myself and Gideon covers the entire screen with the caption *DA's Wife Missing*, along with a helpline number. The screen cuts to Gideon's upset face as journalists jostle to hear his words. "My beautiful sweet wife, Honor, has been kidnapped, taken by the worst of society. She's paying the price that being married to a warrior of justice takes."

He lifts his shirt, revealing the bandage over his knife wound. "I tried to stop them but failed. I just want her back. Someone, somewhere must know something. I'm offering a million dollar reward for information that leads to her safe return."

"Fuck."

CHAPTER 11

HONOR



Make me a fugitive, but karma sees all, knows all, and never misses.

Derek presses a button on the remote and the TV flicks off.

“You’re a DA’s wife?” Louise whispers.

“I did not see that coming,” Derek says as he rubs a hand over his mouth.

“This is who you are running from?” Louise checks.

I collapse onto the sofa. “Yes.”

“And he’s just started a national hunt for you, with a life-changing pot of gold as the prize. He’s a brilliant and determined man,” Derek observes.

A worm of worry snakes through me. A pot of gold that would persuade even the kindest of souls to give me up. I glance at the open door to the bedroom. *Grab my bag and the medicine, then I can be out of here.* I’ll run. Where? I’m so exhausted, I can’t think straight. I could disappear onto the streets. Sure, and get raped and murdered before the week is out. I didn’t come this far to give into the fear. I can’t give into the fear.

“You can’t leave the top apartment,” Louise utters. “I have too many unknown guests. They will recognize you.”

I bury my head in my hands. “I’ll leave. I don’t want to drag you guys into this. I’m so incredibly grateful for everything-”

“No, that’s not what I meant. I’m not throwing you out, but you can’t wander around and we will need to devise a better plan,” Louise declares.

My hands fall from my face, and I blink at her sitting opposite me. “I can’t put you in danger. My husband is not a nice man. He will annihilate you if he even suspects you were involved in helping me evade him.”

She folds his arms. “I’d like to see him try.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. “Not physically. He’s powerful, Louise. Don’t underestimate his connections.”

“Maybe so, but nobody but us knows you’re here. And I can say with absolute certainty that we wouldn’t dream of handing you back to a monster—one that tortured your body and forced medical procedures onto you. We have to be able to sleep at night, Honor, and that doesn’t involve lying in a bed of blood money.”

Derek leans forward, resting his elbows on his knees. “We won’t stop you from walking out of that door right now. But if you run while you are ill, exhausted, and frightened, you will make a mistake. Take a few nights, get your strength back, and make a plan. Wait out the media frenzy. They’ve plastered your face over the internet and news channels. Right now, you are more recognizable than the president.”

He flicks open his phone and hands it to me. Sure enough, they have my face on every major newsfeed. My head drops back. *No more tears*, I remind myself as I weigh up my options. I take a risk that they are telling me the truth and put my trust in these three people, or I expose myself to hundreds, if not thousands, of unknowns who believe me to be the victim of a kidnapping plot. Every law enforcement officer and busy-body will be on high alert.

I growl into the air. “I’ll stay.”

“I’ll be back after my shift tomorrow night to check on you. Eat small meals, at least six times a day,” Derek says as he stands with a nod at Louise before leaving us alone. My

mind turns over the probability Derek is on the phone right now turning me in.

“I know it’s hard, but try to stop thinking the worst of our intentions.”

“I’m sorry.”

“It’s okay, honey. It’s going to take time to trust and heal. But you will be okay, I promise you that. Now, do you want to go to bed and rest, or watch Star Trek with me on the sofa?”

“Star Trek and sofa sounds amazing.”

She switches the TV on, pulls up a streaming service, and locates the original Star Trek series on her favorites. “I’ll grab the popcorn, and then we can discuss the many reasons you are incorrect about Kirk being the third on your list.”

I FALL asleep on the sofa after persuading Louise to put on an iconic episode of Voyager. Unfortunately, with sleep comes nightmares, and with nightmares comes Gideon.

I’m back in that concrete room. Heavy shackles have replaced the bed on the wall. The bite of metal against my limbs sends my heart into panic. Gideon paces like a feral beast in front of me. His normally pristine appearance is gone, his wrinkled shirt is half tucked into his pants, and he’s sporting longer stubble than I’ve ever seen.

He drags his hands through his hair and growls. “Every day I can’t find you, it only makes this worse. You think you know pain and suffering? You’ve experienced nothing. While the world heralds me as being the most attentive, loving, and greatest husband, I’ll make sure they know I’m shielding you from the worst and that you’re taking a step back from the public eye. No one will question why. Think about it.”

A rambling Gideon is a hundred times more frightening than the calm collected Gideon I’m used to. His fingers reach out and trail over my breasts. My eyes slam closed.

“I’m not here,” I whisper. I’m in an apartment with a caring woman named Louise, right?

“Enjoy your freedom, baby, because once you’re back here, this will be the only room you ever see. You have given me the excuse I needed to do exactly as I please. I tried to tame my needs and protect you from this side of me. I gave you everything that was good in my world, showered you with praise and compliments, worshiped your body. I was attentive. Many husbands don’t even know what their wives get up to on a daily basis.” His hand grips my chin. “Look at me.” My eyes snap open. His gaze holds an icy-blue flame.

“Don’t worry, you won’t make a move without my say-so. You will breathe because I allow it, and if I decide you’re no longer worthy of this world, no one will question when you take the easy route out. The struggles you suffered at the hands of my enemy might overwhelm you. I feed them the image I cultivate, the biggest warrior of justice, when we both know I’m the biggest monster. I don’t have enemies.”

The pad of his thumb presses against my bottom lip. “Every single person who has helped you escape, who continues to shield you, will suffer. Not only them, but their families. If you truly give a shit about anybody that’s helping you right now, you’ll run straight back to me. Perhaps I can be persuaded to be lenient. So think your next moves through carefully.”

I suck in a breath, and my eyes snap open. My gaze darts around the strange room. Shadows dance on the walls. Icy baby blues move toward me. My mouth opens and a scream tears from my throat as my husband towers over me. He slaps his hand over my lips and curses. I shake my head and mumble against his palm.

“Stop. You can’t have them. You can’t hurt them. They didn’t do anything.”

“Honor, stop. It’s me, Louise.”

I freeze. Louise. Safe, not tortured.

“That’s right,” she coaxes. “Don’t scream, okay? I’m gonna turn on the light.”

Her palm peels back from my mouth, and she moves toward the wall, switching on the overhead light.

My body trembles and tears escape down my temples as I stare at the ceiling. I'm safe, wrapped in a worn patchwork quilt that looks like it was made with patience and love.

Three nights. Three nights to make a plan and leave behind these wonderful people who are risking their lives by shielding me.

THAT PLAN GOES to shit the next evening as Louise bursts into the apartment.

“Honor,” she hollers. I appear out of the guest bedroom, having napped half the day away. She holds out her phone. “Do you recognise him?”

She presses play on a video. Ice floods my veins as my hands rise to my mouth. “Yes, that’s Mike, one of his security team.”

Louise’s hand tightens around the phone. “Fuck. He’s traced you here to Knoxville.”

“I have to run,” I utter as my body rebels.

“You need a plan. Blindly running into an observant nation when you have a two million-dollar price tag on your head is not a good strategy.”

“Two?”

“Yeah, your devoted husband doubled the reward this morning.”

Someone knocks at the door. I back away to the other end of the living area and shake my head.

“It’s Tony. I called him.”

She peeks through the privacy hole before opening the door. The big guy bustles into the apartment brandishing a big bag, which he dumps on the sofa. “I have clothing, wigs, extra medication from Derek, and a van. I couldn’t get you a new identity in this short time frame, but I don’t think that’s wise,

anyway. Gideon will ferret out those resources and trace you faster. There's enough food to last you a week inside the van, a mattress so you can rest, plus some other bits to help you survive. You need to fall off the grid for a while, let the media circus die down."

I swallow. "Okay."

He pulls out a phone from his back pocket and hands it to me. "Destroy your old one. This is a burner. In the contacts are the names of people we trust and their location. You call them any time of day or night, and they will offer you sanctuary."

Louise folds her arms. "She can't leave."

Tony snaps his gaze to her "Don't be shortsighted. They are already hot on her trail. It's a matter of *when* not *if* they find her here."

I move forward and wrap my arms around her. "Thank you for everything, for showing me kindness and protecting me from my shadows. I will repay you one day."

She huffs, stirring the hair on the top of my head. "Repay me by evading this fucker and getting your revenge."

"I've found the best revenge is success. Karma is a bitch that sorts the rest out, and while she might take her sweet time, she never misses."

"If you are running, I insist you take a weapon. Ever shot a gun, Honor?"

I shake my head. "They terrify me."

"As they should. Which is why if you point one at ninety-nine percent of the population, they will stop coming at you."

Let's hope I never have to put that theory to the test.

CHAPTER 12

HONOR



JUNE 29th

Being old doesn't make you sweet, just as being young doesn't make you stupid.

Six months. That's how long I've been running. I destroyed the phone Louise gave me after one week and never replaced it. Going off the grid meant no tech. No trace. No identity. Everyone leaves behind a footprint no matter how careful they are, so I had to make sure my trail was as light as could be and hope they missed it.

The first month was easy. I drove the van at night, parked during the day, and slept in the back. I stopped at random service stations to clean up and refuel. But my cash slowly eroded away, and I could only live off energy bars and soda for so long.

My first job at a bar lasted four days. The owner was an asshole and when he made a move on me, I fled and didn't look back. My second job at an all-night diner lasted two weeks. Then Gideon upped the reward, and I had to disappear again. In six months, I've had ten different jobs, traveled through eighteen states, and perfected the art of being forgettable. When I wasn't working, I wouldn't speak to a soul, and it took a toll. Humans are social creatures. Some might be introverts, but they still seek human connection. Being hunted long term makes you jump at shadows and make rash decisions.

I scan the newspapers at service stations and pay attention to the TVs in diners and bars. My kidnapping no longer gains airtime as most media outlets assume the worst—that I am no longer breathing. Little do they know that’s the best possible outcome. If I’m dead, no one is looking for me. That’s the beauty and the horror of the media cycle. How fast one’s well-being becomes uninteresting when there’s no new information to report.

I imagine Gideon is furious. His anger is a pulse I can feel echoing in my chest across the thousands of miles between us, as if his psyche is linked to mine. Does that mean he can feel the flutter of my heartbeat like a terrified bird?

My head thumps onto the wall of the van as I scan the tiny metal can I’ve been living in. I’m down to my last hundred dollars, and I have two energy drinks left. I weigh less now than I ever did with Gideon. How ironic.

Every few weeks I treat myself to a night in a motel that rents rooms by the hour. That’s where I hand wash my clothing, but I’m always gone before daybreak. I examine the duffle bag. I have one pair of clean panties left. *Shit*. Time to get a job and take a risk.

I’m a hundred miles west of San Antonio, deep in cowboy country, in a little town with a population of nine hundred forty-one that professes to have the best barbeque ribs in the world. The cattle outnumber the people five to one.

I open the Red Lake Chronicle—the local paper—and scan the scarce wanted ads. Most jobs are online. I could risk popping into the library and using a computer, but everyone wants a contact number or at least an email address, and I have neither. I sigh and lay the paper down next to me and pop open the can of soda. Time for a sugar boost.

Hairdresser, no. Not unless you need it shaved or were happy with a shop bought color. Avoiding customer facing jobs is preferable. The more people I have contact with, the greater the risk of discovery. So bar and restaurant work isn’t ideal. My finger pauses on a set of bold words. Help Needed. Okay, I’m helpful. *Personal support worker for busy retiree*

required. Experience is not essential, but must have great organizational skills, be able to cook, and have a sense of humor.

That's me. I can do those things. My sense of humor is buried deep inside of me, but I'm sure I can find it. There's a landline number to call. My gaze snaps to the public pay phone across the parking lot, like the universe is sending me all the signals. *Fuck it.* I can't live in the back of this van forever.

I BLINK at the white mini mansion. The female busy retiree snapped an address at me and told me to be there in less than an hour before hanging up. No request for information or pleasantries, and because I have zero options, I find my way to the home after asking a few locals for directions.

Stepping out of my van, I trot up the few stone steps to the double doors. I raise my fist to knock, but it flies open. A woman in her mid-forties, dressed in a pencil skirt and cream blouse, eyeballs me. She turns her nose up at me. Oh boy, this isn't going well.

I hold my hand out. "Hi, I'm—"

"Don't speak to her," a voice snaps behind the woman. "And if you are another gold-digging woman who thinks you can worm your way into my home and get written into my will, you can turn your ass right around and disappear."

My mouth falls open as the woman sneers. "Good luck with the cantankerous old bitch. If you value your sanity, you won't even step foot inside this house."

"I'm not surprised you didn't get the job with that kind of attitude. She clearly has the uncanny ability to cut through your bullshit pristine appearance to the rot underneath. Expensive clothes and perfectly applied makeup don't make you beautiful, they make you a liar."

She huffs as she barges past me, checking my shoulder on her way out. I scan my outfit. Three day-old dirty jeans, a stained and wrinkly Mickey Mouse T-shirt, and I'm pretty sure

I smell. I take a step back from the open door. What am I thinking? The type of person who lives in a house like this will never hire me.

A slight woman with a sharply-cut angled bob of light blonde hair appears in the doorway. She's dressed in navy tailored slacks and a white cashmere sweater with a colorful red silk scarf tied at her neck. Her dark brown eyes scan me from head to toe, but not in the same manner as the woman who left. This is with the keen gaze of someone who has met every type of person and can judge them accurately.

I swing my thumb over my shoulder. "Sorry, I couldn't help myself. I'll see myself out."

She folds her arms. "If you have that kind of fire for someone you've never met, you pass the first test. Follow me, unless you have somewhere else to be?"

She turns on her heel, revealing the red soles of her pumps, and disappears around a corner. I glance at my van, then the open door. The urge to retreat is strong, but I can't keep this up for much longer. Dragging in a fortifying breath, I breach the threshold and close the door behind me. The interior is stunning. Warm, inviting, and carefully designed not for show, but to reflect the personality of the owner. Each piece of art is a study of fire and determination. It's not to impress, it's to express. I follow her trail through a sitting area and under an arch into a massive modern kitchen. Black and white is the theme, with chrome accessories placed on the countertops.

She waves a hand at the breakfast bar. "Take a seat."

I slide onto a cushioned stool and grimace at the plethora of resumes laid out before me. I don't have any employment history I can comfortably tell her about, and lying to this woman is pointless. She puts a kettle on the stove and selects two china teacups before turning to me as she folds her arms and leans against the sink.

"You aren't local."

I shake my head and twist my hands in my lap. "No, ma'am."

“Helen.” She raises a brow and waits for me to respond in kind.

“Cleo.”

Her gaze studies my face for a full minute. “No, you’re not. But I’ll accept it for now.” I glance at the door to my left. I should leave. This is a mistake. “Don’t do that. I’m not prying, merely informing you I will know if you lie.”

“Understood.”

“Do you have a resume?”

I shake my head and glance at the expensive paper before me. “No. I’ll leave.”

“Why?”

“Excuse me?”

“I question if you have a resume, and you gave me an honest answer and now you are leaving. Why?”

I wave my hand in front of me. “I can’t compete.”

“But you aren’t aware of the parameters of the competition.”

I pick the top one. “Rose Hunter. Trained nurse, chef, and experience as an executive assistant.”

“She also helped embezzle millions at her last place of work.”

She steps to the other side of the island and sweeps the papers into a neat pile before opening a cupboard and dropping them inside the garbage can.

“My grandson decided I needed an assistant in his absence, like I’m not a sixty-nine-year-old woman who has had a successful career and is financially independent. This position is as much to pacify him as it is to help me.”

“You don’t seem like you need help,” I observe.

She points a finger at me. “Now you’re getting it. These people watched me as if I was already picking out my casket and hymns. The fact is, I will not live forever, but I’m still

going to live a fuller life than half of them stuck up snoots who wouldn't recognize fun if it slapped them on their pumped-up lips and bounced on their fake tits."

Why is it so startling to witness someone older use naughty words? I mean, they have committed the act far more often than me. They've earned the right to swear.

She winks at me like she can hear my thoughts. "You don't have to give me details of your training and experience."

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip. "I'm an engineer."

Her brows raise up. "Now that, I wasn't expecting. What kind?"

"Nuclear."

"Hmm." The kettle whistles. She unfolds her arms and switches the gas off before gripping the handle. She pauses for a second, and I notice a slight tremor down her arm.

I dart to my feet and gently push her out of the way. "Let me do that. If I can't give you a resume, I can at least make the tea."

She huffs as she relents and slides onto the stool I vacated. "You're from the East Coast."

I nod as my shoulders stiffen. It's the accent. I locate the fridge and pull out the milk before finding the sugar cubes in a pot. Next, I locate a small jug and pour some milk inside it.

"Do you like books?" she asks.

"I do."

"What kind?"

My cheeks flame. How to explain your taste in books is smut to a retiree? "A little of this and that."

I pull open a drawer, looking for a spoon, and instead find a variety of cakes. Choosing a chocolate brownie, I open a few cupboards before finding the plates, and serve one on it with a fork.

Helen's eyes never leave me. "Romance," she guesses.

“Yes.”

She smirks. “Dirty romance.”

I shrug. She laughs. “Oh, the group is going to love you.”

I frown. “Group?”

“The book club I host every Tuesday evening.”

I prepare the tea in a flowery pot that is out of place in the modern sleek kitchen. Her words filter into my brain. My gaze snaps to hers.

“You’re offering me the job?” I whisper. That seems implausible. I must have misheard her.

“I am.”

I round the counter and sit on the stool next to her before I sink to the floor and embarrass myself.

“We can do a week’s trial. Where are you staying?” she asks.

I grimace. “I’ll find a local guest house.” Called my van.

I gather my senses and pour the tea into the cup. The jug is light enough for Helen to add her own milk. She also drops a lump of sugar in and gives it a stir.

She nudges the brownie toward me. “Help a girl out and half that for me.”

I use the fork to part the treat. She picks up one half and nods at the other. “Eat.”

“Oh no, that’s okay.”

She scowls at me. Helen is scary. I grab the brownie and take a small bite. It tastes like heaven.

“The job requires you to stay on my property.”

I cover my mouth as I cough. “What?” That wasn’t in the ad.

“If you’d prefer to not be in the house, I have an empty two-bed poolside villa out back I can accept as a compromise.” My mouth flops open. How is she making it

seem like I'm doing her a favor by living here? "I can pay you cash, weekly."

My mouth snaps closed and for the first time in a month, I'm almost brought to tears. By kindness. "Are you sure?" Why am I trying to talk myself out of a perfect job?

"Don't think this is an easy ride. I need help with cooking, cleaning, and shopping, among other things. I'll expect you in my kitchen by 7 a.m. preparing breakfast, and some nights you won't clock out until after dinner."

"That's okay."

"You'll have one day a week off."

"Also acceptable."

"But I will pay you by the hour, so be assured that you'll be well compensated for your time."

"I never doubted it." Not when stuck up Mary Poppins was my competition.

"Excellent. Now pour yourself a congratulatory cup of tea, eat the rest of that brownie, and I'll show you where you'll be staying. You can have the day to move your things in and get acquainted with the property."

"Thank you."

"Don't thank me yet, Cleo. Let's do the week and see how we mesh."

"Right."

"Last question before we commit to this, and it's make or break, so don't lie to me."

I fist my hands in my lap. "Yes?"

"Do you like dogs?"

CHAPTER 13

HONOR



JULY 29th

Heartbreakers and charmers need not apply.

I shoot up in bed and grab the gun from under my pillow before aiming at the shadows in the bedroom. The nightmares have returned. Fully-formed demons wearing Gideon's face invade my nights, and when I open my eyes, they take a hot minute to recede into Hell where they belong.

I drag in a breath, click on the lamp, and check the clock. 4:40 a.m. Good enough. I tuck the gun under my pillow and get up. Attempting to go back to sleep now is pointless; I'll only get frustrated. Today is Tuesday so I have plenty to do.

I grab a red bikini from the bottom drawer, a sneaky purchase Helen added onto my order. She guessed I can't buy anything directly, so she's taken to asking me if I need anything when she places an order with a well-known online company. She deducts the cost from my weekly wages, and even then, I'm earning more money than I know what to do with.

After changing into it, I exit the house and drop into the warm swimming pool before starting my laps. The exercise helps me to chase away the evil and insidious thoughts, and the tiny voice telling me to run quietens. I've been here a month—I should run. But the desire to continue sleeping in a comfy bed, eating regular meals, and not look over my shoulder every time I risk taking a shower is strong.

In four short weeks, I've settled into a routine with Helen. While we've not discussed it, I figured out she has some kind of condition that causes tremors in her hands. She hides it well most of the time, and it doesn't appear to affect anything else on her body. She's more spritely than me and has a full schedule that rivals most full-time working people.

After swimming, I make quick work of showering and changing into a pair of jeans and a plain navy T-shirt. I let myself into the main house and prepare breakfast and snacks for the book club meeting this evening.

Duke trots into the kitchen one minute before Helen appears, at exactly 7 a.m., with a full face of makeup and styled hair. Today, she is rocking a black polka-dot swing skirt and a boat neck sweater. She is who I want to be when I grow up. The giant black and white great dane licks my hand in greeting, and I make a fuss over him, scratching behind his ears. His tongue lolls out of his mouth.

"You were awake early again this morning," she observes as she slides onto the stool and opens the Chronicle I left out for her on the countertop.

I smile as I stir the scrambled eggs and push the button down on the toaster. Helen misses nothing. "Couldn't sleep."

"Duke is being a pain in the ass," she declares. I arch a brow at the dog sitting next to me as he patiently waits for his breakfast.

"Are you driving your mom nuts?"

He tilts his head and widens his eyes, looking every inch the guilty party. "Can you take him for a few nights?" Helen asks.

Ah, the master manipulator. Helen is trying to battle my nightmares by giving me her giant guard dog. "I'm sure he'd rather be with you." We've had this conversation several times.

"Cleo, I have a gentleman visitor calling to escort me to dinner after my book club. I'd like not to be watched by Duke as I let Henry have his wicked way with me."

Duke huffs through his nostrils. He's not a fan of the male kind. I can sympathize. "Fine," I concede as I plate the granary toast onto two plates before topping both with half the scrambled eggs. The rest I tip into Duke's bowl. He glances at the bowl, then back at me as a strand of stringy drool stretches from his mouth to the floor. I nod. "Take it."

He tucks in with obvious pleasure. After pouring two cups of tea, I settle down next to Helen to eat my breakfast. Another way she has won my heart is by insisting I am doing her a favor by eating with her. Apparently, dining alone is sad.

I scan the newspaper. Helen is averse to much technology. There are no TVs in the house. She owns a phone and a tablet for business reasons—and shopping, of course. But other than that, we are tech free, and I love it.

"Ooh, the butcher has steak on offer. Pick up three for tomorrow's dinner, and don't forget to get something for yourself tonight. Henry is wining and dining me before he—"

I hold my hand up. "I feel like this is too much information for an employee."

She snorts. "We don't have healthy boundaries."

"I'm aware."

I swallow another forkful of eggs and devour half of the slice of toast before my stomach twists. That's enough. Seven months out, and I'm still battling with the physical effects of Gideon's control. Deep down, I know some of it is mental, and that I'm unlikely to solve it on my own. But it's not like I can wander into a therapist's office with a false name and demand to be seen.

Helen finishes her breakfast, and I empty the leftovers of mine into Duke's bowl before stacking the dishwasher.

"Anything special you want for book club tonight?" I ask as I grab a pen and notebook. I make a trip to the store on Tuesdays and Fridays.

"Do you have time to make those little red onion tartlets?"

I nod. "Of course."

“And did you read this week’s book?”

My cheeks heat. “I did.”

She smirks. “Good, because tonight you aren’t serving us. You’re joining us.”

Oh boy.

RED LAKE IS a town built on generations of cattle rearing and old money from the glorious days of oil. Helen’s parents, her grandparents, and great-grandparents amassed wealth over the years, passing it down from generation to generation.

Helen bucked against the expectations of her parents and made a name for herself in high-end fashion. She told me, “There’s not much creative outlet in cattle markets, but it pays the bills.”

The town centers around a square, with the church sitting proudly in the middle. This is the heart of the community where everyone attends Sunday morning service to get their weekly religious guidance and an update on the town’s gossip. Red Lake is too small to attract tourists, which is why, unfortunately, everyone took notice of me.

Not everyone is as reserved as Helen. I’ve been interrogated by multiple locals from the married couple who own the bakery, to the manager of the bar and grill.

Red Lake doesn’t have much—you have to travel thirty miles if you want to spend a day shopping—but there’s a convenience store, post office, mom and pop hardware, a boutique, and two restaurants. One serves traditional Texas cuisine, while the small Italian bistro serves the best carbonara I’ve ever tasted. But the highlight of my shopping week comes from the farmers’ markets held every Tuesday.

I pull up on a side road in Helen’s F-Pace Jaguar. I tucked away my poor van in the garage, sulking as it stares at the three cars made for every occasion. She has the traditional soft-top sports car, this more practical vehicle, and another

undisclosed car resting under a dust cover. I haven't pried, but I am curious.

I get swept away into the crowd, working my way down the list from Helen and adding a few items for myself, which I pay for out of my earnings. Helen doesn't insult me by trying to pay for everything. It's not that she wouldn't, but it's a recognition that I need control and to be independent.

My arms are full with paper bags as I emerge from the market and cross the square toward the car. My chin balances against an apple that looks like it wants to make a break for it.

A shadow falls in front of me, making me freeze. A six foot blond-haired, blue-eyed Adonis smirks at me.

"Hey, Cleo, let me help you with those."

Samuel Davis, breaker of hearts and chaser of skirts—according to Helen and the ladies who spill the town's more risky gossip every Tuesday at the book club.

I shake my head. "Thanks, I'm okay."

"I'm aware you've got this, woman, but that doesn't mean I can't help," he utters as he hooks his arm under one bag and relieves me of it. I sigh.

Samuel holds the bag hostage as he walks by my side to the car. He opens the trunk and deposits the bag inside before folding his arms and leaning against the car.

"So, this is week four," he starts. I roll my eyes. "And it's a Tuesday. Which means when we bump into each other on Friday, it will be the eighth time I've asked you out. There's only so much rejection a man can take before it becomes personal."

I place my bag in the trunk. "There's a solution to that."

"Yes, you give in."

"No, stop asking me out."

"I prefer my solution."

I don't think this man has ever been refused before, and why would he? He is charming, gorgeous, and charismatic.

And for that reason, completely terrifying. It's not his fault I react this way to him. He likely isn't harboring a deep-seated need for control and abuse, but my mind doesn't recognize logic. No, when it comes to the male species, I've sworn off them for the foreseeable future. Perhaps forever. The risk isn't worth it.

He clutches his heart like I've wounded his ego. "One date. I bet I can sweep you off your feet and make you fall in love with me in one night, Cleo. Give me a chance?"

I shake my head, my lips twitching as I climb into the car. He holds the door open and waggles his eyebrows at me. "Is that a yes?"

"Nope. You listed every single reason the answer is no, and always will be no."

He blinks as I tug the car door free and slam it closed. *Sorry, Sam, my fucked up heart and mind aren't the place for your sunshine and smiles. It would eat that goodness in you and twist it until you hated me.* I'm better alone. Nobody could ever love the fucked-up woman I've become. There's no one strong enough to deal with the nightmares that stalk my every waking moment.

CHAPTER 14

HONOR



Treat 'em mean, and hopefully, they will get the hint.

This is what I want my later years to look like. A group of giggling women bonding over spicy books and good food.

Marie pats the vacant spot on the cream sofa next to her. “We have enough nibbles now, Cleo. Come sit and share your thoughts on this week’s book with us.”

I glance at the round glass table chock full of delicious snacks. She’s right, there is nowhere else to fit anything.

Helen raises a brow. “That’s an order.”

The four women burst out laughing. Helen, my boss. Marie, the governor’s wife. Liza, a retired kindergarten teacher. And Rosa, a semi-retired vet. They are always immaculately dressed, with makeup that takes years off their true ages.

“Let me get my copy,” I mutter before retrieving it from the pool house and returning to the group of women. Helen started gifting me with whatever the book of the week was, saying I had to read it so we could discuss it before Tuesday evening. Sharing your thoughts with your boss on spicy scenes is the new normal for me. I stopped blushing after she told me I was sheltered if I’d never experienced a piercing. I informed her I would not be getting pierced down there for anybody, and she corrected my silly notion that it would be me getting pierced.

“Ohhh, you made notes,” Marie says, snatching the book from me with a grin. “This chapter has a lot of highlights.”

Liza plucks an onion tartlet from the table. “Is that the scene? You know with the—”

“Gun, yes,” Helen agrees.

Rosa fans her hand in front of her face. “That man is hot.”

“He’s unhinged,” I point out.

“Fictionally unhinged.”

“That’s fair.”

I’ve always been ashamed of the type of romance I love reading, particularly after being married to Gideon. There’s an expectation that if I could ever bring myself to be sexually involved with someone again, that I would only enjoy soft and sweet. Vanilla, as the term goes. But I’ve always aired on the darker side, and the brief fantasies I have experienced since escaping Gideon aren’t that flavor. It’s another reason why I think I’m broken. Surely, I shouldn’t want this kind of relationship after experiencing the horror of my marriage? It doesn’t fit the victim profile people would expect.

“So, what are we reading for next week?” Helen asks. I must have zoned out for some of their conversation because the tray of nibbles is half empty.

“Already ahead of you,” Liza declares, grabbing a bag from the floor and handing out a new book. “Don’t forget to take note of the trigger warnings at the beginning of this one. They are extensive.”

“Is it a standalone?” Rosa asks.

Liza shakes her head. “No, a trilogy, but it’s completed.”

“Ugh, I hate cliffhangers,” Rosa grumbles. “At least the conclusion is already out.”

“I love a good cliffy,” I add. “Builds anticipation.”

“Speaking of anticipation, I was informed Samuel Davis asked you on a date—*again*—and you shot him down. Again.”

Helen snorts. “Treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen.”

“I have not treated him mean, nor do I intend to keep him keen. All I want is for him to leave me alone.”

Rosa tilts her head and squints at the ceiling. “I’m trying to remember the last time he got a knock back.”

“Friday,” I mutter. We all laugh.

Duke lifts his head from his slouched position on the rug, a low growl rumbling in his throat.

“Looks like Henry is here,” Marie says.

He barks as Helen rises to her feet. “You still okay to take my baby tonight?” she checks.

I stack the empty plates and nod. “Sure, enjoy your evening. I’ll see you bright and early. Should I make an extra breakfast?”

Liza smirks. “I like you, Cleo, so much sass while still being respectful.”

Helen snatches her handbag. “Don’t be ridiculous. It’s a booty call. He will be gone before sunrise. Can’t have the man thinking he’s got any rights to my house or my body.”

“Or Cleo’s cooking,” Rosa adds.

“Indeed. She’s mine,” Helen agrees with a smile aimed my way.

The ladies bustle out the door, giving poor Henry hell as they leave. Duke stops his grumbling a minute later. “It’s me and you tonight, buddy. Let me get cleaned up, then we can go for your walk before bed.”

He puts his head to the floor and whines. I have never met a dog that hates exercise like Duke.

I ensure the living area and kitchen are sparkling before clipping him on his leash and grabbing a front door key. I set the alarm and step out into the warm evening. Duke strolls next to me at a lumbering pace as we do a circuit of the pretty grounds surrounding the house. We weave into the fruit orchard, and I pluck a ripe apple from a low-hanging branch,

munching on it as I draw deeper into the shadows. Duke drops his head and emits a deep growl. I swallow the bite of tart apple and freeze before spinning in a slow circle.

“What’s wrong?”

Why I am speaking to him like he’s Scooby Doo, I will never know.

He takes a step forward to where the trees thicken. A breeze rustles the tree branches, creating dancing shadows on the ground. He tugs at the leash as a snarl erupts from his throat.

“Let’s go,” I whisper. I jerk my gaze over my shoulder and dig into my jeans pocket for the front door key. I can make that in less than a minute.

Duke disagrees and jerks so hard he pulls the lead free and darts into the trees. A rabbit bounces out. My hand falls to my chest and a laugh bursts from me. A second later I’m lying on the cool grass, clutching my stomach. I’ve not laughed like this in a long time—slightly hysterical and very unladylike. It was something Gideon quickly trained me out of.

I wheeze as Duke lumbers over to me before the big lug drops onto my chest and licks my chin. I push his face away. “Ew, no. You might be the only guy allowed to touch me, but I do not do tongues with dogs. There’s a line, buddy, and you have crossed it.”

He whines and lays his head on my chest. I take a minute, watching the sky bruise with the beginnings of the night. “Time for bed, Duke. I might have found my laugh, but let’s not push our luck by lounging around in the dark.”

We find ourselves back in the house in no time. I grab the new book, collect a few dog treats and Duke’s water bowl before locking up and arming the alarm again. Duke pushes into the pool house, clearly on a mission to ensure we are alone. I close and lock the door. I check it twice, then move through the property, triple checking all the windows are locked and secure. I recheck the door.

Duke watches me from the middle of the sitting area.

“Okay, we are tucked in for the night. Let’s see what happens to this woman and plot how many ways we can murder an asshole.”

Duke tilts his head. I smile and lead the way into the master bedroom. Duke jumps on the end of the bed, occupying more space than me. I pull on a black silky short nightgown and slide between the sheets. During the day, I dress conservatively to avoid attracting attention, but at night, it’s nice to feel a little desirable while I’m alone. I give Duke a quick scratch between his ears, check under my pillow for my weapon, and settle down to read. The heroine need not worry, her possessive hero will find her come hell or high water. Isn’t that what we all want? Yes, so long as you *want* to be found.

CHAPTER 15

FOX



There's a hen in my house, and I'm about to flush it out.

“**W**hat time is your flight?” Larry asks from the screen on my phone. He’s every inch the cunning defense lawyer who is a shark in the courtroom while still maintaining his principles. Rare to find in this world. His tanned skin highlights the wealth he owns to vacation in sunnier climates often. He’s always dressed in a three-piece suit, making me wonder if he sleeps in it.

I glance at my watch. “Thirty minutes until boarding.”

“You know the plan. Go home, lie low. I’ve kept this out of the media circus, but that won’t last forever. If this case goes ahead, all hell will break loose.”

I glare at him. “It can’t go ahead. We need to find the woman.”

“Agreed. In future, take note of their name and number before spending a night with them.”

“That’s what I’m paying you for. I want this over as quickly as possible.”

He frowns. “You know the options. We keep looking, or we can go public and ask her to come forward. But that will raise questions, causing the vultures to circle.”

“I’m not ready for this to go public. I want to avoid it.”

He nods. “Justice always prevails.”

I don't point out the estimates that four percent of people are wrongly convicted and incarcerated. It's a robust system but not infallible. Twelve random strangers won't just be exposed to the actual evidence if this hits the press. No, I'll be judged in the media. The court of public opinion will have already served its justice, and they will follow it through.

"What plans do you have when you get home? It's been a while, hasn't it?" Larry asks.

"Run, swim, read, watch some movies."

He snorts. "You're going to go mad within a week."

"All first-class passengers on Delta flight DL1566 to San Antonio International. Please make your way to the gate," a pleasant female voice echoes around the lounge.

"That's me," I tell Larry.

"I'll keep working on the search. Remember the plan. Don't go rogue on me."

I nod, and switch off my phone before grabbing my carry-on leather case. I hand the clerk at the desk my boarding pass, and she smiles at me. Perfectly styled blonde hair, expertly applied makeup, and a fitted uniform highlighting her slight curves. She is exactly my type, and I find I'm no longer interested. The more cultivated their exterior, the more my mind tries to assure me they are hiding.

"Thank you for traveling with us today, Mr. Alderidge. Please be sure to let the team know if there's anything we can do for you."

I give her a sour expression before retrieving my documentation and striding down the short bridge and onto the plane. A guy in a similar uniform greets me and sees me to my seat like I can't possibly find it myself.

"Take off is in thirty minutes. Would you like a drink?"

"Sure, sparkling water."

He nods and retrieves a cold bottle and a glass with ice before he bustles off to look after the next passenger. I gaze out at the dark sky. I'm going to arrive in the middle of the

night, which isn't my preference, but I couldn't stand another minute in this city.

I pull out my personal phone and shoot off a text.

Be home this evening. I'll be late, so don't wait up. I'll let myself in.

I pull out my work phone as I sip the water and tie up a few loose ends before powering it off. I have an image of me dropping it from thirty thousand feet and it imploding on the ground, much like my professional life has.

Five hours later, I step out of the taxi and stride toward the house with only the moonlight illuminating the way. I dig into my pants pocket and pull out my key. Wait. Fuck, wrong key. That's for my apartment in L.A. *Damn it.*

I sigh and make my way around the side of the main house. The keypad for the gate glows blue, but when I type in the code, it turns red. That's the correct number—I set it myself. I try again. Nope. She must have changed it. I tilt my head back and growl at the sky. Looks like I'm scaling the wall this evening. I throw my small suitcase and carry-on over the fence. They land with a thud. I take a few steps back to get momentum and charge at the gate. My foot hits the wall, propelling me upward, and I grip the top of the fence, launching myself over with ease. After collecting my bags, I amble through the garden, past the glowing pool, and stop at an unassuming-looking stone. I lift it, revealing a little key-coded compartment. This one turns green and the door springs open, revealing a key. At least that's not changed.

I push the key into the door of the pool house, which is where I stay when I'm home. My grandmother deserves her privacy, and I'm not an easy guy to live with. The house is coated in darkness, but I know this property like the back of my hand. The door clicks closed behind me, and I stride deeper inside before my foot catches on something, making me stumble.

“What the fuck?” There was no furniture there the last time I was here. Has she been rearranging the house?

I carefully pick my way through the living room and open the master bedroom door. *Bang*. Fire blazes across the outside of my left shoulder, and I drop to the floor as dust crumbles onto my head.

“I will kill you,” a woman growls. Yeah, I got that loud and clear.

I get to my knees and raise my hands in the air. I can make out a slender frame trembling as she stands on the bed, with her feet planted wide apart and a gun pointed at me. A giant beast huffs in annoyance, before flopping down and rolling onto his back for a belly rub.

“Duke, what the fuck are you doing?” she squeaks.

Taking advantage of her distraction at *my* dog not attacking me, I snap to my feet and knock her shaking arm. The gun goes off again. *Fucking hell*.

I grip and twist her arm, digging my thumb into a pressure point. She drops the weapon and cries out as I wrestle her to the bed face down, with her hands pinned behind her back. She jerks up, trying to dislodge me. In response, I press my weight onto her and squeeze her thighs together with my own.

“No, I won’t return. I’d sooner die,” she snarls as she thrashes under me.

“Nobody is dying. But you are going to hurt yourself if you continue to fight me.”

“Fuck you,” she snarls, still wriggling under me. She can’t be taller than five foot three, and a hundred and ten pounds soaking wet. But she fights like she’s twice that size.

I hold her down until she wears herself out a little. I shift to reach for the lamp. She takes advantage and crawls out from under me.

“Oh, no you don’t,” I mutter, abandoning the light. I flip her over and sit on her thighs while my hands grab her wrists and pin them to the bed. She jerks her head up, and her teeth dig into my bottom lip. Blood springs free as I jerk away. She’s a wildcat, and I’m a little hard. *Fuck*. Since when did I

get turned on by psycho crazy chicks who shoot first and ask questions later? This is not the plan.

“Who are you?”

“Not who you are looking for. Let me go.”

Hmm. Meaning she is being looked for by someone. Might explain why she’s fighting so hard, but not why she’s in my bed with my dog. “Not the question I asked, wildcat.”

“Cleo.”

Lie. But I’ll let it go—for now. It’s something my gran and I have in common—the ability to ferret out an untruth.

The big light snaps on and my gran stands in the doorway in her nightgown. A familiar guy, Henry, stands behind her, wearing only his boxers. That’s something, at least.

Gran folds her arms. “What the hell, Fox? Get off Cleo.”

Duke licks my face, taking advantage of the fact I can’t stop him while I’m holding this woman down. My gaze drops to the mysterious Cleo. Long wild red hair spreads out across my black comforter and green eyes glare at me. A kissable full mouth, responsible for the blood dripping from mine. Her chest heaves in the thin black silk nightgown she’s wearing. There are worse things to find in your bed.

“Did I hear gunshots?” Henry asks from behind my gran.

“Yup, she got my shoulder.” My blood is coating half of her chest now.

“You come sneaking into someone’s home in the dead of night, and you get what you deserve. Be grateful I’m a shit shot,” Cleo snaps.

I tilt my head at her. “You are worse than a shit shot. I was two feet from you, and you only grazed my shoulder.”

“For my first time, it isn’t so bad.”

I huff as I climb off Cleo and the bed. She jerks upright, a blush staining her fresh cheeks. When was the last time I saw a woman with zero makeup look this stunning?

“Cleo, meet my grandson Fox. Fox, this is the assistant you pushed me into employing.”

I snort. “Assistant as in someone to help you out, not move in.”

“Tomayto, tomahto. I’m attached now. She’s not going anywhere.”

My gaze widens. My gran hates *everyone*—apart from me—and the occasional man she takes to her bed. How has this woman worked her way into my gran’s affections? She’s probably a gold digger. They see the big house, the expensive car, and designer clothes and think they deserve a slice of that pie.

“She’s in my pool house,” I point out.

Cleo folds her arms, pushing her breasts up. “Helen offered me somewhere to stay. I can leave, though.”

“Good plan. Let me help you pack.”

“You will do no such thing,” my gran snaps.

I pinch the bridge of my nose, aware of the hot blood seeping down my arm and staining my white shirt.

“Fine, I’ll move into the main house,” Cleo mutters.

And have her with unsupervised access to my gran at night? “No, stay. I’ll sleep in the main house.”

“Not tonight,” my gran says, lifting her eyebrows and jerking her head at Henry. “I’m not finished.”

I did not need to hear that. “Fine, I’ll stay in the guest room here.”

Cleo swallows, and her jaw ticks as she grinds her teeth. *Sorry, wildcat.*

My gran tilts her head at the blood covering my left shoulder. It’s seeping into my white shirt. “Cleo, can you get Fox cleaned up? There’s a first aid kit under the sink in the main bathroom.”

Cleo drags her bottom lip between her teeth. I owe her a debt for punishing my own lip. I shake my head. Nope, not happening.

“Sure, Helen.”

Gran smirks. “Looks like we will need that extra breakfast after all.”

Henry’s gaze darts between the three of us like we are an entertaining reality show. His gaze skims over Cleo. I step in front of her, blocking his view and fold my arms.

“I’m staying for breakfast?” he asks hopefully.

Gran spins on her heel and ushers him away. “No, Henry, you’ll be gone before dawn. But there’s a scene I want to act out after seeing that gun.”

“Oh my God,” Cleo mumbles as her lips twitch.

“It won’t be loaded, dear, don’t worry,” Gran calls out.

I’m so confused.

They disappear, leaving me with the mysterious woman and my traitor of a dog that stays on the bed waiting for her. I stride out of the bedroom. She follows, her footsteps light. “I don’t need help,” I grumble. “Go back to bed. We can sort this out in the morning.”

She huffs as she pushes past me into the main bathroom. “Unless you are hiding a third arm in that shirt, you aren’t going to bandage the wound with one hand.”

“You’d be surprised what I can do with one hand.”

She snorts as she returns from the bathroom with the kit. She points at the sofa. “Sit, and stop being a hero.”

I drop my ass onto the end of the sofa and unbutton my shirt. I make it halfway, then decide to tug it off over my head. Cleo freezes and blinks. “See, one handed.”

She rolls her eyes, but sets about cleaning the blood from my chest and shoulder. I take the opportunity to study her more closely without appearing like a creep. She seems familiar but also not. There’s an odd rim around her iris.

Contacts. Colored, if I had to guess. Which she wears to bed? Interesting. My gaze trails over her hair. It's a coppery red, but her eyebrows are lighter. Hmm. She leans forward and holds a gauze over the graze, putting her silk-covered breasts in front of my mouth. *Fuck*. What is that smell? Peaches and cream, but richer. Warm, like she's been baking in the sun. Coconut. Peaches, cream, and coconut.

My knee brushes her bare thigh, making her flinch. "Who are you?"

Her gaze darts to my face before she grabs the tape and snaps pieces off onto my shoulder, holding the dressing in place. "Cleo Williams. I've been helping your grandmother for nearly five weeks."

"She didn't mention you."

"Did you call?"

I raise a brow at her. She's right—I didn't call. Not as often as I should have. But I was dealing with my shitshow of a life and trying to contain it so it wouldn't taint my family. Gran's all I've got, as my parents are long dead, and I'm an only child. Gran brought me up, and I owe what little humanity I have in my soul to her.

"No, but she tells me everything."

"I'm sure she would have gotten to it eventually."

"What kind of name is Cleo? Did your parents have an obsession with ancient Egypt?" I ask, changing tack. I'm curious how quickly she can come up with an excuse on the fly.

Her lips twitch. "No. Did yours have posters on their bedroom walls with little green men and the caption 'I believe'?"

"Touché."

She taps on the dressing. "There, all done." She steps away from me, taking that mouth watering-scent and the heat from her body with her. "Goodnight. We can sort out this living

situation tomorrow so that everyone is happy.” She spins on her heel and walks away.

“Cleo?”

She pauses and glances over her shoulder. Her wild hair sweeps across the curve of her ass. Flashes of wrapping it around my fist as I slam into her barrel in my mind. No, not happening.

“Yes?”

“Who is it you’d rather die than return to?”

Her entire body stiffens as if she’s been struck by lightning. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

Then she’s out of the room and closing the door to my bedroom. There are no locks, but I recognise the thud as she jams a chair under the handle. *Sure you don’t, Cleo.* Looks like I’ve found my new hobby while I’m lying low.

CHAPTER 16

HONOR



Beware of thin walls and determined minds.

Adrenaline pumps through my body with nowhere to go, making my heart jump. *Boom, boom, boom...* like an explosion going off in my chest over and over again. I shake out my arms and roll my shoulders, trying to work off some of the excess energy.

I shot someone. Holy shit, I shot someone.

Duke snores away on my bed, blissfully ignorant of my blooming existential crisis. No, not my bed. *His*. Fox. “What did he expect?” I mutter to the sleeping dog. “He stalks in here all big and powerful in the shadows, and I’m meant to, what?” I pull at my hair. “Roll over and open my legs? This isn’t a stalker fantasy or stranger desire.” I stride into the ensuite and turn on the shower. “Is that how people conduct themselves these days? Have things really changed in the short time I’ve been married? Did the world wake up nuts? No dinner, no dates?” I peel the silk nightgown from my body and sigh as I dive under the spray. “It’s going to be enough to give me new nightmares for weeks. I should bill him for my extra therapy—if I could go to therapy.” I jerk the loofah into the air. “Ha, I should make him sit and listen to me in penance. If he can’t solve my nightmares, he can fucking share them.”

My hand braces against the wall as the first sob wrenches from my throat. I let myself cry in the shower. It’s the only time I do, because my tears get washed away instantly.

I'm stupid for staying this long. It's time to move on. My hands cover my face, and I scream into them. I've just stopped being exhausted. I convinced myself I could stay here longer. Comfort and safety is a seductive illusion. Nowhere is safe from Gideon and remaining here only puts Helen in danger.

It's difficult not being able to form any meaningful connections, relationships, and friendships. How can I, when they all have short expiration dates?

I turn the knob, cutting off the stream of water, and step out to wrap myself in a big fluffy towel. My gaze catches upon my reflection in the mirror. I've put on a little weight while I've been here, reducing the sunken dark rings around my eyes. My skin is flushed and clearer with the quality of food I eat with Helen, and I laughed. For the first time in months—truly laughed.

I check the chair is still wedged beneath the handle of the door before grabbing a set of silky pink sleep shorts and matching cami. The black silk gown I dump in the garbage. No amount of delicate washing is getting blood out of that. I retrieve the gun off the floor, snap the safety on, before sliding it underneath my pillow and climbing into bed. Duke nudges my leg, getting even closer. He's such a cuddler.

I shot someone. *Fuck*. I shot my boss's grandson. Everyone's okay, nobody's dead. Right, like that should be the bar for a good day. My thoughts turn to Fox again as I try to get comfortable. I'd be lying if I said I wasn't curious about the only person Helen speaks of fondly. *Stop it. We're leaving, remember?*

The glowing clock on the bedside table reads 3 a.m. I bash my pillow with a fist and twist my legs in the sheets before puffing out an exasperated breath. Staring at the ceiling doesn't bring sleep. Nor does counting sheep or that *relax your toes* shit. Sighing, I twist and turn on the lamp, then grab the book from the pillow next to me. Romantic suspense is my new favorite sub-genre. I crack it open and fall into another world where the hero who stalks the woman would never hurt her, but will burn anyone who dares to try.

When my eyes start crossing, I glance at the clock and blink at the time. *Fuck*. I blame the book. My heart hasn't stopped pounding the entire time. But now I have a full day ahead of me with no sleep. It's not like I haven't done it before, but I'm self aware enough to recognize I'm a bitch when I'm exhausted.

Ugh. Swim first. I slip on my red bikini and Duke drags his eyes open, huffs, and rolls over to face away from me. I eyeball the chair jammed under the door and bite my bottom lip. Nobody sane is awake at this time of day. I can be out of the house, into the pool, and back again before he's even awake.

"Fuck it," I grumble as I drag the chair away from the door and dart through the sitting room, out of the front door, and into the cool pool. See? Nothing to worry about. I do an extra ten lengths hoping the exercise will catch up with me tonight and knock me out. Once Fox is sleeping in the main house, I'm sure it will be fine. I'll make a plan and be gone within a week. I have saved enough money to do without work for a few months if I'm careful. That gives Helen time to find a replacement, and if not, she has her grandson now. Is he aware of her condition? I haven't pried, but she needs the support. Some days are worse than others.

Rising from the pool, I grab my towel from the side and dry myself off. I'll make her pancakes this morning and that slow-cooked lamb dish for dinner to help break the news of my pending departure to her.

My lips and throat are dry after my extra laps, so I slide open the back door to the main house and stride into the dark kitchen. The air is coated with the rich scent of java, and I wonder if Henry helped himself before Helen ushered him out of her door before the birds chirped their early song. I open the refrigerator, grab the jug of orange juice, and pour myself a large glass before downing the whole thing and topping it back up.

"Not going to offer me one?" a low rumbling voice asks.

I squeak and spin on my heel. Fox sits at the breakfast bar with his head resting on his palm. My hand pushes against my chest to stop my heart from escaping. “Why the fuck are you sitting in the dark like a creep? Did my shooting you not suggest that it is a deadly course of action around me?”

He smirks as he sips at his mug—the source of the java. I’m an idiot. “I considered it, but I don’t believe you are hiding a weapon inside that bikini.”

My hands fist as I fight the urge to run and cover up from his assessing gaze. “You could have announced yourself as I came in.”

He tilts his head and climbs to his feet. “Why?”

I swallow as he rounds the breakfast bar. “Normal folks don’t sit around drinking coffee in the dark, letting others believe they aren’t there.”

He’s dressed only in a pair of dark sleep pants—no shirt, no shoes—displaying his stupid muscles for the world to see. I wonder if they are as smooth and firm as they appear to be. “You came to drink in the dark. Does that mean you aren’t normal?”

He stalks closer, and my heart races as I back up. “I guess not. What are you doing?”

Heat rolls off him, like he runs a few degrees warmer than the rest of us. It’s making my skin flush. His hands land on either side of me, grasping the countertop. It’s not a cage exactly. I have enough room to duck and run. But I’m not as terrified as I imagined I would be having a powerful man this close to me. Gideon never did this kind of thing. His terror was often in the anticipation that I had failed in the perfection he demanded. The consequences were rarely played out for the world to see. Torture isn’t palatable in the public domain, hence the secret fucked-up room. Gideon’s violence was hidden so well behind a mask even I, after months of sleeping in his bed, didn’t suspect it. I’ll never trust a man that hides himself again. I’m not sure I’ll ever trust *any* man again.

Fox's dark gaze drops to my chest. Fucking typical. I don't know why I'm disappointed by his classic response to a woman in a revealing outfit.

"What do the birds mean?"

I blink and lean back, placing my hands on the counter behind me. Slapping my boss's grandson or touching his chest like a horny teenager isn't professional. My brain catches up to his question. "What?"

"The birds, Cleo. The tattoo under your left breast. It looks unfinished."

The birds are a representation of my escape. Each month that goes by, I find a tattooist to add to the relatively simple design. There are currently five; each new one soars higher and opens its wings wider. I've not added another yet for this month. Gideon wouldn't allow me to get a tattoo, so it's a special fuck you to the man that tried to cage me.

"They're birds. No exciting secret meaning."

He hums low in his throat and licks his lips like he's tasting my words. "Another lie."

"It's not interesting," I mutter as my gaze flicks to his plump lips. The bottom one is still swollen from my bite.

"Tell me, and I'll be the judge of that."

I stiffen. "I don't have to tell you shit."

"You do while you are working for my grandmother."

"My secrets don't affect my job. I am not here to harm her, only support."

He tilts his head like he's processing the cadence of my words. "And I have found my first truth."

I relax. Now he can back off. "Good, now move. I won't be intimidated by an asshole with trust issues."

"Also a truth."

"What are you, a human lie detector?"

"Near enough."

My gaze falls to the bandage on his shoulder. There's a dark stain gathering underneath it. "You need to change your dressing."

"*You* need to change my dressing."

"I thought you could do everything one handed?"

"You are the cause of the damage, Cleo. You can take responsibility for fixing it."

"Fine. But you'll need to back up. I can hardly redress it while you have me pinned to the kitchen counter."

He chuckles, stirring the hair on the crown of my head. His thumb grazes the edge of my little finger, setting off sparks of sensation that whisper up my arm and prickle the back of my neck. Oh no, not after months of no libido. I cannot lust after Fox Alderidge. "I'm not touching you, Cleo. If I was pinning you, you'd feel every inch of body against yours. I'm merely cataloging your responses. I'm observant. Remember that when you spill lies from your pretty lips."

"Well, observe me from a distance."

"But I wouldn't be able to see the flutter of your pulse in your neck as you lie."

Joke's on him—I'm a master at shielding my body's responses. I had to be in order to survive, and I can draw upon it again. I dig deep, pushing down any swelling panic into that place buried inside of me. My hands unclench from the counter, and I drop them to my sides as I draw in a steady breath.

Fox's lips twitch. "You think you can fool me?"

I know I can. "Perhaps."

"You just got more interesting, *Cleo*." He drawls my name out in a heavy Southern accent, emphasizing he knows even my name is bullshit. I one hundred percent need to run. He will put my history together soon. Helen knows I'm lying and has let me keep my secrets, but her grandson is a different beast. He won't stop until he knows everything.

"I'm not even the slightest bit interesting," I counter.

He pushes away and steps back, taking his heat with him. He runs a hand through his hair like he's wrestling with his own demons. "I'll grab a shower, then you can replace the dressing."

"Okay," I breathe.

His hand digs into his back pocket, and he pulls out a small business card. He offers it to me. I take it with a frown. "What's this?"

His lips twitch. "The name of a great therapist. You know, since I'm responsible for your new nightmares. Perhaps you can discuss that stalker fantasy with him. Or with me, if you'd prefer—the choice is yours. Don't be embarrassed." He winks. "Bill me."

My mouth falls open as he spins on his heel and disappears out of the door. He heard me ranting in the shower? My mind replays my words. *Fuck.*

CHAPTER 17

FOX



The things you don't say speak louder than the words you let loose.

I wait for Cleo to emerge from her shower as I wander through my pool house and note the changes she's made. The sideboard, dining table, and kitchen window ledge are all cluttered with stacks of books. Most of these, I suspect, are novels she's borrowed from my grandmother given the abundance of half naked hot dudes on the front. I don't judge people's preferences. I pick up one with a pink cover which holds a bookmark in it. Hmm, so this one she's still reading. I think I'll put this somewhere else. After securing it in the guest bedroom, I click on the TV and select a streaming service, expecting it to be full of romantic, sappy shit. I bet she watches Christmas movies in June.

My eyes widen as I take in the recently viewed. *Oh, Cleo, now you're tempting me.* Flicking the TV off, I sit on the sofa, unable to keep the smirk from my face.

She tumbles out of the master bedroom in a frantic hurry, the mouthwatering scent of peaches and coconut strong from her shower. She freezes when she spots me sitting like one of her half naked dudes on her book covers.

I jerk my head at the new dressing I'd laid out so I can feel her soft hands on me again. "As promised."

She huffs. "We need to make it quick. I'm going to be late making Helen breakfast."

“Consider spending less time in the shower.”

She levels me with a blank stare. That’s right, I hear everything you say in there.

I’m desperate to see the real color of her eyes. Green is wrong for her.

“Doesn’t seem too bad,” she mutters as she replaces the dressing and tapes it up.

I arch a brow at her. “Do you have medical training?”

She scowls. “No.”

“So how would you know?”

Her hands land on her hips. “Would you like me to call you a doctor for your boo-boo?”

“Doctor Maggie would scold me for getting shot and scaring a woman.”

“Sounds like my kind of woman.”

I shudder. “I’ve had drill sergeants less scary.”

Her eyes widen and her body tilts toward me slightly. “You’re in the military?”

“I’ve been gone for six months.” She hums in the back of her throat. “What?” I ask.

“Nothing, it makes sense.”

“What does?”

She smirks as she turns on her heel and dashes out the door. What makes sense? Ugh, I hate not knowing what someone is thinking—particularly when it’s about me.

I pull on a T-shirt as Duke emerges from the master bedroom. He lumbers over and nudges my hip for attention. I give him a scratch behind his ears before we both make the brief journey to the kitchen. Cleo prepares breakfast at the stove while my grandmother sits at the counter, already made up to perfection with styled hair, light makeup, and designer clothes.

My eyebrows raise as I watch her flick through the local newspaper. Everything about this picture is wrong. Helen Alderidge never sits at the breakfast bar. I'm not sure anyone has used the stools but me.

“Good morning, Fox,” my grandmother greets.

“Morning,” I greet them both.

Cleo looks over her shoulder, catching my eyes. “Helen tells me you're okay with scrambled eggs and a slice of granary toast.”

“Is it organic?”

My grandmother huffs. “Welcome to the world of the health freak.”

“Organic isn't only about health. Having the ability to pay for the luxury means I can pass on some of that wealth and ensure the farmers get a fair wage for their produce.”

Cleo snorts as she places a piece of granary toast on the three plates. “You think because you pay extra, they get extra? It's not the way it works.”

“Sit down,” my grandmother demands.

“The eggs are from the farmer's market, and the bread is from the town bakery,” Cleo informs me.

I slide into the chair to the left of my grandmother. “Not there. That's Cleo's seat.”

“Oh, that's fine, Helen,” Cleo mumbles as she tops the toast with the perfectly scrambled eggs.

“No, you always sit there so you can read that side of the newspaper. Fox, move.”

I roll my eyes and swap to the other seat. Cleo slides the plates in front of us. So not only are we sitting in the kitchen while she makes breakfast, we are eating here too? It's a minor miracle that she shares breakfast with Cleo and enjoys her company. My grandmother tolerates people, and doesn't seek out their company—unless they're me. She hosts the book club, and she'll have an occasional meal with a male friend.

Other than that, she prefers her own company and keeps her own counsel. Cleo has managed to break through every wall.

She puts an extra portion of breakfast in Duke's bowl while he waits patiently for her command. She nods. "Take it." He darts forward and demolishes his food.

Cleo pours my grandmother her tea from the pot and adds the correct amount of milk and sugar. What is happening? She jerks her head at my empty cup. "Tea, or would you like coffee?"

"Tea is fine. Thanks."

She fills our cups, before sliding into the seat to my grandmother's left. They fall into an easy conversation about the various items in the newspaper.

My phone vibrates in my pocket. I withdraw it and frown at the message.

We have three promising leads. Stay low while we pull on the strings and see which one gets us the result you need.

"Fox Alderidge, I know I brought you up better than having a phone out while we are eating." I bite my tongue, knock off the vibration, and place it back in my pocket. I am not eager to feel the wrath of Helen Alderidge.

"What are your plans today?" she asks as I take my first bite of my breakfast. Damn. I'm not saying scrambled eggs are difficult to make, but they can be overcooked, undercooked, and the seasoning off. Cleo delivers the perfect plate of scrambled eggs and toast. She even let the toast cool a little so it didn't go soggy.

My plans? I'm trying to distract myself from the fact that my professional life is imploding. "Catch up with a few friends and take a walk around town with Duke. Move my stuff into the main house."

"About that," my grandmother starts as Duke growls and narrows his eyes at the door. We have a male caller at 7 a.m.? What is happening? Cleo wipes her hands on her napkin and

hops off her stool, in tune not only with my grandmother, but my dog. She scolds Duke on the way with a look. He drops his ass down onto the floor with a huff. This woman has fire in her soul.

There's a gentle rap against the door as Cleo flings it open.

"Samuel?" she questions as her shoulders stiffen and her fists tighten. "What are you doing here?"

What is my best friend doing here? I can't see him from my position and decide to stay put as I figure out their dynamic.

"Good news. You don't only get the pleasure of my company on Tuesday's and Friday's—I'll be here six days a week for the next month."

My grandmother's lips twitch. *What are you up to?*

Cleo's body is tense, like she's fighting not to run. "I don't understand."

"Helen didn't tell you? I'm here to renovate the bedrooms and bathrooms in the main house."

Her head whips around to my grandmother, who busies herself eating her breakfast. Why is Samuel so familiar with Cleo?

"She mentioned plans for renovation, but not when it was starting."

"The timeline was expedited last night, and when Helen Alderidge says do it now, you don't question it." True enough. "Which means my persistent ass can get rejected by you daily." Cleo's brows slam together before she twists back to him. "No woman can resist these baby blues for long." So he's pursuing Cleo? Figures. Samuel sees women as mountains he has to conquer.

Cleo flexes her shoulders. Something about his statement has upset her.

Wait, if he is here to renovate the bedrooms and bathrooms, that means there are no spare rooms in the main

house. My gaze falls back to my grandmother, whose expression is a picture of innocence.

“Like I said, you’ll need to stay in the pool house with Cleo,” she confirms. Fuck. My meddling grandmother is playing cupid. But with me or Samuel?

“So what do you say, Cleo? Saturday night?” Samuel says. I can hear the playful yet hopeful tone in his voice.

Okay, enough of this. I leave my seat and stride over to the door. My hand grips the edge, and I open it wider. Samuel’s famous panty-dropping smile morphs into a genuine one.

“Dude, you’re back,” he says as Cleo backs away. He drops his arm over my shoulder, and we do the one arm bro hug thing before pulling apart.

“I am.”

“How long for?”

“A few weeks, at least.”

“Fucking awesome. We have to meet and catch up this week.”

“Language,” my grandmother chides.

Samuel blushes. “Sorry, Mrs. Alderidge.”

His gaze drops back to Cleo between us. “Saturday?”

“Fine,” she relents. Wait, what?

Samuel blinks. “Really? You made me a happy man, Cleo.”

“It’s a date, not a proposal,” she says.

“I’ll pick you up at seven?”

“Sure.”

Samuel fumbles in his pocket for his phone and reaches out to hand it to Cleo. She folds her arms. “Put your digits in there in case you have a change of heart.”

“I don’t have a phone.” That’s ridiculous; everyone has a phone. Unless she’s in hiding and fears it might leave a trail

straight to her. That's not unfounded, but it is improbable unless the person hunting her has vast means. "As you said, you'll be here six days a week. Let me know when you are here if anything changes."

Cleo turns, and Duke swings his head between the retreating woman and the guy at the door he doesn't trust.

My grandmother's gaze also tracks her. Cleo grasps her barely touched breakfast and scrapes it into Duke's bowl. That won't do—she must have done sixty laps this morning. She can't function on a crust of bread and a forkful of eggs. She disappears out of the back door. I realize Samuel has been talking nonstop, and I refocus on the conversation.

"She's been playing hard to get for weeks. But she's gorgeous. I knew I'd wear her down eventually."

What changed Cleo's mind? She doesn't seem the type to be swayed by persistence. If she told him no, she meant no. *Unless...* ah, got it.

CHAPTER 18

FOX



I'm no Prince Charming.

Cleo reappears an hour later looking less shaken. She blinks at me like I'm a new piece of furniture before heading into the sitting room with my grandmother. Ignoring me won't make me disappear.

Samuel joins them and they pour over the paper plans rolled out on the coffee table. I observe from the doorway I'm leaning against. Cleo has donned a mask to hide her emotions. It's enough to fool most people, but not the Aldridges.

"Will there be adequate pressure for that new shower in the master bath?" Cleo asks from her position on her knees on the opposite side of the sofa. My brain feeds me images of a naked Cleo on her knees. *Fuck.*

Samuel's head jerks to her. "Yes, because the system in this house is in the attic."

"Did you include a new extractor fan? The old one stops working intermittently. I dismantled it and installed a new fuse, but it still chooses when to whirl to life."

"Are you a plumber?" Samuel asks.

"Engineer," she offers. Well, knock me down with a feather, a substantial truth from her lips.

"Which is why Cleo will oversee the renovations," my gran declares.

She shakes her head. “No, Helen, this is your home. I can’t make these decisions for you.”

My grandmother waves her hand in the air. “You know what I like. Anything you aren’t sure about, bring to me. But the small things, the thousands of decisions that happen with projects like these—I trust you.”

Cleo drags her teeth over her bottom lip. “Okay.”

“How long will this take?” I ask.

All three of them snap their heads toward me. “At least a month, more likely six weeks,” Samuel says.

“Which means ten,” Cleo mutters.

Samuel runs a hand under his jaw. “You’re right.”

Not being afraid to call someone out on their bullshit gets added to the list of her qualities I enjoy.

“My team will arrive in the next thirty, and we will get started,” Samuel declares, rising from the sofa. “I’m going to walk the first room through another time. Do you want to join me, Cleo?”

“Why, will you get lost?”

Sassy. Another quality. Samuel grins his trademark panty-melting one, making Cleo’s gaze shutter. “She might be here for those irritating questions you’ll have a hundred times a day,” my grandmother snaps. “But she is not eye candy, nor does she work for you. Find your own way to the bedroom. Cleo will be busy the rest of the morning.”

Samuel’s grin falls from his face. Duke eyeballs him from the rug. He’s deciding if he can eat him yet.

“Of course, Mrs. Alderidge, my apologies.” He sweeps past me and disappears deeper into the house.

“I was thinking of popping into town and getting some lamb for that slow cooked recipe you like,” Cleo says to my gran.

Her head snaps up from the plans between them. “Why?”

Cleo's gaze darts to me before skittering away. "A nice meal to celebrate your grandson being home?"

She phrases it like a question. It's also a lie. "Take said grandson with you, please. He's starting to clutter my home."

Cleo climbs to her feet. "I can find my way around town and to the butchers."

"I'm aware." I press my lips together to contain the laugh. Good luck trying to argue with Helen Alderidge.

"So I'll go alone."

"Like you, my grandson is hiding. Perhaps, as you are unwilling to confide in me, you might find solace in each other's mutual secrets."

I'm not surprised that she's worked out that I'm hiding. But I am hoping by the time the cause is revealed, I will have dealt with it.

Cleo rises to her feet and locks eyes with me. "Fifteen minutes. If you aren't ready and in the car, I'll leave without you." She rushes out of the room and heads to the pool house.

My grandmother raises a brow. "What?" I ask, folding my arms.

"Don't interrogate her."

I quirk a brow. "You have a woman living with you who is concealing her identity, and that doesn't worry you?"

"Yes, but not for the same reasons as you. That girl is terrified, not malicious. She needs patience, not bullying."

"And you think with patience, she will tell you why she's hiding?"

"No, I think with patience she might stop being scared. She's already come so far in the month she has been here. If you undo that, we are going to have a problem."

A long sigh escapes me. "I make no promises, but I will try."

She pauses on her way out of the door. “If you upset her, I will be taking your own secrets in payment.”

My grandmother knows how to play hardball. She can't find out why I'm home. I won't be able to stand the suspicion from the only woman who has ever loved me unconditionally. I will move heaven and earth to protect that love.

I STARE at the monstrosity of a van parked next to my baby. This is what she drives? I'm surprised it even starts. I think there's more rust than paint covering the off-white bodywork.

The door to the garage opens, and Cleo strolls inside and falters at my presence. She must think I'm stupid. It's been barely five minutes, not fifteen.

Her gaze falls on my car, which I uncovered for the trip to town. “That's yours?” she asks.

I quirk a brow and open the passenger door for her. I'm proud of my 1962 Shelby AC Cobra. She runs like a dream and is a pleasure to drive.

“I'd prefer to drive,” she says, jerking her head at the Jaguar. I might be forbidden from interrogating her, but that doesn't mean I'm going to feed her demand for control. I hope she enjoys being off balance, because that's her life for the foreseeable future.

“Sorry, no one drives her but me.” I tilt my head at the passenger seat.

She gestures toward the other covered vehicle in the corner. “And the bike? She's yours too?”

“She is.”

“I suppose I don't get to drive that either.”

“Most definitely not. You'll never even sit on her. That's a highly personal thing.”

“Sounds like you and that bike have a very complicated relationship.”

“There’s nothing complicated about a machine that purrs between your legs.”

She snorts as she climbs inside and settles into the passenger seat. Two minutes later, we rumble down the drive and out of the gate. I take a left, away from town.

Cleo’s hands clench in her lap. “Where are we going?”

I glance at her before I change gear and push the car harder. “I rarely get to drive her. When I do, I want to enjoy the open road for a short time.”

“So we aren’t going anywhere specific?”

I grin as the engine vibrates under us. “No, I’m taking the scenic route to town.” Cleo presses her jean clad thighs together as her hands grip the edges of the leather seat.

I push the car to its limits, ensuring it takes the bends in the road safely but fast enough to make Cleo’s breath catch in her throat.

Thirty minutes later, I spin into a parking spot in town and cut the engine. “You doing okay there?” I ask her.

Cleo frowns, before leaping out of the car like her ass is on fire. And it’s a fine ass, too—but also a complicated one, and I am on a woman ban right now. I follow her into the butcher’s to overhear Rosa giving her the third degree about Samuel and their impending Saturday night date. That didn’t take long—gossip in this town spreads faster than a wildfire.

“You have boots, right?” Rosa asks as George the butcher hands her a grocery bag.

“No, I’ll figure it out,” Cleo utters.

“What size are you?” Rosa’s gaze drops to her feet. “Seven?”

Cleo nods. “That’s right.”

“I’ll bring you some of mine over.”

“Oh, no, that’s okay.”

“Nonsense, you finally said yes. You are going to knock his socks off.”

“I’d rather he kept them on,” Cleo mumbles, making me snort.

All eyes snap to me, and Rosa abandons her bag. “Fox, you’re home.”

“Evidently.”

“That’s why Helen is in such a good mood today.” She winks. “Of course, that could be Henry’s doing.”

I pinch the bridge of my nose. I’m not stupid. People, including my grandmother, have needs. But I don’t need to hear about it.

“You know, Amalee is newly single,” Rosa says as her eyes glaze over. “You guys made the cutest homecoming king and queen.”

Cleo’s lips twitch as George hands her the parcel of lamb. “I won’t be in town for long,” I tell her, hoping to cut off any matchmaking attempts—particularly with Amalee Cage. We dated for a whopping month in high school, and ever since, the town and Amalee believe we are destined. It’s never going to happen. I need someone to challenge me intellectually, and Stepford wives don’t do it for me.

“See you later, Rosa,” Cleo says as she brushes past me. Little zaps of electricity dance from where her skin touches mine. What is that?

She stalks down the sidewalk to the convenience store. I catch up with her in a few strides. “Why did you say yes?” I ask as we enter the store, and she grabs a basket.

She raises a brow and gives me a flat look. “Because he asks every single time I see him, and your grandmother made that a daily occurrence. Better to get it over with, so he realizes now that I am not a catch. I make shit company and an even poorer date. This way, he can concentrate on the job and not me.”

Logical, but untrue.

“Can you pick a bottle of red wine for the meal?” she asks as she turns into the fresh produce aisle and leaves me alone without waiting for an answer.

I do as instructed and stop at the small fresh section that the bakery supplies. Then I wander around looking for Cleo. I spot her at the opposite end of the toiletries aisle. She stares at something on the end of the display, her entire body frozen.

“Cleo,” I call out so she doesn’t disappear somewhere else. Hunting someone in a store is a pet hate of mine. She doesn’t acknowledge me, despite me calling her name three more times. Makes sense, because it’s not her real name. As I approach, I realize she isn’t frozen. She’s trembling from her head to her toes. Fucking hell. I follow what she’s staring at. White roses. Okay. Not exactly the most terrifying thing on the planet.

I reach out and touch her arm. She swings her fist and punches me square in the jaw. “Fuck.” Her glazed expression falters, and the basket of groceries clatters to the floor. I grab her wrists to prevent her from hitting me again. “What’s wrong with you?” I snap.

She squirms as her chest rises and falls rapidly. Her breath crashes over my face in fast whips of air. “Let me go,” she says between pants as she jerks her wrists, trying to break free.

She’s having a panic attack. “Breathe,” I coax as a surge of my protective instincts rises in me. “Come on, follow me. You are safe. I won’t let anyone hurt you.”

She blinks but is still trapped in whatever horror stalks her every moment. Her gaze drops to my lips before sliding to my chest. She coughs as she tries pulling in a deeper breath. A few people give us the side-eye as they pretend to shop for things close by.

I need to get her out of here. I rotate us so her face is protected by my body and the shelves. Her eyes widen at the items behind me. *Fuck. Stupid.* She pulls free and sprints out of the store like her ass is on fire. I drop my items in the basket and take off after her. She’s quick for having short legs but can’t compete with my stride.

“Cleo, fuck. Wait up.”

She blindly runs out onto the main road, right into the path of a truck. I dart into the street, grab Cleo around her waist, and throw us onto the sidewalk. My body takes the brunt of the fall, and the truck screeches to a stop next to us. My head falls back and I sigh. That was close.

“Are you okay? She came out of nowhere,” a woman’s voice asks.

“We’re fine,” I mutter as I grip Cleo and climb to my feet. Her breathing is calm, which is a good sign. She lies limp in my arms as I scoop her up. Maybe not. She’s out cold. I will teach this woman to look after herself if it’s the last thing I do. But to do that, I have to make sure she doesn’t run.

CHAPTER 19

HONOR



I know my worth. It is not my responsibility to explain it to you.

“**W**akey wakey, sleeping beauty.”

A huff moves past my lips. I have never been treated like a princess. No, that’s a lie. The villain treated me like a princess until he revealed himself. I guess the more accurate thing to say would be that I never again want to be treated like a princess. Not when I’m forced to question every word, every action, knowing that what follows affection is horror.

Something warm and wet snakes across my face. My hands rise and dig into soft fur. “Ew, how many times do I need to tell you, Duke? We do not kiss ladies with the same tongue that licks ass.”

“Well, if I ever attempt to kiss you, I’ll be sure that no ass licking has occurred for at least twelve hours prior.”

My eyes snap open, revealing Fox hovering above me. I scowl. “What are you talking about?”

He shakes his head as Duke drops a paw on my chest, bringing my attention to the fact I’m horizontal on the sofa in the living room of the main house.

How did I get here? I was shopping for lamb and listening to Rosa reminisce about Fox and his childhood sweetheart, and how she’s suddenly single and waiting for his call. Then... my mind is blank.

Helen's face pops over the top of the sofa to join her grandsons. "Gave us quite the scare, Cleo. You are no good to me if you're unconscious."

"I passed out?"

Fox rolls his eyes. "Yep, straight into my arms. Like a fainting damsel."

"Like a fairytale," Helen says with a smile.

I grimace. This is why I don't socialize. "Never seen the Wednesday morning shoppers of Red Lake look so excited," Fox agrees.

"I wanted to call the doctor, but he stopped me," Helen says with a pointed look at Fox. "He claims he knows what's wrong with you."

"It's not rocket science, Gran. She didn't eat her breakfast."

"I did, eggs and toast with you guys."

"No, you made eggs and toast, then gave yours to Duke."

The dog in question tilts his head in agreement. Oh wait, yes, he's right. Shit, that was really stupid.

"Sit up slowly," Fox advises.

I do, experiencing a wave of dizziness as I right myself. Fox hands me a glass of orange juice. "Drink that first," he instructs. I take a few sips, my stomach twists. Damn it, that happens when I've not eaten. I force a few extra mouthfuls, fighting the burn in my throat. Next, he hands me a small brown paper bag.

"What's this?" I wonder, peeking inside and getting a whiff of the freshly baked goodness.

"Chocolate croissant."

I blink at him. "For me?"

"Don't get excited. I got it for myself, but you need it more."

I try passing the bag back to him even as my hands shake. “I can’t take it, it’s yours.”

He rolls his eyes. “You can and you will.”

“You have work to do, and a meal to cook,” Helen agrees.

I take a bite of the flaky treat and it melts on my tongue. Fucking hell, that’s better than an orgasm.

Helen nods like she is satisfied and stalks out of the room, leaving me alone with Fox. He slides on to the sofa next to me, sprawling to encompass three-quarters of the four-seater sofa.

“You have to start taking care of yourself,” he grinds out.

I dart a look at him as I swallow the last bite. “I missed one meal. It’s hardly neglect.”

He skewers me with a look. He sees too much—like his grandmother—but isn’t afraid to call me out on my bullshit. If I try explaining to Helen, she will talk me out of it.

“I brought the ingredients back from the store,” Fox says. “So you can still make this lamb dish.”

“Thank you. I don’t remember what happened.”

“You had a panic attack.” I frown at him. I have zero recollection of any panic attack. “You were by the flowers.”

White roses assault my vision. Fuck. *Fuck*. I blacked out. No wait, was there a truck? Oh, my God. “Did you save me from a truck?”

His gaze darkens. “Only just. You need to start dealing with whatever has got you acting that way. If you don’t, it won’t be whatever you’re running from that will spell your end. You will take yourself out.”

I nod as a plan formulates in my mind, then crystallizes. I have to leave tonight. Friday is too far away.

IT’S TRULY SATISFYING WATCHING people you care for enjoy a meal you prepared. Of course, the addition of Samuel into our

dinner was unexpected. Helen is matchmaking, and she is so obvious.

Fox finishes his plate of food and eyeballs the half-eaten portion on my plate.

Samuel places his cutlery on his empty plate and sighs. “Damn, Cleo, you can really cook. You are going to make a man very happy one of these days.”

“Is that the sum of what a woman is worth?” I wonder as I take a small bite of the rich lamb.

“Now you’ve done it,” Helen utters.

Samuel frowns, and Fox’s lips twitch. “I’m not following,” Samuel says.

“A woman’s worth is measured by how happy she makes her man.”

Samuel’s mouth falls open. “That’s not what I meant.”

Helen presses her lips together as I point my fork at Samuel. “Perhaps I should advertise that I can iron a man’s shirt in under a minute and, much like Jane Austin’s heroines, enjoy spending my afternoons perfecting my needlepoint.”

Samuel scratches the back of his head. “I was trying to compliment your cooking.”

“Then do so, but don’t wrap it in words that destroy feminism.”

“Yes, ma’am.”

Poor guy looks confused. I take pity on him and redirect the conversation. “So, you went to school together?”

Samuel’s cheeky grin is back. “Went to school, played football, partied. We were inseparable until this idiot skipped town two weeks before we were due to start college and joined the military.”

Fox takes a sip of his wine. “I’d had enough of sitting in classrooms listening to information that I was highly unlikely to ever use. I wasn’t entirely sure what I wanted to do, so I didn’t see the point of going to college.”

Samuel rolls his eyes. “Yes, the all-time American hero.”

“There was nothing stopping you from joining me.”

Samuel shrugs. “I knew what I wanted to do.”

“What’s that?” I ask.

“Architecture. My family owns one of the most successful construction companies in the area, but we always had to outsource the design. I plugged the skill gap.”

“You want some more?” I ask Fox and Samuel as I rise from my chair.

Fox also stands and puts a hand on my shoulder. “Sit, woman. I can get my own food. You made it, after all.” He scoops Samuel’s plate and disappears into the kitchen.

The rest of the meal passes with light conversation, but as the clock ticks by, sadness pulls at my soul. Helen has become so much more than my employer in such a short time, but it’s time to move on.

Samuel hovers around helping Fox with the dishes as Helen and I sit at the breakfast bar sipping the last of the wine. “Before I forget, here’s your items from the order,” Helen says, sliding off the stool to retrieve a box from the sideboard in the entryway. She places it on the breakfast bar with a frown. “Oh, wait, I have a few things in there.”

My hand stretches out covering the box. “That’s okay, I can retrieve them tomorrow once the order is sorted.”

She pushes my hand out of the way. “Don’t be ridiculous. I need them now.”

The boys turn to look at us. Helen pulls out a long cream silk nightgown and hands it to me. “That’s yours, honey.” Fuck my life. She hands me the short crimson version and two sets of lingerie. “That’s everything, I think.” I squeeze my eyes closed as my cheeks heat to match the gown. *What the hell, Helen?*

One of the men clears their throats. “I’ll be heading home now. See you in the morning, Mrs. Alderidge. Cleo.”

I keep my eyes closed and hold my hand up, giving Samuel a little wave. The front door opens and closes. I peel my eyes open, hoping I'm alone. Helen has disappeared, leaving me with Fox. He leans against the sink with his arms crossed and a small smile playing on his lips.

“Planning on a big night this Saturday?” Fox asks with a pointed look at the items in my hand.

“A woman can wear nice lingerie for herself. It's not always about impressing a man.”

“Pity, they'd impress me,” he mutters, exiting the kitchen.

I CHICKEN out of explaining to Helen face to face and opt instead for a handwritten letter.

The pool house has long since fallen silent. Fox said very little after dinner, and I gave false promises to Samuel that I hadn't changed my mind about Saturday. I pack my duffle bag, count the cash I've saved, and tuck a quarter of it into the rucksack. I think I'll head north next, toward cooler climates. Duke watches me from his lounging position on the bed, his eyes wide open as he realizes something isn't right. I kneel in front of him and scratch behind his ears. He licks my cheek, making me smile. Damn dog doesn't get no kisses on the face.

My eyes burn. The last thing I want to do is leave this family behind, but it's because I care that I need to move on. Every day is like waiting for the sword of Damocles to fall. I won't bring Gideon to their door—it's not fair to them. Now that Helen has Fox here to help, she can replace me before he leaves.

I stand and huff into the darkness. Time to go. Snatching the bags from the bed, I move quietly through the pool house and sneak out the door. My shoulders shake as I try to hold myself together. A long road stretches ahead of me, filled with cheap motels, dark and scary nights, and looking over my shoulder.

I slip into the garage, open the front door, and drop my bags in the passenger seat of the van before hurrying around to

the driver's side and strapping my seat belt on. The keys slide from the foldaway mirror into my hands, and I insert them into the ignition. I turn the key, but the engine sputters and dies. No. I check the engine every few days for this exact reason. The last time was yesterday. I try again. It coughs and then silence. I hammer my fists on the steering wheel.

“Come on, you piece of shit,” I snap.

“I'm curious. Does verbally attacking your vehicle normally work?” a male voice drawls from behind me.

I scream, grab the gun from my rucksack, and spin in my seat. I pull the trigger without thinking. Fox smirks from his prone position on the mattress, his gaze on the ceiling as he tosses an apple in the air.

“You think I'd risk you being in charge of a loaded gun?” he says with a chuckle. “Been there, done that. You are still responsible for my recovery, Cleo. So where the fuck do you think you're going?”

CHAPTER 20

HONOR



Don't play on my weakness to bend me to your will.

“Get out,” I growl as he continues to toss the apple in the air like he’s got all the time in the world.

“I don’t think so. I’m comfortable here. Why would one have a mattress in the back of their van? You know they rent rooms by the hour for this sort of thing.”

“I don’t need to explain myself to you.”

“You were going to leave without saying goodbye? I’m hurt. I thought we had a connection.”

I huff. “The only connection we have is my fist that’s going to connect with your nose if you don’t get out of this van right now.”

“I could get out, but it still won’t solve your vehicle problem.”

A light bulb goes off in my head. “What did you do?” I snap.

“A little snip here and there. Now your van is going to need a week in the garage while they find new parts.”

I turn and face forward before smacking my forehead on the steering wheel. “What is your problem? You don’t like me. You don’t like me being here. You don’t like the fact that you don’t know everything about me. So why not let me leave?”

“My gran likes you. Have you explained to her that you’re leaving?”

“No, I don’t have to explain to anybody.” True, but I have left a letter on the bed for Helen to find which reassures her that my leaving has nothing to do with her. “Please, let me go.”

He rises to sit and his eyes meet mine in the rearview mirror. He takes a bite of the apple and chews as he turns over my request. “I’ll do you a deal, Cleo Williams.” I stare at him and arch a brow. I already know this deal is going to be bullshit. “You tell me your real name, and I’ll give you my car, right here, right now. All yours for the taking for one simple truth.”

“I don’t want your car.”

“Well, this heap of shit isn’t going anywhere in a hurry.”

“Because of you.” My heart thrums in my chest as Fox tries to trap me. “I don’t have to put up with this.” I grab my bags, open the driver’s door, and fling myself out of the garage and stomp down the shadowy drive.

Fox catches up with me, his stupid long legs having no problem keeping pace with me. “Where are you going at this time of night?” he asks as his gaze drops to my feet. “In a pair of Crocs?” Like my footwear is the biggest issue here.

“Anywhere away from you.”

“This is Red Lake, Cleo. There are no buses, Ubers, or even hotels that will open their doors to you at this time of night. You’re not going anywhere.”

“I don’t need a car to get away from you.” My heart pounds at the thought of being trapped once again by a man who thinks he knows better.

“I could see if Samuel’s awake? Give me your phone, and I’ll pop his number in. Oh wait. You don’t have a phone. Why is that?”

“Because technology is slowly but surely killing our social skills. I made an active choice to switch off. You should try it sometime. Looks like you could do with a little relaxing.” The strap of my rucksack falls off my shoulder into the crook of

my arm, but I don't pause as I keep stomping toward the main road.

Fox plucks the bag from my arm and swings it over his shoulder. I freeze and turn to face him. "Give it back."

He smirks. "I'm being a gentleman. Also double-checking you didn't decide to take a little extra on your way out the door." He swings it forward and unzips it.

"Hey! You have zero personal boundaries."

"Can't have personal boundaries for a person whose name you don't know."

"That makes no sense. Personal boundaries don't stop existing because you don't know someone's name."

"So you admit Cleo isn't your real name?" I press my lips together as he roots around in my bag. He whistles. "Who carries this much cash around with them? Do you have a bank account? Oh wait, no. That would need a real name. My grandmother has really been paying you in cash? I need to have a talk with her about money laundering."

"Don't be ridiculous."

"Tell you what. I'll give you a ride to the nearest station."

"Seriously?"

"Sure. The nearest police station where they can take your fingerprints and photo which they can run through their systems and maybe they can tell us who you really are."

"Not everyone who's running has something to hide. Sometimes they're just hiding from people."

"In my experience, people who run do so because they have done something wrong. What did you do? What sort of trouble did you cause?"

I laugh, but it's an empty sound. "I loved the wrong person. That's my crime."

His gaze narrows on my face like he's picking apart my words. "What does that mean?" he says low, as if the shadows are waiting for my secrets to be spilled. There's a tug in my

chest, willing me to explain my history to this stranger. But why would he believe me when even my own parents didn't? Gideon is an expert at portraying the dutiful and concerned husband. He's likely to have me committed for my psychological needs—if I'm lucky. If I'm not, he will make that secret room my entire world. No, I have to continue to hold these experiences in my chest, releasing them into the world gives them weight and allows others access to my pain which they could use against me. It's a weakness.

“My crime is imperfection. You still want to take me to the police station? You will get a hit but not for the reasons you are imagining.”

“A month.”

I frown. “What?”

“Give me a month.”

“A month for what?”

“You stay here for one month.”

I shake my head and try to lift my rucksack from his hands. “No.”

“It's not for you or me. It's for my gran. If shit goes sideways, she's going to need your support. You're not the only one hiding, Cleo.”

My eyes close and I sigh. “I can't.”

“I'll double your pay—in cash—and I'll get you an RV to replace your van.”

My teeth dig into my bottom lip. “Why?”

“I already explained to you. My gran might need your help.”

“She can hire someone else.”

He snorts. “Do you know how long I've been asking her to get someone to help? An entire year. One year. Do you know how many people she's interviewed? Over a hundred. So imagine my surprise when I come home and find she's hired you.”

The pull to stay is strong, to escape back to the warm bed with the large protective dog. “Okay,” I whisper.

Fox tugs the duffel bag from my shoulder and swings it onto his before jerking his head back to the house. We trudge back up the drive. “What triggered you to run tonight?”

“I’ve been here too long.”

“Has there been any indication that you’ve been located?”

“No.”

“Tell me the real reason.”

I drag my teeth over my bottom lip. “You.”

He snorts. “Me?”

“Yes, you. Helen knows I’m hiding and doesn’t pry. You know, but have immediately started unpicking my secrets. I can’t deal with this constant suspicion.”

“It’s part of my nature.” He sighs as we move around the side of the house and enter the pool house. Duke grumbles low in his throat from the sofa. “I’m suspicious, but I’ll try to keep a lid on it.”

“Thank you.”

He moves into the master bedroom and drops the bags on the bed. I follow him inside as he twists to face me. His spicy clean scent invades the room. He reaches out and tucks a lock of my hair behind my ear, sending little tingles skating down my spine. “I promise if you stay, nothing bad will happen.”

“It’s a nice sentiment, but don’t make promises you cannot keep.”

“Do you know who you are sharing a house with?”

“No.”

He grins. “A highly trained soldier. After I left, I became an extremely competent bodyguard. I’m not a stranger to danger. I thrive on it.”

“While I actively avoid it.”

“I’m offering you my protection.”

“I don’t need protection.”

“Perhaps not, but you still have it.”

My resolve to leave was already on shaky ground, and he’s chipped away at the last of my resistance. My shoulders sag. I’m staying.

“What’s this?” He grabs the envelope from the pillow. I reach out to grab it, and he lifts it into the air. Fucking tall people.

“It’s a letter explaining to Helen that my leaving had nothing to do with her. It’s now redundant, so give it back.”

I raise a brow and hold my hand out. *This is a test, Fox. You keep something as a simple letter from me, and I will be out that door so fast it will make your head spin.* He must see these thoughts playing across my face because he places the unopened letter into my palm.

“What gave me away?” I wonder. He was waiting for me in the van like I’d personally explained my plans.

“Your date night with Samuel.”

I frown. “I’m not following.”

He smirks and steps closer so that my breasts touch his chest, and I have to tip my head back to look at him. “You have rejected Samuel at every turn for weeks. Then, without warning, you give in? Why? Because you were planning on being gone.”

“Perhaps I like him?”

He tilts his head and trails a finger down my forehead, over my nose, across my lips, and along my throat. Goosebumps erupt on my flesh. “Erratic breathing, blown pupils, lips parted for a kiss—that’s how I know you are attracted to someone. You exhibit none of these things around Samuel.” My gaze tracks from his dark eyes to his parted lips. He closes his eyes and steps back from me, breaking our connection. “Get some sleep, Cleo. But no more lies.” He lets Duke in before glancing at me over his shoulder and closing the door behind him.

My fingers touch my lips. Was I about to kiss him? Since when did real-life men become okay? I've sworn off them. *Fuck*. I cannot be attracted to Fox Alderidge. A man like him would never want a woman like me—bruised, battered, and broken. No man would ever want the remnants of what Gideon left behind.

One month. That's enough time to make a plan, and with the extra money, I can make it stretch to live off the grid for a year. I have to hope Gideon doesn't catch up to me, because no matter how skillful a protector Fox Alderidge professes to be, he's no match for a monster with no morals.

CHAPTER 21

FOX



Princess treatment is reserved for royalty.

I refuse to sleep. She's still a flight risk, but Cleo is not going anywhere. I wasn't lying about my grandmother needing her support should my private life be splashed across the media, but the more fundamental truth is I like the way she brings a spark of warmth to my world. Nobody but my grandmother ever called me out on my shit, until Cleo. She's an excellent distraction from the looming darkness. I find myself eager for the night to pass so I can experience her fire.

I keep my bedroom door open and listen carefully for signs she is trying to run again as I open my bedside table drawer and pull out the book she is reading.

The hours pass as I become absorbed in the story. Not for its stellar plot—which isn't bad—but for the spice. This is what she dreams about? I'm not stupid. I know she's been through something horrific, and there's an expectation that a survivor should act in a certain way, want certain things from a sexual partner—soft, slow, gentle. All the things I'm shit at. But if this is an indication of her desire, I can more than deliver.

I shake my head. I'm not meant to be going near any woman. But she's here, looking like a fucking wet dream and verbally sparring with me. If I had any common sense, I'd let Samuel woo her, sweep her off her feet, and usher her into the light. My eyes skim the last chapter and I groan. Now this is all I'm going to think about the entire day.

An experiment is called for, and her reaction will determine my next move. The shower turns on in the next room and she begins singing a terrible rendition of *Zombie*, causing a smile to spread across my face. She's not running. Excellent.

I get myself ready and slip out to the main house before she can catch me. Ten minutes later, she appears in the kitchen and halts. Her damp hair is piled on top of her head, she has zero makeup on, and she's wearing a pair of jean shorts and a Hollywood Vampires band T-shirt teamed with a pair of sky-blue Crocs that have little cherry charms attached. She's stunning when she isn't even trying. God help the man she decides to try for—he has zero chance. “What are you doing?” she asks as Duke barges past her and gives my hand a lick. *Yes, buddy, pancakes for you too.*

I smirk as I turn back to the stove. “Breakfast.”

“Is what I make not good enough? You can tell me. I'm a big girl—I can take it.”

“I just bet you can,” I mutter as I flip a pancake.

“What's that?” she snaps as my gran appears next to her.

“Ooh, he's making pancakes. What did you do right, Cleo? Or what did he do wrong?” she asks as she slides onto the stool. I still can't get used to the sight of her eating in such a casual manner. It's another reason I think keeping Cleo around is good for us all.

“I didn't do anything,” Cleo says as she approaches the refrigerator. I move in front of her, blocking her access.

“Ah, ah, ah, princess treatment today,” I say with a raised brow.

My gran snorts. “Now you really have to tell me what you did.”

Cleo throws her hands up in the air. “Nothing.”

“She chose to stay,” I declare as I plate up the pancakes and pile fresh organic blueberries on them.

“You were going to leave?” my gran says. She keeps her tone neutral, but I can tell she’s upset.

Cleo lasers a glare at me. I raise an eyebrow. It’s not like we agreed to not tell her. “I was worried I was encroaching on your family time. Fox corrected my assumptions.”

Gran’s eyes find mine and she raises a brow. *Yes, yes, I scared your assistant away. But I also retrieved her before she could escape.*

“I’m glad that got sorted, but you must come and see me if you are worried in the future, okay?”

Cleo drags her bottom lip between her teeth, causing my cock to stir. *Fuck.* I blame that book. “Okay,” she whispers as I squirt some local honey on top of the stack of pancakes and slide the plate in front of her. She takes a mouthful and groans. *Not helping, Cleo.*

My gran grins. “So, princess treatment. What are you going to have him do? Peel and feed you grapes? Massage your feet? Run you a hot bubble bath?”

“I’m not following,” Cleo says between bites. “I need to review the plans for the master suite with Samuel, I have dinner to prepare, and the windows need cleaning according to the schedule.” I take great satisfaction in the fact she’s consumed more of my breakfast than any other meal I’ve seen her eat.

“Oh no, princess treatment is an Alderidge tradition,” my gran says. She levels me with another pointed look that says *one reserved for family.* One I’ve never graced a woman other than my grandmother with. “Today is yours. No work. No chores. Fox will be at your beck and call, and will do the windows and manage Samuel on your behalf.”

Cleo freezes and her eyes meet mine as she puts her fork down. She’s eaten a quarter, which is a win. “Why would you do that?”

I shrug as I devour my pancakes while standing at the island across from her, ready to intervene if she tries to do

something stupid like the dishes. “We got off on the wrong foot. It’s my way to make amends.”

Her eyes narrow. I also have a few theories to put to the test which involve her not working. “I guess I’ll take a walk with Duke, have a swim, and do a little reading. Maybe watch a movie.”

“Sounds perfect,” Gran says with a wink at me. *No, Gran, you can’t possibly know how perfect that is.* “Unlike your footwear, young lady. I thought we discussed Crocs and their appropriate placement.”

“Yeah, yeah, in the trash. It’s not happening, Helen. I am on my feet from 7 a.m. until 7 p.m. I wear comfort, not fashion.”

Cleo pushes her plate away but stares longingly at the rest of the pancakes, making my chest tighten. *What happened to you?* Eating disorders aren’t something I’m familiar with, but PTSD is, and she shows subtle signs of it. Duke growls low in his throat just before someone knocks at the door.

“Samuel’s here,” my gran declares.

Cleo hops off her stool. I round the island, darting in front of her and walking backward to the door. “Sit and relax. No work for you today. You’ll be seeing enough of him on Saturday now that you aren’t running.”

Her face falls with that realization. Ah, so zero interest in my best friend and his charm. She turns on her heel and makes her escape out the back door as I open the front. Samuel smiles at me and looks over my shoulder.

“Morning, Fox. Is Cleo up yet?”

I wave him in. “You’ll be dealing with me today as it’s her day off.”

My gran presses her lips together to stifle a laugh. “I’ll be out all day,” she declares. She snatches her purse and leaves the house as Samuel’s team invade the house.

“What do you need?” I ask. Samuel runs a hand through his hair, and his gaze darts around the house. *You won’t find*

her, buddy. She's mine today, while I get to the bottom of what makes Cleo Williams tick.

“Erm, I think I have enough to get on with today. Decisions can wait until tomorrow.”

Yeah, that's what I thought. He's so transparent. “You got it bad,” I observe. “For a woman you've never spent any one on one time with, you are wrapped in knots.”

“Have you seen her?”

I fold my arms as the door closes behind the last of his team. They disappear up the stairs, leaving us alone. “Are you interested in her, or just the thrill of the chase because she didn't whip her panties off and throw them at you when you first met?” I ask.

He shakes his head. “Dude, she is like the most mysterious present I've ever seen. All I want to do is unwrap her to see what she's hiding. She covers herself in baggy clothes, but I just know she's hiding perfection underneath.”

You have no fucking clue, dude, but I do. “My gran likes her.”

He nods. “I got that.”

“Which means if you fuck with her, you'll have Helen Alderidge on your ass.”

He chuckles. “Not planning on upsetting her.” His laughter dies and he narrows his eyes before mirroring my pose by crossing his arms. “You like her.”

“I like the fact my gran likes her. There's a difference.”

“So you have no issue with us going on a date on Saturday?”

It's on the tip of my tongue to inform him that her acquiescence was a condition of her skipping out before the time for that date ever came to pass.

“No problem whatsoever,” I declare.

“Good. You can make it a double date with Amalee. She has been asking about you nonstop.”

Amalee is the embodiment of a self absorbed narcissist and is the last person I want to spend any time with. But I guess it gives me an excuse to keep an eye on Cleo.

“Fine.”

Samuel narrows his eyes. He knows how much I detest Amalee. “Really?”

“Sure. People change, right?”

“Right. I’ll let her know you’ll pick her up around seven.”

“No need. She lives across the street from you, and Cleo lives in the same house as me. We can drive our respective dates and meet there.”

“Not exactly the beginning of a romantic encounter, allowing another man to chauffeur her.”

“I’ll make sure to let her know I insisted.”

Samuel huffs. “Fine.”

I raise a brow. “Fine.” He turns and disappears up the stairs after his team.

I make quick work of cleaning up the kitchen before going in search of Cleo. I enter the pool house to find her stalking around the living room and picking up cushions. “Looking for something?” I ask.

Her body jerks, and she raises a hand to her chest as she spins to face me. “My book.”

I lean against the door frame and jerk my head at a stack of books under the side table. “Have you tried over there?”

She frowns and ducks before plucking up the book she is reading, the same one I read last night. “That makes no sense, this is my TBR pile.”

“TBR?”

“Yeah, to be read.” She holds the book close to her chest like a shield, her gaze flicking suspiciously between me and the pile, so I change the subject.

“What are you planning on doing first?”

She starts toward the bedroom. “A swim, followed by some reading. I guess I’ll see where the day takes me.” She pauses on the threshold. “It’s lasagne for dinner. Do you have it in hand or should I make it?”

“I’ve got dinner covered.”

“Cool.” She drags her teeth over her bottom lip, a gesture I’m realizing means she’s nervous or unsure.

“Did you need something else? I’m at your beck and call today.”

“No, that’s okay, thank you. I don’t normally take days off, even though Helen tries to force them on me. I like to keep busy, as it stops the thoughts.” A bright blush spreads across her cheeks and she peers at her feet. “I don’t know why I just told you that. I hardly know you,” she mutters.

I stalk closer. “We could rectify that.”

She blinks at me. “What?”

“Not knowing me. I’ll offer you a deal. Every day, I will tell you one truth of your choice, and you tell me one of yours.”

Her eyes widen with interest before a frown creases her forehead. “I’m not doing that.”

I hold up my hands. “I promise not to ask questions linked to what or whom you are running from, and if I do, you can refuse.”

She swallows. “Okay. What do you want to know?”

“I haven’t decided yet. What would you like to know?”

Her lips tick up. “I’ll think about it.” She darts into the bedroom and closes the door.

I smile at the piece of wood separating us. *You’ll be telling me a lot more by the end of the day.*

CHAPTER 22

HONOR



Sometimes the truth hurts.

An entire day to wallow in my head. Fox thinks he's being nice, but I don't do relaxation well. It gives the insidious thoughts inside my head free reign, ending in panic clawing at my throat, making it impossible to breathe. But to reject this olive branch isn't going to win me any favors with the insistent Fox. Better to suffer through the day of princess treatment and get it over with so he can leave me alone. I yank on the white bikini and wrap myself up in a huge fluffy black towel, not wishing to give him another eyeful of my goods. Or the wrong impression.

I step into the living room, finding it empty. Looks like princess treatment lasted a whole hour. I pick up my book and make my way to the pool. The day is already heating up, so the reprieve into the cool water will be awesome.

Helen's pool isn't a simple rectangular affair. It's more of a tropical oasis, complete with a crystal-lined cave shielded by a waterfall. It's long enough to do laps in but is also luxurious enough to relax in.

I drop my book and towel on the lounge then dive into the pool. I do twenty laps, glancing up every time my hand touches the wall. Still no sign of Fox. Maybe he took Duke for a walk, or is dealing with Samuel. Ugh, my date with the charmer is looming, and I have no viable excuse. Hopefully, he will see how uninteresting I am after a few hours in my company and stop pursuing me.

On this last lap, I push a little harder and dive beneath the heavy push of the waterfall. The welcome burn in my lungs makes me feel alive and grounds me in the moment. I breach the surface and suck in a breath, swiping my hair from my face.

“Were you on the swim team? Because you held your breath for over two minutes,” a masculine voice echoes in the cave.

A gasp huffs out of my parted lips as I twist to find Fox leaning against the edge of the cave with his arms spread.

“You’ve been here this entire time?”

He quirks a brow. “It’s quiet here, like a shield from the world. I can think.”

“Sorry for disturbing your peace. I’ll just leave.”

“Don’t be ridiculous. There’s enough room for us both in here.” Now if I leave, I’ll look petty. *Ugh*. I move to the opposite side of the cave and lean back against the edge, tipping my head to gaze at the glistening lavender crystals lining the ceiling. “Helen knew what she was doing when she designed this little oasis.”

“I designed it.”

My head snaps forward. “Seriously?”

His lips quirk. “What, a soldier can’t have a taste for design? That’s stereotypical thinking of you.”

“What did you do in the military?”

His gaze turns flat. “Is that your truth for the day?”

“Depends if it’s something you’d tell me anyway.”

“It’s not.”

Interesting. “Then yes, it’s my truth for the day.”

“After my initial training and time served, they discovered I have a knack for ferreting out the truth.”

I frown as I kick my legs under the water. “You aren’t telling me anything new.”

“Interrogation, Cleo, that’s my specialty. I know exactly how hard to push a body and mind until it breaks and spills its secrets. What I’m not adept at, is putting them back together.”

Fear inches down my spine. I’ve probably been subjected to much of what he’s been trained to do. My initial instinct to run from this man was correct—it’s a new level of stupid to promise to stay with someone trained to unpick lies and deceit when that’s all I’m made up of. It’s like waving a raw bloody steak in front of a hungry tiger and expecting it not to bite.

“Stop,” he commands, his tone a deeper rumble that freezes the trembling in my limbs.

“Stop what?” I whisper.

“Stop looking like you are going to bolt. I promised I wouldn’t pry, and I don’t lie. When you run, make sure you have a plan. In fact, make sure you have three, because things rarely go off without a hitch. But one thing is for sure—having no plan will get you caught quickly. So take the month and make a plan with the money and vehicle you will have at the end of it. That’s how you survive—not running in the night on a wing and a prayer.”

I swallow the knot in my throat and nod. “Okay.”

He smiles as he moves through the water toward me. “I’m going to get some laps in, then I’ll sort us some lunch.”

“I don’t eat lunch.”

His arms come down on either side of me and he tilts his head. “That changes now. Like I say, I will ensure you start to look after yourself. Can’t have you fainting in my arms everyday; people will talk.”

I huff before dropping into the water and swimming under his arm and out of the cave. I pull myself out of the pool and drop onto the lounge before wrapping myself in a towel. He’s impossible. Sexy, but impossible. Wait, what? No, not sexy. Not him. I grab my book and turn to the bookmarked page before losing myself in the words. Well, I attempt to. My gaze keeps getting dragged to the man making short work of the laps in the pool. The way the muscles on his back tense and

bunch as he works his arms. That shouldn't be hot. I close my eyes, letting the book fall to my side. My fingertips tingle as I imagine how those muscles would feel beneath my hands as he powers inside of me. My core clenches. *Fuck, no.* Fictional men only.

My eyes fly open, and I gaze at the impossibly blue sky for a moment before grabbing my sunglasses to shield my eyes from the sun. Yes, that's their purpose in life. I grasp the book and nibble the inside of my cheek as Fox approaches the edge of the pool directly in front of me, his hands landing on the side and he launches himself out of the water. My breath catches in my throat. Hot damn. Okay, fictional men and hot fantasies about my housemate. That's acceptable.

He smirks as he stalks to stand over me. "Good book?" he asks with a nod.

"Hmm?" My gaze drops to the open novel. "Oh yes, I'm engrossed."

"Really?"

"Yup, totally."

He snags the corner of my towel which has loosened from my breasts. "Do you mind? I forgot mine."

I arch my spine as he drags the towel from underneath me and uses it to dry his face and hair. The water trails down his chest and his abs to the waistband of his shorts. *Fucking hell.* His hand grabs the book and snatches it from my hands.

"Hey," I protest.

He spins the book one hundred and eighty degrees before placing it back in my hands. "Helps the experience if the words aren't upside down." My mouth drops open. He chuckles as he stalks off into the main house. *Oh. My. God.*

My gaze darts to the pool house. Maybe I can just hide in my room for the rest of the day? Or week? Perhaps the month? Remote working is a thing now, right?

"Don't even think about it. I will drag you back out of that bed naked if I have to," Fox calls out just before his delectable

ass disappears into the main house. Duke comes bounding out like he's not seen me in days, instead of hours.

"Your dad is a domineering asshole, you know that, right?" Duke huffs in agreement as he lies next to my lounge. I refocus on my book and without the distraction of Fox and his ungodly muscles, I'm able to slip into fantasy land. So much safer. No one can hurt you in books. No one can judge you for what turns you on or off.

Fox reappears after I've devoured a few chapters, and I pause at a scandalous moment. I peer at him over my sunglasses as he lowers a large plate onto the small table between the loungers. The man has prepared me fruit. Not just any fruit, but pineapples, grapes, apples, pears, oranges, peaches, and pomegranates.

"I won't be able to eat all of that."

He sits on the lounge next to mine and grins. "That's why I'm going to help you."

My hand reaches out, ready to pluck a juicy piece of pineapple as my mouth waters. He smacks my hand away. "Ah, ah, I said I was going to help you."

"Yes, by sharing."

"No."

He picks up a piece of the sacred pineapple. "Open."

"What? No. I'm not a baby."

He quirks a brow and drops the delicious fruit into his mouth before licking the sticky juice off his fingers. Jesus. Now my brain is focused on his tongue wrapping around his thick fingers. I need to get off. It's been way too long since I've had an orgasm, but I just can't reach that point—although God knows I've tried. But I haven't attempted it since having a safe place to sleep, so maybe it's time to try again. Goodness knows Fox gives me enough visuals to help.

He picks up a slice of peach and drops that into his mouth as I glare at him. "Close your eyes," he murmurs. I fold my arms and blank my features. Like fuck am I being that

vulnerable. He drags in a breath as his eyes drop to my lips. “Trust me?”

It’s the plea in his tone that makes my eyes flutter closed and my mouth part as he pushes a piece of fruit inside. Fresh watermelon explodes on my tongue as his fingers linger a little longer than necessary on my bottom lip.

“More?” he asks. I nod as he feeds me pieces of fruit. I have no idea why this is so sexual. He gives me small gaps where I suspect he’s feeding himself too. “All finished,” he declares. My eyes fly open and land on the empty plate between us. “You need to get out of your head. Food should be an enjoyable experience, not just a necessity for existence.”

“I can hardly go around eating with a blindfold every day or have hot half-naked men wait on me hand and foot.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for one, I lack the coordination to feed myself without sight.”

“No, why can’t I help you?”

I swallow the knot of unease that tightens my throat. “Because I could learn to depend on that, and then how will I leave?”

“Maybe you shouldn’t think about leaving. That would solve all your problems.”

“But it would inevitably bring those problems to your grandmother’s door, and that is unacceptable.” He tilts his head as I snatch the book from the lounge and stand. “I changed my mind. I think I’ll play a video game now.”

“I’ll join you,” he says, making my shoulders stiffen. It’s not like I can say no—it’s his home, not mine.

“Fine, but I hope you don’t scare easily,” I mutter as I enter the pool house. After a quick shower, I dress in a pair of sleep shorts and a baggy Guns N’ Roses band shirt I got at a thrift shop. I have a small collection of band tees going.

When I stroll into the sitting room, Fox has closed the curtains and laid out a blanket on the L-shaped sofa, which he

is taking up half of. He nods at the video controller on the blanket.

“Is there a particular game you like? I got you a selection of sodas too.” My gaze falls on the coffee table in front of the sofa, finding a choice of four different types as well as some snacks.

I relax back on the sofa just as Duke leaps up on the end and nudges me toward the center, closer to Fox. It’s my usual spot, so he’s just being a creature of habit. A large, bossy, stubborn creature of habit. Fox smirks at Duke.

“He’s really protective of you.”

“He’s a big softie that likes me because I feed him. He likes me less when I force exercise on him.”

“Honestly, if you’ve managed to get him out even once, you are beating me. He does enjoy a trip into town though, because of the attention he gets.” I scratch Duke between his ears and he flops his head down, hogging the blanket. “I can get you another one,” Fox says, moving to stand.

My hand snaps out around his wrist. “No, I’m good. I tend to run a little hot.”

“Really?”

“Don’t make it weird.”

“I’m not, I’m just being a good housemate knowing what temperature you prefer.” I roll my eyes as I release him and turn on the TV. I navigate to a popular game that features battling the supernatural and scroll to my saved character. “Fan of scary shit, huh?” Fox observes.

“Spooky, not gore. Not human. But yes, scary games, movies, but not books.”

“Why?”

I dart a glance at him. “I don’t believe in ghosts or creepy weird stuff. So I can enjoy those, comfortably knowing they aren’t reality. Gore, however, human real world stuff—that is too real, too close to home. The demon under my bed is fine—

the man wearing a charming smile, pretending he's here to battle that demon—he's the one to be afraid of."

His gaze takes in too much. It picks apart my words, assesses them for genuineness, and continues to inform the picture he's building of me. I'm broken into too many pieces—some of them will never again be part of my psyche. That's why I'm not good company for anyone.

"Do you want to join in?" I ask, praying he says no. But I feel compelled to ask, since it's his house.

"No, I'm happy to observe."

I side-eye him. "There's a storyline to the game, but it's more enjoyable to sit back and enjoy the ride." He rolls his eyes as the game loads, and the world around me shrinks away so I'm immersed in the experience. I jump as a zombie attacks me from the left. I remove his head using my machete.

"I'm confused. You said no gore," Fox mutters as I stab a vampire.

"Mmm. But it's so cheesy, it's good."

"Makes no sense."

The corner of my mouth lifts. "It's a guilty pleasure. It doesn't have to make sense. Now shush."

He relaxes, and I forget he's even in the room. I grimace as a werewolf makes a fatal mistake. I scoot to the edge of the sofa, my eyes wide and heart pounding as I race to make it out alive.

"I want my truth now," Fox says from next to me. His voice is deeper than normal, making my eyes dart to him.

"Can it wait until after the game?"

"No, because it's in relation to the game." That doesn't seem too bad. I've been expecting some horrific demand for truth. I refocus on the TV just as I make a break for it out of the basement. I'm probably running straight into a trap. Ugh, I'm right.

"Are you turned on right now?" Fox asks.

My breathing stutters as I swing my wide gaze to his. “What kind of question is that?” I snap.

“Tell the truth, Cleo.”

“No, of course not. Gore and murder doesn’t get me off.”

He leans forward and places his chin in his hands as a small smirk pulls at his lips. “It’s not the gore and murder, it’s the fear—albeit in a safe space, one which you control. It’s nothing to be ashamed of.”

“I’m not turned on or ashamed,” I mutter, tearing my eyes from his as I swallow.

“We agreed—no lies.”

I battle with a knife-wielding ghost in the kitchen. “Not lying.”

“Don’t make me prove otherwise.”

I arch a brow. “Be my guest—I’m happy to prove you wrong. But you won’t get another truth from me today.”

He slides off the sofa, shoves the coffee table out of the way, and positions himself on his knees at my feet. His gaze trails over my face, down my chest, and along my bare legs.

“Exhibit A: Your thighs are pressed tightly together.”

“I need to pee.”

His lips twitch. “B: You are rubbing them together to try to alleviate the pressure of the blood rushing to your clit.”

My eyes go wide. “You have a filthy mouth.”

“You have no idea. Exhibit C: Your pulse is hammering in your neck like a hummingbird.”

“Because you are too close.” Why is my voice breathy?

“Exhibit D: Your cheeks are flushed, a result of the other things in your body. No matter what you say, Cleo, you are turned on.”

“Fear does the exact same thing.”

He tilts his head. “And your nipples are hard.”

My head drops to my chest, and sure enough, the hard points can be clearly seen through the thin material of my T-shirt. I one hundred percent need to always wear a padded bra around this man.

“It’s cold.”

He inches closer, placing his hands on either side of my hips and leans over me. “Your pupils are dilated.”

“It’s dark,” I whisper as I drop the controller on the sofa.

“Keep lying to me, and I will strip you out of these tiny shorts, where I’ll discover the telling wetness between your legs. What possible excuse will you think of then?”

My thighs clench. Fuck. My mouth opens to reject his conclusions. He hooks his thumbs into the sides of my shorts and raises an eyebrow in challenge. There’s a wicked part of me that wants to lie just to see if he will follow through on his promise. I mean threat. Definitely threat. I drag my bottom lip between my teeth as his thumbs caress the skin on my hips. I should be freaking out, right? I can barely tolerate being in the same room as a man. But Fox isn’t just occupying the same space, he’s breathing the same air.

“Yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“I’m turned on.”

“Good girl. That wasn’t so hard, was it?”

CHAPTER 23

FOX



Cheese is a classic.

I pushed her too hard. I'm an asshole, which is why she's hiding out in her bedroom under the guise of needing a nap like a ninety-year-old woman.

Duke eyeballs me from the sofa as I clear away the untouched snacks I'd set out in hopes of getting this woman to eat something. "Don't judge me," I grumble to my overly perceptive dog. He raises a brow. It's always amazed me how expressive dogs are—how they communicate with body language I'm sure they learned from us.

Still, every second I spend with her is an insight into the tightly controlled psyche she exudes. Her deepest darkest desires don't lie with a missionary vanilla guy like my best friend, Samuel. No, Cleo Williams conceals a darkness that sings to my own soul, drawing me in like a moth to a flame.

Whatever she's running from, whatever she's been through, makes her suppress her needs in an act of self preservation. Perhaps it's the cultural stigma that dictates the type of man she should be desiring warring with the type of man she needs.

I pinch the bridge of my nose as I stare out of the kitchen window. This is not laying low. Women are supposed to be off the menu for the time being—even ones as tempting as Cleo Williams. She wears her innocence like a shimmering shroud, which screams her need for something more wicked. I want to

unravel that desire burning in her veins and offer her a sanctuary in my arms as she explores what sets her on fire.

Fuck. I'm a mess, swinging between never touching her and demanding she let me. It's not like I'm out in the public eye pursuing her; she's here in my space. Behind closed doors, I could take the time to unpick everything that makes her tick and help her explore her needs in a safe environment. It would be a public service, really, providing the therapy she so clearly needs.

Wait. Am I going to justify my actions with the pretense of psychological help? *Get it together, Fox.*

On the surface, Cleo isn't my usual type. I prefer superficial encounters, ones where both parties understand it's nothing more than a fling. Those women don't present a danger to me, because they don't hold my attention. I don't spend hours wondering if they've taken care of the ache between their legs or if they've had enough to eat.

If I'm brutally honest with myself, my focus on Cleo is as much about me as it is her. I don't do well with being idle and can't remember the last time I took a vacation. Sitting back while others handle the mess I call my life doesn't sit well with me—my mind needs constant stimulation, and Cleo presents a puzzle too intriguing to not solve. And therein lies my dilemma. Do I allow my inner demon to rise to the surface in the hopes of drawing Cleo out of her shell? Or respect the wall she's erected around herself?

Deep down, I know I should leave her alone. There's always the danger that if I allow myself to explore her deeply enough, I'll become too entangled with her. On the other hand, she's leaving in a month, and I'll likely never see her again, which makes her safe. She can be someone to play with to pass the time, something to focus my enquiring mind on. And when she leaves, she'll have a clearer understanding of her needs, making it a mutually beneficial arrangement.

Decision made, I clear the dishes, then settle down to watch a recently released movie. It's cheesy as shit, but definitely addictive. I take Duke out for a walk around the

grounds, usher Samuel and his team out of the main house, then return to the pool house to find Cleo sneaking back to her room with a can of soda.

“Did you have a good nap?” I ask. Duke prevents her from returning to the bedroom by nudging her hand in hopes of some attention. She mindlessly scratches between his ears as she looks everywhere but at me.

“Sure, nap. Awesome.”

My lips twitch. “I’m about to order a pizza for dinner.”

“Oh, that’s okay. I’m not hungry.”

I stride to the bedroom door and lean against the frame, ensuring she can’t escape to the confines of her room. “I insist.”

“I was thinking,” she starts.

“Dangerous.”

Her eyes lift to mine in defiance. *There she is.* “Perhaps it would be better for us to have as little interaction as possible. I can sleep on the sofa in the main house until the guest room is ready.”

“My grandmother wouldn’t allow it.”

Her face falls. She knows I’m speaking the truth. “Also,” I add, “you would be sleeping in a wide open space. Would you be comfortable with that?”

“No, I guess not,” she whispers.

“What type?”

She blinks. “Sorry, what?”

“Of pizza. What toppings do you like?”

She licks her lips. “I haven’t had pizza in forever,” she mutters.

“All the more reason to get one you enjoy.”

“Spicy.”

It’s my turn to blink. “Like pepperoni?”

“No, spicy. Like an explosion of heat in your body, something that makes you sweat.”

I screw my face up. “Okay...we’ll get half and half.”

“Not a spicy fan?”

I snort as I move to the coffee table and pick up my phone to put in the order. “I’m one hundred percent a spicy fan—just not on my food.” She eyeballs the bedroom, then the sofa. *Come on, Cleo, find that fire in your soul and come sit with me. Stop retreating to the dull boring life you covet. It might be safe, but it’s slowly killing you.*

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth. She needs to stop doing that if I’m going to behave. My heart sinks as she disappears into the bedroom. I can’t enjoy her if she’s hiding. She reappears with a book in her hand and plonks her ass down on the sofa. She’s still wearing those tiny fucking shorts that I have spent the better part of the afternoon wishing she’d continue to lie to me so I could peel them off her body.

“What’s your book about?” I ask.

Her eyes flick over the top of the book at me. “Tragedy, love, desire.”

“Sounds good. Perhaps I should read it after you.”

I’ll give her credit for the fact that she keeps her heart rate in check and the blush from creeping across her cheeks. That control comes from a time when she had to conceal her true reactions. That’s the control I want to unravel.

“Perhaps you should. You might learn a thing or two,” she mutters.

My lips twitch. Sure, the scenes in that book test the edges of what people might consider normal when it comes to sex. But to me, someone whose tastes run a little darker, it barely scratches the surface. Good to know she considers those things to be situations she would enjoy though.

“You should highlight the scenes you think I should pay attention to.”

She narrows her eyes. “Why?”

I shrug. “I enjoy learning.” *About what you find interesting.*

She drops the book to her lap. “You’ve read it,” she accuses.

“Have I?” I tilt my head like I’m trying to see the cover, and she snaps the book closed.

“Why don’t you tell me your favorite scene?”

“Now you are playing with fire, Cleo. Are you sure you want me to answer that question?”

Her mouth pops open and she quirks a brow. Stubborn—and I’m here for it.

“I wouldn’t have asked if I didn’t want to know.”

“There’s a scene where he hunts her.”

“It’s called primal play.”

My lips twitch. *Oh, I’m well aware of what it’s called, Cleo.* “Yes, that’s the one. She gives her consent for him to do what he wants. On the surface, it might seem like he has all the power.”

Her head tilts. “Doesn’t he?”

I shake my head. “No, she does. He might be acting out a desire to hunt, but she’s the one who consents. She’s the one with the power to make it stop, while he is at her mercy. He explores her need to be chased, to be caught, to be so desired he will take her where he finds her—whether that is in the middle of a forest or on a bed.”

“I hadn’t thought about it like that,” she mutters as her chest rises and falls more rapidly. “Perhaps you need to join the book club on a Tuesday evening.”

“And discuss this with my grandmother? I’ll pass.”

She chuckles. “Probably for the best. Those women are feral for this darker smutty stuff.”

“There’s also a difference in reading it, imagining it, and desiring it in reality.”

“True.”

Time for a little push. “Do you?”

“Do I what?”

“Want it to be a reality?”

She blinks. “Some of it.”

Good girl. No more lies. She knows that doesn't work with me. “Then perhaps you should use a different color to define the parts you enjoy in fantasy versus the parts you might want to explore.”

She pulls the book up to hide her face. “What would the point be? I am never going to act on them,” she whispers as she loses herself inside the pages of the story once more. *Wrong, Cleo, I'm going to ensure you have every opportunity to explore every wicked thing that makes your thighs clench and breasts ache.*

I leave her to escape into her mind and retreat to the main house to claim the pizza delivery. I, too, haven't eaten junk food in a very long time. I pay the delivery girl and then take it to the pool house. Still no sign of my grandmother. It's not like I keep tabs on the woman, but I do like to know where the people I love are.

I grab two plates and slide the box onto the coffee table between us. Cleo abandons her book in favor of a classic horror movie. She chuckles as I take a piece of the pizza from my half.

“Cheese?” she mutters. “Of all the toppings in the world on offer you choose cheese?”

“What's wrong with cheese? It's a classic.”

“It's a wasted opportunity.” She takes a bite of her slice and emits a low groan that I feel down my spine and into my groin.

“I'm missing out on having my mouth on fire? I think I'll survive.”

“It’s not that hot,” she mutters as her tongue swipes at a piece of stringy cheese. Now my mind is right there imagining her tongue doing that to my cock. *Dear God.* “Try it—if you are man enough.”

I roll my eyes. I’m not stupid enough to fall for a little goading, but it can’t be that hot with the way she moans around every bite. I lean over and chomp down on the piece in her hand, meeting her gaze with my own kind of heat. *You’ve woken the beast in me, Cleo, now you have to feed him.*

My mouth explodes. “Holy fuck,” I sputter as I force myself to swallow something the devil would struggle with.

She presses her lips together, her shoulders shaking as she tries to contain her laugh. “Why in the everloving fuck would you enjoy something that spicy?”

She winks. “Cheese pizza is like vanilla ice cream—boring, predictable, nice. But it doesn’t emit fire in your veins or make you feel alive. It’s comfort food, but hardly satisfying.”

Then she settles back to watch Sigourney Weaver battle aliens. I stare at Cleo with newfound respect as I realize my biggest threat is right here inside this house. *Game on. You want spice? You got it. Hold tight, Cleo.*

CHAPTER 24

HONOR



Someone special needs to hold your desire in the palm of their hands, because you are never more vulnerable than when you are on the cusp of release.

The dreams are the most unexpected part of my journey. Nightmares are expected and aren't going anywhere anytime soon. Most occur in the house I once believed my castle, my sanctuary, with a man I considered my home. But these desires playing out in my subconscious are a testament to my fucked-up soul.

If I was to ever entertain a romantic relationship again, it should be with a guy physically weaker than myself. Someone soft and sweet and who considers anything outside of missionary adventurous. That's society's expectation of a survivor of sexual and domestic abuse, but that's not what I dream about. Many would struggle to differentiate between the nightmares and dreams I experience.

Turning over in bed, I grasp the journal hidden at the bottom of my rucksack and pry it open. When the dreams come, I write them down. It's a poor imitation of therapy, but in the absence of someone qualified, I decided I should at least document my thoughts—no matter how dark they are. Occasionally, I'll wake up on the cusp of an orgasm, like tonight. But I never tip over the edge, and if I try to finish myself, it never works.

My pen moves swiftly, detailing this latest dream.

HE FLIPS me onto my stomach and presses my hands into the pillow above my head. "Keep them there," he commands. His voice is a dark caress that sends a shiver down my spine as he straddles my thighs, keeping me pinned to the bed. My hands fist the soft pillow as his hands travel over my back, trailing down to the edge of my silk nightgown. He lifts it, revealing me to his gaze. He groans. "No underwear? Were you waiting for me, Honor?"

"Yes," I hiss as his fingers massage my butt. He shoves his left leg between mine, forcing them open. He cups me, and the heat of his palm makes me moan as I push back into his hand. I twist my head to look at him, but his features aren't discernable in the shadows. He spits, and it lands between my butt cheeks. He moves his hand and swirls his finger around my ass. I arch my back and the tip of his finger breaches my tight hole.

He chuckles. "You want to be taken here?"

"Yes."

"You aren't ready."

I shove back, taking more of him. "Do it."

There's trepidation, but I want him inside of me. He unzips his pants and fists his cock. "It's going to hurt," he warns.

"I want it to." A truth, because I need it to hurt, to make me feel, to reassure me I am still breathing.

I try to rise up to give him better access. "Don't move," he snaps as he places his knee on my thigh and presses down, keeping me pinned to the bed. His hand leaves his cock and smacks me between my legs, making me hiss at the sharp pain. He rubs the sting away with slow strokes around my clit, then slaps me again, and again, stopping every so often to bring back the pleasure until I'm sobbing into the pillow with the need to come.

"Please," I beg. He growls low, then hot liquid splashes over my ass. He swipes his fingers through it and fists his other hand in my hair, before snapping my head up and

running his wet fingers along my lips. “Open,” he snaps. “Taste what you do to me.”

My tongue darts out and licks the evidence of his desire for me. I suck them into my mouth, his heady flavor exploding onto my tongue. “Good girl,” he utters against my ear before nipping at the sensitive lobe. My body jerks under his.

I cry out as he disappears from my body, leaving me on the edge—again. He’s the world’s biggest tease, and I fucking hate him for it.

I SNAP the journal shut and drop it onto the pillow beside my head. Just recounting the dream has a throb echoing between my legs. My thighs fall open, my eyes close, and my hand slides beneath my panties. I’m right there. My finger rubs a slow circle around my clit. I’m wet, like I always am after one of these dreams. But my shadowy guy never takes it further than this, no matter how much I beg. There’s a psychological block, and I don’t need a therapist to tell me I fear penetration after what has been done to me. I have no idea how tight I am or how painful it’ll be.

I imagine the wetness is from his release, and the bands inside my core snap tighter.

“Yes,” I murmur into the darkness. “Just there.” My other hand squeezes my silk-covered breast and pinches my nipple through the soft material. My head falls back, and I arch my spine as I move my finger faster over that bundle of nerves. My legs tremble. *Come on, just a little more.* The precipice taunts me. I feel empty as I clench around nothing. My finger slips lower and I circle my entrance before chickening out and returning to my clit. My mind flicks to being strapped in that chair while the doctor remakes me for the pleasure of my husband and the pleasure slips from my grasp.

“No,” I cry out and grab the pillow pulling it over my face. My hands fist, my nails digging into my palms, and I scream. I’m so fucking broken, I can’t even get myself off. Every time I try, it chips away at my soul a little more—bolstering the belief that I will never again experience pleasure.

“Do you need a little help?” a male voice asks.

I bolt upright and find Fox sitting in the chair by the window. “What the fuck are you doing?” I snap.

“You were crying out, so I came to investigate like a good housemate should.”

“Get out.”

He leans forward, putting his elbows on his knees, and rests his chin in his hands. “You know this activity is better between two people.”

My cheeks burn, and I’m grateful for the cover of darkness. “This isn’t a freaking scene from *Twilight*. Your name is not Edward, and it is not smart—or romantic—to lurk in the shadows of my bedroom and watch me sleep.”

“I wasn’t lurking. I came to see if you were okay. You were moaning my name, after all.”

My heart flip-flops. Was I? “No fucking way. We discussed personal boundaries, Fox, and you aren’t respecting them.”

“I told you I’d protect you.”

“From what? My dreams?”

“From whatever is stalking you, Cleo, whether that’s in the cold light of day, or in the dead of night. I take my job very seriously.”

I drop back on the bed and run my hands over my face. “Your job is not to watch me at all times.”

“That’s exactly what a bodyguard does.”

“Then consider yourself relieved of your job.”

“Doesn’t work like that. Why did you stop?”

“Excuse me?”

“Why did you stop yourself from coming?”

This conversation can’t be happening. I snort into the darkness at his idea that I stopped myself. Why would I even do that? “I didn’t. Just leave it be, Fox.”

“How long has it been?”

“Since what? Sex? Six months.”

“Since you came.” His voice is closer. I drop my hands to find him hovering over me.

“Longer.”

He drags in a breath. “You need to get out of your own head.”

“No, I need you to get out of my bedroom.”

My hand snaps out, ready to smack him, but he catches my wrist and then gathers my other one before pinning them over my head. My heart trips over itself, and my breathing becomes erratic as he looms over me. His grip on my hand is firm but not painful. The panic I expect to feel at being pinned down isn't rising, but something else is.

“Talk to me,” he demands.

“No.”

“What were you dreaming about?”

“Bunny rabbits.”

He grins. “Interesting lie. Tell me the truth. Was it about me? I'm good at analyzing dreams.”

“No, not about you.” Although it could be. Oh wow, now that's in my head.

His gaze narrows. “Who, then?”

I jerk my arms, trying to pull free, but it's useless. “Fucking hell, get out. You aren't my therapist.”

“No, but you clearly need one.”

I inch the blanket down, using my legs. “Great deduction. I'll just pop my real name into the system and hope shit doesn't catch up to me.” My leg swings up, aiming for a knee to his head. Might knock some sense into him. He dodges the blow with a chuckle before hooking his leg over my thighs. This is so close to my dream, and the throb comes back with reinforcements. *Fuck.*

“I am trained.”

My jaw drops. “In what?”

“Specifically? PTSD.”

I snort. “And sitting in the corner of the room in the middle of the night is, what? Exposure therapy?”

“That’s something we can try.”

I huff. “You’re impossible.”

“And you are frustrated, but also turned on right now.”

“Don’t you have a filter?”

“Not really my thing.” I growl, making him chuckle. “Cute.”

“Was it cute when I shot you?”

“A little arousing.”

“You’re a freak.”

He leans down and places his lips against my ear. My thighs clench. “Perhaps that’s what you need.”

“What I need is for you to get out of my room.”

He trails his nose down my throat. Goosebumps erupt across my chest and down my arms. “Are you sure? I can help you get out of your head.”

“One hundred percent.”

His gaze meets mine as he lifts his head away. “You promised. No lies.”

“This reaction is just instinct. I would be having it no matter who the attractive guy was. Don’t think you’re a special cupcake. You aren’t.”

“Really?” he says with a tilt of his head. “You want to put that theory to the test, Cleo?”

Bad idea, reverse, reverse. “Anytime.” Okay, so my idiot brain is in charge right now.

“Give me one kiss,” he says.

“No.”

“Chicken.”

“I’m not twelve. You can’t goad me into a reaction by calling my personality into question.”

“How can you expect anything to change if you don’t do something differently?”

Huh, that makes sense. My eyes lower to his mouth. Am I really contemplating a kiss? *The guy just watched you try and fail to get yourself off—it’s not as if this is breaking some invisible housemate boundary.* That happened sometime between fantasizing about him in the pool and the book conversation.

“Let me up.”

He releases a sigh, clearly disappointed as he lets go of my hands and sits back on the bed. Before I can talk myself out of it, I rise to my knees and swing my leg over his, so I’m straddling him. My hands wind into his silky hair as his mouth parts in surprise.

A smile curves my lips as his arms wrap around my back, and he holds me close to his body. He’s half naked, dressed only in a pair of sleep pants. The heat rolling off his chest caresses my front, seeping beneath my skin. I can feel his heart thudding powerfully.

“One kiss,” I mutter.

“One kiss,” he agrees.

I close the distance and graze my lips against his, expecting to feel panic and disgust at the physical touch. What I get is so much worse. Fire blazes a path down my spine and tingles between my legs. My thighs clench in response as his hands flex on my back and hold me a little closer. That’s not normal. Kissing has never felt like this. I press my mouth against his, keen to erase the promise of heat in his touch. This is about proving I’m not a slave to the desire in my veins, that Fox Alderidge is not the guy for me. He’s the opposite of what I need.

His hand slides into my hair, tugging on it, and my mouth parts at the gentle sting. His tongue swipes across my lips and washes away every single notion that I am not going to be affected by his kiss, that my entire world isn't tilting on its axis to accommodate the storm he promises—one that will sweep away my self doubt, fear, and the notion I am broken. Fox Alderidge kisses me like I'm the most desirable woman in the world, and that is devastating.

He groans as I open to him and deepen the kiss. My body arches, and tears sting my eyes. The war of emotions makes me dizzy. He leans up, and his hard erection presses between my legs. Ice splashes down my spine, chasing away the fire and leaving me with the fear. I break away and shift, falling backward off the bed and out of his arms. I squeeze my eyes closed and brace for the pain, but his strong hands flex and catch me.

He twists and dumps me onto the bed beside him before falling to his knees in front of me. My hands cover my face and a sob tears free from my throat.

He tucks some hair behind my ear. "Hey, what happened?" he asks. His soft tone undoes me.

I shake my head and keep my face covered, my cheeks heating with embarrassment. I was wrong. I *am* broken. So fucking smashed into pieces I will never again be whole.

"Just leave."

"No."

My hands drop, and I glare at him. "You want a front row seat to a fucked-up woman who can't even feel a man's hard cock against her panties and not panic? Even if that man is kissing her and there are sparks flying like some romantic movie?"

His lips twitch. "Sparks, huh?"

"Not the point."

"Actually, that is the point. You think I didn't feel that kiss down to my core? You want me to lie and say it was lackluster, like kissing my grandmother?"

“Ew, not okay.”

His lips twitch. “Also, I’m going to be replaying that kiss in my head with the way you say *hard cock* for the rest of the day.”

“You are impossible.”

He winks. “I’m determined.”

“To what?”

“To have you squirming in my arms again. To show you that you aren’t broken. You are a desirable, hot-blooded woman with needs she might not understand.”

“And you are just the man to teach me.”

“It’s a public service I offer to very few.”

Then he rises, drops a featherlight kiss on my forehead, and stalks from the room, leaving my body aching for more and my heart packing its bags and making a hundred different plans for escape. I squeeze my eyes closed. Maybe I should run now. It’s not Gideon on my tail, but a grumpy bodyguard with trust issues determined to show me I’m not broken. I have never heard anything more seductive. I am in so much trouble.

CHAPTER 25

FOX



A moral compass is tested when someone who isn't playing by the same rules as you tries to decimate your world.

There's a driving need in me to uncover her secrets. The notion that she is here to hurt or take advantage of my grandmother is shattered into dust. As stated, Cleo Williams isn't hiding because she did something wrong, she's hiding from someone who has done her wrong. That person has had such a profound impact on her psyche that she can't let go to accept the touch of another.

She needs to listen to her body's response to touch, to relearn what makes her sink into the pleasure of the here and now, not the pain of the past. Which is why I'm scrolling on my laptop as I wait for Larry to call with an update.

Her first gift should be here before lunchtime as I ordered that yesterday. The rest will arrive tomorrow. My eyebrows rise at the plethora of options available. Since when did they make stuff that needed a video instruction to use? Where does that... oh, I see. Yup, one of those. All the options for Cleo. I switch departments and grin at the extra things I'm about to add.

Her shower switches on. That's my cue. I move into her bedroom and have no shame as I lift the outfit she's selected for herself off the bed. I turn it over in my hands as an idea forms in my mind, a sly smile spreading across my face. A woman as beautiful as Cleo needs to feel gorgeous inside and out.

My laptop announces Larry's call just as I select rush delivery from the menu. I quickly close the page and click on accept, and his face fills the screen. He squints at me.

"Where are you?" he asks.

"Pool house."

"I see. Keeping yourself out of the public eye?"

"Red Lake is only interested in local gossip, not national. It's both a blessing and a curse."

"Well, make sure you stay out of both."

I resist the urge to roll my eyes. "Do you have an update for me?"

"Yes and no."

"Ever the lawyer's answer."

He arches a brow and leans forward. "I can't locate the mystery woman that is your alibi. But, I had a thought."

"God forbid."

His lips twitch. Will wonders never cease? Larry has a sense of humor. "If we can't prove who you were with, let's prove who you weren't with."

I narrow my eyes. "Why haven't we done that before?"

"Because to do that means picking around in her life, which you said you didn't want to do. Something about your moral code."

"It's difficult to alter my perspective when I'm employed to protect."

"She ditched the moral code when she leveled this accusation against you, Fox. It's time to play dirty to get to the truth. They won't hesitate to use everything they have if we end up in court, and I know you want to avoid that at all costs. So let me dig where you aren't willing to go."

I swipe a hand down my face. "Fine."

He grins, reminding me why he's one of the best defense lawyers in the country. I am all for paying for your crimes, but

this one I didn't commit. I'm not willing to be a sacrificial lamb for a woman who ultimately got caught cheating and used me as a scapegoat. A small part of my heart still hopes she will come to her senses and see reason. Destroying someone's life to cover up her own transgressions is a sure-fire ticket to Hell.

"I'll call next week and let you know what we find," Larry says. "And Fox, remember—"

"Keep my nose clean and away from women. I know, Larry. I'm not stupid."

He makes it out like I'm a guy who struggles to keep it in my pants. I'm not. I enjoy sex and women, but my encounters are casual, engineered for a release, not a relationship. It has suited my lifestyle to date. Cleo is the first woman in a very long time who has caught my attention. I'm not sure if that's a good or bad thing, but I'm rolling with it.

The bedroom door opens, and I exit the call with Larry, forgoing the usual goodbyes. He's used to me by now. I spin around as Cleo appears in a pair of ass-hugging jeans and a plain baggy black T-Shirt that hides her body. No makeup, as usual, and she's twisted her wet hair into a bun on the top of her head. The freckles across her nose have expanded onto her cheeks from her brief sunbathing yesterday. She is fucking stunning without even trying.

"Breakfast?" she asks as she avoids my eyes. Duke lumbers out behind her. I think I have lost my dog to this woman, and I'm not exactly mad about it.

I follow her to the main house. "That would be great, thank you."

She moves around the kitchen with practiced ease, and my grandmother makes her entrance at exactly seven. She arches a brow at me and swings her gaze to Cleo.

"Good morning. How was your day?" she asks both of us.

"Great," Cleo says in a slightly higher pitch than normal.

"And your night?" my grandmother asks.

Cleo whisks the eggs a little too hard, making some mixture splatter on the worktop. “Peaceful.”

Ha. If she calls having a sexy dream and kissing me peaceful, then I’m going to have to step up my game. Keeping her off balance is part of the plan.

“What are your plans today?” my gran asks us both.

“Catch up on yesterday’s tasks, check in with Samuel about the renovations, and head into town to pick up some bits from the market.”

“I already did the tasks,” I inform her.

She tosses me a glance over her shoulder. “When?”

“Does it matter? I cleaned the windows and vacuumed underneath the sofa cushions, so you are all set for today.”

She turns and pours us all a cup of tea. Her gaze drops to my gran’s hands, who moves them into her lap away from our eyes. Cleo adds the right amount of milk and sugar, but I notice my gran’s cup is only half full. My hand reaches out to grab the teapot to top it up. “What are you doing?” Cleo snaps as she starts assembling the breakfast on the plates.

“Making sure my grandmother has a full cup for breakfast.” I think it’s obvious.

“I’m limiting my caffeine intake,” my grandmother says. “Cleo is just following my instructions.”

I frown as I set the pot back down. No, something else is going on here and the knowing look between the two of them just underscores that fact.

Cleo takes her seat on my grandmother’s other side, and they fall into conversation about the usual items in the newspaper between them.

“The fish man will be at the market today. What sounds good?” Cleo asks.

“Whatever’s fresh. Sometimes he has salmon, sometimes prawns. I’m easy.”

Cleo’s gaze raises to mine. “Are you joining us tonight?”

“Of course.”

“You should accompany Cleo to town,” my grandmother declares. Not this again.

“I’m good,” Cleo mutters. “I’m not twelve.”

“Nonsense. Fox is going to take you to the surprise I’ve set up especially for you.”

Cleo slants a look at her. “Helen, I don’t need surprises.”

“Tough. Make an old woman happy and accept the gift graciously.”

Cleo sighs and pinches the bridge of her nose. “Eat up,” I instruct. “Unless you want to play the fainting damsel again, and I’ll have you coming in my arms.”

Her eyes narrow on mine. Yes, there is a double meaning there, and I won’t apologize for it.

Duke growls thirty seconds before someone knocks on the door. Cleo is already up and out of her chair before I can think of moving. She flings the door open, and I can hear the delight in Samuel’s intake of breath at being greeted by his latest obsession. I wonder how attracted he’d be knowing scary games and horror movies make her hot and bothered, and that she isn’t looking to be handled with kid gloves, but rather ushered into the darkness that creeps on the outskirts of her soul. Sure, she could end up with someone like Samuel, but she’d never be truly satisfied and that’s where the cracks in relationships appear—when one or both can’t be honest about what they need.

“I missed you yesterday,” he declares. *Jesus, dude, desperate much?* Where has the guy who can sweep any girl off her feet gone?

“Why?” Cleo answers.

My grandmother’s head leans to the side, and I copy her to see Samuel rubbing the back of his head. “I like seeing you everyday, Cleo. It sets me up for the day and keeps me smiling.”

“That’s me, a ray of sunshine and glittery rainbows,” she deadpans, stepping back to let him in.

He enters the house, his gaze landing on us. His cheeks pinken a little and he shoves a small parcel at her. She clasps it with a frown. “That’s for you.”

She tilts her head. “Presents? It’s not my birthday.”

Truth. “Uh, no, the mailman handed me that after I parked.” She tosses a glance over her shoulder.

“It’s from me,” I declare.

Her fingers tap against the side of the white box. “You still okay for tomorrow?” Samuel checks.

“Yeah, Samuel. Tomorrow. Sure.”

She spins on her heel and dumps the box on the kitchen island. “Excuse me. I’ll be back in ten.” Then she’s out of the door and disappearing into the pool house. What triggered her? The gift, or the date? Both perhaps.

My grandmother chuckles as she finishes up her breakfast and pours herself some more tea. She is not making any sense right now.

“You are making an idiot of yourself,” I tell Samuel as he looks at the back door like a lost puppy.

He swipes a hand down his face. “Dude, I know. I can’t help it—she has me tied up in knots.”

I fold my arms and lean against the breakfast bar. “Why?”

“Why, what?”

“Why her? And where’s your game?”

“Cleo doesn’t respond to my usual game, and I’m not playing for one night, or even one week. That woman is marriage material. She’s going to wear my ring and have my babies one day.” *Fuck. That.* His hands drop to his sides. “Don’t tell me you haven’t noticed. I know you, Fox.”

“She’s not my type.”

“She’s everyone’s type.”

I shrug. “Fair enough.”

“Maybe you can put a good word in for me.”

“No.”

“What, why?”

“Because you are either who she wants and needs, or not. I’m not feeding her a lie, you’ll need to figure it out for yourself. But I will give you one piece of advice.”

“What?”

“Be yourself. Don’t lie to her, and don’t put on an act of who you think she wants you to be. She will cut through that bullshit and leave you weeping on the floor. A woman like Cleo is marriage material—endgame—but only for the right man.”

“And you think that isn’t me?”

“Not what I said.”

“You are talking in riddles.”

I chuckle and grab the parcel from the counter. It’s time my friend learned to stop wearing a mask for what he thinks everyone wants him to be and learn to be himself. Cleo is about to school him in being genuine, and I’m glad to have a ringside seat.

CHAPTER 26

HONOR



Red isn't the color of sin, it's the color of fire.

How is this my life? I was minding my own business, helping a lovely older woman battle her everyday tasks, and in sweeps her grandson with his stupid warm whisky eyes, steel muscles, and soft lips. My hand ghosts over my tingling lips. Damn kiss is playing on repeat in my mind. No one kiss should have the power to consume your every thought and spin a web of desire in your body that needs to be satisfied by the orchestrator of that kiss.

The main door opens, and I spin around to find Fox stalking toward me with the parcel in his hands. I eyeball it like a snake. “What’s in it?” I mutter.

He smirks as he starts unwrapping it. “Don’t panic, it’s just a phone. If you are looking after my grandmother and her mystery ailment, then you need to be contactable. Unless you want to explain to me what is going on with her?”

I narrow my gaze, fully aware I’m being manipulated. “That’s not for me to disclose.”

He bobs his head as he slides the top off the box. “I admire your integrity. But that leads us to you being contactable.”

I fold my arms. “But you are here.”

“And I’m unaware of her needs because neither of you are forthcoming. Half a cup of tea? Really?”

“You need to discuss this with Helen, because you won’t get anything from me.”

He pulls out a pale green cell phone and pops it on the wireless charger on the kitchen counter. “There. It should be done by the time we get back.”

I rub two fingers across my forehead, hoping to stave off the impending headache. “I can’t have a phone.”

“It’s registered in my name, and only myself and my grandmother will have the number, unless you want to add Samuel too.”

“Fine.”

He grins like he just won a battle. It should be fine. It’s not like I’m going to log into my emails and socials, which I’m one hundred percent sure Gideon is monitoring. Nothing bad can happen with a few contacts if it’s in Fox’s name.

“You can even take it with you at the end of the month when you leave if you want. I’ll continue to pay for the contract,” he adds.

And have him track me? I don’t think so. I’ve worked too hard and too long to be unraveled by a bodyguard with personal boundary issues.

I offer a noncommittal noise, making his lips twitch.

“Give me ten minutes, and I’ll meet you in the car.” He disappears into the guest room and closes the door. For thirty seconds, I debate leaving without him. But he will just follow, and I’ll never hear the end of it once he catches up to me.

I LOVE BRINGING Duke to town. He growls at all the guys—apart from Fox—and gives happy vibes to all the women and kids. I think he’s a dog version of me.

Fox gets many admiring glances from the women passing us. A few greet him with a hi and a fluttering of their lashes. *Save me now.*

After grabbing fresh produce, we stroll toward Gary the fish guy. Fox has been suspiciously quiet, but that doesn’t mean he’s not attentive. In fact, I think it’s the opposite. He examines and catalogs every single move I make as he tries to

pick apart my psyche. I can't believe I kissed him. Not only kissed him, but straddled his lap like some sex-starved woman, then lost it over the feel of his erection. Is this where I'm at? Never having sex again? Maybe I should join a convent—the only place you aren't judged for not having sex.

“You are thinking long and hard about something,” Fox says, breaking his stoic silence. I glance at him as my hand tightens around Duke's leash. I blink before turning back and quickening my pace toward the stall at the end of the street. “This next month could be very long if you refuse to speak to me.”

“You didn't ask a question, and what you said didn't warrant a response.”

His gaze narrows. “I'm not buying that you aren't schooled in the art of conversation.”

“I don't care.”

We both turn to Gary, and his teenage daughter, Melissa, squeals when she sees Duke. She rounds the stall and drops to her knees in front of the big beast, giving him lots of ear scratches and love.

“Morning, Cleo,” Gary says with an eye roll at Melissa.

“Morning. How's Kiera?” I ask. His wife sometimes helps out.

“Same old, same old. Chasing me to shower before I touch her with my fishy hands.”

My lips twitch. “How are her roses?” Kiera is a keen gardener whose roses were failing to bloom.

“Oh, she has two new buds! Thanks for the tip. She told me to give you a discount.”

I wave him off. “No need. Glad it helped.”

Gary's eyes land on Fox. “So the prodigal son has returned?” Fox has been taking in the exchange between us with wide eyes. Yes, I do know how to be pleasant and sociable—I just choose not to be.

Fox folds his arms. "For a short time."

"You need to stay home and look after your grandmother the way she looked after you."

That's unfair. It's not the job of the children to look after their parents, and I know Helen would sooner climb into an early grave than be mollycoddled by her grandson. Helen is not a woman you take care of in the strictest sense. You support, turn up, ask what she needs, but you do not force yourself into her personal life.

"I am here for whatever she needs," Fox responds. He gets it.

"What do you recommend today?" I ask, breaking the weird tension rolling off these two.

Gary blinks just as Melissa decides she's done getting her puppy cuddles and returns to her father's side. He glares at her. "Go wash your hands." Melissa rolls her eyes in the overly dramatic way reserved for the teenage years before she skips off to the cafe.

"I have some meaty yellowfin tuna. Would go lovely with a Mediterranean salad and some lemon roast potatoes."

"Sounds amazing," Fox mutters. I agree, and we already have everything else needed. So we buy three tuna steaks and head back to the car. Fox places the fish in a cooler in the trunk as I open the back door and wait for Duke to decide to get his big ass in the car.

"Wait," he says, shutting the trunk. I pause.

"What's up?"

"Your surprise. Gran would murder me if I don't get you there."

I narrow my gaze. "What's the surprise?"

He closes the car door and locks it before sliding Duke's leash onto his wrist. "You know the definition of a surprise, right?" He chuckles at the thunder on my face. I huff as I follow him back onto the main street. He takes a left past the bakery and waves his hand at the door to the boutique.

I freeze, then take a step back. “Oh, no.”

He quirks a brow. “You mean the woman that stands on the bed waving a weapon around and shooting people in the middle of the night is afraid of a little dress shopping?”

My gaze goes flat. I have a love-hate relationship with my body. It’s complex, but putting myself in a situation where others are judging the clothing I’m selecting is a massive no-no.

“I don’t need a dress.”

“You are going on a date tomorrow. You absolutely need a dress.”

Oh, fuck. He’s right, and it’s too late to order something online. My shoulders drop and Fox holds open the door to the store. I storm inside and he follows me. I spin to face him. “What are you doing?” I snap.

“Taking you dress shopping.”

“I can handle this part on my own. Go wait in the car with Duke.”

Fox ignores me and drops his ass onto the pale pink velvet sofa facing the dressing room just as a woman maybe a decade older than myself swans into the store from the back room. Her blonde hair is highlighted to perfection and twisted up into a loose bun. Her subtle makeup speaks of years of practice. I tense. These are the kind of people I’ve spent months avoiding. It’s not that I think she will know Gideon, but it’s these circles I’ve avoided.

She grins. “I’m Lorraine, and you must be the lovely Cleo that Helen has told me about. So you have a hot date tomorrow.”

“Date, yes. Hot, no.”

She quirks a brow at Fox. “Mr. Alderidge, you have nothing to say about not being hot?”

“It’s not me she’s going on a date with.”

Lorraine's eyes go wide. "It's Samuel," I declare before we have a postmortem of my dating future.

"Oh, good choice. Lots of muscles, and the rumor is he's been blessed if you get my drift," she says with a wink.

In the city, people are colder and more brutal, but ultimately, they don't measure each other's actual dicks. Red Lake is the opposite of that. It's both a blessing and a curse that they are less interested in the national news over the local gossip.

"We need a couple options. One for tomorrow, and another for the follow-up date."

There will be no follow-up date. I'm planning on being so painful to deal with that Samuel runs a mile the next time he sees me. But I'm not going to argue with a woman whose livelihood depends on sales and a man determined to make his grandmother's wishes a reality. Better to suck it up now.

Lorraine eyes my frame with a frown then ushers me into the dressing room. Fox smirks at my pleading look before Lorraine yanks the curtain closed, shielding me from them. "Give me five minutes, Cleo, and I'll have you feeling like a million dollars," she sing-songs.

I've felt like a million dollars, and it's not worth the price of my soul. I strip down to my underwear and wait for her to reappear.

She sweeps in with a fistful of hangers. "Oh my, you are hiding quite the hourglass figure under those ill fitting clothes. You know, you catch more flies with honey than vinegar."

I scowl at her. I'm not here for a hundred different lectures on my less than sunny demeanor.

"Try the white first," she instructs. "Do you need help?"

"No, I can dress myself."

She huffs but leaves me alone to try on the first item. It's a floaty knee-length cotton dress which cinches at the waist and makes my boobs pop up. The little angel sleeves flutter, much like the skirt. I stare at myself in the mirror for a full minute,

fighting the feelings of doubt and worry about dressing to attract the opposite sex.

“Are you coming out?” Fox asks.

I squeeze my eyes closed and sigh. “Sure.”

I rip the curtain back and step into the store. Fox looks up from his phone, and his eyes go wide. Anyone would think he’s never seen a girl in a dress before.

“It’s so—”

“Innocent,” Fox finishes with a shake of his head.

Lorraine claps her hands. “Are you saying yes to the dress?”

Someone has been watching too much reality TV. “To the virginal sacrifice dress?” I snark.

“No,” Fox mutters. “It’s not you.”

Lorraine scowls at the pair of us before ushering me back to the changing room and thrusting a pale blue version of the dress in my hands. When that doesn’t satisfy neither me nor Fox, she opts for a shorter sunshine number. Yellow doesn’t suit me.

I’m on dress six, a little black number that might be perfect for heading to a cocktail bar in the city, but won’t work for a date in Red Lake at the bar and grill. There is such a thing as trying too hard.

“One more,” she declares, ripping the black one off my body and replacing it with a dark green sheath dress that is so close to something I owned when I was with Gideon, it gives me goosebumps.

“Hmm, not exactly showing off the goods, but I guess you need to leave something to the imagination,” Lorraine declares, pushing me out to see Fox. He glances up from rubbing Duke’s belly and shakes his head.

“Why don’t you have a look around, see if anything catches your eye that I haven’t already pulled for you,” Lorraine declares as she leaves the room and heads out back,

probably to message Helen about how difficult I am proving to be.

I wander around the edges of the store, running my hands along the many dresses and outfits. Fox rises and does the same. He pauses over a strappy silver number. I shake my head. “Too much for a date I don’t want to go well,” I mutter.

“True, but you should still get to feel pretty while you break Samuel’s poor golden heart.”

“Not helping.” My hand pauses on a blood-red dress. It would sit just above my knees, the V neck would show enough cleavage to feel feminine, and the simple button up A-line design would skim my curves without indicating that I am looking for anything more.

It’s perfect. Apart from...

“Yes, that’s the one,” Fox states over my shoulder. “Try it on.”

I swallow and shove it back on the rail. “It’s not my color.”

“Lies, Cleo, we agreed.” I slant a look at him before snatching a similar design in black. Like the pits of my soul, this seems more apt.

“Lorraine, I found a dress,” I shout, placing it on the counter before disappearing back inside the changing room to pull on my own clothing.

There’s some quiet conversation taking place and then a light tinkling laughter that is definitely not coming from Lorraine. I snap the curtain back, finding Fox holding the handles of the bag containing my dress, but his gaze is squarely lasered on the absolutely stunning woman in front of him. Legs up to her armpits, shiny bobbed icy-blond hair, and an ass that people pay for. She glances over her shoulder at me. I hate her on principle. She grins her pearly whites at me. Sharks have looked less predatory.

“Oh my days, you must be Cleo. Samuel has told me all about you.”

“Yet I’m completely clueless who you are.”

Her hand rises to her chest, drawing attention to her breasts accentuated by a well-fitted white blouse. “Where are my manners? I’m Amalee Cage. We’re double dating tomorrow with the town’s hunks.”

I throw up a little in my mouth. Who says hunks? There’s a slight softening in Fox’s eyes that I don’t like. Wait, what? Who cares? Not me. But was it her room he was sitting in last night? Was it her who was in his lap kissing him? No... but then again, she won’t freak out over a little dry humping. Now I hate her for being a precious princess while I’m a broken bitch. If that is my competition, I concede defeat now.

“I just know we are going to be the best of friends,” she continues. Not fucking likely, she’s the type of girl I’ve always avoided like the plague, through school and college. Fake princesses always rubbed me the wrong way. Be yourself, because if that’s not good enough for those people around you, then they aren’t worth your time. I knew those wise words even as a child, but it didn’t stop me from being snatched up by an evil man who set about destroying the very core of my being so he could remake me to his exacting specifications. Being perfect is exhausting. I won’t ever change myself to be what I think someone wants again. Which is why I’ll end up a weird cat lady who scares the crap out of kids on Halloween. That thought makes me smile.

Amalee spins to face Fox again before dropping a quick kiss on his cheek and leaving a smear of pink lip gloss. Ew. Did we not stop wearing that when we hit twelve? Just me? Okay then. She gives me a simpering wave and swishes out of the door with glitter and rainbows under her feet. I’m not being literal, but she walks around like she’s never known a bad thing in her life. I envy her.

I drag my lip between my teeth, feeling a little self-conscious about the fact I wear zero makeup. I’m not the sort of woman a man like Fox would ever want. He’s got all those muscles and that dark and broody attitude that makes women swoon at his feet. *Still, it wasn’t her room he was in*, whispers an insidious voice in my mind. I swat it away as we exit the store and climb into the car.

“I want my truth,” he says as he puts the car into drive. I squeeze my eyes closed. *Here it comes.* “Why don’t you wear red?”

I suck in a breath and toy with the answer, worrying this is too close to revealing something about my past that could identify me. But that’s a lie, and we agreed no lies. I’m sick of it anyway. At some point, I have to trust someone; it’s exhausting always checking your responses. Fox isn’t here to hurt me, and in a month, I’ll be gone.

“Back before him, it was my favorite color. It’s the very color I was wearing when I met him on a fateful rainy evening.” I lean my head against the cool window. “Perhaps if I had been wearing something less attention seeking, I wouldn’t have attracted the devil.”

“So you don’t wear it because it reminds you of him?” he asks. His voice is carefully neutral, like he’s holding himself in check.

“No.” My lips pull up in a sad smile. “I don’t wear it because he, the devil, said it was the color of sin, of a whore, and after we were married, he had it eradicated from my wardrobe. Most things that gave me joy were slowly erased over time, so by the time I was stripped bare, with only him in my life, I had nothing left to cling to. So no, it’s not because it reminds me of him. It’s because he spent a great deal of time infecting my mind with the poison that to wear the color I love meant I was a slut.”

“Colors don’t make people sluts. I despise that word. Who in the hell thinks it’s okay to call another human being a slut for their perceived notion of what is acceptable behavior? If it’s legal, then folks should just mind their own business. They aren’t hurting anyone. We aren’t living in biblical times. It makes my faith in humanity shrivel whenever I hear this kind of shit.”

“This *shit* is nothing, Fox. The stories I could tell you won’t just make your humanity shrivel, it will make your balls turn tail and tuck inside your ass to escape the disgust.”

“Graphic imagery.”

“You have no idea.”

He taps his fingers on the steering wheel, and I can practically hear the wheels turning in his mind. I don't prompt whatever it is he's thinking. He will either explain, or not. In thirty seconds I will regret that thought...

“So,” he begins. “You have a husband?”

Fuck.

CHAPTER 27

FOX



Is obsession a personality flaw?

I'm unwinding the puzzle that is Cleo Williams one careful strand at a time, and she's letting me. To heal, you have to face your demons head on, and for Cleo, that means opening up to someone who won't use her demons against her. I think she may have told my gran some snippets, but I can see the darkness she has experienced is buried deep and has its claws around her heart.

She disappears into the kitchen as soon as we arrive home, muttering about preparing lunch and making sure Samuel is on target. I head to the pool house, deep in thought.

Samuel. I'm not sure why he's trying so hard. He can get any woman in Red Lake to fall for him with a look and he chooses the one who fights him? He's clueless how to handle someone like Cleo. He will panic the second he sees the beautiful yet chaotic mess underneath her exterior. Cleo doesn't need a nice guy; she needs a strong one.

I drop the dress she chose onto her bed with a frown. At best, it's basic, at worst, it's bland—neither of which suit her. Opening her closet, I grab a couple of hangers and then write her a small note which I tack on before closing the door. My gaze lands on the duffle bag she was planning on making her escape with only a few nights ago. What worldly possessions does she deem important enough to carry with her as she runs?

My fingers twitch as I try to talk myself out of looking. Then it's like my hands have a mind of their own and before

I'm even aware of it, I've unzipped it and I'm rummaging around in what is essentially a bug out bag. It contains everything she'd need for at least two weeks of survival. My fingers graze across some strings.

I drag the item out with a frown and hold it in front of my face. "What in the everloving fuck?" I mutter as I turn the leather over in my hands. It's some kind of corset, but it looks shaped to fit a real-life Barbie doll. The laces haven't been undone, they've been cut. Ice tingles down my spine and a weird snarl rips from my throat as I piece together her eating habits and the snippets of information she's given me about the man she's running from. Some might think it's weird to hold on to a remnant of their trauma, but it's often used as a way to remind us of why we ran. One day, I hope she finds enough peace to burn every reminder of this piece of shit. But until then, I intend on showing her what being with someone who isn't out to harm or change her feels like.

I stuff the offending leather back into the bottom of the bag and close the closet door before my eyes land on the bed as I replay having her in my arms. She's a greedy kisser, passionate, demanding, hungry, and intoxicating. She stripped me bare with that one kiss, and now I need to know if it was really as good as I remember. The only way to test that is to repeat it. Perhaps she thought I would be put off by letting me have a taste of her. If so, she miscalculated.

After I type in my and gran's number into Cleo's new phone, I change into a pair of sweats and then take off down the road for a run. My workout routine has gone to shit, and I need to get back on track. I swing a left out of the drive and circle the property border. It's a solid five miles around, and a route I've taken a thousand times before. Which is why, when I'm a few yards past the garage and find a large hole in the thick bush surrounding our property, I know something is wrong.

I bend and stare through the large gap. Fresh footprints in the soil along with several cigarette butts suggest someone was here for an extended length of time, or had come back more than once. Dropping to my hands and knees, I'm easily able to

climb through the bush, which isn't good. I jog back to the garage and hunt in the back, finding the deer fencing we used on the opposite side of the property which is more open. I grab a few wooden posts and my grandpa's tool box. The heat of the sun beats down on my back as I secure the fence into place, creating a new barrier. My quandary is, is this someone hunting Cleo, or someone who has found out about my own drama?

Surely, if the media had gotten wind of the accusations against me, they'd be camped out at the property gate. No, this feels like someone stalking their prey.

"What are you doing?" Cleo asks from behind me. I'd heard her approach, and had hoped I would be done with erecting the fence so she didn't get spooked. She hands me an ice-cold glass of water.

"I do a sweep every few weeks to improve our security. I noticed a small gap, probably from a wild animal."

She squats and tilts her head to look at the hole. A frown wrinkles her brow. "That's some animal."

"This is Texas. Any number of animals could have made that hole." *But none of them smoke.* I already removed the cigarette butts. The last thing I need is for Cleo to get twitchy and leave before her month is up.

"Dinner will be ready in around an hour. Helen wanted it earlier, because she has a hot date with Henry."

I don't need to know the ins and outs of my grandmother's sex life. "I'll be there shortly." I gulp the water and hand the empty glass back to her.

She scowls at the gap again before rising and heading back to the house. I need to make sure Cleo knows how to set the alarm in the pool house. It won't keep people out, but it will give us a warning. I have no idea how dangerous her husband is. I had wondered if it's mafia related, but I can't see her marrying someone like that. It might be worth putting a few feelers out into the community and seeing if any of the big bosses are missing their wife.

I drag my phone out of my pocket as I stroll back to the garage to put the tool box away and send off a few messages to people who can help me exclude the mafia. My finger hovers over my lawyer's name, but I change my mind and shove my phone back in my pocket. I can easily solve this myself by giving her a chance to enlighten me about how much danger she's in—before I breach her trust and hunt for information she can freely give.

I take a quick shower before stalking into the main house, just in time to see Cleo serving up dinner. I grab two plates and help her carry them into the dining room. My gran raises a brow at me. *Yes, yes, I'm being the perfect gentleman.* Kind of.

“Did you get a dress?” she asks Cleo as we take our seats.

Cleo nods but keeps her eyes trained on her plate. “Yes. Thank you for setting that up for me.”

“Don't thank me. It will do something for my soul to see you wearing a pretty dress for once.”

The conversation stays light as we devour the delicious meal Cleo prepared. She manages her salad and half of her tuna steak, but doesn't touch her potatoes. I think that's progress, but it's still not enough. Cleo makes a sport out of looking like she's still eating but nothing on her plate disappears.

Once we are done, she stands and begins to collect the plates. I snatch my own and my gran's before heading to the kitchen. She sighs as she follows me.

“You will have me out of a job if you continue to do the tasks allocated to me.”

“You cook, I clean. It's simple manners, not a job threat.”

She mutters as she loads the dishwasher with the plates and I set about scrubbing the griddle pan. We finish cleaning the kitchen in silence, finding we are weirdly synchronized in a small space.

My gran appears in the hall, dressed in her coat. “Don't wait up for me,” she calls out as she opens the front door and disappears. A small tug of worry gnaws at me with her being

out of the house when there's an intruder on the property, but my gut tells me that it's related to Cleo. She's the one under threat.

"Unless you need me, I'll be in my room reading."

"Fancy watching a movie with me?" I ask as Duke and I follow her into the pool house.

She turns to face me. "And have you interrogate my every breath? I think I'll pass."

"Then join me in the living room while you read," I push. I don't want her shutting herself away when she's just started opening up to me.

She raises a brow. "Same problem. Both of those activities are meant to be relaxing, but with you, they become a lesson in micro reactions."

"I promise to not say a word."

"But you'll still be analyzing me."

"That's a little more difficult to control."

"Hence why I should just go to my room and read."

I fold my arms. "Fine."

She pivots on her heel and enters the master bedroom, with me following two steps behind her. She twists to close the door, finding me in the way. "What are you doing?"

"Preparing to read with you."

She pinches the bridge of her nose. "That's not..." She sighs. "Fine, fuck it."

She opens a drawer, grabs a set of silky pajamas, and storms into the bathroom. I pick up the first book I find in a stack underneath the side table, grab my glasses from my room, and make myself comfortable in the chair near the window.

The dedication on the first page makes me chuckle. I love that people are embracing what society has shamed for too damn long. I hate the judgment, the accusations, the labeling,

the distrust. If we were as open as this author, then we'd be able to have healthy conversations about sex and all the nuances. We have a ways to go, though.

Cleo steps out of the bathroom and falters as she spies me sitting on the chair with my shoes off and my feet on the corner of her bed. She scowls before yanking the comforter back and tucking herself inside. Duke drops his head on her lap and looks at her with big soft eyes. She gives him a scratch between his ears that has him making a happy grumbling noise and then she sinks into the pile of pillows, closing me out of her world as she reads about a fictional one.

I tear my eyes away from her, trying like hell to not invade her privacy by watching her. It's not my fault she's fascinating. It's just her.

Then I turn the page and realize I've picked up a book she must have already read because she's highlighted, made notes, drawn little hearts and eyes in the margins and around certain lines. Oh, this distraction will suffice nicely. I become as riveted in the book as I am in Cleo herself. Each time she does something to the page, I wonder what it means. Is she curious? Scared? Intrigued? Grossed out?

What is it about each of these events that has her responding? I could ask, but I don't want to ruin this fragile truce. So I read, plot, and plan, and with every new page, I realize just how dangerous Cleo Williams is. Dangerous, but intoxicating. There's a reason I keep my sexual encounters superficial and brief. I have an obsessive personality flaw, which is why I've stayed clear of women like Cleo—women who could turn my world upside down and inside out with a snap of their fingers. I glance at her. It's too late now—I was addicted from the first taste. I won't stop until I've devoured her.

CHAPTER 28

HONOR



I might be a confusing mix of contradictions, but I dance to my own beat.

I try to lose myself in my book, but my gaze keeps tracking to Fox. It's both nice and disconcerting having company while I'm reading. He's also wearing glasses. Fox wearing glasses is doing funny things to my insides.

His gaze skims over the words, and he turns the pages like he's devouring the story. But I know the author's story isn't the only thing written in that book. No, amongst the printed text are my personal thoughts and reactions. Reading those is like peeling away a layer of someone's soul. It's as personal as looking in a diary and as private as the scattered thoughts running through your mind before you finally succumb to slumber at night.

His tongue peeks out of the side of his mouth as he absorbs the words. He's no doubt combining my personal thoughts and the actions of the characters to continue to build a picture of me. *Good luck. I'm far more fucked up than you know.*

But he's not the only one who is an expert in nonverbal cues. I had to learn the hard way how to read someone capable of inflicting pain in the name of molding me to be the best version of myself. Now, I know the best version of myself was before Gideon, but she no longer exists.

I make it through three chapters before I realize I haven't absorbed a word. It's not a bad book; it's just that the guy sitting in my chair takes all my attention. He's not like many

other big men—he purposefully makes himself less threatening and is aware of how his size might intimidate. Not that he isn't capable of switching it around. I've been on the receiving end of that.

His eyes rise and meet my gaze. They crinkle in the corner as he catches me staring red-handed.

“Good book?” I ask.

“Not my normal read, but it is enlightening.”

I ignore the hint he finds my notes entertaining. “What kind of book do you normally read?”

He lowers the book into his lap. “Honestly, I haven't done much reading lately. My job keeps me busy for the most part. But if I had the chance, I guess a good thriller. Perhaps a horror.” My face must give away my thoughts, because he snorts. “So you like horror movies but not horror books?” he checks.

“That's right.”

“And you like romance books but not romance movies?”

“I can tolerate them in small doses.”

“That's confusing.”

I huff. “Not really. With a romance book, the authors give you enough information to picture the scene to understand the mood and what's playing out, but still allows us to fill in the blanks and create the world in our heads. The movie versions never compare.”

“There have been some very famous movies made from romance books.”

“True, but ask anyone who read *Fifty Shades* and they'll tell you that Jamie Dornan was never who they imagined as Christian Grey. He's a great actor, but he doesn't command the room like the book version did. Women are seduced by their five senses, but it's our imaginations that make us melt. Men are visual creatures.”

“You were doing a fine job of ogling me a few minutes ago.”

My cheeks flame, but I refuse to look away. “Well, if you are going to sit there in your bare feet with your glasses on and your muscles on show, I’m going to look. Any red-blooded woman would.”

“You consider *Fifty Shades of Grey* a romance movie?”

“It’s romantic suspense.”

He drops his feet to the floor and leans forward. “I see. What is romantic suspense exactly?”

“Where you combine a romance with a suspense plot.”

“Ah, that makes sense. You enjoy books that call to your romantic soul but make your horror-loving heart pound in anticipation.”

“Yes.”

“So why not read horror?”

“It’s the reverse. In a horror book, I struggle to understand the picture the author is creating. But in a movie, I’m there to enjoy the special effects—the jumps and the scares, the tension, music, all of it.”

“What would you consider your life to be if it was a genre? Romance, horror, thriller, romantic suspense. Where does it fit?”

I tilt my head. “None of the above, and all of the above. But my life isn’t worth immortalizing.”

“You might believe that, but they say we all have one book inside us.”

“What would yours be about?”

He quirks a brow. “Is that your truth for today?”

“Sure.”

He drags his bottom lip between his teeth before releasing it. “Ex-military guy turned bodyguard gets betrayed.”

“How were you betrayed?”

“That’s another question.”

I huff. “Can you tell me how the story ends?”

“Only if you do.”

“My story ends with me living a quiet life surrounded by books and dogs.”

He pulls his glasses off and looks at me. “You are missing something.”

“Nope, I’m not. Books and dogs can’t hurt me.”

He sighs. “Not everyone is out to hurt you, Cleo. But you have to give people a chance and let them in.”

I shake my head as tears sting my eyes, and a lump lodges in my throat. “I can’t.”

He stands and rounds the bed so he’s looking down at me. He slides a phone from his pocket and places it on a wireless charger he must have set up earlier.

I chew the inside of my cheek, not trusting myself to speak. He reaches out and tucks a stray lock of my hair behind my ear. “Only you have the power to change your narrative, Cleo. The life you deserve is there for the taking. You just have to be brave enough to reach for it.”

Then he sweeps out of the room, leaving me with my book, his dog, and a yearning for that future I haven’t let myself dare to imagine.

A FEW HOURS LATER, I give up reading and let Duke out for his final bathroom trip. He decides to make himself comfy on the sofa, keeping an eye on us both. I lock up the house before escaping to my bed.

I toss and turn for two hours, my mind processing the seductive words, and the promise of something more. *Do you dare to dream?* plays in my head over and over again.

My phone vibrates on the table next to me. My eyes fly open as its glow illuminates the room. Who the hell is

messaging me? I've not had a phone for months, which means it can only be one person.

There's no name attached to the message, just the fox emoji. Cute.

FOX

Go to sleep.

CLEO

It's not like I'm not trying.

FOX

Try harder. I can hear you thinking.

CLEO

You can't hear people think.

FOX

Let me demonstrate. You are tossing and turning as you consider a future I painted for you.

CLEO

Eye roll emoji Get over yourself. You're not that memorable. Not everything you say has to be immortalized on a cup or T-Shirt.

FOX

Try reading your book to relax.

CLEO

Not a relaxing book.

FOX

Did you get to the bit where he chokes her yet?

My eyes go wide.

CLEO

No. Isn't that dangerous?

FOX

Only if you don't do it right. *Smirking emoji*

CLEO

And I suppose you know how to do it right?

FOX

It's one of my many talents.

CLEO

Good luck with that.

The three dots appear, then disappear. I suck in breath as I await his response, but after a minute I don't get one.

CLEO

Who enjoys being choked?

FOX

Curious?

CLEO

No.

FOX

Admit it, and then we can both sleep.

I can't be curious about something like that. Not with what Gideon has put me through. I know what it's like to have someone hold your life in their hands, and it's not freeing or fun. My thighs press together. I need help.

FOX

Now admit you are fantasizing about it.

CLEO

This is not a When Harry Met Sally moment. Oh, yes, Fox. Just there. Right there. Oh, my God. Yes. Yes. Yes. Ooooooh.

FOX

Your acting talents are commendable, but you won't be needing them. If I have you screaming my name, it will be while your eyes cross and your thighs shake.

CLEO

Sounds like I'll be needing medical help.

FOX

No, but I might with how hard your thighs will have my head in a vice.

I blink at the explicit imagery.

CLEO

I have a date. With your best friend.

There's the bucket of ice water that's needed for this situation.

FOX

We both know you'd eat Samuel for breakfast and still be starving.

CLEO

He's a nice guy.

FOX

He is, but is nice what you want?

It's what I should want. But I definitely shouldn't be fantasizing about arrogant alphaholes with boundary issues.

CLEO

Rejection isn't working, and I need to burst Samuel's bubble. I'm not this perfect woman that he's built up in his head.

FOX

He wants to marry you.

CLEO

Hahaha

FOX

What's funny?

CLEO

Shouldn't you be more concerned with your perfect prom queen? Amy or Annalise or something, right?

FOX

Jealous?

An uncomfortable flip happens in my stomach.

CLEO

Absolutely not.

FOX

Liar.

CLEO

Dum dum de dum...

FOX

What?

CLEO

Announcing the new Mr. and Mrs. Fox Alderidge.
Aww, look everyone, we knew they were end goals
even in high school.

FOX

Tomorrow, I don't want a truth.

CLEO

No?

FOX

No. I want a promise.

CLEO

For what?

FOX

You'll see tomorrow.

CLEO

That seems dangerous.

FOX

It won't hurt anyone.

CLEO

Not helping.

FOX

How about this. When the request is revealed, you'll at least give it more than a passing thought before rejecting it.

CLEO

Just what in the hell are you asking me to do?

FOX

You'll see. Goodnight. Dream of me.

I swipe up and block Fox. This phone is so Helen can contact me, not her overbearing grandson.

FOX

Nice try.

CLEO

What the hell?

FOX

winky face

CLEO

You are impossible.

FOX

I'm aware.

CLEO

Good night.

FOX

Dream of me.

I drop the phone back on the charger and rub my hands over my face. This guy is going to be the death of me. Quiet life I said... then fate stuck me in the path of Fox Alderidge with a peace-out sign. I wave the one fingered salute back at

her before doing exactly as he said—dreaming of him and all the wicked, wicked things he’s put in my head.

CHAPTER 29

FOX



My goal is to make her feel alive, but my methods might be unconventional.

The tracker on Cleo's phone puts her a few miles from the house in the direction of the national park. I check in her bedroom, but the duffle bag is still there. Next, I check in the main house, unable to find Duke, so I guess that means she's either made a run for it with my dog, or she's taken him for a walk.

My grandmother perches on a stool at the counter, eating her breakfast. Next to her plate is another one wrapped in foil.

"Ready for your big date with Amalee tonight?"

I blank my features. "Yes."

She chuckles. I can fool the best of the military, but not my own flesh and blood. "You know, this could be avoided if you'd ask Cleo out yourself."

I uncover the plate and slide onto the stool next to her. "I don't want to date her." She hums in the back of her throat. "What?" I snap.

"It's amusing how you believe your own lies."

"Cleo is a complication I don't need right now."

"That's the truth at least." I shovel in the perfectly scrambled eggs.

"Plus, Sam is smitten."

“Sam is smitten with a make-believe version of Cleo that doesn’t exist.”

“Agreed, but that is up to him to figure out.”

“Don’t hurt her, Fox.”

I jerk back. “I would never hurt a woman.”

“Not physically, you twit. Did I ever tell you how I met your grandfather?”

“No. If it was love at first sight, I don’t want to hear it.”

She snorts. “Your grandfather was relentless, and I was not amused. He was all wrong for me. At least, that is what I thought.”

“Wrong, how?” As far as I knew, they were madly in love until the day he died.

“The guy I’d decided I needed was someone who was easily manipulated, a push over, someone to be by my side, to support me, but not get in my way.”

“And that wasn’t Gramps.” He was the opposite of a pushover. Difficult is a better word to describe him.

“No, it wasn’t, because what I needed was a partner, someone to call me out on my bullshit, to pull me back to Earth when I was spiraling.”

“He definitely did that.”

She nods as her eyes glaze over. “So what I’m saying is, you might believe you want and need a woman to bend to your every whim, who won’t question or challenge you. But that’s not how we improve or become the best version of ourselves. Left unchecked, we start to believe our own shit. What you need is a puzzle piece that fits your jagged edges. Someone who soothes your worries and helps you see the qualities in yourself you miss, but accepts the shortfalls and still loves you for them.”

“And you think Cleo is that for me?”

“No. I think you might be that for each other.”

“She’s leaving.”

Her head snaps to mine. “What?”

“I already stopped her once, but we are on borrowed time. She’s leaving us in less than a month. I can’t get attached to a woman who is running.”

“Yes, you can.”

“It will only hurt us both.”

“Then I suggest you give her a reason to stay, one bigger than the demon on her tail. Help her to stand strong, to face whatever shadows are chasing her. Be a sentinel at her side. Don’t smother her, and for fuck’s sake, Fox, stop kidding yourself that the only reason she scares you is because you know deep down that she could be it for you.”

She’s wrong. I already know all of the above. In the space of a few days, Cleo has captured me in her spell of contrasting snark and softness. I’m strong enough to be at her side, but she has to let me in.

I DON’T SEE Cleo for the rest of the morning. I have a few errands, some meetings and emails that need my attention. I also put out a tentative message to a contact.

FOX

I need your services.

GHOST

Is this you calling in your favor?

FOX

Yes.

GHOST

Noted. What do you need?

FOX

I have a woman who is hiding her identity.

GHOST

You need to know who she is?

FOX

Yes, but I also want to know why she's running.

GHOST

Got it.

FOX

But you need to leave no footprint. I suspect whoever is chasing her is high profile. The extent she's gone to hide her identity suggests they have means.

GHOST

I'll ignore the insult that I would ever leave even a whisper of my snooping for anyone to find.

FOX

I have her photo. If you want fingerprints or hair, I can get it.

GHOST

Who is this girl?

FOX

That's what I'm asking you to find out.

GHOST

Not what I meant. Who is this girl to you? You've just traded in a highly valuable favor for her.

FOX

My grandmother's assistant.

GHOST

That's all?

FOX

Yes.

GHOST

I don't know if you are lying to yourself or just me.

FOX

Does it matter?

GHOST

Send me the photo. Let's start there.

I send the photo I snapped of her without her knowledge and send a prayer that the Ghost doesn't trigger a manhunt for Cleo. They are the best, so I don't know why I'm worried. Perhaps it's the guilt of prying into her past when I said I wouldn't. But Gran's words resonated with me. In order to get Cleo to stay, I have to slay her demons. She isn't going to tell me of her own accord, so I'll make moves in the background and she will only know once I've made it safe for her. Sure, she might be pissed at me initially, but once she realizes I've done it to give her a future where she's free to decide her next moves without the fear of being found, she'll forgive me.

Hopefully.

THE PACKAGE HAS ARRIVED. It's bigger than I thought, and as I place it on her bed, I contemplate if I should open the box. Lay them out like a bouquet? No, that's weird. No need to make it weird. I'll just leave it on her bed.

Instead, I drop a note on the top.

Cleo,

*The helping hand you need and for you
to feel as beautiful on the outside as
you are on the inside.*

I BLINK, and before I can second guess myself, I change into my running gear and take off. I loop around the side of the property border and check the fencing I put up hasn't been

disturbed. It hasn't, but there are two new cigarette butts in the exact same spot. Maybe I'm being paranoid and it's just someone out for a walk who needs a cigarette break and likes this particular spot. The spot where the bushes had a massive hole in them. Yeah, I'm not being paranoid. I just have to figure out what they are here for—or rather, who.

The rest of the property border looks okay, but I make plans for tightening up security. Some covert cameras won't go amiss. Perhaps they will reveal who is skulking around us. Silent trip alarms could work, although I wasn't lying when I said we get big wildlife, and I don't want to freak Cleo out over every armadillo that crosses into the yard. Maybe I can just hook it up to my phone. The other thing I need to do is teach her how to use that weapon before she hurts someone she doesn't mean to—or misses someone she does.

Halfway through my run, my phone buzzes against the strap on my arm. I stop and pluck it free.

CLEO

What in the ever-loving fuck have you bought me?

I smirk.

FOX

A helping hand. Maybe it will help you loosen up a little?

CLEO

PERSONAL BOUNDARIES.

FOX

I'm not sitting on your bed waiting for you with them. I'm proud of my restraint and boundaries.

CLEO

Oh my God. What is...

The three dots appear then disappear.

FOX

Did I lose you? Did you decide to play? Should I cut my run short to help? *eyes emoji*

Now I can't get that image out of my head.

CLEO

There's something wrong with you.

I chuckle as I start walking.

FOX

The promise...

CLEO

No.

FOX

You said you would hear me out.

CLEO

If it's to do with anything in this box, I can safely say the answer is a very firm no.

FOX

Tonight...

CLEO

What about it?

FOX

Wear the pink and black on our double date.

CLEO

The pink AND the black. Are you insane?

That's a strange word to put in shouty capitals.

FOX

Calm down. I didn't ask you to go naked.

CLEO

No, because that would be more reasonable, and honestly, you would have more of a chance.

My brows lower at her overreaction.

Cleo has blocked you.

I roll my eyes and chuckle while unblocking her from my master account.

CLEO

I am flushing the phone down the toilet, and your presents are going in the trash.

Doubtful on both accounts.

FOX

Live a little. What do you have to lose?

CLEO

My dignity.

FOX

I thought I picked out some very classy items.

CLEO

You thought wrong.

FOX

It's not like anyone is going to see it, unless you plan on making Sam's dreams come true?

CLEO

But you will know I am wearing them.

FOX

And I will be painfully hard the entire night thinking about it.

CLEO

Lucky Amy.

I snort. The fact she keeps getting her name wrong is testament to how bothered she is by me going on a date. She needn't worry; I have zero interest in Amalee. I am there for one reason only—for this girl wearing black and pink for me while on a date with my best friend.

FOX

Take pleasure in the fact you will give me blue balls the entire night. I will be in pain as I imagine exactly what you are wearing underneath your dress.

CLEO

And what if I end up with blue balls and feeling all sexy and unsatisfied?

I trip up and catch myself before I faceplant on the asphalt.

FOX

Wasn't aware of your ball situation.

CLEO

What the fuck, Fox? What is...

I wish like hell I had thought to set up cameras in her room already. I would pay good money to witness these reactions.

FOX

Yes?

CLEO

I have questions about your decision making skills. At what point did you think it was appropriate to buy me these things?

FOX

When I had you in my arms with your lips on mine.

CLEO

I made a mistake.

FOX

Make more.

Cleo has blocked you.

I shake my head and start running back to the house. Tonight is going to be interesting.

CHAPTER 30

HONOR



The things you can find on the internet...

I'm living with a certifiable psycho. That's the only explanation for his decision to purchase a bouquet of sex toys and leave a note like it's a normal housemate gift.

Only you can own your pleasure.

I glance at the clock. I have a couple of hours to get ready for the disaster date, and there's no way I'm wearing the pink *and* the black. I drag my lip between my teeth and shut the box before opening the closet, ready to toss it inside. I assume one can't return unwanted sex toys, so I guess they'll gather dust until I leave. Then Fox can have a party with them, perhaps with Amalee.

My heart twists. Amalee Cage is perfection—the sort of woman Gideon wanted to shape me into. I could never understand why he didn't just marry someone more suited to him. It's not like he was short of offers.

I freeze as I open the closet, finding a familiar red dress hanging next to the black one I picked out. My fingers trail over the note punctured through the hook.

Nobody can steal your fire and light unless you let them.

My lips twitch as I find another note tacked on the black dress.

Are we attending a funeral!

My eyes drop to the box in my hands. Wildly inappropriate? Yes. But now the note makes a little more sense. Fox is trying to give me the tools to fight my way back to the woman I once was. It's a shame she's dead. You can't be in a marriage like mine and not have it alter your brain chemistry. I drag in a breath and let it out slowly. But I'm barely living now. I'm not sure I will ever stop looking over my shoulder, but I can grasp onto the rays of light whenever I see them. That's what this dress is, a slither of sunshine in the darkness. And the toys are the inky darkness that make the contrast all that much sweeter.

Let's do this. I grab the red dress and lay it on the bed next to the box. Time to introduce Fox Alderidge to the real Cleo Williams. I hurry out of the pool house and find Helen curled up with a book and Duke on the sofa.

"I need your help," I say as I wring my hands together. It's been so long since I wore even light makeup.

Helen smiles and closes her book as she rises. "About time."

I blink at her. "What?"

She ushers me up the stairs and toward her bedroom. "You are going to make him speechless."

"Sam is never speechless."

She pushes her hands on my shoulders, forcing me to sit on the stool in front of her dressing table. "That's who you are trying to impress?"

"I'm not trying to impress anyone," I mutter as I glare at her in the mirror. "But your grandson is determined to push me out of my shell, so I'm giving him exactly what he wants."

"God help him," Helen says with a smirk. "It's about time a woman made him weak in the knees."

"He's going on a date with Amalee, not me."

“No, he’s attending a date you agreed to with his best friend. Amalee is the excuse to not make him seem like the third wheel. So my question to you is, are we going for a widening of the eyes, or are we leveling these men who think they know better to their knees?”

I grin at her. “Knees, always the knees.”

She squeezes my shoulder. “Good girl. What color are you wearing?”

“Red.”

“Shade?”

“Blood.”

“Then half my work is done. But let’s go for a dramatic smoky eye, some gentle contouring, and a shade of lipstick to match the dress. Nails, we can do in gold.” She pulls my hair tie out and lets the long mop fall down my back. “Soft but bouncy waves. Sound good?”

I drag in a breath and shove down the rising panic that dressing to purposefully attract brings. “Let’s do this.”

HELEN WORKS a goddamn miracle in less than an hour. I’m almost unrecognizable. What’s even better is that it’s a look Honor has never rocked. It’s dark, mysterious, and sultry—a reflection of everything inside my soul, and I love it. She even packed me off with some essentials so I can recreate it.

Standing in my bathroom, I stare down at the box Fox gave me. Do I take the challenge he’s laid at my feet? Dirty dreams and night time rumblings aren’t getting me off, so it’s time to try something different. I pull out the black object and unwrap it. I’ve never done butt stuff. Gideon thought it was dirty, and before him, my sex life was fairly mainstream. I think an ex-boyfriend slapped my ass once, and I might have kicked him like a donkey.

I drop the butt plug and pick up the slightly less scary bright pink bullet, which, according to the instructions,

vibrates so quietly you can enjoy it on the go. Maybe orgasms on the subway are how people manage the commute to work.

I also pull out the small bottle of lube Fox so kindly added for me. Guess that's for the plug. What was going through his head when he made the decision to order this? I glance at the note. This isn't for him, it's for me—which is why I'm about to accept the challenge to wear the damn pink and black.

I grab the underwear I'd laid on the bed and take my toys to the sink before washing them. How does one insert a butt plug? I retreat, grab my phone, and then lock myself into the bathroom. *Google, don't fail me now.* Oh, interesting—it's a question on Quora. It seems I'm not alone. Okay. Lube? Check. Deep breathing exercises? Umm, I mean, I can breathe, so that's halfway there.

Insert the tip, relax, then withdraw. Then try again. I glance at the time on the phone. I have twenty minutes max before Fox comes to find me, and I don't want it to be with a butt plug stuck halfway in my ass. If I feel pain, stop. No shit. People really need to be instructed to stop if it's painful?

I smother the bulb in lube and take a sniff. It's fruity, like mango or something exotic. Does that make a difference to how it feels? How am I so sheltered after living through a relationship with Gideon? Resting my palms on the counter, I lean forward and stare at myself in the mirror. Honor would have never even considered this. She would have dumped the box in Fox's room and never looked back. But Cleo is curious and ready to take a step out of her comfort zone. If you do nothing different, how can you expect things to change? Am I any freer than I was six months ago if I constantly live in fear? I need to embrace the challenge, to live a little and make Fox Alderidge squirm.

I watch an informative video, and ninety seconds later, I feel like a porn star. *Okay, just the tip first, it's not that big.*

I gasp. “Jesus fucking Christ. How do people do this?” I mutter to the mirror. “More importantly, why do people do this?” My body gives me a firm signal that we don't put things in here; it's where things come out. My cheeks flush and a fine

layer of sweat glistens on my chest. My cheeks flush as I wiggle it back and forth. No pain, deep breathing, and relax. It pops in, my body literally sucks it. Interesting. I straighten and wiggle my butt. Oh, that's an unusual sensation. Not painful, just unusual. It makes me very much aware of all the sensations down there. Perhaps that's the point?

I eyeball the pink mini bullet vibrator as I slip on the red silk panties which match the dress perfectly. Then I slip it inside and nestle it against my clit. I grab the tiny remote control and press the *on* button. My hand slaps against the vanity. "Holy shit." I can't come just before I go out on a date. That would be weird, right? I switch it off and press my lips together as a rumble of laughter tries to break free.

After exiting the bathroom, I pull on the dress and slide the remote control, phone, and lipstick into the borrowed black clutch. To finish, I push my feet into the designer black pumps with those famous red soles. Apparently, Helen just happened to have these shoes in her closet, even though they aren't her size.

One last glance in the mirror, and my mouth parts at my reflection. I look like someone else. Someone who wears sex toys outside the bedroom apparently. This is going to be an interesting night.

I head out of the door and into the main house. Fox is in the kitchen with his back to me as he takes a drink of water. Duke potters over, nudging my hand for some attention. I bend to give him some love and gasp at the sensation.

"Hello, my precious boy," I mutter. "I need to go out for a few hours so we can convince Sam I'm not a princess, and then I'll be back and we can hit the sofa with a book." He huffs in agreement as I stand, and Fox turns to face me. His jaw drops, and his eyes widen.

"Holy cow. I changed my mind. The red dress is a bad idea. Wear the black."

I park my hands on my hips and level a glare at him. "Not a chance. I'm not getting ready all over again."

He shakes his head and takes a step toward me. I hold my ground and tilt my head back as he approaches. His fingertips trail up the column of my throat before grasping my chin to stare into my eyes. “You look stunning, like a siren calling to the strongest of sailors, luring them to the watery depths. They would no doubt go willingly with a smile on their faces.”

I blink. It’s been far too long since anyone looked at me like this. Like I am desirable and perfect, even with all my flaws. Actually, I’m not sure anyone has ever looked at me like this—with a single-minded determination to strip me naked. And I’m not just talking about my clothes.

“Is everything else you’re wearing comfortable?” he asks as he clears his throat to break the weird tension.

“Black and pink, as requested.”

He drags a hand down his face and groans. “Now I’m going to have blue balls all night knowing exactly what you’re wearing underneath that dress, and that you’re wearing it for me.”

“That sounds like a you problem, and one of your own making. But rest assured, you might have blue balls, but it’s me that’s going to be uncomfortable.”

“Did I not get you the right size?”

I scowl. “There are sizes?”

He scratches the back of his head. “I believe so.”

“Sure, the sizing was fine. A little difficult to put on, but I got the hang of it.”

He tilts his head like he’s trying to understand my words. I’m not spelling it out for him. Fucking pervert. He shakes his head and takes a step back.

“Let’s go before I say fuck it to the date portion of the evening and beg you for a private show.”

A small voice in my head urges him to do exactly that—throw me down and have his wicked way with me. Perhaps that’s what the new Cleo wants and needs. Maybe, just maybe, I should find out.

CHAPTER 31

FOX



She's whiskey and fire.

She's a dangerous distraction, looking like every man's wet dream in that dress. I can hardly keep my eyes on the road knowing she's wearing the underwear I picked out for her. She squirms in the leather seat.

"Are you okay?"

She flicks her gaze to the side and arches her brow. "I'm just peachy wearing this super comfortable stuff you got me."

I frown in confusion. The "stuff" wasn't cheap—that's silk and lace against her porcelain skin. My thumbs tap the steering wheel to the beat of some 1980s air rock as I try to ignore her pressing her thighs together.

Oh, now I get it. It's not the material of the lingerie making her feel uncomfortable, it's making her feel sexy, and she's been avoiding that out in public.

My face breaks into a grin. If I have to walk around with blue balls all night, then she has to walk around with whatever the female version is. Lady blue balls?

As long as she doesn't give in to my best friend's charms and allow him to take the edge off what I have started. I'm ninety-five percent sure she will stay true to her convictions and push Sam away, then disappear into her room to either hide from the desire or, as I hope, use the toys to get herself off. She has to learn to take back control of her pleasure and push out the demons that stalk her.

I'm here to get under her skin, to make her itch until she has to scratch—until she's consumed with only pleasure and feels safe enough to explore it. Not that I'm mollycoddling her. That's not who I am, and it's not what she needs. If it was, I'd push her into Sam's waiting arms. He's great at playing the knight in shining armor, while I'm the beast that stalks the shadows.

Thinking of her stripping out of that dress makes me hard. I'm desperate to see her in something I chose. There's a possessive glint to that thought I'm unfamiliar with.

She reaches forward and turns up the volume on the radio, and my seat vibrates. She huffs and turns it back down, making my lips twitch. Oh yeah. She is ready to blow.

I wonder what she'll enjoy from the selection of toys. Nope, damn it, now I'm the one ready to blow.

She hums to the tune and white knuckles the clutch in her lap. I can't tell if it's a nervous reaction to going on a date or whether it's just being in the car with me.

She suddenly stops, causing me to glance over. Her lips part and a blush creeps on her cheeks. Holy shit, how is sexy lingerie doing this? I haven't even laid a finger on her.

She closes her eyes and releases a low groan that goes straight to my already hard cock. I want to be there the first time she climaxes after months of pent-up frustration. She's going to go off like a firework, and I want to bear witness to the pleasure consuming her as it blasts through the walls she's erected. She drags her bottom lip between her teeth and the contrast with the crimson stain causes me to slow down so I can steal more glances. Fuck the pointless date. We shouldn't be wasting another second with people neither of us see a future with. Even a short-term one.

She forces her hands to relax before flicking her eyes open and releasing her lip. "You doing okay, firecracker?" I rumble.

"I'm fine. It's my fault—I accepted the challenge. Now I'm paying the consequences."

I shake my head. “Relax. If you walk into the bar looking like you’re going to strip the nearest man to his skin and ride him like a bronco, Sam will think it’s for him.”

“Who’s to say it isn’t?”

I chuckle. “You have made it clear this date is to show Sam you are everything he doesn’t need or want. If there is any stripping, it will be for me.”

“Cocky, aren’t we?”

“Self assured. Tell me I’m wrong.”

“You’re wrong.”

My head snaps to the side, finding her lips twitching. “About which part?”

She shrugs. “That’s for you to figure out.”

I shake my head at myself. These are my consequences, so I guess I have to own them. I drive down Main Street and pull into the parking lot of the bar and grill. It’s Saturday night, so it’s rammed full of old and young townfolk. It’s the place to be unless you want to take the longer road into the city.

I put the parking brake on and climb out of the car, rounding the front and opening the passenger door like the gentleman I can choose to be. What’s surprising is that Miss Independent hasn’t launched herself from my car.

I poke my head inside and offer her my hand. “You coming?”

Her eyebrows dip. “Very funny.”

She fumbles in her purse before dropping something small and plastic in my hand. “I can’t use that, you do it. Have fun.”

She barges past me toward the bar’s entrance. I turn the odd object over with a frown. What the hell is this? I slam the car door and stride across the parking lot, my legs eating up the distance so I reach the door at the same time as Cleo. I pull it open and usher her inside.

“What’s this?” I whisper in her ear.

Goosebumps erupt down her neck and before I think better of it, I nip the sensitive lobe of her ear. She stumbles just as Sam and Amalee turn on their bar stools to greet us. I slide the unknown object in my jeans pocket. I'll have to figure out what it is later.

Sam greets Cleo in a weird half-hug, half-kiss on the cheek thing you'd offer your grandmother. I resist the urge to shake my head. He meets my eyes, his gaze already wide as he fucks up even the simplest of things. *You're on your own, buddy.* Then a warm body presses against me, and Amalee reaches up to lay a kiss on my mouth. I twist my head to the side, so her lips graze my cheek. There's only one woman's mouth I want to feel pressed to mine, and she's all fire and spice, not ice and control.

I gently pry Amalee's arms from around my waist. She's being overly familiar, and I don't appreciate it. However, it's for Cleo's benefit, not mine. She's trying to stake her claim in pink sticky lip gloss and sharp nails.

Sam looks totally out of his depth as he leads us to a booth. Cleo stands to the side and waits for Sam to slide in. He doesn't. He just blinks like a fucking idiot. Cleo doesn't like being trapped, and with his sheltered upbringing, he can't comprehend why she is waiting.

I untangle myself from Amalee and slide into the booth in front of Cleo, catching her hand in mine and dragging her in next to me before nodding at the seat across from us. Amalee huffs, then realizes she broke her perfect princess facade and takes the seat opposite mine with a false smile in place.

"What's good here?" Cleo asks, staring at the laminated menu with a frown.

"The salads are amazing," Amalee says, batting her eyelashes like someone blew dust in them.

"The salads are shit. Anything butchered is excellent—the steak and ribs in particular," I mutter. Cleo snorts and slaps a hand over her mouth, her eyes crinkling in the corners.

"I could order for you?" Sam says.

Cleo's hand drops and she slow blinks at him. I grimace and drag my phone from my pocket before shooting him a GIF of someone shoveling a grave hole. "No, I can manage to pick my own food like a big girl."

"Of course, I didn't mean—"

"It's fine," she cuts him off. "Asking for recommendations isn't the same as ordering for someone. That kind of control is—"

"Sexy," Amalee breathes in my direction. Cleo and I side-eye each other. We are on the wrong date, and we both know it, but the two people actually suited aren't even aware of each other. Sam's head dips as he reads my message.

"Do you want to order for me?" Amalee asks in my direction while doing that ridiculous thing with her eyes.

"No. Do you have something in your eye?"

She giggles. Why the fuck she thinks that's funny, I will never know. "I'm not sure. Do you want to check?"

Cleo hides her face behind her menu, her lips pressing together as her shoulders shake against mine. This is going to be a very long night.

My hand drops to Cleo's thigh, and I skate my hand under her dress to grip her bare flesh. Jesus, she's got soft skin. Her laugh dies, and she sucks in a breath. If I have to suffer, so does she.

The waitress appears with a pop of gum and a bored expression. "Ready to order?"

"I'll have the Caesar salad, hold the dressing," Amalee says with a smile at me. *You can hold the dressing all you want. I won't be kissing you.* "And a sex on the beach, please."

"Jesus Christ," Cleo mumbles too low for anyone other than me to hear.

"How about you, Cleo?" Sam asks.

"Still deciding. You guys order first."

“I’ll have the brisket and a Bud Light,” Sam decides. “And a side of fried okra and mac and cheese to go with it.” Ahh, so he’s avoiding his favorite to ensure he doesn’t make a mess in front of Cleo. I have no such need.

“Ribs, the potato salad, and a Lone Star,” I tell her. All eyes turn to Cleo.

“The ribs are good?” she checks.

“The best,” the waitress tells her.

“Better than the steak?”

“About the same.”

Cleo grips the menu tighter. “Do you want to go for the sharing platter?” I ask. “It comes with steak, ribs, wings, and a couple of sides.”

Her shoulders relax. “Perfect.”

Sam’s scowl couldn’t be any clearer. He’s an idiot. I’m not going to watch her struggle. As her date, he should be more in tune with her. My phone buzzes in my pocket, and a WTF GIF appears. I shoot him back the Scar *I’m surrounded by idiots* GIF.

He rolls his eyes just as Cleo says, “Double bourbon, neat.”

And if I wasn’t already convinced that Cleo is everything that sings to my soul, this would seal the deal.

“Wooo,” Amalee says. “Like your liquor?”

“I rarely drink, but when I do, I want it to be amazing.”

“Just not very ladylike,” Amalee mumbles.

Cleo rolls her eyes but doesn’t engage. In fact, I’m certain her attention isn’t on the couple across from us, it’s firmly on my fingers tracing lazy patterns on the inside of her thigh. She widens them slightly and swallows.

Amalee engages Sam in a conversation about the work he’s scheduled to do on her parents home. I take that moment to lean my mouth against Cleo’s ear. “Do you want me to

stop?” She twists her lips to the side like she’s contemplating her answer, then shakes her head. I keep in the safe zone of the lower part of her inner thigh. The point is to wind her so tight that she defeats the demons.

“How long are you planning to be in town for?” Sam says, breaking my focus from the fascinating creature next to me.

“I’m not sure,” I answer truthfully.

Amalee giggles and sweeps her heeled foot along my calf. Does she think I’m not sure because of her? Has she made up some convoluted future where we have two kids and a dog? I stare at her, and she drops her eyes like she’s bashful. She’s not. And while Cleo might conceal her reactions, thoughts, and emotions from me, it’s an act of self preservation. She’s had to hone that skill to survive, which is something I can understand.

On the other hand, Amalee is all pretense. She’s trying real hard to be what I want, but if she’d relax for a damn second, she’d realize she’s not it. She needs to open her eyes—her perfect match is sitting right beside her. I always thought they’d end up together, even back in high school.

I’ve often found that light chases dark, and that’s what both of the people across from us are doing. It’s the thrill of the unknown, the high of excitement, the rush of unpredictability—until the mask falls and they realize the darkness is a mark on our souls, one we either can’t or don’t want to fix.

The waitress arrives with our drinks and slides them in front of us before hurrying off to take her next order.

“Will you be at church tomorrow, Fox?” Amalee asks.

“No.”

She pouts. “But it’s a town tradition.”

“One you don’t observe,” Cleo adds.

Amalee lasers a glare at her. “And I suppose you do?”

Cleo blinks at Amalee like she’s a bug that wandered onto her food and she’s wondering if she should waft it away or

swat it. “I’ve been there every Sunday since I began working with Helen. Have you had the flu? Are you contagious?”

Amalee scowls. “No, I’m not contagious. I’ve been busy.”

“Oh, of course. God doesn’t always work for everyone’s schedule. What is it you do?”

“I-I-I do charity drives and fundraisers.”

Cleo shudders next to me, a tiny tremor I only feel because I’ve got my hand curved around her leg. “Sounds amazing,” Cleo mutters in a flat tone I’ve only heard her use a few times. It’s when something triggers her.

“But I’m sure I can make the time tomorrow if you’re attending, Fox?”

“No, I’m not.”

Sam and Amalee hold the majority of the conversation while I try to figure out a way of pulling Cleo back from her demons. The food arrives, and I reluctantly let go of her leg, instantly missing her silky skin under my fingertips. She shakes out her napkin and puts it across her knee. I chuckle as I grab it and tuck it between her breasts.

“You’re going to want to protect that pretty dress.” *At least until I get you alone. Then I can’t be held responsible for how it comes off.*

“Your dress is very pretty,” Sam adds on.

“Thank you.”

Give it up already, dude. I shoot him another GIF of Robert Downey Jr. rolling his eyes. He glares at the phone in his lap before sending me a *fuck you* GIF. *Nice.* I shoot back an arrow emoji pointing in Amalee’s direction. His brows lower, his gaze snapping between us. Oh, for fuck—

“So, is there a special someone I should be jealous of back in New York?” Amalee asks as she cuts up a piece of already small lettuce. This time, Cleo’s reaction would only be missed by the super non-observant.

“No,” I answer.

“That’s where you’re from?” Cleo whispers.

“It’s where I was working.”

But clearly it’s where she’s from, and that little niggling thought in my mind tries to place her again, like it did when I first met her. New York is a big place, but given she’s running from someone with means—top one percent means—then it’s very possible, probable even, that we’ve at least been in the same room before.

“Try the steak while it’s still sizzling,” I advise.

She blinks at the food, and I watch her wrestle to find her way back to the present. When she picks up her fork, I feel a sense of pride that she did that without coaxing or needing to be distracted. She fought her darkness and came out on top. It’s a silent struggle that requires the deepest of strengths. Distraction is great, until it’s not. Tell your brain enough times that it can’t handle shit without looking for something else to divert its attention, and it believes you. Then you literally rewire your neural pathways to always need one of those crutches in times of stress. It’s not healthy and how the hell she’s figured this shit out when she’s never seen a therapist is astounding.

She slides a piece of steak into her mouth, and all three of us watch her. Sam is figuring out how he can get her to make him steak every Friday in their little home with a white picket fence, Amalee just looks jealous and hungry, while I’m wondering if she’d make that low groaning noise if it was my cock sliding past her lips and not the steak.

“Damn, that’s good,” she mutters, taking another piece from the giant sharing platter. She points her fork at Amalee. “Girl, put your salad aside and fucking eat. You only live once, and if he doesn’t like you for the way you look when you put food in your mouth, he isn’t worth your time.”

Amalee grips her fork as she eyeballs her salad. “Maybe just a little.”

And that’s why Cleo Williams is dangerous. She cuts you to the bone and then shows you the truth.

Amalee stabs the smallest piece of steak and chews on it thoughtfully. We all stare at her and wait. She covers her mouth with her hand. “That is so much better than the salad.”

Cleo snorts and Sam and I grin. Amalee relaxes, giving up trying to be who she thinks I want, and just lets herself shine. We share the massive platter of food and talk about the people we grew up with—who moved away, who stayed close to home. Cleo listens and asks questions every once in a while, but other than that, doesn’t try to dominate the conversation like many others might. The more Amalee lets down her guard, the more Sam sneaks glances at her. Now he’s getting it. We demolish the food, and it pleases me to see Cleo eating a little more than usual. I’m finding if the food isn’t her focus, she doesn’t overthink it.

The waitress takes our empty plates away and Cleo stands. Sam moves to stand with her. “I’m going to the toilet.”

He runs a hand over the back of his head and glances at Amalee. “I’ll escort you.”

“I can manage to find a toilet, Sam. I’ll be sure to holler if I need help wiping.”

He freezes, and before he can reply, she’s gone, weaving through the crowded bar and disappearing from sight. I keep my gaze locked on a couple of guys I recognize, although they’re not locals. They aren’t wearing their cuts, but I’d spot that pair of idiots anywhere.

Cleo comes bouncing through the crowd, her tiny frame pushing through the heavy throng. Sam swings his gaze over his shoulder, tracking his date. My eyes narrow as one of the bikers eyeballs Cleo’s ass, and I note the exact moment he makes a stupid decision to grab it. Sam also notices and rises like he’s got the stones to do something about it. He doesn’t, but I grab his shoulder to hold him back. The least I can do for his ego is to make him think he would have intervened. Cleo’s face reddens. She spins, says something to him, and clocks him in the jaw.

“Holy fuck,” Sam mutters.

“I think I have my first lady crush,” Amalee adds.

The biker rubs his jaw and smiles down at her like she just offered to suck his cock. Violence is their love language, and she just propositioned him. I stride past Sam and snake my arm around Cleo’s waist, dragging her back into me. Her round ass bounces against my hard cock, and she shuffles to the side to try to avoid it. Jesus, those heels make her fit against me in unholy ways. Images of bending her over while she’s wearing these sinful heels are doing nothing to tamper my raging erection. I plaster her against me, making those perfect globes rub against me. “Fox!” Mark hollers. “Is this tiny ball of fury yours?”

I grip Cleo’s hip, trying like hell to communicate that I’m trying to help her by staking my claim. “She is, and if you like your balls where they are, you’ll keep your hands off her.”

Hunter’s gaze eats her up. He’s not as rash or easy going as his brother, but that one look is far more worrying than the ass grab Mark did. Hunter is wondering, after knowing me for all these years, what kind of woman has finally got me to stake a claim in public.

“Just a little harmless fun,” Mark volleys. “Come drink with us and catch up.”

Cleo squirms in my arms.

“Behave,” I breathe in her ear before nipping it. She jolts against me, and her fingernails dig into my forearm.

“Fox,” she breathes. “Please, I can’t. Not here.”

That has my attention. Can’t what? And since when did my firecracker beg?

CHAPTER 32

HONOR



Stripped bare, am I enough?

I regret so many of my life choices right now, but the biggest is giving Fox that remote control. Why in the ever-loving fuck did he choose now to turn it on? I want to strangle him, but the blood rushing to my core has all of my attention.

The burly guy who thought it wise to grab my ass frowns at me. “What’s wrong with you?”

I snort. Isn’t that the pertinent question. I spin in Fox’s arms to hide my face, and my hand snakes into his jeans pocket. He stiffens as I brush his erection. Jesus Christ, he’s rocking a monster. My fingers clasp the remote, and I drag it out before clicking the off button. I sag against him as I let the impending orgasm disappear, dragging in breaths as I pull myself together. I push my shoulders back and spin again to face the guy who grabbed my ass. Mark.

“Sorry, cramps. You know how it is.”

Hunter snorts from his position on the bar stool, his gaze lasered on my hand that’s curled around the remote. “Nice deflection, but we all know what was going on here.”

“Do we?” Mark asks, looking between us with a frown.

I raise a brow, daring him to say it. He shakes his head and lifts his gaze to Fox. “Best take your lady home before we kidnap her and finish what you started.”

Mark reaches toward me. I raise my aching hand, ready to explain to him in a language he understands why touching a

woman without permission is wrong. Then I'm being twisted and hauled over a shoulder.

"Put me down," I huff as Fox carts me out of the door. I give Mark and Hunter a one finger salute before we spill out into the night air.

Sam bursts out of the door behind us. Oh, nice save. My hero. He hooks a thumb over his shoulder. "Amalee wants to go home. Do you want me to take you? Or..." He looks at Fox's hand plastered against my ass to keep me in position. "Right."

I feel a stab of guilt and tap Fox's back. "Put me down. Sam, I need to have a very honest chat with you."

"You promise not to start a bar fight with a seasoned biker?"

"I promise."

Fox slowly drops me to the floor, letting me feel how hard he is in all the right places.

Amalee stands just outside the door with a frown and her arms folded. "Five minutes," I mouth, trying to express I'm not the kind of woman who needs all the male attention on her.

The cool night air is a relief on my skin as I pull Sam with me away from the entrance. I spin to face him and fold my arms. "Let's get real for a second," I say.

Sam scratches the back of his head, and I realize I hadn't even taken in what he's wearing tonight. Whereas with Fox, I could tell you everything from his shirt to his shoes.

"I don't think this is going to work out," Sam says with a wince, like he's letting me down gently.

I rub my right temple. I could just let him think he's the one rejecting me, but I'm all about the hard truths—even if it would be kinder to his ego.

"Sam, this date was never about giving you a chance, it was about letting you see the real me and how wrong I am for you. You want a woman who is happy to be your little wife, to

wash your clothes, make your dinner, and dote on your every word.”

“That’s not—”

“There’s nothing wrong with wanting those things, but I can never give you that. I won’t be the damsel in distress that swoons in the sight of danger. I’m the woman who punches men twice her size to put them back in line. You don’t like that, and I’m not changing to fit anyone’s expectations—I’ve been there and done that.”

“You are one hell of a woman.”

I grin. “I’m aware.”

Suddenly, he wraps me up in a hug that is one hundred percent platonic, and I find I don’t hate it. “As for finding that perfect woman, look a little closer to home. She’s right in front of you.” I pull free and spin him around.

He chuckles. “I thought matchmaking was Helen’s thing.”

I shrug as I stride next to him to meet Fox. Amalee’s gaze is all for Sam.

“You good?” Fox asks as his gaze rakes me up and down.

“I am.”

“How’s your hand?”

I stretch my fingers and wiggle them. “No damage.”

“You’ve got one hell of a left hook.”

“So I’ve been told.”

He hands me my clutch I’d left inside, and after a quick goodbye to Sam and Amalee, we are on our way home. I resist the urge to squirm, and I definitely don’t turn on the vibrator. I’m already struggling to remember the reasons why I shouldn’t allow a man to touch me, especially not one like Fox who entertains my demons with a dare.

He turns up the music. I close my eyes and groan as the seat vibrates under me, causing the butt plug to wiggle. Oh my God. My hands grip the sides of the leather chair. Can I come

from this? Fox's large warm hand curves around the inside of my thigh, just like he did at the grill. My head knocks back against the seat, and I widen my legs, both hoping and terrified that he'll go higher. He does, but not enough to give me any friction. I could solve this right now and click the switch on the remote. I'm ninety-nine percent sure I'll come in thirty seconds flat and that's thanks to him and the very clever challenge he laid at my feet.

He turns down the music using the button on the steering wheel so he doesn't have to let go of my leg. It's like he's afraid of breaking the spell he's woven over me. He needn't worry; it would take a disaster to stop this freight train. I try to stay calm as I accept that Fox is probably going to see me come tonight. I'm not ready for more, though. The icy fear of being that vulnerable to anyone creeps up my spine, squashing the need that's been riding me hard all night.

"I can feel how hot you are from here," he mutters. "I'm so tempted to pull over and taste you on the hood of my car right now."

I shake my head. "No, not here." Out in the open where anyone could catch us? Is he insane?

He jerks his head at me. "Not here?"

Ah, he caught that. I keep silent. He steps on the brakes and stops in the middle of the road.

"What are you doing?" I stutter.

"Answer the question."

"You heard me clearly."

"I want you to expand on it."

"I don't want to be half naked outside when I come for the first time in months."

He huffs and restarts the car, driving a little faster while keeping a firm grip on my thigh. I wrestle with my thoughts, torn between locking myself in my room and stripping myself bare and begging him to help me finish. If I'm honest, the second I decided to wear this dress, the moment I accepted his

naughty challenge, I was lining myself up to be on his menu tonight. What's the harm? It's just a little fun, right? In less than a month, I'll be gone. Fox doesn't seem the type of man to get attached. Of course, that means I have to control the darkness in me that wants to recoil from anyone more physically powerful than me—which is pretty much everybody.

“Are you getting out?” he asks.

I blink, finding us parked in the garage with Fox looking at me weirdly.

I fling the car door open and edge around the property to the pool house. My hands wring together as I decide whether to jump and hope like hell he's strong enough to catch me. I survived Gideon, but I won't be able to put myself together if the first man I give my trust to breaks it into pieces. My psyche is woven together with a fine web. I'm not strong enough to take a punch, which is why I should forget this night, forget the desire he stirs within me, and forget how my body responds to him. I fling open the door and make it three steps toward my bedroom before he wraps an arm around my waist and anchors me to him.

“Where are you going, firecracker?” he whispers as the front door slams behind us.

“I need a drink,” I grumble. My voice is raspy, which gives some credibility to my declaration. He walks with me to the kitchen and releases me. I quickly grab a glass as he turns a parcel left on the countertop toward him.

“I didn't order anything,” he mutters.

“You did, but I'm wearing it,” I taunt.

His heated gaze sweeps over me before he tears open the box and pulls out some tissue paper. He freezes, his gaze flicking to me as his brows lower.

“What are you wearing?” he snaps.

I gulp a little of the water and concentrate on not choking. “The red dress you bought me and the pink and black as requested.”

He plucks two scraps of black and pink silk and lace from the box and holds them between us. “Don’t lie to me.”

I choke on the water and hammer my chest. Fuck, fuckety, fuck. I’m fucked. “Take the dress off,” he demands.

I shake my head and back into the counter opposite him. He drops the underwear he thought I was wearing and prowls toward me. He grabs my abandoned clutch and tears free the remote control before crowding me against the hard surface. His hands wrap around my thighs, lifts me onto the kitchen counter, and shoves himself between my legs. My hands land on his shoulders, but I don’t push him away.

He leans his forehead against mine, his chest rising and falling in time with my own rapid rhythm. “If I press this, are you going to squirm?” I gulp but stay silent. A little voice shouts *mayday, mayday...* but a bigger one says *fuck it*. “If you aren’t going to answer, then I’m going to test it.”

My eyes stay locked on his. “Do it.”

He growls in both annoyance and challenge. He clicks the button, and in the silence of the house, the soft yet unmistakable vibrations can be heard. My legs tighten around his hips as I try dragging him closer. He turns it off, and I slump against the wall behind me. “Don’t tease.”

“What was black?”

Umm. I give him my best confused look. He doesn’t buy it. “The mini bullet vibrator is pink.”

“Yes,” I agree.

“So what’s black?”

“Don’t make me say it,” I utter.

“I can do this all night,” he says as he clicks the button. I arch my back and groan as everything clenches inside me. He turns it off, leaving me a panting mess. He does this twice more, until I’m on the verge of sobbing.

“It’s the butt plug,” I shout.

“You’re not only wearing a vibrator that you gave me control of the entire night, but a butt plug too?”

“Yes.”

“Fucking hell. This night would have gone so differently.”

“How?”

“We would have never fucking left the house, for a start.”

“I thought that was part of the fun?”

“It’s only fun if both parties are aware.”

“How was I meant to know you’d bought sexy lingerie for me? It wasn’t in the box.”

He shakes his head. “I need a do over of this entire situation.”

“Well, I’m not going back out, so you can forget it.”

My passion cools, and I try to wiggle away from him, but I end up grinding myself against his erection. He hisses and grabs my hands before pinning them behind my back.

“I want my truth,” he says.

“Haven’t you had enough for one day?” I snap.

“I want to watch your eyes as you come.”

My brows furrow. How is that a truth? He stares down at me with an air of expectation, his large body crowding me, making me feel utterly vulnerable again. But I’m also not fighting the situation as hard as I thought I would, so that’s progress. I release a breath and utter, “Fine.”

“Your real eyes.”

Oh. I blink at him and wet my lips, not all that surprised he knows I’m wearing colored contacts. I’m due for them to be changed tomorrow anyway.

“Let my hands go,” I instruct. He pauses, and I roll my eyes. “I can’t just make them dissolve.” He releases my wrists, and I take out the contacts, dropping them into the sink beside us before turning back to face him.

“Holy fuck,” he mutters as he takes in my eyes’ two different colors. The left is gray with flecks of blue, while the right is a startling blue with flecks of gray that almost make my eyes look violet. They are memorable, which is why I conceal them.

He cups my face and lays a soft kiss on my mouth. “Thank you for trusting me with that. Here, in the safety of this house, shed the layers you use to protect yourself. I want as much of the real you as I can get.”

My eyes flutter closed as he kisses me deeply and brings that raging need back full force. My hands wander up the inside of his white shirt and trace the muscles of his back. He’s so utterly powerful and could break me with a careless snap. But that’s the beauty of Fox—he’s purposeful and deliberate in every movement, but that power is being utilized to stoke my desire, not control it. His hands drag the hem of my dress up to bunch at my waist, and his thumbs trace circles on my hips, just under my panties.

“Can I touch you?” he murmurs against my lips.

“Yes.”

He sucks in a breath and takes a step back to look me over. His eyes darken as he takes in the red silk encasing my pussy.

“Remove your dress,” he demands, but I don’t move. “Now, Cleo, before I tear it off you, and it can’t be worn again.” I grab the hem and pull it over my head. He closes his eyes for a brief second, and when he opens them, I find demons stalking his gaze to rival my own, but they don’t scare me.

“Tell me to stop at any point and I will, okay?”

He unbuttons his jeans, and panic wells inside of me as I dart my gaze from his underwear to his face. “I’m not—” I start.

“I know, firecracker. I know you aren’t ready for that—yet. But I need a bit of fucking relief. I’ve been hard for hours.” He closes the distance and winds a hand in my hair before fisting it and snapping my head back to look at him. “This isn’t going

any further unless you tell me you understand that the word stop will make everything cease no matter what we are doing or how far gone I am. I will always stop.”

“I understand.”

“Good girl,” he mutters before covering my mouth with his. This kiss isn’t like any other he’s given me, any other I’ve ever experienced. It’s both frantic and controlled, needy and insistent, and it’s fucking devastating. I go pliant in his arms as he takes down another brick in this carefully built wall I’ve erected around myself.

He leaves my mouth and scrapes his teeth down the column of my throat, making me shudder and squirm in his arms. His mouth closes around my silk-covered nipple, the heat making me squirm as my hands dive into his hair and yank on the strands. He growls his approval against my breast, and I suddenly need to have that growl against my core.

“Fox, please,” I whisper.

He nips at my nipple, making me almost lose it right there. He unclips my bra’s front fastening, his hand cupping and squeezing, forcing more of it into his mouth. He pinches my other nipple at the same time his teeth clamp down. Pleasure and pain shoot between my legs, making me curse. He handles me like I’m precious, but at the same time, like he wants to devour me.

His mouth trails down over my belly until he reaches the waistband on my panties, and he spends an infuriating minute brushing his tongue along the edge. The vibrations come back on for a few seconds, and my eyes snap open, finding a grinning Fox kneeling on the floor between my legs.

“Don’t take your eyes off me, firecracker. Stay with me, okay?” I drag my swollen bottom lip between my teeth and nod. “Good girl.” I never understood the hype about those two words until this moment.

His fingers hook into the sides of my panties, and he pauses a beat to gauge if I’m okay. I give a small nod of encouragement, and he tears them off my body, catching the

vibrator in his hand before dropping it in the sink. He grasps my calves and folds my legs back so the edge of my heels rest on the edge of the counter.

“Put your hands where mine are, and don’t let go.” I grab my calves, and it forces my hips to tilt, opening me up even more. “You want this out or in?” he asks, tapping against the handle of the plug.

“In, I think.”

“Have you had anal sex before?” I shake my head, and he swipes a hand over his face. “Have you had anything in there before tonight?”

“No,” I whisper.

He squeezes his eyes closed, and my legs slide together as I wonder what the hell I’m doing thinking even for a second that I could be enough for someone like Fox.

“What are you doing?” he asks, placing his hands on my thighs and keeping me pinned open.

“I thought you wanted to stop.”

“Did I say stop?”

“No.”

“Did you say stop?”

“No, but you looked disappointed when you realized I might not be as adventurous as you hoped.”

He rises and covers my front with his as one hand slides into my hair and the other grips my chin. “You are a fucking dream. I’m trying to not hump the counter and come in my pants like a horny teenager. You have a plug in your ass for the first time, and you are trusting me with your pleasure. I’m fucking floored by that, and I’m trying not to push you too hard, because I want nothing more than to make you scream so loud my grandmother contemplates calling the police. Not only have you not had a release in fuck knows how long, but you’ve never had one with something in your ass, meaning this is going to feel fucking amazing. I’m simply taking a moment to wonder how I got so lucky to earn that trust. So put

your hands back on your calves, keep a tight hold, and enjoy the ride. Got it?”

“Got it.”

He punctuates that confession with a kiss that steals my breath before sinking to his knees. He winks at me. “You take your eyes off me and all of this stops. Understand?”

“Yes.” Honestly, I don’t want to miss a minute of this anyway. He’s a god on his knees before me looking like he’s about to worship at my altar, and that’s powerfully addictive.

He tugs on the plug, grinning evilly when I gasp. I’m fucked, so utterly fucked for this man. His thumb skirts the outside of my swollen clit, and I cry out as my hands grip my legs so tight my muscles cramp. “You’re close,” he mutters more to himself than me. No shit. I’ve been close for hours. He leans forward and blows on my oversensitive clit, making the bands inside me snap in response. “And so responsive.”

“Please, Fox.”

He groans. “You begging me is doing things to my control, Cleo. Stop.”

“But I need—”

He dips and licks from the plug to my clit, stealing my breath and causing my eyes to flutter closed. “Fuck. You taste like you smell, like coconut, peaches, and fiery sunshine.”

His movements stop. My hands tighten on my legs as my eyes flick open so I can glare at him. “I warned you—eyes on me. I want you to be fully aware of who is making your thighs shake.” He’s keeping me grounded. This man...I’m done.

He leans forward and traces lazy circles around my clit with his tongue. My spine arches, and my muscles pull taut in anticipation. “Ready?”

“I was ready hours ago,” I mutter the truth.

He chuckles before he closes his lips over my clit and uses his hand to twist the plug, causing friction. Then he sucks, and every nerve ending explodes as he growls against me. Months of frustration, of thinking I’m broken beyond repair fly out of

my mind and are replaced with pleasure I'm not sure I'll recover from. A scream tears from my throat and it's like I'm being reborn back into my own skin, one that Gideon never touched.

I float on a relentless rising tide that will surely drown me when it breaks. Oh, but what a way to go.

"I need another one, Cleo. Give me another one," Fox rumbles.

"I can't—"

He manipulates my throbbing clit between his teeth and nibbles while his fingers sweep through my release and press inside. Ice coats my veins, dousing my passion. I release my legs and squirm away from him.

"Stop," I shout. He jerks back.

"What's wrong?"

"Just not inside."

He tilts his head, his eyes widening. "Cleo Williams, are you a fucking virgin?" I slide from the counter and trip over his leg before catching my arm on the counter in my haste to escape. "Cleo, wait."

I dive into my bedroom and slam the chair under the handle before bursting into tears of frustration. Not only am I broken, but I'm also a fucking mess.

CHAPTER 33

FOX



For her, I will relinquish control.

I blink at the empty space before me for a minute. She's not a virgin, right? It wouldn't make sense, not with having an abusive husband. I'm pretty sure that, among other things, he subjected her to rape.

I swipe a hand down my face, my fingers still coated in the addictive taste of Cleo. No, she doesn't get to hide after falling apart on my tongue. I turn and storm to her door, hammering a knock and getting no response.

"Cleo, come out, we need to talk about this." Silence. She's spinning inside her own mind, and I can't stand the thought of her sinking into the trauma because of something I did.

I twist the handle, but the door doesn't budge. There's no lock on this door, meaning she's wedged something under the handle. *Sorry, firecracker, that won't keep me out.* I slam my shoulder into the door, and it gives straight away. The frame splinters, and I climb over the remnants of the chair and scan the room. Finding it empty, I fling open the door to the bathroom. She's not there either. I drop down to the floor and look under the bed. Nope. The window isn't large enough to climb through.

A tiny sob echoes off the wall, the sound full of anguish and heartbreak. I slide open the closet door, finding Cleo with her knees curled up to her chest as she rocks herself. Her eyes are open but she's not here with me; she's reliving something

horrific. I swallow the knot of anxiety and reach out to grab the comforter off the bed before draping it around her shoulders and covering her up.

I drop to my ass in front of her and tangle one of my hands with hers. Those pretty gray and blue eyes look straight through me as tears stream down her flushed cheeks. I give her a few minutes, allowing her memories to play out. Trying to interrupt them can cause even bigger problems, and in this state, she might cast me as her villain.

“Do you want to talk about it?” I ask as her crying abates. She blinks, her gaze focusing before glazing back over.

I lean my back against the wall and close my eyes, never breaking the connection with our hands. When she comes back, she needs to know I’ve got her. She’s not alone.

“I joined the military to escape the life that was mapped out for me here in Red Lake. I was expected to marry someone like Amalee, take over the family business, cultivate more wealth, and hoard it while people were starving and dying. I couldn’t do it. I needed more. I wasn’t mentally set up for the college life that Sam coveted either. One where we had a different girl every night and lorded it over the masses, all because we were athletic. So I left. The military doesn’t care about your wealth or influence. It levels the playing field and you have to climb on your skills and hard work. Turns out, I was exceptional at getting people to spill their secrets.”

Cleo’s fingers tighten around mine and a sigh escapes my lips. “There are things I’ve done I’m not proud of—sanctioned and otherwise. The better you get, the deeper you go. We have to stop lowering ourselves to the level of the bastards we are fighting. We aren’t doing anyone any favors. There’s a fine balance between pushing someone enough for the truth and instilling such terror that they will tell you anything to stop the pain.”

“I’m sorry that happened to you,” she whispers.

My thumb rubs a soothing pattern on the back of her hand, and I find for the first time that I’m grounded while talking

about this. It's her—she's holding me in the present. A smile pulls at my lips.

“The final straw was an operation with my mentor. He crossed a line. There were children involved. No matter their actions, children should be treated accordingly. They didn't know any different, and to use them—it's unethical and inhumane.”

“So you left and became a bodyguard?”

“Yes, alongside a few other jobs. I keep busy.” I open my eyes. “Do you want to talk about it?” I ask again.

“No, I just want to leave.”

“Some demons you can't outrun.”

“I can damn well try.”

“Trust me, eventually you will have to stop and face them. The longer and the harder you run, the more insistent and terrifying they become.”

She drags her bottom lip between her teeth and sucks in a deep breath. I hold mine, waiting to see if she will trust me with a slice of her past.

“I'm not a virgin.”

“Okay.” It's not that it would be a problem if she is, I was just shocked.

“But the day before I ran, he took me to a clinic.” A tremor runs through her. Fuck this. I bend forward and scoop her up into my arms. “What are you doing?” she asks with a laugh as I stand and carry us to the bed.

“I need to hold you.”

“It's not necessary.”

“It's for me, not you.” She hums in the back of her throat, but doesn't call me out on it. “Continue,” I urge.

“There's a procedure they can do to tighten your vagina.”

I still, my heart tripping over itself. “Is that something you wanted?” I've heard of it being done and know it can be for

legitimate reasons. I'm not here to judge her.

She shakes her head, then lays a palm over my heart and places her head on my shoulder so I can't see those gorgeous eyes. But I understand; it's easier to speak your horrors to someone when you aren't looking at them.

"No. I didn't even know what I was there for until the doctor took me into the procedure room."

"That must have been difficult. Did the doctor not talk to you privately?"

"My husband insisted on being with us at all times, even during the procedure."

Rage for this man, and the clueless, careless doctor grows. "And you've not had sex since?"

"No, I ran the next day. But there's more." I'm sure there's a hell of a lot more. She shifts in my lap, and my arms tighten to keep her close as I try to instill her with the courage she needs to face her demons. "He had my hymen reconstructed," she whispers, her voice full of shame.

The air stills around us. Now her reaction makes sense. I'm going to murder him. Cut him up into tiny tiny pieces before feeding him to the pigs.

"What?" Cleo asks with a gasp. I must have let that slip.

"Again, was that forced or voluntary?"

"Forced."

"Thank you for trusting me with this."

"I freaked out on you, so you deserved to know."

"No one has automatic access to your thoughts." I will, however, be calling in a few favors. Her demons are about to meet the devil.

"That felt cleansing. I've only spoken to two other people about this, and that was because I was forced to. He caught up to me once, and I had to leave my medication behind. I got an infection and needed help."

“I’m glad you found someone to help.”

“Now you know why I’m so fucked up. I’m not worth your time. I’m damaged, Fox. So thank you for listening, but now you can leave.”

My heart twists. “Do you want me to leave?” I wait a beat before sighing. “Your body is for your pleasure, not mine, nor anyone else’s. Being a survivor doesn’t mean lingering in the trauma or conforming to society’s views on what a person who has had those experiences should behave like. You need to reclaim your body. You’ll find no judgment from me—ask for what you want and need. Do not feel ashamed of your desire, feel empowered. Healing isn’t a linear process. Expect to get up some days like it just happened, and others like it was years ago. Grieve, get angry, rage, process the loss of the woman you were before, but celebrate the woman you have become.”

“How can I claim it when I freak out just at the feel of a man’s cock?”

“I think you’re freaking out at the unknown, because you have no idea how sex is going to feel. That’s the fear talking. You have options.”

“Yeah, become a nun.”

I snort. “Sure, that’s an option. Others include breaking your hymen with your fingers or a toy, trusting someone else to do it with the same, or through penetration with a man. I don’t think it’s a penis you fear, but the act itself, and whether it will still be something you enjoy.”

“You’re right.” She squirms in my arms, and the comforter falls off her shoulders, revealing her body.

“What are you doing?” I grumble, keeping my eyes on her face so my body doesn’t get any bright ideas about persuading her to trust us. She has to come to that conclusion on her own.

“Facing my fear.” She leans forward and presses her lips against mine, still salty from her dried tears. My hands thread into her hair to keep the kiss from escalating. I want to give her what she needs, and I’ll push her, but not before she’s ready. In this heightened state, she’s nowhere near ready.

She huffs in annoyance as she pulls away. I cup her face and look in her eyes. “I’m not rejecting you, Cleo, but you’ve just taken a huge leap of faith in trusting me. We need to take this one step at a time. You need to think about how you want to do this. I’m going to entertain that darkness in your soul. I’m not a gentle lover, but I’m not a careless one either. If that’s what you need, we need to stop this now.”

She leans forward and keeps her eyes wide open as she sinks her teeth into my bottom lip. My cock jerks to attention. *Fuck*. She releases it, and a wicked glint in her gaze makes me almost feral to own her. She scoots back, shedding the comforter completely before exploring my chest with her fingers and lips. My muscles bunch and contract at her exploration as she goes lower and lower.

I capture her hand as it grazes the waistband of my underwear. “Please, let me reclaim my power,” she whispers.

I’m so fucked when it comes to this woman. I deposit her on the bed next to me before storming out and grabbing what I need from my room before returning to find her exactly as I left her, looking stunned.

I chuck one set of handcuffs on the bed and she shakes her head. “I’m not ready for that.”

I snort. “They aren’t for you, they’re for me.”

“Oh.”

It’s going to fucking kill me to give up control. I’ve never done this before, but I want her to feel safe with me. I click the other set around my left wrist, then climb on the bed and snap it to the bedpost. I jerk my head at the other cuffs. “You need to do the other set.”

She hollows her cheeks, grabs the metal cuffs, and in the blink of an eye, they are around my other wrist and attached to the bedpost.

“Now I’m all yours. What are you going to do with me?” I challenge with a raised brow.

She moves off the bed and tugs my boots and socks off before pulling my jeans down and dropping them onto the

floor. Her breathing picks up speed.

“Hey, look at me,” I instruct. Her gaze raises to meet mine. “You don’t have to do anything.”

“I want to.”

Her warm hands hook into my boxer briefs, and she slowly pulls them down, revealing me to her gaze. My hard cock catches, then bounces free against my stomach. Her eyes go round as she takes me in, and I see her confidence waver.

“Touch it. I promise they don’t hurt.”

“Hurt you, or me?”

I choke a laugh. “Both. All of those piercings will feel amazing for us both, I swear.”

Her fingers trace the Jacob’s ladder with morbid fascination and curiosity. She hollows her cheeks again as she skims her thumb over the head. *Fucking hell*. My hands jerk in the handcuffs, causing her eyes to fly up to the headboard. *Yes, firecracker, I’m still here at your mercy*.

“Don’t suck your cheeks unless you plan on putting your mouth on me.” She licks her lips, and I close my eyes, gritting my teeth. She pushes against the metal up my cock, playing, teasing, testing, and I dig really deep for patience.

Something warm and wet sweeps across the tip. My eyes fly open as heat licks up my spine, and my hips jerk. Cleo meets my gaze as she wraps her lips around the head and sucks, hollowing out her cheeks just like I asked.

My thighs tense with the need to direct her thundering through my soul. But this isn’t about me—it’s about her. My hands fist as she swirls her tongue around me before tentatively taking me a little deeper. She keeps going, a little further each time, until I breach her throat. She doesn’t gag, not once. *Jesus, fuck*.

“Stop,” I grunt.

She pulls back immediately and straddles me, her wet core making me groan. “Did I do it wrong?”

I shake my head. “No, it felt amazing.”

She nibbles her bottom lip. “Do you want to...”

“No. I’m only going to be inside you once you trust me enough to tell me your real name.” Her gaze shutters. “Right now, I want you to turn around, and sit on my face.”

“What?”

“Turn around, put my cock back in your mouth, and sit on my face.”

“Oh, I already had an orgasm.”

“Benefit of being a woman is multiple orgasms.”

“I’m okay. I can just—”

I can see she is hungry for me. “You want me in your mouth, firecracker? You want to feel me come apart underneath you, to lose control and be vulnerable?”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Then turn the fuck around.”

She drags in a breath then spins off me, giving me her back. She’s still wearing the butt plug. Perfect.

She looks over her shoulder as she lifts her leg and hooks her feet under my shoulders before shuffling back. Then she bends to take me in her mouth, and I realize what a bad idea this was as her glistening pussy hovers over my face. I’m going to come in three seconds flat.

“Move back further.”

She complies, and I tilt my head, licking around her clit, over her pussy, and to her ass. I grab the plug with my teeth and tug gently. She gasps and drops me from her mouth. I release the plug.

“Two things. Keep me in your mouth, or I’ll stop.”

“Okay, and the second?” Her voice is raspy and sexy as hell.

“If I can breathe, you aren’t low enough.” Laughter bursts free from her as she looks at me over her shoulder, her long

hair almost touching her butt. This position is going on the list.

She lowers herself further. “More,” I rasp. “I’m still breathing.” She drops the last inch. *Finally*.

Her mouth covers me and she runs her tongue over each piercing like she’s trying to commit their position to memory. I’m slightly hindered without my hands, but she loses her inhibitions with each stroke of my tongue until she’s pressing down on me and doing exactly what I asked for.

Her tongue swipes over my head before she slides me in deep and swallows. *Holy fuck*. That feels amazing.

I turn my face to the side and nip her thigh. Her pussy clenches and leaks. So she likes a little bite of pain? She was made for me.

“I’m going to come,” I warn her, giving her every opportunity to pull away. She hums and the vibrations go straight to my balls. “Come with me,” I demand.

Her hand slides between her legs and skims her finger across her swollen clit. I push my tongue inside of her repeatedly, showing her she’s far from broken. My hips jerk, sinking my cock deeper, and she comes apart on my tongue as I spill deep into her throat.

“Swallow,” I urge. She does, igniting something feral inside of me. I’ve just claimed Cleo Williams, and now she’s mine.

She turns and uses her thumb to push a dribble of my cum inside of her mouth. She slides off the bed and goes to the adjoining bathroom for a minute before returning. Then she flops down onto my chest like a contented cat. “Thank you, Fox,” she whispers.

“For what?”

She replies with a soft snore. Being tied up with a beautiful naked woman asleep on my chest is a first, but I can’t say I hate it, and it’s all down to this woman. Fuck one month. Cleo won’t be escaping me in this lifetime or the next.

CHAPTER 34

HONOR



One, two, three, the Fox is coming for me.

Awareness creeps in, pulling me from the deepest sleep I've ever had. Warmth surrounds me, threatening to pull me back under, and I snuggle deeper into it with a sigh. A steady rise and fall beneath my head makes me feel like I'm on a vibrating cloud. Wait. It's not vibrating, it's laughing. Clouds don't laugh. My eyes spring open, and I lift my head to find Fox's warm whiskey gaze tracing my features. His arms tighten around me, and my gaze jerks to the handcuffs dangling from the headboard.

"How?"

He winks. "Not many restraints I can't get free of. Call it occupational training."

"So what was the point?"

"For you to feel safe enough to do what you wanted."

"You lied."

"No, I created a situation to allow you to follow your desire without fear of danger. Nothing about that is untrue, Cleo."

"But you could get free at any point?"

He pushes a lock of my hair off my forehead. "Yes, but I was at your mercy with or without them."

Doesn't explain why he's still here though. Fox doesn't strike me as the snuggling type. "Why didn't you leave?"

Something dark flitters across his gaze. “You really think so lowly of me? That I would leave you after making you come—twice—for the first time in months? Or after you swallowed down my release?” He rests his forehead against mine and stares into my eyes. “You think I would abandon you after you pulled yourself out of a panic attack and shared some of your demons with me?” he whispers.

Guilt spears my chest as my mouth opens and closes like a fish. That makes a lot of sense. He’s a protector at his core; of course he stayed.

My eyes hit the clock, finding I have less than ten minutes before Helen will be in the kitchen expecting her breakfast. “I need to get up,” I mutter, pushing against his chest. His arms tighten like steel bands around me.

“Kiss me first.”

I blink at him in disbelief. “With morning breath?”

His lips twitch, and he brushes his nose against mine. “That’s the payment to make me let you go.”

I drag in a breath and jerk my head up, ready to peck his lips. His hands bury into my hair, and he kisses me until I’m dizzy and have to break away panting.

“Now, I really need to get up,” I mutter with less conviction.

He sighs and releases me. I stumble to my feet and make my escape into the bathroom. My gaze lands on the mirror, and I don’t recognise the woman staring back at me. She’s relaxed and happy, with that secret look that shows she found a release last night— not once, but twice. My body might not be ready for the scrap heap just yet.

After bypassing the shower in lieu of a quick face wash and teeth scrub, I find myself in the kitchen with two minutes to spare. I pull up short when I find a shirtless Fox flipping pancakes like a professional line cook. Duke lies on Fox’s feet, staring up at him with pleading puppy eyes.

Knowing it’s pointless arguing with him, I slide onto the stool and take a sip of the orange juice he left out for me.

“What’s the occasion?” I ask.

He casts me a glance over his shoulder and smirks. “It’s Sunday. Plus, I think you might have worked up an appetite.”

My mouth pops open, but then my stomach rumbles. What the hell? I can’t remember the last time I actually felt hunger. It’s something else that Gideon so thoroughly broke. But I found pleasure in sharing food with Fox last night, and now when he’s making me breakfast, I find myself looking forward to it. Wait, no. I can’t get hung up on Fox being part of my life. Time is already slipping away from us faster than sand through my fingers.

Helen appears, dressed in a conservative smart navy sheath dress. Her eyebrows raise at seeing her grandson once again beating me to it.

“He was here before me,” I say.

“Oh I’m not complaining,” she says, taking her seat next to me. “It means I can have all your attention while you give me a blow-by-blow account of your date with Samuel.”

I grimace. “I think he’s decided I’m not for him.”

Fox snorts, making Helen’s eyes crinkle. “Was your evening a complete bust, or did you manage to enjoy yourself a little?” I do my best. I really do. But there’s no stopping the blush that heats my cheeks or the way my eyes find Fox. Helen’s lip curls at the side. It’s such a Fox trait, it takes me by surprise. “I see.”

I press my lips together, and Fox serves us a breakfast of banana and blueberry pancakes with maple syrup. *Yum*. I manage half of my stack as we make idle chat.

“We leave in an hour, Cleo,” Helen says. “Best shower and get freshened up before Pastor Peel decides you need extra intervention.” I roll my eyes as I stack the dishwasher. Pastor Peel has his work cut out for him if he is trying to salvage my soul. “Are you joining us, Fox?” Helen asks.

I glance at him. He leans back against the counter, folds his arms, and bites his bottom lip as he stares at my ass. “No

salvation for me, Gran. It would be a waste of godly energy. Best save it for those who deserve to be saved.”

Deserve? He doesn't think he is worthy? I've danced with the devil, and he's held my soul in his hands and crushed my light, leaving only darkness. Fox Alderidge might have been through Hell, but he didn't linger to see if he enjoyed the sins. Perhaps he is here to help me reclaim my power, but in return, I could help him see his good outweighs his bad.

IT'S hotter than Hades today, so I ditched my normal jeans for the black dress, which is conservative enough for church. Helen leads the way with her arm linked through Rosa's as they gossip about Samuel and Amalee having been spotted kissing outside of her house before disappearing inside. Good for them. They are a much better fit, but I think that's the extent of my matchmaking skills for this lifetime.

The ladies settle into the back pew, and I sit on the end. This is by far the most entertaining church I've ever been to. Pastor Peel likes to tailor his sermon around the town's weekly gossip, and today is no different as he talks about childhood friends finding a deeper love in each other because of their history.

“I'm sure something was deep,” Helen mutters.

I cover my mouth and snort, causing some of the parishioners to turn and glare at me. Oh yes, I'm fair game, whereas Helen and her friends aren't. Another round of amusement comes from the group of ladies to my left who are busy whispering about this week's smut book—in a house of God. I send up a prayer that the good Lord isn't listening.

We are halfway into the service when my bag vibrates against my leg. Luckily, the Pastor's exuberant preaching about wayward grandsons returning home and likening them to the Prodigal Son blocks out the noise. I slide it out of the bag, intending to turn it off, but my gaze catches on the message.

FOX

Enjoying the sermon?

CLEO

It's certainly interesting.

FOX

I particularly like the part about the wayward grandson.

My eyes round and dart around the room, but there's no dark and broody bodyguard hidden among the church-goers.

CLEO

Where are you?

FOX

I want my truth.

CLEO

I'm in a church. Pretty sure all I have are truths.

FOX

Make an excuse to leave, and come to the entrance.

CLEO

No.

FOX

Live a little.

CLEO

We did plenty of that last night.

FOX

Don't mention last night unless you are willing to get up and leave.

CLEO

You aren't even here. Pastor Peel is always talking about wayward grandsons, you aren't the hottest news in Red Lake.

I fidget in my seat, the answering throb an echo of what he made me feel last night.

FOX

Not here? Then stop squirming in your seat.

I blink. Wait, how?

FOX

Fuck it. On the count of three, I'm coming to get you and carrying you out of there on my shoulder.

CLEO

Try it.

FOX

One.

CLEO

Only works if you count beyond that.

FOX

Two. And Cleo, I have zero fucks to give about this congregation, so go ahead and test me.

My eyes widen, and I jerk to my feet. Helen blinks up at me.

I swing a thumb over my shoulder. "Toilet," I whisper. Before she can call me out on my shit, I hurry out of the nave and close the door behind me with a snick. I stalk toward the entrance, and an arm snakes around my waist while a hand covers my mouth, preventing my shriek of surprise from escaping.

"Three," Fox utters against my ear. I squirm, which only makes him growl as his erection presses against my ass. Does he just walk around with that thing permanently hard? "Behave, Cleo, or this is going to go a lot differently than I planned."

He drags me backward, spins me in his arms, and throws me over his shoulder before striding up a narrow set of winding stairs. We emerge into the choir loft which overlooks the nave and has a grand piano situated in the middle. He slides me off his shoulder, and my heels hit the wooden floor with a click. Oh my God, the acoustics.

He backs me up against the pillar at one side of the balcony. We are shielded from the congregation, but only just. His hands pin my wrists above my head, and he licks his lips as he stares down at me. Our height difference is still pronounced, even in these heels. My heart thumps in my chest, not out of fear, but excitement. There's a darkness in Fox, and it wants to push me, but not control me. He leans down and brushes his lips across mine. They part for him, and he licks into my mouth, sending a shiver down my spine. He deepens the kiss and groans low when I suck on his tongue. He presses closer as his hands clench tighter around my wrists.

I'm getting dizzy, but wild horses can't tear me away from the passion bubbling between us. I didn't think I was capable of feeling this way again. Wait, no, I've never felt this way—like I'm riding the crest of a tsunami wave. He breaks away first and buries his head in the bend of my neck. *Quitter.*

He chuckles against my ear. *Oops.* Must have said that out loud.

“If I go down on you now, are you going to be wet for me?” he whispers in my ear.

I smirk at him as he pulls away to stare into my eyes. They are back to green with the contacts.

“That's for me to know—”

He releases my wrists and drops to his knees, skirting his hands up my dress. My breath catches in my throat, and my eyes go wide. “And for me to find out.”

“It wasn't an invitation,” I mutter as he hooks his thumbs into my black and pink lacy panties—the ones he thought I was wearing last night.

He groans as he lowers them. “Did you wear these for me?”

“No, for me.”

“Good girl.” He urges my feet up and slides them off. “Open your mouth,” he demands.

If I’m going to Hell, it’s already too late for me, so I may as well enjoy the express ride down. My lips part, and he stuffs the panties inside. The dampness can’t be mistaken. “Now you tell me, are you wet?”

My eyes narrow. *Dumbass. How am I meant to answer?* He presses his lips together. *Yes, yes very funny.* He slides a hand under my left knee and lifts it over his shoulder. My hands land on his head and bury into his hair. The scruff of his beard scrapes against the inside of my thigh before he sweeps his tongue through my center. My head smacks off the stone pillar as I suck in a breath. He circles my clit but doesn’t create the friction where I need it. Am I really going to come in a crowded church? Won’t we burst into flames or something?

“Mmm. How do you taste like peaches and fucking coconut?” Fox groans against me, making my hands tighten in his hair as I try directing him. He tears his mouth away from me and grabs the back of my knees before carrying me over to the piano and sliding me onto the top. “Sorry, firecracker, I have a job to do. But that doesn’t mean I can’t multitask.”

My gaze darts to the closed door, my body stiffening when I hear someone say his name. Did they find us?

He grins as he takes a seat on the stool. He pushes my knees up, lifting my feet so he can snap open the lid to the keys. My panicked gaze darts to his. What is he doing? He winks at me, amusement dancing in his gaze as he places his fingers on the keys. What? Wait—no. People will definitely hear that.

I squirm backward to ensure I’m not responsible for the pastor finding us like this. Fox shakes his head and tsks, his hand snapping out to drag me back to the edge.

“Stay. If I have to stop to get my mouth on you, they will know.” He drags his bottom lip between his teeth. “You have until the end of the song to come. After that, you’ll still be coming, but it will be to a silent church. And Cleo, you tend to come with a roar.”

Stop what? Then he presses down on the keys and out comes a beautiful melody. The congregation below begins to sing, and I’m caught between being in awe of his musical skill and strangling him for perching me on said piano while the vibrations hit me in all the right places.

I scowl at him. He leans forward and swipes his tongue through my center. His gaze rises to mine as he continues to play without pause. Then he drags his teeth over my clit and everything inside me clenches. I just need him to apply a little more pressure...

My hand snakes between my legs. I have to come now, as I have no doubt he’ll make good on his promise. Then I’ll be going from Little Miss Hard-to-Get to the town harlot.

He nips my fingers in warning, and I snap them back. Too easy. *Fuck.*

Then he sucks and I convulse, my throat vibrating as pleasure flares to every nerve ending in my body. He lets me ride out my orgasm on his tongue before tearing his mouth away and completing the last few keystrokes.

He plucks the panties from my mouth and sweeps them through my swollen oversensitive center, before tucking them in his jeans pocket. And that, ladies and gentlemen, is how I know I am done for. This man is dirty and possessive with a care and tenderness that’s as confusing as it is addictive.

CHAPTER 35

FOX



Let me teach you how to strangle your nightmares and make them submit.

I lean against my car and wait for Cleo to emerge from the church. She walks out with my gran, and the corner of her mouth lifts when she sees me.

Did she think I was here to steal her panties and make her come, then just disappear? Not fucking likely. I'm already addicted to her taste, her scent, her smokey voice that wraps around my cock as she rasps my name. And the sounds she makes when she comes? Fucking hell.

My meddling grandmother spots me and winks before giving Cleo a little push toward me. Cleo scowls and folds her arms as she stalks my way.

“Apparently, I have the day off,” she snaps. “Which is strange, because I’ve had a day off this week already.”

“No, you had a princess day. It’s not the same thing. That was me covering your work for the day, which I did. And I did it well. Today is your actual day off.”

Most people wouldn’t be so averse to having a day off, but I know it’s because when she’s working, she’s not concentrating on the encroaching shadows that nip at her heels. But I’m here to show her not all distractions have to be work related, some can be play. In fact, they can offer a more solid barrier to the demons.

“Also, Helen has a sudden engagement, so I need to ride with you.”

I suppress a smile. I haven't spoken to my grandmother, but she knew what to do the moment she saw me waiting here. I open the passenger door and Cleo flops inside with a glare my way. I jump in and spin the car around before turning left on Main Street.

“Where are you going?” she asks.

“Thought I'd take you on a tour. It was clear when I drove the other day that you haven't ventured away from the town itself. Have you even seen the lake?”

“There's a lake?”

“The clue is in the town's name,” I reply with a chuckle. Her lips press together, looking thoroughly unamused at my lack of hilarity. I shake my head. The more confident she gets, the brighter the fire I see burning beneath the surface.

“If we're going out, I really need my panties back.”

“No.”

“Fine, then can we make a pit stop at home to get new ones?”

“No.”

My chest tightens at her use of the word home. Like she sees it as somewhere permanent to lay her head, not a pit stop. She might not realize it yet, but between my grandmother's addictive personality and my gentle persuasion, Cleo Williams doesn't stand a chance.

She folds her arms, but her gaze is wide as she takes in the stunning scenery surrounding my home town. I let her stew in silence as I set a leisurely pace. A few miles out, I take a turn onto a single track road which narrows as it guides us deeper into the woods surrounding the lake.

After coming to a stop and killing the engine, I grab the cooler and backpack from the trunk before opening the door for Cleo. I lean in with a rakish smile and drop a pair of white bikini bottoms on her lap. They have starred in my dreams

more times than I care to admit this week. She lifts them up with two fingers and raises a brow. I wink back at her before redirecting my attention to the open backpack in my hand. I pull out a pair of sneakers I took from her closet and hand them to her. As I rezip the backpack, I can't stop my gaze from running down her shapely legs before landing on the heels she's wearing.

“While I have had a thousand fantasies of the things I want to do to you in those heels, they aren't suitable for this terrain, and I don't want you to break an ankle.”

She huffs as she swaps her footwear and shimmies into the bikini bottoms underneath her dress, as if I hadn't had my tongue buried inside her an hour ago.

I hold my hand out to her. She rolls her eyes and hops out of the car, ignoring it. I shake my head and lead the way into the thick forest.

“Great place to murder someone,” she mutters from behind me.

I cast her a quick glance over my shoulder. “Not today.”

She snorts, and her shoulders relax a little. I know it's costing her to put a little trust in me, but it will be worth it. The first step to healing is trusting someone and finding they aren't here to hurt you.

The five minute trek gives way to a clearing at one end of the small, yet stunning lake. Cleo gasps behind me as I drop the cooler and backpack underneath a tree in the shade. I retrieve the sunscreen while Cleo draws closer to the edge of the lake.

A thick line of trees surround the crystal-clear water, offering a decent amount of privacy. There is no signage or well worn paths that would lead tourists to the spot, and it looks like we are totally alone.

“Apparently, Amalee and Samuel ended their evening together,” Cleo says, raising her hand over her eyes to squint back at me.

“Good. It’s about time they stopped looking elsewhere. Sometimes, when childhood friends are perfect matches, they can’t see it.” If she is looking for any indication I have the slightest amount of interest in Amalee Cage, then she will be sorely disappointed. I wave the sunscreen bottle at her. “Take your dress off. I don’t want you getting burned.”

She rolls her eyes and drags the hem of the dress up and over her head. I pluck it out of her hands and hang it on a tree branch. When I spin back around, she also hands me her bra. Okay, then. Seems my shy Cleo is shielding a confidence that I want to nurture to life. Something tells me this is how she was before her marriage. I meant what I said—she should mourn the woman she once was. You can’t go through what she has endured and not have it alter your brain chemistry.

I squirt some of the sunscreen into my hands and work it into her shoulders and back. She sighs as her whole body relaxes, and I store away the fact she likes massages. My hands work along her collarbone, then dip lower. Her breathing stutters as my thumbs skate the curve of her breasts. I drop a kiss on the sensitive flesh just below her ear as my fingers skim her nipples. Her back arches as she pushes her ass against me.

“Behave,” I utter. “This is about staying cool on a hot summer’s day.”

She smirks at me over her shoulder, then toes off her sneakers before running into the lake and diving in once it’s deep enough. She breaks the surface and spins to face me, her eyes widening at my lack of clothing. I dive into the refreshing water and head toward her, surfacing about a yard away. I tread water while she tips her head back, letting her gorgeous red hair float around her.

“What’s your real hair color?” I wonder.

Her lips twitch. “Is that your truth for the day?” The fact she’s entertaining telling me something about herself that could help identify her, isn’t lost on me. But I have a hundred more important questions I need answers to before this.

“No.”

She drags her head up and stares at me. “Honey blonde.”

Okay, now I need to see that one day. “Will you go back to it?”

She shakes her head. “Not as long as I’m being hunted.”

“And if you stop running?”

“I can’t,” she whispers. “The consequences would be too great. Death would be a welcome mercy he would never grant.”

Jesus Christ, what did that bastard do?

I reach for her and drag her closer until she wraps her legs around me, the demons haunting her eyes back in full force. My arms band around her waist as I try to ground her in the present, but there is a question I want answered.

“In the bottom of your duffle bag,” I start. Her entire body stiffens. “There’s a corset.”

She quirks a brow at me. Okay, she’s determined to make this harder. That’s fair—if I’m not strong enough to ask the question, I don’t deserve an answer.

“Is it something you chose to wear?”

“No.”

That’s what I thought. “Your husband made you wear it?”

“Yes.”

Her eyes are hyper-focused on my face as she looks for signs of a reaction she isn’t happy with.

“For what reason?”

Her eyes flutter closed, and she releases a slow breath. “He wanted to reshape my body so that he could wrap his hands around my waist until they touched. It also had the added benefit of reducing the amount of food I could tolerate.”

A tremor runs down my spine, and I force myself to relax my grip around her. This is so much worse than anything I imagined. I’d thought her food intake was because of a

perceived flaw he worked into her psyche. Instead, he effectively gave her a non-surgical gastric band.

She keeps her eyes closed but continues to explain. “It took a few months of him tightening it to get my body to submit to his desired shape. He got it into its final position a few days before I ran. He said I’d need to wear it continuously for weeks to get my body to hold its shape.” I’m unable to suppress a rumble in my chest, making Cleo’s eyes fly open. “When I ran, I discovered he had padlocked the straps into place. I had to be cut out of it.”

I am going to murder him, and it’s not an empty threat. I know a hundred ways to kill a man slowly, and I have the perfect combination in mind for this poor excuse of a human being. My new focus isn’t on learning who Cleo is, because a name is just a set of letters pushed together. Her soul, her light—despite the darkness she’s endured—is everything I need to know and understand about her. But him? I need a name, because his days are numbered.

“Why keep it?” I wonder.

“It’s a reminder of why I keep running. It’s what awaits me if I ever give up—if he ever catches me. When the exhaustion sinks into your bones so deep that you’d give anything to stop being hunted, even give in to the monster nipping at your heels, you need a reminder. It’s a representation of my fate. The control, the devastation, the inadequacy, knowing nothing I do or say will ever be enough. It’s proof that for some people, loving them harder won’t save you—it just gives them deeper access to your soul.”

My heart breaks a little that she, like many domestic violence survivors, believed that loving someone harder would stop the pain. “What if you could stop running?” I ask.

She swallows and dips her head. “I can’t. It’s too dangerous, Fox. The potential pain I would bring to anyone helping to shield me—I can’t do that.”

My fingers wrap around her throat, and I gently tip her chin up so she can stop avoiding my gaze. “Perhaps I am strong enough to battle your demons.”

She squeezes her eyes closed. “I wish I could believe that, Fox, but I’m not worth the risk.”

“Isn’t that my decision?”

“No, it’s mine. The pain was so deep, I couldn’t breathe, Fox. When I ran, I was a shell of myself. All I had left were my broken pieces. The good parts of me were already overwritten by his control.”

“Can you breathe now?”

Her gaze drops to my lips, and a tremor runs through her body. “Yes,” she whispers, like something is going to steal her oxygen if it overhears her declaration. “But I can’t fall again.”

“I will catch you.”

“I don’t want to lose myself.”

“You won’t.”

I can see her teetering on the edge of wanting what I’m offering. To fall is a surrender of control.

“I’m scared, Fox.”

“I know, and I’m telling you I am here to protect you.”

“Not of him. Of us. I’ve known you less than a week, and I’m already in deeper than I was with the man I married. That makes me sound a little crazy.”

“Only if it’s not reciprocated.”

Her eyes flare with hope, and something curls tight around my heart as I will her to take that leap with me. “Is it?” she whispers.

“Yes, firecracker, it most definitely is.”

She blinks and a tear escapes down her left cheek. My hands clasp around her tighter as I tread water to keep us both afloat. It’s an apt metaphor, because I will take the burden of her demons and be enough to hold us both up. I have three weeks to prove to her that she belongs in my arms, and that isn’t achieved by pussyfooting around what makes her quake.

It's by making her grasp her nightmares and strangle them until they submit.

First on the agenda—make sure she can shoot straight. Then the only thing she needs to be scared of is me owning her pleasure, because I'm about to turn her inside out and destroy any notion that she is fucking broken.

CHAPTER 36

HONOR



Take aim, take the shot, no hesitation, no regrets.

My mind reels. How did I get here? Entangled with a man who makes my heart race and my skin tingle from just a look? I slide the dress back on and glance at him over my shoulder as he tugs on his jeans. He's a lot of man to handle, but I know why he's managed to break through every barrier I've erected. Most people wear a mask—they alter their persona based on their company and what they need from the situation. It's a form of manipulation I can't tolerate, and one of the reasons Samuel never had a chance with me. He was trying to be who he thought I wanted. Perhaps if he'd just been himself...nope, still a no.

Fox, however, while a little on the grumpy and dominating side, doesn't hide who he is. That appeals to me and is maybe why I'm drawn to him. But the future he dangles in front of me is seductive, one where I'm not looking over my shoulder every moment. He makes me feel safe, which is something I haven't felt in a very long time.

He bends and rummages around in his backpack before retrieving a gun. My blood runs cold, and I freeze, my breath catching in my throat.

He shakes his head at my reaction. "You need to learn how to shoot straight, firecracker, so if you ever need to protect yourself, you won't miss." He hands me a box of ammunition and jerks his head at the trees.

"But that's not my gun," I point out.

“No, your gun is difficult to aim for a beginner. I swapped it out for something more user friendly.”

“How thoughtful,” I mutter as I follow him a little way into the woods.

He pauses and turns to face me. “Let’s go through some basics.” He talks me through the safety catch, and how to load and unload a gun. “Never ever point a gun unless you’re prepared to use it.”

“I think I’ve demonstrated I have no issue using it.” I give a pointed look at the mark on his shoulder, making him snort.

“If there’s time and distance to run, do so. That should always be your first choice. Only stand your ground if you absolutely have to.”

My heart flip-flops in my chest. If Gideon catches up with me, I won’t be running. I will take the opportunity to shoot him. I still regret not twisting that knife back at the motel.

He hands me the gun, and I keep it pointed at the ground like a good girl. He grasps my shoulders from behind and turns me to face a tree ten feet away. “See the knot in the trunk?” he asks.

“Yes.”

“That’s approximately where most adult torsos would be. The aim here is not to get fancy. The chest is the biggest area to aim for and will stop them from coming at you.”

“Got it.”

“Okay. Take aim, but don’t shoot. I’ll correct your form.”

I raise the gun in my right hand and squint at the tree. Fox’s fingers trail down my left side, and he grasps my hand and guides it up to the gun. “Always use two hands. It will help you aim better and you’ll get less kickback from the shot.” He curls my fingers around the grip and nudges my feet apart slightly. “To help your balance.” Lastly, he alters the position of my shoulders. “Deep breath in, and on the exhale, take the shot.”

My eyes flutter closed as I inhale for two heartbeats, then snap open before I squeeze the trigger. The shot skims the bark, sending shards flying into the air. My body presses back against Fox's. "Shit," I mutter.

Fox drops to his knees behind me and grabs my left foot. He inches it forward, then places his hand on the base of my spine. "Again."

I take a deep breath, take aim, and squeeze the trigger as I let it out. The bullet lodges in the tree. "I did it," I whisper in awe.

"You did, and I'm so proud. Now do it again." I lick my lips and manage another four bullets in the trunk. "Reload," he says, holding the box of ammunition up to me from his position on the ground. I reload the bullets with shaky fingers. "Good. Six shots in the tree, and I will count this lesson as a win."

"Do I get a prize?" I wonder as I take aim.

"Perhaps." I empty the gun into the tree and resist doing a happy dance. "Reload, then let's take it a few paces back."

I follow his direction until we are positioned fifteen feet away. He drops to his knees behind me again and keeps a steady hand on the base of my spine as I take aim. I miss the first two shots, but the third finds its mark.

"Of course, in an emergency situation, you will have distractions to contend with," he mutters as his fingers circle my ankle and draw lazy patterns up my calf. My breathing stutters, and I miss the next shot.

"Fox," I utter as sparks of desire dance down my spine.

"Shoot the tree, Cleo."

"Then stop touching me."

He nips my calf and trails his tongue up my leg, wrapping around to the sensitive skin on the inside of my thigh. I miss the next shot, but the one after hits the tree.

"Good girl. Now put the safety on."

I do as he says, then scowl at him over my shoulder as he rises. He plucks the gun out of my hand with a wink. “That’s it?” I snap. “You are going to work me up and leave me wanting?”

He shakes his head as his lips twitch. “That is barely scratching the surface of ‘working you up.’”

I huff and stride back toward the shoreline. He follows me with a chuckle, repacks the gun, pulls out a blanket, and lays it across a grassy area in the shade. I drop my ass down on it as he opens the cooler and unpacks an array of refreshments and some sparkling elderflower drink that Helen always has in stock for me.

He hands me a paper plate and nods at the spread. “Help yourself.”

I take a little of each of the snacks he’s packed, marveling at the fact some of these are homemade by him. There are a few spicy things that are one hundred percent for me, given his aversion to things that make his mouth sizzle. It’s a level of thoughtfulness that hooks another chain into my heart and increases his level of dangerousness.

We eat in comfortable silence, both of us staring over the lake, lost in our thoughts. He cleans the empty containers up and puts them in the cooler as they become empty.

“I really like it here,” I murmur.

“The lake? It is stunning.”

“Not just the lake, but here as in Red Lake. Helen, Duke, the town, the people.” *You*.

“You lived in a city before?”

“I did.”

“You don’t miss the bustle of people?”

I tilt my head. “No. I thought I would, but it’s something I had to experience in order to compare it. Now that I have, I prefer this.”

“I miss the diversity,” he mutters. “But not the coldness.”

“I understand. Living somewhere like Red Lake means you are only an hour from that kind of life. You can take weekend trips to the city and get your fill before coming back to the sanctuary.”

“That is the dream.”

“You don’t miss the military?”

“Again, I miss the diversity—the variety of work, the opportunities to hone my skills. But the bad outweighs the good for me, and that’s why I left.”

“Bodyguarding gave you that diversity?”

“No. It’s not what I thought it was going to be.”

“Things rarely are.”

“What about you, Miss Engineer? What’s your speciality?”

“Nuclear, but I was doing my masters in renewable energy—before him.”

“That’s a very noble career choice.”

“I had plans to help change the world. This country is one of the biggest powerhouses in the world, and we should be leading on climate change.”

“Would you like to go back?”

Would I? It’s not even something I have considered, because you can’t study with a false name. I shrug, not allowing myself to have hope for a future that is about as likely as winning the lottery. “Perhaps.”

His gaze softens as he takes in my face. He sees so much without me saying a word. He leans over and threads his fingers into my hair. “One day soon, you are going to be free to follow your dreams, Cleo. I promise you this.”

My eyes flutter closed. He kisses the lids, and a tear escapes down my cheek. “Hope is a dangerous thing,” I whisper.

He leans his forehead against mine. “I know you don’t believe me, but you need to give me time to prove it to you.”

“I’m already on borrowed time here, Fox.”

His gaze hardens as he studies the resolve on my face. He leans his body against the tree, then picks me up by my hips and drops me between his legs, with my back against his chest.

I tilt my head to stare at him. He retrieves something from the backpack and places it in my lap.

“Read,” he demands.

I glance at the book he’s brought. Fucking hell. It’s my current read—the one he’s already finished.

“Why? You know what happens.”

“I’m not interested in what’s happening in the book. I’m interested in your response.”

I sigh and drag my knees up to balance the book as I turn to where my bookmark is. My eyes trace the words, and I know this is going to be a spicy chapter. I lick my lips as I turn the page.

Fox’s hand reaches out and he turns the page back.

“What are you doing?” I snap.

“Read it out loud.”

“This was embarrassing in high school, and it’s even worse now,” I mutter.

His chest shakes behind me, but he doesn’t remove his hand from the book. I sigh and begin reading. Fox unhurriedly unbuttons my dress, his deft fingers sliding from one button to the next. I’d left the bra off after leaving the lake, so my nipples pebble as soon as the air hits them. I squeeze my thighs together as I continue reading, determined to not show him how he affects me.

Oh... oh shit. This is *the* chapter.

“Keep going,” he rumbles as he tugs on the ties at the side of my bikini bottoms. I keep my legs glued together as I read. He kisses below my ear before skimming down my throat. My breathing stutters, and he stops touching me.

“Keep reading, firecracker,” he demands. There’s a deep tone in his voice, one that’s dominant, dark, seductive, and a little dangerous. It melts my insides and lights a fire within my soul I’d long thought dead. Fox makes me feel beautiful, desirable, free, and a little wild.

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth as I turn the page and continue describing how the hero dominates and controls the heroine all in the name of giving her what she needs. He lights up her world and lifts the veil on what makes her hot.

“Open your legs, Cleo,” he whispers in my ear as he trails his hands up my thighs.

Like the woman in this book, I need to trust him to keep me safe as he leads me down a dark path. My legs part, and he lifts them to hook over his knees. My ass slides down, tilting my bare sex to the sky. His hard cock is like a brand on the base of my spine. I have so many questions about those piercings, but to ask them means I’m considering letting him into my body. I’m not there—yet.

Fox traces seemingly mindless patterns over the delicate flesh of my inner thighs, making me squirm. I will him to go higher as I throb with need. The guy in the book grabs the woman’s throat in a dominant move, and Fox’s hand circles my neck. He doesn’t squeeze, just lets me know he’s there. I freeze. Do I like this? My core clenches in reply. *Fuck.*

“Remember—anytime you say stop, I will.” His fingers twitch around my throat. “Words, firecracker.”

“I understand.”

“Good girl. Now keep reading.”

His fingers squeeze, making my pulse spike and heat pool between my legs. “Fox,” I rasp as I arch my spine and silently beg him to touch me where I need him most. “Please.”

“Patience. I haven’t had the opportunity to savor you yet. Last night was driven by need and this morning by fear of being caught.” I grind my ass against his hard cock, making him chuckle. “You want to play dirty?”

I tilt my head back and stare at his whiskey-warm gaze. “Always.”

His fingers grip my chin, and he looks into my eyes as he finally touches my clit. I suck in a breath, and he drops a kiss on my lips as he swipes through my arousal.

“You’re fucking soaked,” he growls as he grazes my clit with a calloused finger. A low sound of pure need escapes my lips. He pauses at my opening. I tense, trying to close my legs, but he has them pinned open. “Trust me,” he mutters.

A little of my passion cools as I shake my head. “I can’t.” Those feelings of inadequacy—that I am broken and unlovable—rear their ugly head.

He jerks his head back. “You don’t trust me?”

“I do, but I think I’m broken, Fox.”

He shakes his head, and his gaze softens. “You are not broken, Cleo. If something hurts more than it feels good, let me know, and I’ll stop. Okay?” Nothing ventured, nothing gained—so the saying goes. I nod. He sighs like he was holding his breath, and it’s at that moment I realize how important my trust is to him, how vital my consent is.

“Relax,” he demands. That tone sends a spark of desire through my body as I obey. He circles my entrance again and again, bumping against my clit with each pass. He alternates between kissing me and gazing down at where his hand is causing a beautiful chaos in me.

Fox slips the tip of his finger inside, and the sensation steals my breath. “You okay?” he asks as the hand around my throat squeezes.

“More,” I beg.

He gives me a wicked smile and presses a little deeper. There’s no pain, just an aching need to be filled. Fuck. I can’t remember the last time I felt that—and I’m sure it’s never been this strong.

“Greedy, just like you kiss.” His thumb makes agonizingly slow circles around my clit, making me want to scream in

frustration. Then something vibrates against my hip. *What the hell?*

“Fuck,” he says as his hand snakes between us and drags out his phone. “I need to get this. Don’t fucking move.”

“Seriously?” I snap. He’s taking a call? Now? What the fuck?

“Trust me, I wouldn’t answer if it wasn’t important.” He flicks the answer button as I blink at him in disbelief as he snaps, “This better be urgent, Larry.”

I’m being edged for some dude called Larry? No. Not happening. My hand falls between my legs, and I gasp at how wet I am.

Fox’s gaze narrows. “Don’t you fucking dare,” he hisses at me. “No, not you, Larry.”

I smirk as I bite my lip and push the tip of my finger inside, making my breathing stutter. Damn, that feels good. Not as good as Fox’s hands, though. I arch my spine and press my ass tighter against his cock.

He grunts and taps the mute button. “If you come, firecracker, I will teach you the true meaning of the word edging.”

“Is that meant to be a threat?” I whisper as he returns to his conversation and snaps a few more words at Larry. His gaze flicks from my hand buried in between my legs to my face. I’m so close. I just need...

Fox’s hand tightens around my throat, and my pulse skyrockets, blocking out everything but the heavy thrum of my heartbeat in my ears. “Don’t,” he warns. The bands snap tight inside me, then my vision darkens, and I explode. My eyes fly open as I start to come down. “Did you enjoy that?” he asks, his phone discarded on the ground next to us.

“Yes,” I whisper.

“Good. We have about a twenty minute journey home, and in that time, I want you to decide.”

“Decide what?”

He urges me up and to my feet. He collects the blanket and phone, stuffs them inside the backpack, and grabs the cooler in one hand. He spins to face me and tucks a lock of hair behind my ear.

“How you want to deal with your hymen. My fingers, your fingers, a toy, my cock. Tick tock, Cleo. It’s time to teach your body it is far from fucking broken. In fact, you will come harder than you ever have before from a little danger and fear. Darkness exists in you, and I’m answering the siren call. So choose. You have twenty minutes, or I’ll decide for you.”

Well, fuck.

CHAPTER 37

FOX



Decisions, decisions.

There's a storm rolling in. Rare for this time of year, but fitting as my emotions clash inside my chest. The sky darkens as the car eats up the road toward home, giving Cleo enough time to consider if she wants this. And if she does, *how* she wants it. Falling into bed with her might test her limits, but it's breaking all of mine. I need to come clean about my situation to her soon. Cleo's definitely not on the 'lay low' plan. I think fate threw us together—two souls meant to heal the wounds of the other.

She grasps the edge of the seat as I take the corners a little too fast for comfort. I chuckle and increase the speed, making her slam her eyes closed and shriek at me to slow down. Taking pity on her, I do as she asks, and she releases a breath before crossing her arms over her chest.

After a few minutes of comfortable silence, she leans forward and swipes her finger on the dashboard. I frown until I spot the small black spider dangling from her fingers. It scurries up the web to her hand.

"Hello, old friend," she says as she twists her hand so the critter crawls onto the back of it.

"You are on speaking terms with this spider?" I ask.

Her lips twitch. "Think about it. They would form the perfect network of spies, going undetected in every room in the country. Think of the stories they could tell, the history

they have witnessed, the good, the bad, and the ugly. People drop their mask because the spider can't share their secrets.”

“Most women run from the room at the sight of a spider, not contemplate their usefulness in society should they become more intelligent and organized.”

Cleo's lips twitch as she places it back on the dashboard. I turn onto the drive and pull the car into the garage just as a roll of thunder echoes in the thick clouds above us.

Cleo climbs out of the car at the same time as me. The unmistakable tip tap of rain drums on the roof.

“Wait here,” I instruct as I open the door and dart out into the storm. I stomp into the pool house, grab an umbrella, and snap it open before starting my return to the garage. My feet stall as I catch Cleo spinning in the garden, her arms stretched wide as the rain pelts her skin, soaks her hair, and plasters her dress to her body. My breath catches at the look on her face—free, joyous, and wild. She's never looked more beautiful.

She pauses and blinks at me, the rain water clinging to her long lashes as I stride toward her. She eyeballs the umbrella, and her shoulders tense. I snap it closed and drop it to the ground before I reach her and cup her face. Her lips part and her shoulders relax.

My mouth lands on hers, a heated kiss in the cool rain. Her tongue tangles with mine as I angle her head back. She's like putty in my hands—beautifully pliant, yet vibrating like a live wire. Touching her in the rain is like getting electrocuted; it's addictive, seductive, and disarming.

I drag my mouth away from hers and we pant, dragging in much needed oxygen.

“I want my truth now,” I tell her. She knows what I want. What I need. She squeezes her eyes closed and a tremor runs through her body. *Come on, firecracker, take that leap. I will catch you.*

“Honor,” she whispers.

I frown. “My intentions right now are not honorable, but I promise you'll enjoy them.”

Her mouth pulls into a sad smile. “No, Fox, my name is Honor.”

How apt. It suits her. “Honor,” I say, trying it out. “Thank you for trusting me.” I grab her hand and tug her toward the pool house. “Come on, girl who dances in the rain. Let’s get you warmed up.”

We pause in the living room, our soaked clothes dripping water on the floor. Electricity charges the air as we stare at each other, the air seeming to thicken as the moment draws out. Honor breaks it by lifting her dress over her head. I follow suit, my fingers clumsy as they remove each item of clothing. I can’t keep my eyes off her, and my breath catches when she removes her contacts, putting the full depth of her eyes on display.

She bites her bottom lip, her gaze tracing over my chest before slipping lower to my cock, which has spent the majority of the day hard. Most of it is my own doing, making her come apart for me in church was the most religious experience I’ve had in that building. At the lake, I hadn’t planned for it to go that far. She’s such a sensual creature, I find myself breaking all my convictions just to witness a smile on her face.

“Did you decide?” I ask, stalking toward her.

She tilts her chin in the air. “I can’t.”

I freeze just before I reach her. She can’t? I must have read her wrong. I thought she was ready. My jaw clenches as I take a step back. “Okay.”

She frowns. “Where are you going?”

My hand falls to my hard length and gives it a quick pump. “To take care of this in the shower.”

She slow blinks like she’s trying to understand, and her cheeks flush. “Oh, no. I didn’t mean I *can’t*, I mean I can’t decide. You choose whatever feels right. Scripting it is going to make me panic.”

Thank fuck for that. I rush forward and lift her by the hips, encouraging her to wrap her legs around my waist. I carry her into the master bedroom with our lips locked together, stealing

one of her greedy kisses that I fucking live for. I lower her body to the bed and lick and suck on her pert breasts before moving farther down. She laughs and squirms as I kiss her hip bones. Ticklish. Noted.

She's still wet from her release less than an hour ago, making me groan as I settle my mouth on her clit. She jerks on the bed, so I pin her down as I manipulate the bundle of nerves until it's swollen and she's begging me to tip her over the edge. But I don't want her sated—I want her desperate and mindless enough to take the edge off the pain.

“Fox, please,” she whispers as she throws an arm over her face from another denied release. I push one finger inside until I feel the resistance.

“Relax,” I coax as I work another finger inside of her. Fuck, she's tight. She cries out when I feed her a third, but doesn't move away or tell me to stop. She relaxes a little as I pump them into her slowly. With each pass, her legs fall open a little wider.

“Are you trying to kill me?” she snaps. *Perfect.* I rise from my knees and back up out of the room. “Where are you going?” she squeaks with a look of panic.

“Give me a minute, I need to get a condom.”

She rises onto her elbows and bites her bottom lip. “I'm on birth control, and I'm clean.”

I freeze in the doorway and my eyes fall closed. “I've never taken anyone bare.” It's not something I do. I'm rarely with someone long enough to get a feel for their true personality and whether or not they are trustworthy. Most people aren't—they constantly lie. Not big lies, but small ones to make their lives easier. Honor rarely lies, and I can feel that she isn't now, and what she's offering—the trust in me to not hurt her—that's my undoing.

I return to the bed and climb up and over her body. Her arms wrap around my neck as she welcomes me into the cradle of her thighs.

“Are you sure?” I ask.

“Yes, I trust you.”

I’ve thought a lot about the type of man she’s running from, the relationship she’s escaped, and how I want this experience to be different for her. I flip us so she’s straddling my thighs. Her mouth parts as I drag her forward so my cock rubs against her clit. Her teeth sink into her bottom lip as she twists her hips, making us both groan.

“You’re in control, firecracker. We are going to do this together. You choose when, but use my cock to do it.”

Her hands ball into fists on my chest as she grinds down, and her breathing stutters. My hands grab her hips and lift her off me. “Ah, ah, no coming until I’m inside you.” She huffs in annoyance, making me smirk. She has a little brat in her, not something I’ve ever found attractive until now.

“I’m scared,” she whispers.

I release her hips and wrap my hands around her neck as I inch up the bed so I’m sitting up. I kiss away her worries and feed her my courage and strength. With each pass of my tongue against hers, I describe a future filled with love, not fear, but she has to trust me.

She grinds down on my cock, and I let her squirm a minute before lifting her away. I meant what I said.

“Honor, look at me.” Her eyes flick open, and her pupils are blown wide with desire. She’s so close to overcoming this hurdle, to healing herself from the torment. “I promise your night will end in pleasure, but sometimes to get there, we have to endure a little pain. But it will be worth it. Trust me to take your pain and turn it into restless heat and desire.”

Her hand drifts between her legs, and she grasps my cock before lining it up at her entrance. I’m already coated with her juices, and there’s nothing more I can do to help prepare her, so I just stay patient.

Her legs tremble as she holds herself above me. “You don’t have to—” She slams down and steals my breath as she takes half my length. *Fuck.*

She hisses and tears spring forth from her eyes and spill down her cheeks. My hands land on her hips, and I hold her steady as she adjusts to me. I kiss her wet cheeks, stealing the pain in her tears as she breathes through it. She rocks against me, taking another inch, then another.

My thighs are clenched as I fight the need to thrust inside her. I've never done gentle and slow—it's not in my nature. But I will for her. I will be what she needs. But the feel of her heat, naked and tight, squeezing my cock like she's trying to hold onto me—fuck.

“That's it, firecracker, you are taking me so well.”

Her eyes lock onto mine as she works to take all of me. “That feels good,” she utters with a look of pure wonder as she finally sits flush against my thighs.

My lips twitch as I twist my hips to rub my piercings against her G-spot. Her head falls back and a moan of pure need erupts from her throat. I urge her up so I can create a little more friction. Watching Honor come apart while I'm inside her is a revelation. She clenches around me, and I fight not to come like a teenager. I've been worked up all day, so it's not a surprise.

She twists her hips as she sinks back down, finding that one spot that drives her crazy. I'm going to find every single place that makes her moan like this, inside and out. I will know this woman better than she knows herself.

She gets more confident as the pain fades, and she realizes something very important—she is not broken. She owns her pleasure, and I'm the lucky bastard that gets to hold her on this journey of rediscovery.

I swipe a lock of damp hair from her forehead. “You okay, firecracker?”

She nods, then she says something that makes my control snap. “Fox? I need you to stop holding back. Fuck me hard, steal my air, and make me scream so loud that the pastor thinks I've been possessed.”

CHAPTER 38

HONOR



I'm done being broken.

His pupils expand and then he flips us, never losing contact between our bodies. He buries himself even deeper than before. The pain slowly fades as my body adjusts to his size. It wasn't half as bad as I imagined it to be, largely due to him spending the day preparing me for him. The tenderness he's shown me helped me get over my fear. Letting another man inside my body is a massive deal—it's not something I ever expected to do again. But Fox has broken through every barrier, soothed every fear, and stoked a fire in my soul I'd long thought snuffed out by Gideon.

His hands tangle in mine as he presses them above my head into the soft sheets. It's a dominant move, but it's not to control, it's to connect.

"Don't take your eyes off me tonight," he demands as he thrusts slowly into my body. His piercings rub me in all the right places. Damn. I've never come from penetration alone. In fact, I've never come while having a cock inside of me. He twists his hips, and my eyes roll in the back of my head. He freezes until I refocus on him.

"Good girl," he utters, dropping a heated kiss onto my lips. My legs wrap around his hips, and I lock my ankles behind his ass, tilting my pelvis. We both groan at the new position. "Do you have another orgasm for me?" he asks.

That would make four in a single day. I always thought having multiple orgasms was a myth, as it's something I've

never achieved before. But as he continues to rub against me, building a deeper tension, ushering me toward a strange yet inevitable cliff edge, I know I'm about to discover what it means to be made love to by a man who knows what he's doing.

Keeping one hand pinning mine down, he uses his free one to wrap around my throat. He squeezes, stealing my air, and my skin flushes in panic.

“Fuck. You just gushed all over my cock. My dirty little firecracker enjoys being choked.”

I'd slap him if one, I had use of my hands, and two, he wasn't one hundred percent correct. He swivels his hips, and my lips part on a tiny gasp. His whiskey-warm gaze tracks every micro movement of my face, checking to see that I'm still with him. I've never felt so seen, so cared for, so stripped bare and vulnerable. It's intoxicating having his full attention on me, but also disconcerting. He sees too much.

He loosens his grip, allowing a brief flood of air into my lungs and blood to my brain. “Harder,” I rasp, trying to break the tether to my soul.

He shakes his head and skims his lips over mine. “No, Honor. Feel me.”

I do feel him, everywhere. He floods my senses with his touch, his gaze, his scent. I can't breathe without him, and that terrifies me.

I'm at that cliff edge, clinging on for dear life to stop myself from drowning. I squirm beneath him, not sure I want him to witness my destruction.

“Ready to scream my name, firecracker?”

I glare at him in response. *Arrogant asshole*. He chuckles as he releases my hands, then dips his head to latch onto my nipple, sucking hard. I grip his shoulders with the intention of pulling him off me or urging him to go faster—I can't quite make up my mind. Neither of those things happen, because the second he clenches his teeth over my nipple, it sends an arrow of pleasure straight to my core, and I scream his name. He lifts

and captures my lips, swallowing my cry of pleasure. I have never felt anything like this—a deep extended pleasure that makes me see pretty stars.

He growls into my mouth as my body drags his release forth and leans his damp forehead against my own. His arms curve around me, caging me in, but I don't feel panic, just safe and cherished.

“That was...” I start but can't put it into words.

Fox huffs a laugh. “Yeah, it was.”

He pulls away from me, and I glance down, catching the blood staining him. My blood.

“Let me up, so I can deal with that,” I whisper.

He shakes his head. “Stay here, and I'll draw us a bath.” He stands and runs a hand down his face as he looks at me. I swallow and move to cover myself. Is he repulsed by me now he's had me? He grabs my hands and pins them to the side of my head. “What are you doing, Honor?”

“You were just wondering why the hell you touched me,” I state.

His gaze narrows as it drills down into my soul. “You're right.”

My breath stutters in my chest. I'm so stupid. “Let me go.”

“No, Honor, you are right—because now that I've touched you, I can't let you go.”

“Oh.”

“Yeah, *oh*. Now let me draw a bath without you descending into a crazy mess of rejection.” He releases my hands, grabs the corner of the comforter, and wraps me up in it. He leaves the bedroom and the sound of rushing water follows. I stare at the ceiling and watch as a spider creeps into the corner of the room, another witness to a pivotal moment in my life. I'm starting to think they are the keepers of history, guardians of the truth.

Fox reappears and scoops me up in his arms, still wrapped in the comforter. “I can walk,” I state.

He arches a brow. “Then I haven’t done my job well enough. Don’t worry, we can keep practicing until I get it right.”

I chuckle as he sets me down on the tiled floor. Candlelight flickers in the darkened room, and my heart stutters when he slowly peels the comforter from my naked body. His fingers twine with mine as he urges me into the steamy bath, and I hiss at the sting of the hot water.

Fox climbs in behind me and settles me with my back to his chest. He grabs a sponge and starts washing me down. My eyes flutter closed. Damn, that feels good.

“Where have you been all my life?” he mutters, almost to himself.

“Becoming the woman brave enough to give you everything you deserve.”

It’s too soon to feel love, right? The words are on the tip of my tongue, but I force them back. Even if I do feel it, I have no room in my future for a man with whiskey eyes and a huge heart. The monster on my trail won’t hesitate to devour anything good in my life.

He nuzzles my shoulder before scraping his teeth along the sensitive flesh. “I can hear you thinking hard. You gave me a month, and I’ve had a week,” he utters. “Run from me, Honor, I fucking dare you.”

CHAPTER 39

HONOR



I'm an addict for your touch.

I shoot up in bed and blink into the room full of shadows. I'm slightly disoriented from last night, and as I gaze at the empty space next to me, I have to wonder if I dreamt it all. My hand grazes my swollen lips, the ones he couldn't stop kissing. I squeeze my thighs, finding them a little achy. No, it definitely happened. I had a steamy night of sex with Fox Alderidge—my boss' grandson. I must be insane.

I launch myself out of bed and cast a glance at the clock. I'm an hour late. So, not only am I fraternizing with my employer's family, I'm also slacking in my duties. I race through a quick shower, tie my hair up into a messy bun, and grab a pair of jeans and a plain forest green T-shirt. My feet get smushed into my blue Crocs, and then I'm out of the pool house and heading to the main kitchen with a tumble of excuses and apologies prepared in my head. I stumble when I find Helen sitting at the breakfast bar with an empty plate and cup in front of her.

She raises a brow at me. "Fox said you were unwell." Now that seems like a sensible excuse, much more believable than *Sorry, I slept in. The aliens abducted me last night, and I needed a little more shut-eye because I got probed.*

"I'm feeling better now," I squeak as I hurry to clear away her dishes. If I wasn't already aware of just how late I am, the banging coming from upstairs from Samuel's team would have clued me in.

“He left you breakfast in the refrigerator.”

I open the door and find a small platter of fruit, yogurt, and granola. Ugh, this man. “Do you want another cup of tea?”

“Sure, make yourself one too and come and sit with me.” Great. An Alderidge-style inquisition—exactly what every girl needs to start their week.

I top her cup up and arrange my own breakfast before dropping into my seat and tucking into the food. I’m actually ravenous, for the first time in longer than I can remember.

“Now I get it,” Helen says.

I glance at her. “Get what?”

“The need for the contacts. I thought it was overkill. Who would be recognisable from just their eyes? Blue, brown, green, they’re all very common.”

I swallow the chunk of mango as panic seizes my lungs. I’m stupid—so very, very stupid. Fox is going to get me caught.

“But those mismatched blue and gray eyes are both stunning and memorable. So now I get it.”

I push my half-eaten breakfast away and turn to look at Helen, who’s wearing a soft smile. “Fox and I...”

She pats my knee. “No need to explain, Cleo. I know my grandson, and I like to think I’ve gotten to know you. Fox doesn’t let anyone in. He was orphaned at a young age, and while I have always strove to be there for him, and he knows logically that his parents death wasn’t abandonment, no one can stop those feelings as a child and how they shape their relationships later on. He’s opened up to you, and even if you are still planning on passing through, I am eternally grateful that you managed to pull down his walls and show him not everyone is out to hurt him.”

“But if I leave, won’t I abandon him also?”

“That’s for you and him to work out. He knows your intentions—he’s in this with his eyes wide open. You will do what you have to do to stay safe. Just know that he’s strong,

smart, and a protector. He will defend you with his dying breath.” She rises from her stool and sweeps out of the room.

“That’s what I’m afraid of,” I whisper to the empty kitchen.

I FIND FOX and Duke in the garage. My van has disappeared, leaving a nice big space for Fox to do his workout. I saunter in and am greeted by Duke with an aggressive lick to my hand. Fox is skipping, and I don’t mean hopscotch. I mean shirtless, gray sweatpants, hot and focused movement as he swings a rope fast enough to cause a stir in the air. His muscles bunch and tense as he powers through the jumps. He’s got a baseball cap on backwards, and his short beard is a little longer today, like it’s due for a trim.

“Morning,” he says with a grin. Damn, he’s not even out of breath. The stamina of this man is unreal.

I take a seat on a creaky wooden stool in the corner and sip my tea. “Good morning. Thank you for my breakfast.”

“Did you eat it all?”

I shake my head. “No, I forgot my contacts and Helen noticed.”

“She won’t tell anyone.”

“I know, but I can’t afford to make mistakes. There’s too much at stake.”

“Hmm.”

I raise a brow. “Hmm? That’s all you’ve got for me?”

He grins. “No, I have so much more for you, but I need to finish my workout first.”

I roll my eyes. “Skipping is hardly a workout.”

He stops, and I almost kick myself for spoiling my own enjoyment. “Come here.”

I shake my head and lean back against the wall. “Oh, no. Please continue.”

“Honor, get your ass over here. Let’s see what you’ve got.”

He doesn’t think I can skip? Idiot man. I place my cup on the floor and move to stand in front of him. He goes to hand me the handles. I shake my head. “You set the pace.”

“Tandem skipping? Sure you can keep up?”

“Only one way to find out.”

He starts slow, allowing me to find my rhythm. Then he speeds up, our chests brushing against each other. A bubble of laughter escapes my mouth as he sets a punishing speed. He halts the rope and stares at me with heat banked in his gaze.

“What?” I ask a little breathless.

“That’s your real laugh?”

“I guess.”

He backs me against the side of his car. “I want to hear it again.”

“It’s not real if it’s done on command.”

He sucks in a deep breath. “Trust me?”

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. “Okay.”

He runs his hands down my arms and urges them behind my back. His mouth captures mine as he winds the skipping rope around my wrists. My heart skips a beat. Not out of fear, but excitement. There’s a massive difference in intention between Gideon and Fox. Gideon was always making moves to manipulate and control. The domination was for his pleasure, while everything Fox does is for mine. I know he would halt everything he’s doing with one word—no matter what state we are in.

He opens the car door, yanks on the rope, then slams the door shut, trapping me against the car. He smirks down at me. “Now to find the bits that make you laugh.”

“What?” Laugh? That’s not where I thought this was going.

He peels the T-shirt up and tilts his head like he's trying to decide something. "Can you handle being blindfolded?"

"So long as you talk to me, yes."

He raises the bunched material and settles it across my eyes, drowning me in darkness. "What's the important rule, Honor?"

"If I say stop, you will without question."

"Good girl."

His fingers skim my ribs, and my breathing stutters. Being robbed of my sight is heightening everything else. His lips blaze a path between my breasts before moving down and licking around my belly button, making me giggle as he unbuttons my jeans and peels them down my legs. A sound of frustration escapes me as he leaves them trapped around my ankles. He kisses along the edge of my panties until he gets to my hip bone, then scrapes his teeth over the hollow. I squirm and throw my head back, laughing as he finds my most ticklish spot.

"Fox, please."

"I have to say, I rather enjoy it when you beg me, firecracker. I guess you gave me what I wanted, so I can return the favor." He pushes my thighs apart and skims his fingers between my legs over my panties. I suck in a breath. "Are you sore?" he asks.

"A little."

"I'll be gentle." He pushes his head between my thighs, his beard grazing the soft skin as he runs his tongue over the silk covering me. He groans. "You are already soaked. I can taste you through your panties."

I toe off my Crocs, and he helps me out of my jeans and underwear. Then he buries his tongue inside me with no build up, and I am right on the edge of an orgasm in seconds. He hums as I clench around his tongue. He tears his head away and opens the car door, releasing me before picking me up and dropping me on the hood of his car. He presses me back and

bound as I am, I'm helpless to do anything but submit to his demands.

He drags his heated cock through my wetness before pushing inside me, feeding me one tortuous inch at a time. I can feel each piercing gliding inside of me, and it drives me insane. I hiss as he stretches me wide. I am sore from last night, but this pain makes me feel alive.

"You feel me, firecracker?"

"Yes," I pant. "But I need it harder."

"Patience."

"Is overrated."

He chuckles as he hooks my knees in his arms and continues to enter me. There's a point where he meets a little resistance. He withdraws, making me whimper, then slams inside and steals my breath. I arch my spine to absorb the impact as he buries himself balls deep in my body.

"Fox, I need..." I cut off as I have no clue what I need, but it's something.

"I know." I'm glad one of us does. "Hold tight, Honor." To what? My arms are bound, and he has me pinned open like a butterfly. I clench around him, holding him in the only place I can. "Fuck," he snarls. He sets a punishing rhythm, and pain blends into pleasure as he works my body into a frenzy.

"I'm going to come," I say hoarsely.

The T-shirt gets dragged over my head, revealing this god of a man before me, intent on filling my world with pleasure.

"Eyes on me, Honor."

I focus on his face. His jaw tics as he withholds his own release, waiting for mine. His thumb flicks over my clit as he swivels his hips, grinding a piercing in a place that makes my entire body taut. The bands snap, and I scream his name, dragging him over with me.

He growls my name as he grips my thighs and keeps himself buried deep in my body. "I think I'm addicted to you,"

he mutters as he collapses over me and kisses me softly. It's like he's in a trance and doesn't know what he's saying, but the truth in his words can't be refuted. The problem is, I feel the same way. It would be so easy to lose myself in this man. His phone breaks the heavy silence, and he reluctantly drags himself away from my body and undoes the rope binding my wrists. He kisses the slight indentation on the sensitive skin before grabbing his phone from his pocket.

"I have to take this," he says as an apology before tapping the screen. "Larry, what's wrong?" Fucking Larry. Who is this man that commands Fox's time? I vow to find out. "Today? Can it wait?" His eyes find mine.

He nods as his eyes narrow on me as I redress. *You answered the phone, I'm not hanging around naked for you to kiss and cuddle.* He grabs my wrist as I slide off the hood of his car. It doesn't hurt, but it's unbreakable.

"Fine, I'll be there by tonight." He disconnects the call. "Where are you going?" he asks.

"Shouldn't I be asking you that question?"

He rubs his temple and the weight of the world seems to be pressing down on his shoulders. "I have shit I need to explain to you, but I need to deal with something back in the city first."

"Why not just tell me now?"

He drops a kiss on my forehead. "Because I don't want you to run." Then he strides out of the garage like he hasn't just alluded to something huge.

Fucking men.

CHAPTER 40

FOX



Sometimes, the evidence is right under your nose.

The yellow cab pulls up in front of the NYPD's First Precinct, stopping alongside a row of police cars. After paying and tipping the driver, I step out and stare up at the three-story gray stone building. The timing is shit, but this couldn't be done from home. Leaving Honor when I've just brought down her walls is stupid, as it gives her time to erect them again, and that's not acceptable. I'm hoping to be back in her arms before breakfast, but it depends on how long it takes the detective to ask his ridiculous follow-up questions.

Larry meets me inside and shakes my hand with a grim smile before we're led through to an interrogation room. He takes a seat next to me, and Detective Greene, a portly man with a receding hairline, comes into the room a moment later with a stack of files and sits across from us. As he goes over information we already know, I can see in his eyes that he doesn't believe I'm guilty. My eyes narrow as I contemplate what is driving his accusations against me.

He removes a set of photos from one of the files and spreads them across the metal table between us. I tilt my head and pull one of them toward me. In it is the woman I protected for months. Deep purple bruising lines her throat, consistent with having been choked. Scratches line her inner thighs, while bite marks cover her breasts. It's interesting that this is the first time I'm seeing these.

I point at the one of her breasts. “We could deal with this very quickly. Take an imprint of my teeth and match them.”

“That would be difficult, since the victim has healed. We would only have pictures to compare.”

Larry glares at Detective Greene. “Your forensics can make an educated opinion, though.”

This is why I feel there’s another driving force behind this whole situation. Gillian, the victim, took photos of her injuries, only to sit on them for months before reporting the rape. Why? Usually, the lack of forensic evidence would work in my favor, as it would be her word against mine. Instead, it seems to be working against me.

Unfortunately for Gillian, she picked a night I wasn’t on duty. I *was* in bed with a woman, just not her. But here’s where my lack of care regarding lovers’ identities comes back to kick me in the ass—she’s my alibi, and I can’t find her.

“The DA is going for the throat on this,” the detective says. “He wants to set an example, to make it known that sexual violence isn’t welcome in his city.”

The fucking DA. I’ve seen him at events where I was working. He’s a charming egotistical fucker, and everyone laps up his warrior of justice act. But I can sense the dark evil burning in his soul.

“No, he wants to lead a high profile case to further his agenda of becoming the state’s Attorney General.”

“I couldn’t possibly speculate on the DA’s career aspirations. But since you’re unable to locate your alibi, I suggest you prove where you weren’t.”

Yeah buddy, we are already on that. I have a little respect for him, since he knows the whole thing is bullshit and is dancing around pointing us in the right direction.

“Take the imprint of his teeth, Ted. I want the comparison document by tomorrow,” Larry snaps.

It seems Ted and Larry are old friends, or maybe rivals. Larry is the best defense lawyer in the state, but he is known to

only take cases where he genuinely believes in the innocence of the accused, and because of that, he has a really high win ratio. However, the DA holds a similar track record, so pitting these two against each other in the courtroom ensures fireworks. Our game plan is to get enough evidence together to get the case thrown out of court before my name gets dragged through the tabloids.

Whatever happened to Gillian, whoever did that to her, deserves to never see the light of day again. But pointing the finger at me, knowing it's not the truth, is a low blow. Especially since I've spent my entire adult life defending the innocent and protecting people. It's crippling.

Someone raps against the door and a short woman with dark bobbed hair enters. She nods at us. "You wanted a teeth imprint, Detective?"

So he'd already made the decision to take this evidence. He jerks his head at me. "Mr. Alderidge, please."

The forensic lady makes quick work of gathering the evidence, and before we know it, the interview is over and we're back outside.

"There's a great steakhouse around the corner," Larry says as he heads left. I follow him. I need to eat, and we have a few more things to talk about before I catch the next flight home. May as well kill two birds with one stone.

We order, and I try not to zone out as Larry bombards me with information. The latest of which is that he is tracking down people who must have witnessed Gillian's attendance at a high profile party which went on until the early hours of the morning. Hours away from where I was and where this attack allegedly took place.

I polish off the food and my thoughts scatter to the woman at home in my bed. I hope she ate something. I glance at my phone on the table. It's almost 11 p.m., is it too late to call? A tiny black spider scurries across the white table cloth and pauses as I chew my lip. Something feels off—a twist in my gut warning me I'm not where I should be.

Larry snaps his fingers in front of my face just as my phone lights up. I swipe the accept from Honor and a dark ceiling comes into view but no face.

“Miss me already, firecracker?”

“Fox,” she whispers. Larry, seated to my left, leans over to look at the screen.

I frown. “What’s wrong?” Her gorgeous face fills the screen as she grabs the phone. She’s by the window in the bedroom.

Duke makes a grumbling noise from somewhere. “There’s someone in the main house.”

“Like one of my grandmother’s suitors?” I ask, even as my stomach drops. Honor wouldn’t call me for that.

“No, Fox.” Her eyes snap to mine as I catch the outline of the gun in her other hand. “Definitely not someone who should be there.”

“Sit tight, I’ll call the police.”

Larry sucks in a breath, making me scowl.

She shakes her head. “It will take too long.” The line goes quiet for a moment. “They are moving through the house, Fox. I think they are looking for me. I have to go.”

“Do not leave that pool house,” I snap, jumping to my feet. I race out of the restaurant and hail a cab.

“I’m so sorry if I’ve brought him to your door. I have to go and protect Helen.”

The phone cuts off just as Larry catches up to me. “Fox,” he pants.

“Not now, Larry.”

“Who is she to you?”

I arch a brow at him as my phone vibrates in my hand. “I pay you to defend me, not police my relationships.”

“But she’s—”

I glare at him and swipe my phone, hoping it's Honor telling me she has come to her senses and is sitting tight. But it's a message from the Ghost. I flick it open.

GHOST

Woah, dude, where did you find her? You aren't going to believe who she really is.

I raise my fist and shout at a cab that speeds past me.

GHOST

Attached photo.

I flick it open, finding a professional picture of Honor with blonde hair on the arm of a man. Her stare is blank as fuck as she smiles at the camera. My heart seizes, and my blood runs cold.

GHOST

You have stumbled on no other than Honor Lowell, the missing wife of Gideon Lowell. New York's DA.

GHOST

Last reward for her safe return was two million dollars. I know you aren't short of money, but the narrative he spun was a cartel kidnapping. Makes me wonder why she's hiding out at your pool house as your gran's assistant. It doesn't seem to fit.

No, but it explains why she's so terrified. It's as if serendipity has sprinkled her shit over me. The very woman who might be able to prove my innocence has been living under my roof. The New Year's Eve party that Gillian attended was hosted by none other than Mr. District Attorney himself. And if memory serves, Honor didn't disappear until a few days later.

FOX

Thanks for the info. I'll put double the payment in your account. Ensure you keep this to yourself.

GHOST

You insult me. No need for the extra—this shit is entertaining as fuck.

I swap to a different chat.

FOX

I need that favor.

H

What do you need?

FOX

A private jet ready for me at JFK in thirty minutes.

H

Where to?

FOX

Home.

H

Done. You owe me.

FOX

I'm not done yet. I'll be in touch shortly and you can add it to my tab.

H

Is this about the woman?

FOX

Isn't it always?

Larry huffs. "What?" I snap.

"She's the DA's missing wife."

"Yeah, I got that. Your point?"

"My point is that if you hand her over, Gideon will back off."

I open the cab door and resist the urge to punch my lawyer. He's just doing his job and is clueless to the kind of danger Gideon poses to Honor.

"Alternatively, she's your ticket to freedom, Fox. Get her to come forward as a witness, and all of this disappears."

I climb inside the cab and slam the door closed in his face. "JFK," I snap at the driver.

He nods and speeds off. I retry Honor's phone, but it rings out. Again and again. My finger hovers over the sheriff's home number. Dragging in law enforcement to a potentially volatile situation where Honor's details will enter the system and raise instant flags is risky, but doing nothing is worse. No,

it's time to call in the friendship card. I hit call and wait for him to answer.

CHAPTER 41

HONOR



My heart can't take the betrayal.

Going on the run and calling the police to deal with the intruder would be the smart thing to do. But emotions don't make us smart, they make us human. I'll be damned if I'm going to leave behind the woman who has shown me more kindness and compassion than my own mother. Is it a coincidence that they broke in the one night Fox is away? I don't believe so.

I block Duke from following me outside of the pool house. *Sorry, buddy, can't have you growling and giving away our position.* Whoever is creeping around in the main house is most likely on the hunt for me at Gideon's bidding, but they must not know I'm staying in the pool house. If they did, they wouldn't waste time searching the mini mansion.

I click the gun's safety off before sliding the key into the kitchen door and turning it as softly as I can manage. The click sounds loud in the dead of night, and I hold my breath as I inch the door open and slide inside the house. I let out a shaky breath and wipe my slick palms on my thighs before silently moving through the downstairs, finding each of the rooms deserted.

The next floor is going to be a little more tricky. Samuel and his team have bits of wood and toolboxes strewn everywhere. But I'm not searching the house, I'm going to reach Helen and get us the hell out of here. All I have to do is evade him. I'm assuming it's a guy, given Gideon's sexist

view of the world. I'm also assuming there's only one of them. My heart thunders in my chest. Shit, I hope there's only one.

The door to the master suite is open an inch, and there's a whisper of movement in that room. Helen never leaves it open, but she also moved into the guest room while the work is being done. I turn left down the hallway and side step the slightly creaky floorboard as I move silently. I twist the knob of the bedroom Helen will be in and slide inside. I close the door as far as I can without actually letting the latch click into place.

I spin around to find Helen sitting bolt upright in bed. I put my finger against my lips and shake my head as I stalk toward her.

"My gun is my lock box in the master bedroom," she whispers. I don't know how she knows what's happening right now. Maybe it's the fact that I'm skulking around in the dark with a gun and a silk nightgown. Nothing screams relaxed about this situation.

"We are going to leave. I think there's only one of them. They are in your bedroom right now. Stay behind me. If he spots a loaded gun pointed at him, that should be enough of a deterrent."

"Okay." She slides off the bed and hovers behind me as I snatch a quick look around the corner. The master suite door hasn't moved. Either he's put it back exactly where it was, or he hasn't left it yet. Isn't it strange that it doesn't take a flighty DA's wife that long to search a room?

I raise the gun and steadily point it at the door. I jerk my head, indicating Helen should move past me and down the stairs. She inches around me, and as soon as I hear her pad halfway down, I turn to follow. Loud thumping comes from the right, and I swivel to see a huge dude barreling toward me. He throws my arm up and to the left as I pull the trigger. The recoil slams me back against the wall, my head bouncing painfully off it while the loud blast makes my ears ring. The shot goes wide, lodging in the opposite wall, and terror slicks down my spine. *Fuck, I missed.*

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Helen scooping up a two by four. She swings it like a professional baseball player and smashes it over his head while he's busily trying to disarm me.

"Bitch," he grunts and snatches the wood from her hands before using it to shove her chest. She loses her footing and tumbles backwards down the stairs in a heap.

"Helen, no," I whisper.

"Come quietly, Honor, and I'll leave the old woman alive."

His voice isn't familiar, but if I had any doubts about his connection to Gideon, they disappear with his use of my real name. "The only way you are taking me out of here is in a body bag," I reply in a steely voice.

He snorts and pulls the gun free of my grip. "No need for that. I won't get my payday if I deliver you cold. A little banged up is to be expected though." He backhands me across my left cheek, sending me sprawling to the floor. If he thinks that's enough to scare me into submission, he is clueless as to the horror his employer inflicts on those he 'loves.'

He tucks the gun into the waistband of his jeans and plucks me off the floor. I keep my body limp as he cradles me in his arms. *That's right, I'm a pathetic weak female who couldn't possibly defend herself against you.*

He storms down the stairs. My gaze lands on Helen, and she winks at me before her eyes flick to the gun at his waist. This is going to be incredibly dangerous, very stupid, and exceptionally courageous. But fuck it. If this man puts me into the hands of my husband, I may as well be dead.

He steps over Helen. At the last second, she snaps her foot up and nails him in his groin. *Fuck me, Helen.* The dude cries out, and I snatch the gun as he falters and drops me onto the floor, my skull receiving a second knock as my finger pulls the trigger. The shot skims his shoulder.

"Fuck no, not again," I grit out, adjusting my aim. He roars and leaps forward in an attempt to prevent me from burying a bullet in him. I squeeze off another shot as his body lands on me. He grunts but circles my throat and squeezes hard, cutting

off my air supply. My first instinct is to panic, but I shove it back. *No. I'm not letting you win.* Adrenaline courses through my system, and my heart races as I fire again. This time, his body spasms before his grip on my neck goes limp. I greedily suck in air, filling my lungs with precious oxygen.

Tremors rack my body as warmth blooms across my chest. My mind races to catch up to my actions. Did I shoot myself? I'm not ready to die. I just found someone to live for, someone to risk my heart with. It's not fair.

Heavy pounding on the door yanks me out of my head. Helen's worried face appears above mine. "Did you call the police?" she asks.

"No." She frowns as the knocking gets louder.

"Helen? Cleo? It's Sam. Fox sent me. I heard shots.

Fuck. Someone let me in, or I'm breaking down the door."

Helen's shoulders droop, and she moves to open the front door. A worried Samuel storms into the house and closes the door behind him. "Where's—" His gaze lands on me.

"A little help please?" I say. He strides over and uses his boot to shove the guy off me. He helps me stand and holds me steady as I sway. When he sees the massive crimson stain covering my chest, his eyes fly wide. "It's not mine," I tell him.

"What the fuck happened?"

"Language," Helen chides.

"Excuse me, Helen, but fuck proper manners when I get a call in the middle of the night from my best friend saying there's a dangerous man invading the home his grandmother and woman are in." He points at the man on the floor. "Someone going to explain that to me?"

"Home invasion," Helen snaps. "That's all you need to know."

"Fine. How long until the police get here?"

“We haven’t called them yet,” Helen says as she bends to check the intruder’s pulse.

Her face relaxes. Because he’s dead or alive? “He’s dead,” she says with a nod at me. “That will make the next part a little easier.”

He’s dead. Gone. Unalived. I did that. I took someone’s life. Fuck. I killed someone. The room sways, and I look down at the gun still clutched in my trembling hand. “Can someone take this off me? I feel weird.”

Helen snatches the gun and snaps the safety on just as an unfamiliar ringtone echoes in the room. Time seems to stop as we all stare at the man on the floor. The ringing cuts out before starting again. *Fuck this*. I bend and rummage in his side pocket for the offending phone, doing my best to ignore all the blood. Unknown caller ID flashes up.

I swallow. Deep down in my gut, I know who it is. But tonight I made the decision to stop running scared. I stood up for myself and the people I care about. No more hiding. He knows where I am anyway. I slide the button to accept the call, leaving a bloody streak on the screen.

“Do you have her?” the voice from my nightmares snaps. “She better be unharmed.” I swallow as Samuel frowns and folds his arms. Helen raises a brow at me. “Honor?” Gideon drawls. “Did my disobedient wife grow a backbone?”

“Who is Honor?” Samuel mouths.

I drag in a breath but force myself to stay in the moment. I wrestle the panic welling inside of me as I gaze at Samuel and Helen. *I’m not alone*. “I always had a backbone, Gideon.”

“You won’t when I snap it,” he snarls. “Stay where you are and surrender yourself to my men once they reach the house in that pretty little town you’ve been holed up in for weeks. Come quietly, and I’ll leave Helen alone. You are there alone with the old women right now, and your knight in shining armor is still hours away. Don’t make her collateral damage.”

Samuel punches the mute button. “He doesn’t have eyes on the house right now, or he would have mentioned me.

Don't bow to his fear tactics. We have time."

I nod and click unmute. "You'll have to catch me first, husband. Happy hunting." I disconnect the call. Helen grabs the phone, pulls out the battery, and tosses it on the floor. She grabs another plank of wood and uses it as a battering ram to destroy it.

"That's the piece of shit you've been running from?" she snaps. "You should have confided in me. I could have helped."

"I don't understand," I mutter. She's worked out who I am from that call? How?

"You are Honor Lowell, the missing wife of Gideon Lowell, the dirty New York District Attorney who is currently trying to put away my grandson for rape. He thinks I don't know, but like with you, I bided my time. I didn't pry, I waited until you found the confidence to come to me."

My mouth falls open. Rape? That's Fox's big secret? The reason he's hiding here?

Rape.

My breathing comes in short pants as the panic I'd kept locked down threatens to overtake me. Samuel answers his phone, but I barely take notice as my head spins, trying to make sense of everything.

Rape.

Samuel trains his gaze on me, his brows lowering as he witnesses me falling apart. I can't have fallen for another snake, for someone who hides their demons beneath their beautiful. I'm not that stupid.

Rape.

I clutch at my hair. Fox, a rapist? My heart can't take it, and my body shuts down. Don't let it be true. Please, please, don't let it be true. The world sways, and black spots edge my vision. The darkness rises up, and I let it take me.

CHAPTER 42

FOX



It's time to flip the narrative. The hunter is about to become the hunted.

The sun is beginning to breach the sky when I climb out of the taxi and race to Samuel's house. I burst through the front door and drop my bag on the floor with a thud. Honor is curled up on his corner sofa, wrapped in a thick blanket.

Her gaze finds me, but it's blank like nobody is home. She blinks slowly and a tear escapes down her cheek. I approach slowly just as Samuel appears from the kitchen with a steaming mug. His shoulders sag before he puts the cup down on a table next to Honor.

I kneel in front of her and swipe a damp piece of hair from her forehead. "Hey, firecracker." No response. I'd gotten the rundown from my grandmother and Samuel as I raced across the country to get back to her. She's killed a man. No matter that it was self defense—it leaves a mark on your soul. Plus hearing her husband's voice for the first time in months, and his apparent threat. It's a lot to unpack.

"She's in shock," Samuel states. "She blacked out for a bit. But we got her out of the house before the police were called. Honor has been taken out of the equation."

My gaze snaps to him as he folds his arms and leans against the door frame. "She told you her name?"

"No, her husband did that."

Her world is falling apart, and I wasn't here to protect her. Instead, I was answering more bullshit questions.

Samuel jerks his head to follow him into the kitchen. I do, reluctantly. He leans against the sink as I take position against the door frame so I can keep one eye on Honor.

“She knows about the charges,” he says with a grimace.

“Mine?”

“Yeah, the rape.”

My eyes close and I swallow. I'd planned on telling her when I got back. “Who told her?”

“Your grandmother let the cat out of the bag.” I pinch the bridge of my nose. How the hell does she know? “Fox, her husband, Gideon Lowell, he's the one prosecuting you?”

“He is.”

“Small fucking world, don't you think? Have you considered that she was planted here by him?”

I shake my head. The psychological impact Gideon has had on Honor can't be faked. “No. You don't understand the extent of her abuse at his hands. Honor is hiding, on the run, trying to outsmart a man with vast means. It's a horrible coincidence, nothing more.”

“Then I suggest you try breaking through whatever has her locked in her mind. She was attacked, killed a man, and received a really creepy phone call from her husband, but none of that broke her. Your rape allegation did. She trusted you, and that has been affected tonight.”

“Thank you for taking care of her.”

He nods. “Take all the time you need. I keep making her hot drinks and food, but she hasn't spoken a word or touched anything since I brought her here.”

I glance over my shoulder at Honor. She's breathing, but that's the extent of her attachment to Earth. Good thing I know how to break into someone's mind and drag them back.

“Can I take your car?” I ask. He rummages in his jeans pocket and hands me the keys. “Thanks, man.”

He squeezes my shoulder. “Anyone who has met you knows it’s bullshit.”

“That means a lot.”

I turn back to Honor and kneel at the side of the sofa. “We’re going to head home now, firecracker. Everything has been sorted and cleaned. We can make a plan of action from there, okay?”

She blinks. I take that as confirmation. I already have a plan and it’s in motion, but I do need her walking and talking. Shit is going to be difficult enough without a catatonic woman.

I scoop her up, swaddled in the blanket, and stride out of the door Samuel holds open.

“Take care of her, Fox.”

“That’s the plan.”

I bundle her into the passenger seat and pull the seatbelt across her before striding around the truck and dropping my ass in the driver’s seat. Ten minutes later, I pull up to the garage.

My grandmother comes out of the house to greet us. She’s got her bobbed hair slicked back and is wearing a pair of combat trousers with a pristine white T-shirt. She’s ready for battle. I grab Honor and cradle her in my arms as I move past my grandmother into the main house. My gaze drops to the red stain on the wooden floor at the foot of the stairs.

“Are you okay?” I ask as I take note of the cut above her eyebrow. It’s been stitched together.

“I’ve been better. But yes, I’m okay. Is Honor?”

“You dropped a bomb on her, so no, I don’t think she is. But she will be.”

“What are you going to do?”

“Snap her the fuck out of this state. Pack a bag, your ride arrives in an hour. Take your passport and the bank card for

emergencies.”

“I’m not running, Fox. This is my home.”

I pause on my way through the kitchen and spin to face her. “Your home has been invaded, and your life is under threat. I can protect you by moving you out of the way. It’s one less thing that can be used against her. He’s not interested in you, but he won’t hesitate to use you to get to her.”

“Are you going to stay here?”

“No. I’m moving to a defensible location to give me a little time to prepare.”

“She will try to run.”

“I’m aware. But one way or another, this has to end.”

“Take Duke,” my grandmother calls out as I escape out the kitchen door to the pool house. The second I open the door, Duke bounds out in a rush of excitement and anxious full body shakes. He sniffs at Honor as I usher him back inside the house, then slam the door closed with my foot. I enter the master bedroom and lay her down on the ruffled bed sheets. I’ll start small, hoping and praying I can pull her back to the land of the living with gentle measures. But it’s not like I have endless time to coax her back. I need her functioning now, even if she’s livid. Anything is better than this impression she’s doing of a corpse.

I run a hand over my hair before moving into the en suite and switching on the shower to cold. Then I return to find she hasn’t moved an inch. I peel the blanket off her shoulders, revealing her cream silk nightgown with a massive crimson stain in the middle. I tear it in half and fling it on the floor. Duke sniffs at the bloody garment and barks his displeasure as I examine her carefully. Being whisked away from the scene means she hasn’t been checked out by medical staff, so I’ll have to do.

There aren’t any cuts, but deep bruising rings her throat, and a shadow under her left eye seems to deepen by the second. Other than that, she appears to be physically okay. But

that doesn't make it acceptable. Gideon will pay for each and every mark on her body and psyche.

I scoop her tiny frame up and march into the bathroom. "Sorry, firecracker, but I need you back." I step under the spray and hiss at the temperature. The water turns red as the blood of the intruder runs off her body, but Honor doesn't react. *Fuck.*

I grip her chin to keep her mouth closed and tip her head back into the flow of water. At first, there's no response, but after a moment, her body's need for air sends a tremor running through her body. *That's it. Come on, fight me.*

Her arms lift to push against my shoulder. *Come back to me, firecracker.* Her body jerks and trembles like she's being electrocuted, and my teeth grind together as I force myself to keep her under the water. It goes against all my protective instincts, but it's for her own good. Her hands curl into claws and she fights me in earnest, leaving red welts along my arms. I yank her back from the spray and release her mouth, and she sucks in a deep shuddering breath. A high-pitched, primal sound erupts from her, shattering my heart.

"I can't...he's here...you lied...I can't." She garbles everything that fights to break free.

I hold onto her and turn the temperature up to help with the shivers racking her body. "It's okay, I got you."

Her fists pummel my chest, each time stronger as my little firecracker fights for her place in this world.

I hold her as she rages. Gibberish flows from her like there's no filter on her subconscious. Her nails scratch at me, but I welcome the pain as it means she cares enough to fight to stay. She eventually tires herself out and collapses against me, sobbing into my shoulder as I wait for the initial panic to subside.

I turn off the knob and carry her back to the bed, flinging the bloody blanket onto the floor before laying her down.

"Fox?" she says, her voice a broken whisper. "Tell me it's not true."

Something inside me wants to die that she has to ask. I know deep down it's not a reflection on me as a person. It's because of the asshole she is married to. She doesn't know who to trust.

I cradle her face in my hands and stare into her gorgeous eyes. "It is not true. I have never raped anyone in my life. I've done questionable things, but never that."

Her gaze soaks in my features, every microexpression, the cadence of my voice, my breathing, my pulse. She is an expert at reading people because she's needed to be to survive her marriage.

She swallows and squeezes her eyes closed before they fly open, and she wraps her hands around my head and grips my hair. Our mouths clash together, and she kisses me like she's never done before. Nobody has ever kissed me like this—like they are offering me their bare vulnerable exposed heart and trusting me to keep it safe. It's terrifying. In return, I give her mine. I take off the years of hardened shell and hope she will not find my blackened soul lacking. She moans into my mouth, an acceptance of love and devotion that floors me.

I tear my mouth away from hers. "While I'm fully invested in where this is going, we have to go. I'm sorry, firecracker, but I need to take this fight somewhere I can control and win."

"Okay."

"Don't run, Honor."

She swallows and nods. "I won't."

For now, at least it's the truth. Time to take this hunt to its conclusion. This woman in my arms deserves to live in a world free of the bastard that tried to steal her light. It's time the hunted became the hunter.

CHAPTER 43

HONOR



Oh, what a complex web we weave.

Fox scowls at his phone and hammers something onto the screen.

“Everything okay?” I ask as I dump my duffle bag in the trunk and open the rear door for Duke to jump in.

Fox’s eyes lift to mine as he raises the phone to his ear. “We are leaving. Are you in position?” he snaps. I sink into the leather seat and click my seat belt on. “Any problems?” he asks as he starts the car.

I’m burning with a thousand questions. *Is who in position? Where are we going? Why are you helping me?* Helen’s already gone off to some nameless place arranged by the protective man next to me. He should be with her, not me. I wrestle with the feeling that I’m leading him to certain death. Gideon won’t hesitate to kill Fox once he discovers he’s been intimate with me and taken what Gideon believes is rightfully his.

He drops the phone into the center console before peeling down the drive and taking the turn leading away from town and toward the freeway.

“Are you going to tell me where we’re going?”

He darts a quick look at me before checking the rearview mirror. *Oh, hello, Mr. Bodyguard.* This is Fox Alderidge in full protection mode.

“I’ll explain once we put some distance between us and Red Lake. Gideon knows where you are, so we need to change that situation immediately.”

“But you have a plan?”

“No, I have three. Which one I follow will depend on what happens.”

“Always have a plan B and C,” I mutter.

“You are learning.”

I leave him to negotiate the roads as he’s driving far too fast for comfort. An hour later, we merge onto the freeway and head north. I drift in and out of consciousness with my head leaning against the window when a loud rumble that shakes my chest erupts around us. My head snaps up, and I blink at the leather-clad man on a shiny motorcycle pulling up next to my window.

He winks at me. Wait—I recognise him from the bar. I twist my head to peer over my shoulder to discover we’ve been surrounded in a V shape by similar bikers.

“Fox?” I whisper.

“Don’t panic, they are here to help us.”

“How?” The other more stoic guy from the bar pulls up on the driver’s side and gives Fox a sharp nod. Fox floors the car, and I grip the side of the seat. “What’s happening?” I grit out.

“They are creating a rolling road block behind us. We had a tail, and we’re working on losing it.”

I stare at him and my mouth flops open. “Who the fuck are you?”

His lips twitch. “There are a million things you don’t know about me, firecracker. But during my career, I’ve helped people from all walks of life, and that has earned me some favors.”

“Please tell me you aren’t in a biker gang.”

He shakes his head. “For a time, I was employed by the prez. He had an issue with a rival club and his son. I also

served with the vice-president.”

“And you called in your favor now? For this?”

“For you. Yes.”

My chest tightens. He takes the exit onto a country road.
“Are they following us?”

“Three will tail us for another thirty miles or so, longer if they feel like it. The rest will continue the roadblock on the freeway, leading our tail to conclude that we are still on it.”

“So, the ones we met back at the bar—”

“Yes, Hunter and Mark. Hunter is the vice-president. Mark is an idiot, but he’s relatively harmless.”

That figures. Hunter watched me like Fox does—assessing every movement and cataloging it to form a picture, all without asking a single question.

“Do you want to talk about the allegation?” he asks after we sit in silence for twenty minutes.

“Only if you do.”

“You believed it was true?”

I can hear the pain in his voice, and it cuts me to the bone. “No, I think it just side-swiped me after I’d been attacked, killed a man, and received a call from the man that terrorizes my nightmares.” His thumbs tap on the steering wheel. I’ve noticed it’s something he does when he’s suppressing his thoughts and feelings. “Spit it out, Fox. You keeping secrets is what caused that reaction in the first place. If you had trusted me, it wouldn’t have been the shock it was.”

“I’m sorry.”

I sigh. “Forgiven.”

His lips twitch. “If it helps, nobody but the authorities and my legal team were supposed to know.”

I snort. “You expected Helen to not have her finger on the pulse of your life?”

“Yeah, that was short-sighted of me. I was trying to shield her from the worst of it.”

“She doesn’t need shielding, Fox. She’s a grown, capable woman.”

“She’s also my grandmother, whose physical health is starting to deteriorate. Don’t think I’m not having that conversion when this is over.”

“Like I said, that’s between you and her.”

Fox hums and goes silent before saying, “Gideon is heading the prosecution against me.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. How did our paths converge in this massive world of seven billion people? “I know.”

“And he knows you are with me.”

“Again, I know. For what it’s worth, I still think we should have all split up.”

He frowns and casts a glance my way. “You have faced this alone for long enough. Running isn’t living, Honor. We take a stand, and when the dust has settled, you can dance in the rain every day with your head thrown back as you laugh at the gods.”

“I’m afraid,” I whisper, lowering my head.

His hand lands on my jean-covered thigh and squeezes. “I know, firecracker, but facing your fears is easier when someone is at your side.”

I reach my hand out to cover his. “He’s a disease. He won’t stop until I’m under his control or dead. Those are the only two options.”

“Wrong. The third is he dies. That is the only acceptable outcome.”

I suck in a breath as I watch the fields fly by. “I find myself wondering what evil I must contain to have ended up with someone like Gideon.”

He slams on the break, and the car skids to an abrupt stop. Duke grumbles in the back seat as he slides around.

Fox wraps a hand around the back of my neck and turns my head to face him. “He was attracted to your light, Honor. Men like him enjoy the challenge of snuffing it out.”

“We all have a little darkness.”

“He isn’t darkness, he’s emptiness. There’s a difference.” He drags me toward him and kisses me deeply. I hiss as his fingers skim the egg-shaped lump on the back of my head. He jerks away. “Are you injured?”

“I have two lovely lumps on the back of my head.”

He frowns. “Any dizziness? Tiredness?”

I slant a look at him. “I’ve been awake all night, terrorized, and now I’m on the run. I haven’t eaten since yesterday. I’d be more worried if I wasn’t feeling those things.”

“We will stop at the gas station. I need to refuel anyway, so you can grab snacks and drinks.”

“Gas station snacks? You? Mr. Health Conscious?”

“It’s not my preference, but until we get further away, I don’t want to stop for too long.” He puts the car into drive, and we are off again, hurtling toward a future I don’t dare to dream is true.

I drag my bottom lip between my teeth.

“What’s on your mind?” Fox asks, reading me perfectly as usual.

“Who is she? The woman accusing you?”

He squints at the road like he’s picking through his words carefully. “She was my employer, an actress.”

“What aren’t you telling me?”

“Nothing important.”

“Fox.”

“Honor.”

“If we are to trust each other, then we have to speak the truth. No knocking the edges off.”

“The incident took place on New Year’s Eve.”

“Okay.” I’m still not seeing the big issue.

“She was at a party.”

“Right.” Like most prominent people on New Year’s Eve.

“In New York.”

“Because that’s where you lived. Still not seeing the reason you are squeezing the steering wheel like you want to strangle it.”

“She was at the DA’s house on New Year’s Eve.”

My jaw drops. *Oh, fuck.* “Her name?” I whisper.

“Gillian.”

I squeeze my eyes closed. “And where were you?”

“Hours away in the bed of another woman.”

“So you have an alibi?”

“I can’t find her.”

“But I can attest to the fact she was at my party, and you were not.”

“Not happening.”

“Fox.”

“There will be another way.”

“No one goes against Gideon.”

“He hasn’t met me.” His chest expands as he releases a deep sigh. “The problem is I believe she was raped—just not by me. I don’t know if she’s being manipulated or if she’s lying.”

“What’s your gut instinct?”

“That she was raped, possibly drugged, and ultimately fed a load of bullshit to cover up what happened. If you can convince the victim of a false truth, then you are fucked.”

“Have you tried reaching out to her?”

He shakes his head. “That’s a big no-no.” That’s fair. It might be seen as intimidating the victim. “I believe whatever happened took place at Gideon’s house.” He raises a brow at me.

I press my lips together. “Gideon is a lot of things—a lot of horrible things—but only to me. He didn’t stray.”

“You’re sure?”

“He is capable of, and has committed rape. Many times. But I am sure they were centered and focused on me. He wouldn’t risk the scandal for a start. But it’s more than that—he has an obsession, one that developed over time. I don’t think he was this way before he met me.” Which brings us full circle to the fact that something inside him must be warped.

“If you don’t stop blaming yourself, I will stop this car and spank your ass over the hood before fucking you senseless to remind you how fucking perfect you are.”

A chuckle escapes me, and I’m half tempted to push him so he makes good on his threat. Heat coils in my belly. I’m so utterly gone for this man.

We make it another few miles before his phone lights up. He presses the button on the steering wheel, accepting the call from someone named H. “No tails. You are a free bird now.”

“Thanks, Hunter.”

“Anytime. Let us know if there’s anything else we can do. If you need a safe house, as discussed, I’m just a call away.”

The phone goes dead and my shoulders tense. How strange that I found a sense of comfort from the burly bikers following us and now that we are on our own, I feel vulnerable. “Plan B?” I wonder.

“No, firecracker. Holing up with a load of violent bikers was plan A.”

“What changed?”

“The tail. They are leading Gideon’s vultures on a merry chase across the state. They will assume we are hiding out

with the MC and waste valuable time searching and eliminating all their known haunts.”

The phone lights up again. Unknown caller. I jerk my eyes to Fox as his jaw ticks. “Not a word, Honor.” He hits answer.

“Fox, you have something of mine. I want it back, and I’m willing to barter something you want more.”

“Which is?”

“Your freedom.”

I squeeze my eyes closed, and my head thuds against the seat. *Fuck.*

CHAPTER 44

HONOR



Hear me roar.

“Bring her in, and I’ll drop the charges.”

“Not going to happen.”

“How do you think this is going to go? You don’t bring her in but still appear in court in front of me? She will be alone and unprotected. I won’t be gentle if I have to take her by force.”

“You don’t know the meaning of the word,” Fox responds.

There’s a stretch of silence, and I glance down at the phone. He’s still there—waiting, weighing, waging a war. “She’s addictive, right?” Gideon drawls. “You’ve been between the legs of *my* wife. Nothing else would get you to risk your freedom and your family.” Fox’s jaw tics, but he ignores the bait. “Was she tight? Did she gift you with what I gave her?”

I suck in a steady breath and ball my hands into fists.

“Did she beg sweetly? I taught her to withstand and revel in the pain. Honor does know how to please, I trained her well.”

Fox grits his teeth. I shake my head, urging him to not snap. He glares at the road.

“When I have her back where she belongs—and make no mistake, I will have her—I’ll make sure she never fucking runs again. Honor? Do you hear me? You took my love and

care and shoved it back in my face. But don't worry, baby, I'll make sure you never step foot outside of our house again, even if I have to break your legs to do it. After all, the public sympathy vote will count for so much once I rescue you from the hands of my enemies."

"I'd rather die," I snap. Fox's head jerks to me.

"Oh, Honor. Just wait and see what I have planned for you. Death would be a mercy, and one I'll never grant you."

"Then I will take you down to Hell with me, Gideon. You will not get another tear or scream from me."

"Hold tight to that conviction, because when I've finished taking you apart, piece by fucking piece, there won't be a single bone in your body that hasn't been broken and remolded with the sole purpose of serving me. I am your god, Honor."

I won't survive it. "You are the fucking devil."

"Hey, Gideon," Fox interrupts. "Have you witnessed her dancing in the rain with her head thrown back as she catches the droplets on her tongue? Have you seen her in a red dress looking like a temptress?" Then he goes for the kill. "Have you heard her roar like a lioness when she comes? It's a fucking revelation, man. She comes apart so fucking beautifully when she rides me. She used my cock to fix what you did to her. I fucked her raw, coated her in my cum, and watched as it leaked out of her swollen pussy."

"She belongs to me," Gideon growls.

Fox chuckles. "No, she belongs to herself. You might have dominated her every move, but your sole purpose was to make her body work for you, to give you pleasure, and make up for that tiny limp dick you hide in your pants. My Honor takes what she needs. She trusts me to satisfy her desires and pops off like a fucking firework brighter than the 4th of July. You fucked up, Gideon. You married a goddess, and then you tried to steal her light."

"When I find you both, I'll slit your throat in front of her, then fuck her in your blood."

Bile burns the back of my throat.

“Kinky,” Fox says. “Honestly, Gideon, it’s not me you need to watch. Your meek wife left the building the second she got the courage to run from you and emerged as a fucking warrior when she shot the guy you sent to retrieve her.”

I can practically hear the wheels in Gideon’s head turning down the phone. “The report said your grandmother did it.”

“Enough,” I mutter and stab the end call button.

“Why did you do that?”

“He’s running in circles. Can’t he track your phone if you stay on too long?”

“If he is stupid enough to follow the trace on that call, he will have a real nice time in Canada.”

Duke puts his head on my shoulder and licks my ear. “Hey, big guy. You enjoying the road trip?” I give him some scratches as I try to calm my nerves after hearing from Gideon—again.

“He’s a real piece of work,” Fox grumbles. “I’m going to enjoy making him suffer.” I close my eyes and drag in a centering breath. “Hey, don’t check out on me again.”

“I’m not. It’s just a lot to handle. I’d resigned myself to running and hiding for the rest of my life.”

“That’s not a life.”

“I know, but it’s still better than the one I was living with him.”

His fingers curl around my hand and squeeze as he places it on his thigh. “Keep your hand on me. I need to remind myself you are still here.”

We drive for another hour before the red light blinks on the dash, reminding us we need to stop for gas.

“Duke needs a toilet break anyway,” I tell him.

Fox jerks his head. “There’s a gas station up ahead. You grab snacks as discussed, and I’ll take Duke and get the gas.”

“Okay.”

He pulls into the large and busy station. Fox scans the area as he pulls up to a pump. “Quick as you can, firecracker,” he mutters, passing me his wallet.

I kiss him on the lips before jumping out of the car and winding my way between the other travelers. I take a basket and grab some of my favorite snacks, things I’ve still not eaten since leaving Gideon. How apt that I’m on the run again and buying the very things he forbade me from consuming. Dog food and a travel pet water bottle get tossed in for Duke. Huh, they make everything. I pay the cashier just as my bladder twitches. “Restroom?” I ask. Don’t know how long it will be before we stop again, and I’d rather pee in a toilet than a bush.

The young man across from me eyes me from head to foot, assessing if I want the sacred key to the shitty restroom for nefarious reasons, or if I just genuinely need to pee. Lucky for me, he decides the latter and hands me the key with a massive wooden tag.

“Thanks,” I utter before darting to the back of the store and unlocking the door. I turn and flip the tiny catch before pulling my jeans and underwear down. After finishing, I wash my hands and move the lock. A split second later, the door flies open and a huge guy dressed in black combat pants and a dark T-shirt herds me back inside the tiny toilet.

My mouth opens to scream and he slaps a hand over it. No, not a hand, a cloth.

“There you go, no struggling now, the boss wants you alive and well. I’m not as stupid as my colleague.” A nasty chemical smell rushes up my nose and gets sucked into my lungs and bloodstream. My eyes roll into the back of my head as darkness rears up to claim me.

CHAPTER 45

FOX



River deep, mountain high—I will always find you.

Duke gives me an unimpressed look. *Yeah, yeah, I'm asking you to shit at the edge of a gas station with a million folks watching.* Who would have thought a dog would have performance anxiety?

Duke squats and overcomes his displeasure at being made to go to the toilet in public, while I keep an eye on the store, watching as Honor grabs a basket and moves through the aisles. My nose wrinkles at the stench wafting from the steaming present Duke's gifted me.

"Fuck, what have you been eating?" I grumble. "That's big enough to make a horse jealous." I grab a poop bag from my pocket and lean over to scoop it up.

He huffs at me before yanking on his lead and barking. "Hey, settle," I snap. Can't have him scaring everyone here and getting wrapped up in a police report. I open the rear door, and he drops onto the back seat. I shove the nozzle in the car and wait for it to fill as I scan the store. No Honor. My brows lower when I can't find her. Where is she?

The pump stops, and I hurry into the store, scanning everywhere for her. I need my wallet to pay for the fuel, and she has it. Maybe she's in the bathroom? I wait in the line behind four people, hoping Honor will reappear before I have to pay.

Minutes tick past, and I reach the guy at the desk. “Hey, my girlfriend was just in here.” I raise my hand to Honor’s approximate height. “About this big, copper red hair.”

“Oh yeah, she took the key to the toilet a while back. I was just about to check on her.”

My blood runs cold. *A while back?* “Where’s the restroom?”

He points to the back wall. I stalk through the store as my stomach drops and yank open the door to find a shopping bag on the floor. A few snacks have rolled out onto the tiles, and next to it is my wallet and Honor’s phone. *Fuck.*

I snatch the phone and wallet and rush back to the cashier desk, barging in front of a steady stream of customers. The woman behind me huffs. “Rude.”

“CCTV?” I snap.

The guy blinks at me. “Yeah, but you can’t look at it, dude.”

I pull out five one hundred dollar bills and slap them on the counter. “How about now?” He jerks his head over my shoulder at the growing line. “I can work it, just show me where,” I tell him.

He grabs the money and opens the door to let me through before pointing at a small dark room to the side. I hurry inside and rewind the recording by ten minutes, my eyes locked on Honor as she grabs the key and makes it to the restroom without incident. She’s in there around a minute before a big guy comes to stand by the door like he’s waiting for the toilet. Nobody pays him any mind, but I can see he’s tense, ready for action. The door inches open, and he barges inside the room. A minute later, he emerges with Honor in his arms and escapes through a back door marked ‘Employees Only.’

I hammer my fist into the wall, splitting my knuckles. *Fuck!* Why did I let her go by herself? I twist my fingers into my hair and glance at the time stamp. This happened seven minutes ago. He’s long gone with her.

I pull out my cell and click on Ghost’s number.

“Fox, this better be urgent. You know not to call,” her melodic voice chimes.

“He has her.”

“Who?”

“One of Gideon’s men. We stopped to get gas, and he grabbed her.”

“Why did you leave her to go to the gas station without you?”

My hand grips the phone tighter. “I didn’t. He took her from the restroom.”

“Her phone?”

“Abandoned.”

I switch the CCTV to the outside footage and watch as he bundles Honor into the back seat of an Escalade. I squint, trying to make out the license plate, but mud splatter blocks it. *Fuck.*

“They are in a black Escalade, heading north from—”

“I have your location,” Ghost says as I hear her tapping on a keyboard. I dart out of the room and slap another hundred dollar bill next to the employee. “For the gas,” I mutter as I race out of the store and climb into my car. I peel out of the station and head north.

“Tracking the vehicle will be difficult,” Ghost murmurs. “It might be easier to...” She sucks in a breath.

“What?” I snap.

“Gideon Lowell chartered a private jet from New York hours ago.”

“To where?”

“The pilot’s logged a flight path to an airfield a hundred miles north of you.”

He came for her himself. I’m not surprised—this man has control issues. “Did they land already?”

“Yes, twenty minutes ago.”

“Dammit.”

“I’ll see what I can find,” she says, cutting the call. I don’t take offense. Ghost is one of the best trackers in the world, but her social skills can be interpreted as rude. She’s not—she’s just focused.

My eyes scan the road as I accelerate. What if Gideon gets his hands on her? What if he... My knuckles tighten on the steering wheel. I can’t let that happen. After checking my rearview mirror, I call Hunter.

“What’s wrong?” he asks, answering after three rings.

“I lost her.”

“She ran?”

“No, she was taken at a gas station.”

“What do you need?”

“To get our hands bloody.”

“Fucking finally,” he growls.

Hang on, firecracker, I’m coming for you.

CHAPTER 46

HONOR



Facing your demons is terrifying, but cathartic.

Voices filter through the haze of my mind, and I fight against it, clawing my way to consciousness. My head feels heavy, like it's laden with lead. Did I fall asleep in the car? A soft, silky caress glides across my cheek, and I groan and turn my face into it. Alarm bells ring in the distant reaches of my mind, and my body stiffens. Fox's fingers are full of calluses. These are the hands of someone who has never done a day of hard labor in their life.

I drag my eyes open, and as my vision clears, I find Gideon staring down at me. My head rests on his lap, my body swaying with the car moving beneath us. "Hello, baby."

I jerk, but my limbs don't respond. There's a tight sensation in my shoulder blades and around my legs. With every second, the chemical fog lifts, and the horror of my situation crystallizes into perfect clarity. My arms are locked behind my back. Not just bound at the wrists, but wrapped up tight from my hands to the tops of my arms. My knees and ankles are also strapped together.

My eyes narrow at Gideon as he strokes the hair from my forehead. Each touch taints me with his evil, and I want nothing more than to recoil from it.

I lick my dry lips, and his gaze falls to them, tracking the movement. He grabs a bottle with a straw poking out of the top, and I raise a brow at him as he lifts it to my lips.

He shakes his head. “It’s just water, Honor. I have a million ways to control and punish you, but you will be conscious for each and every one of them. The lesson won’t stick if you aren’t awake to experience the pain.”

I wrap my lips around the straw and suck in the cool water, gulping down two mouthfuls. The third I hold in my mouth before tearing my head away and spraying the liquid into Gideon’s face.

He blinks like he can’t quite believe what happened. Rage drowns out the fear Gideon expects from me. Fox has given me a glimpse of a future filled with joy and freedom. He has shown me what love could be, and I am livid that Gideon is trying to steal it from me.

He grabs a handkerchief from his pocket and wipes his face with it as his blue gaze hardens, sharp enough to cut glass. My breath rushes through my nose at the promise of violence.

“I am not the same woman you married, Gideon. I will fight, punch, scratch, and make you bleed every second of every day.”

“Oh, Honor, I am counting on it. Breaking you is only fun if you fight.”

My teeth grind as adrenaline floods my veins. “You failed before, and you will again.” I will not return to who I was before I met Fox.

“Make no mistake, wife. I will enjoy breaking your body as much as I will revel in the shattered pieces of your mind. You think what you faced before was bad? That was merely correction; my way of helping you to become the best you could be. Now you will breathe, bathe, eat, sleep, see, touch, and hear only what I allow.”

“Game on, Gideon. Do your worst. You have to sleep sometime.”

He quirks a brow as his hand cups my jaw. “True, but it will be with you strapped down and at my fucking mercy.” His grip turns punishing, and my lips pop open. He spits inside my

mouth and slams my jaw closed. I retch, my stomach turning at the thought of any part of him being inside me. His fingers cover my nose. “Swallow, and you can breathe.”

I glare at him and fight for a minute before submitting and gulping down his revolting spit.

His lips twitch. “See, you are still mine. You still crave my control. Fight if it makes you feel better.” He releases my nose and mouth, just as the car comes to a stop. The door flies open, and I lift my head, spotting Mike crowding the entrance.

“Undo her legs, so she can walk. We don’t want any good Samaritans alerting the police. Leave her arms, I will cover them with my coat.”

Mike grins as he grabs my ankles and tugs me so I slide off Gideon’s lap and bounce onto the hard floor. I hiss as a shot of pain vibrates up my spine.

“Fight me, and I’ll break your fucking legs. You’ll be in a wheelchair for weeks,” Mike utters.

“I’d believe him if I were you, baby, he has quite the temper. Had to cover up a nasty incident on New Year’s Eve with a woman who wanted it—until she didn’t.”

The gears in my head turn. Mike assaulted Gillian, and Gideon helped to cover it up, making Fox the fall guy. Did she accuse Fox because she’s scared? Or did they do something to make her believe he really hurt her?

Mike undoes the belts around my legs, then sits me up as Gideon wraps me inside of his coat. They frogmarch me to the waiting plane, flanking me on both sides. There’s no hostess waiting to greet us. They’ve no doubt gotten rid of as many witnesses as possible. I’m sure Gideon is already planning the news of my rescue and return, about how he and his beloved have sacrificed so much for the city.

Mike pushes on my shoulder and forces me into a cream leather reclining seat before Gideon pulls the seat belt across my lap and yanks it tight. He winks at me. “Safe and sound now, Honor.”

I snort. Safe? Gideon? What a joke. He drops into the seat next to mine, and I eyeball the gun holstered at Mike's hip as he takes the seat across from us.

The curtain at the front of the plane slides open, and a stunning woman with brunette hair and blue eyes appears. Gideon's hand lands on my thigh in warning. "You try to signal for help, and Mike will slit her throat," Gideon whispers in my ear.

"Gentlemen, ma'am, would you care for a pre-flight drink? The pilot is just clearing us for takeoff."

"Champagne for me and my wife. We are celebrating her safe return to my arms."

My arms are bound—drinking should be fun. She nods, her gaze lingering on me a second longer than necessary. Her eyes tighten before she floats off down the aisle. My instincts tell me she knows, but I hope she's not stupid enough to do anything about it.

The speakers click, followed by a male voice. "Apologies, Mr. Lowell. We are just waiting for confirmation from the flight tower. There's been an incident at the local airport, and all flights are temporarily grounded. Sit back and enjoy the champagne, it shouldn't be long."

I freeze before forcing my shoulders to relax. That voice is familiar. I risk a quick glance at Gideon, but he doesn't seem to have noticed my reaction. I've flown on private planes with Gideon before. He doesn't own one, but the rich tend to share their shit among themselves. Perhaps this is someone who has flown us before? Or maybe... No. That's ridiculous. Hope will get me killed.

The woman appears with two glasses of champagne on a tray. She puts two small circular cloth coasters on the table before placing the flutes in front of us.

"Anything for you, sir?" she asks Mike. His gaze sweeps over her, making my throat tighten. Mike is as bad as Gideon—he too needs a visit from karma.

"Maybe later," he drawls. "It's a long flight."

She doesn't miss a beat as she works her way back to the front of the plane. Perhaps she's used to it? Doesn't make it acceptable. The curtain swoops closed behind her, and I hear the click of a lock, followed by a door opening and closing. Is that normal? To have the hostess in the cockpit?

Mike glares at me. If Gideon wasn't here, I think he'd be inflicting his own brand of pain.

I arch a brow. "What's up, Mike? Still pissed that I slipped through your fingers not once, but twice? You know, I walked straight past you on the street in New York. A change of clothes and hair color, and your tiny brain failed to see its charge disappearing right under your nose."

His jaw tics as Gideon chuckles. "Careful, baby. I've promised Mike some alone time with you."

I swallow. Gideon is too possessive to share me, right? Mike's mouth pulls up in a predatory grin. "You'll be lucky if you can crawl away after I'm done with you, Honor."

I tilt my head as I wrestle my body and mind for control. Now is not the time to panic. "Is your attitude masking a micro penis? Is that why she fought you? Couldn't make her come?"

He leans forward, leveling me with his gaze. "Your used up cunt holds no interest to me. My plans for you are far more...torturous in design. And Gideon will ensure the procedure gets redone just for him."

My head snaps to my husband. "I'm assuming Fox wasn't lying, and you gave away something that was rightfully mine. So, I'm going to reclaim it. This time, I'm going to make it so each and every time I fuck you, you bleed, scream, and shake in fear. You did this to us, Honor. I was willing to give you pleasure, but it's clear that needs to be removed to keep you in line. If you can't come, you won't look elsewhere for it."

I grind my teeth together. It's another scare tactic. Even if it's true, I will survive it. Eventually, he will slip up, and the second he does, I won't run again. I will take his life and rid the earth of a monster, sending him south to the fiery pits of Hell where he belongs.

Gideon reaches out and plucks up a glass, sipping deeply from the champagne while ignoring my glass. He thinks tempting me with a drink I used to relish is a punishment. Now, I'm a neat bourbon kind of girl. Champagne makes my stomach twist.

His grip on my thigh lessens. I frown at his slack hand before darting a look at Mike, who is tapping away on his phone. Probably researching torture techniques and planning my punishment. I twist my arms in their binding, trying to ease my aching shoulders.

"Are you going to leave me in this for the whole of the trip?" I snap as I turn to face Gideon. His eyes are droopy and unfocused, like he's been drugged. His head flops onto my shoulder. What the hell?

The curtain moves, revealing Hunter. Hope ignites and roars to life, sending my heart fluttering in a rapid staccato. He raises his finger to his lips as he creeps up behind Mike and pulls something from his pocket. A wire? What is he planning to do?

He loops it around Mike's throat and yanks, blood instantly welling across his neck. *Oh my God.* I jerk, knocking Gideon off my shoulder. He wakes with a start, just as the hostess opens the door to the plane and Fox storms inside. His gaze finds mine immediately, and his eyes soften.

"Don't k-kill him," I stutter at Hunter as he looks like he's enjoying the fuck out of the strangling.

"Why?" he asks.

"He's the guy that assaulted Gillian."

Hunter's eyes widen, and he relaxes his grip on the wire just as Fox reaches me and unclips the seatbelt. He yanks me up into his arms, making the coat fall off my shoulders. His face darkens, and he growls when he sees the bindings. He pulls me tighter to him and slices through them, freeing me. Pain arrows across my chest, making me yelp.

"Kill him anyway," Fox snaps at Hunter.

I blink as Fox cups my face. "But—"

“His identity is enough, firecracker. I don’t need him alive.”

“You came for me,” I whisper. I hadn’t even dared to hope he would.

“I will always come for you.” He seals that promise with a kiss that steals my breath. Gideon roars, and a hand tangles in my hair, yanking me back and out of Fox’s arms.

I cry out and twist around, landing on my knees before Gideon. I sink my teeth into the soft flesh of his forearm, not stopping until his blood explodes on my tongue. He lets me go just as Fox reaches out and snaps his hand around Gideon’s throat, making him grin. *Oh fuck.*

He reaches into the side of the seat and whips out a gun, pointing it at my head. “If I’m going, you are coming with me,” he snarls.

Fox shoves me to the floor, and two shots ring out, followed by a grunt. *No, no, no.* My breath locks in my lungs as an icy-cold shiver runs down my spine. My head shoots up, searching Fox for the telltale crimson bloom.

“You are a piss poor-shot, just like your wife was before she met me.” Fox snorts.

My shoulders slump and relief floods through me. Fox grabs me around my waist and hauls me to my feet while Gideon glares and shakes his head like he’s trying to get rid of the fog.

Fox chuckles. “Good—it’s wearing off. I need you conscious. We can’t have you miss your finale, can we?” It’s so close to what Gideon said to me—that I would be awake for each and every punishment. It’s poetic justice dished out by Fox.

“Can I kill this piece of shit now?” Hunter grunts out. We spin to find Mike still struggling with the wire wrapped around his throat, and my gaze falls to Mike’s empty holster.

“Yes, do it,” Fox orders.

Hunter grins, and I turn my gaze away from Mike. He deserves to burn in Hell, but I don't need to watch it.

The hostess appears from the front of the plane. She's swapped her pencil skirt and blouse for ripped jeans and a frayed AC/DC T-shirt. She winks at me. Oh, I like her. "Explosives are set. All that's left to do is abandon this plane and leave the sacks of shit on it."

"Thanks, Ghost," Fox says as he takes the rope she offers him. He moves around the back of Gideon's chair and makes quick work of binding him to it, just as Mike stops struggling. The light leaves his eyes, leaving him staring blankly at nothing.

Damn, Hunter really drew that out.

"You bitch," Gideon splutters, still seeming to be under the influence of whatever Ghost gave him.

I lean down, getting in the face of the man who caused so much pain and suffering. "By always underestimating the fairer sex, you made the most fundamental of mistakes. You never even contemplated that a woman could be capable of taking you down, making you blind to the most dangerous of creatures."

"Who's that?"

"Me." A small smile plays on my lips as I look down on him with pity. "The proverb says, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'" I lean closer so he can see the darkness in my eyes, the one he placed there. This is of his own making. "But I'm not scorned, Gideon. I don't hold anger. I have an incurable rage that can only be quieted by you sinking into the cold rotten grave you deserve."

"You are the same weak worthless girl I plucked from the rainy sidewalk of Manhattan."

I shake my head. "I gave you love, faith, adoration—and you crushed it to dust. But from the ashes, I have emerged stronger, having rebuilt myself one piece at a time. You might have thought me weak, stripped to the bone. But with each

breath, each heartbeat, I moved away from you, and I came to understand something vital.”

“That you are nothing without me,” he snarls.

I sigh and cup his face in my hands. “No, Gideon. *You* are nothing without me.”

“We can fix this,” he says, his voice dropping lower. Interesting. I’ve never seen Gideon beg.

“We have to go now if we want to stage it as an accident,” Ghost says.

Hunter moves around me and twists the lid off of a large plastic bottle before emptying the clear liquid over Gideon’s head. The sweet pungent smell of gasoline fills the plane, making my eyes water.

I swallow as Fox hands me a box of matches. “Time to light him up, firecracker. Let’s burn your demons to the ground where they belong.”

My eyes find Gideon’s, and I hesitate. “Did you put a will in place?” I wonder.

Gideon’s eyes narrow. “Yes.”

“What does it say?”

“You get everything, because I love you.”

No, he’s an idiot who thought he could keep pushing me without consequences. My lips lift in a smile as I pluck a match from the box. “I’m going to use every cent to help domestic and sexual abuse survivors. Every cent, Gideon. It’s all going to victims of people like you. Perhaps that will carry currency in Hell.”

“Honor, you can’t do this!”

I strike the match, mesmerized by the yellow and orange flicker as Hunter and Ghost exit the plane.

“Do it,” Fox murmurs, placing a steady hand on my shoulder. “End him.”

Gideon shouts and struggles against his ropes, his feet slamming against the floor in a desperate attempt to save his life. I raise my head and meet his eyes, a calmness settling over me like a comforting blanket. “Goodbye, Gideon.” I flick my wrist, sending the match flying. It ignites instantly, spreading over his body and lighting up the interior of the plane.

I stand frozen, watching as Gideon’s mouth opens wide as screams pour from him. Fox grabs my arm, shaking me out of my stupor, and drags me out the door and down the stairs. We dash across the runway and toward the grass where Ghost and Hunter wait for us, Fox keeping me upright as I stumble over my feet.

Ghost hands me a phone. “You want to do the honors, Honor?”

“Funny,” I mutter, grabbing the phone from her hands. “Let’s give it a minute. I can still hear his screams, and he deserves to suffer.” The three of us stand, watching the flames through the plane’s windows. My thumb hovers over the red button, and I blow out a breath. *Three. Two. One.* I stab my finger down, but nothing happens.

“Swipe, not stab,” Ghost says with a chuckle.

“Oh.” I slide my index finger across the screen, and the plane explodes with a deafening sound. A wall of heat slams into us, forcing us back. Thick black clouds of smoke shoot into the sky, while bright orange flames consume the plane’s carcass. Debris flutters in the air, and I find myself once more transfixed. “Wow.”

“Fox?” Ghost snaps. I spin just in time to see him sway and tilt backward.

“Fuck,” Hunter snaps, catching him before his head hits the ground.

I kneel next to him and yank his T-shirt up. Blood seeps out of a hole in his stomach. I shake my head. “Fox, no.” I push my hands over the wound, but the blood spurts between my fingers. He lifts his hand and grasps my nape.

“Marry me,” he whispers before passing out in my arms.
No. *No, no, no.* I can’t lose him. I won’t survive it.

CHAPTER 47

FOX



I have found you.

An annoying beeping echoes in the tunnel I'm traveling in. I shake my head trying to get rid of the insistent noise, but it's no use.

"Fox?" my grandmother says. Confusion clouds my mind. When did Gran join the military? It's too dangerous here. I have to send her back to where it's safe.

"He's waking up." That's the voice of an angel. Melodic. Sweet. Sassy. *Honor*.

My eyes fly open and stunning mismatched blue and gray eyes stare back at me. I glance around the room, taking in the white sheet, raised bed, and sterile walls. "What happened?" I croak.

"You took a bullet for me," Honor replies, squeezing my hand. "You need to stop doing that."

I chuckle, but it comes out as a hoarse rasp. When did I...? The memories come back with a vengeance. *The plane. Mike. Gideon*. My mind settles at the memory. He's dead—he can't hurt my firecracker anymore.

My grandmother appears at my other side with a cup of water. My eyes widen at her disheveled appearance. Helen Alderidge never appears in public looking anything less than spectacular. Her face is makeup free with deep worry lines etched in her forehead, and her wild hair looks as if she's been

running her fingers through it. Knowing I'm the cause of her worry makes my chest ache.

"Easy, sip it," she says, moving the cup in front of me. My lips wrap around the straw, and I take a few swallows of the refreshing liquid. That's better.

The door swings open just before Hunter and Ghost stride through. My brows kiss my hairline. Ghost offered to help when we needed a female hostess to slip the drugs into the drinks, but she rarely goes out in public, so it's a surprise to see her here.

Hunter raises a brow and crosses his arms as he leans against the doorframe. "Are you done with the theatrics, Alderidge?"

The corner of my mouth lifts at how he tries to hide his concern. "I am."

"Good." Hunter's gaze slides to the tiny brunette woman at his side.

She huffs before stalking to my bedside. My grandmother steps back, and Ghost wraps me in a quick hug. "I didn't leave any trace behind for the authorities to find, so don't worry your pretty little head about it. Now get better, and don't die on us. We were worried." Before I can reply, she scoots out the door, and Hunter narrows his eyes on her as she escapes. *Hmm.*

Hunter opens his mouth, shakes his head, and snaps it closed again. "Go," I say, and he gives me a grateful nod before shooting after her.

My grandmother clears her throat, eyes darting between me and Honor. She squeezes my arm before backing away. "I'm going to tell the doctors that you are awake. They'll want to check you over."

Honor bites her lips after the door closes behind Gran. "Come here," I demand.

"I'm right next to the bed, Fox."

I fling the sheet back. “Not close enough. Get in.” She rolls her eyes but crawls onto the hospital bed and snuggles into my side. I wrap my arm around her, and everything inside of me settles.

“I thought I’d lost you,” Honor whispers.

I swallow the lump in my throat at the raw and vulnerable words. “I’m not going anywhere.”

“Can we agree to no more bullet wounds?”

“It depends on whether or not you become a better shot.”

She jerks her head up. “It wasn’t me.”

My eyes drop to her lips. “No?”

“No. Gideon tried to shoot me, and you pushed me to the ground. I thought he’d missed completely.”

My hand sifts through her soft hair. “Hmm, sounds like you owe me big time.”

“What do you want?”

“A truth.”

Her lips twitch. “What’s the question?”

“You already know.”

She feigns innocence. “Remind me.”

Ah, she’s not sure if I remember. I do. “You are my person, Honor. The one who pushes me to be better, who calls me out on my shit, and who makes me strive to be enough for you. You are infuriating in the best possible way. You make my world brighter and give me a reason to smile. Despite our short time together, I know, beyond the shadow of a doubt, you are the woman I want to spend my life with. So, Honor, will you marry me?”

She brushes her lips against mine in a soft hesitant kiss, like she’s afraid I’ll break. I drag my teeth over her bottom lip enough to sting, but not bleed. She gasps and pulls away.

“I’m okay, Honor. But I do want my truth.”

“Yes,” she whispers.

“Yes what?”

“Yes, Fox, I will marry you.”

EPILOGUE

HONOR

New Year's Eve

Six Months Later

Revenge is a dish best served in irony.

I swallow the knot of anxiety in my throat as I wait for my cue. The phone in my hand vibrates.

FOX

You got this, firecracker. Remember you've already won them over.

HONOR

Sure you don't want to swap?

FOX

No, but I will be waiting the second you are off stage to offer my congratulations. Did you wear it?

HONOR

Maybe.

FOX

Now that's all I can think about.

“Please give a warm welcome to the foundation’s founder, Honor.”

I stride onto the stage and squint at the bright lights that shield the majority of the audience from my view. I nod at the man in a tux before coming to a stop in front of the podium. I place my note cards and phone on the stand and smile at the hundreds of people waiting to hear what I have planned.

I clear my throat and glance at my first card. “There’s an epidemic in our country; a silent storm suffocating men, women, and children. Domestic violence can take many forms. Physical, sexual, financial, emotional—each one devastating in its own way. Sadly, many of these cases go unreported. Abusers use fear, guilt, and shame to control, manipulate, and isolate.”

The room is totally silent as the attendees hang on my every word. “The Haven Foundation, funded by my late husband’s fortune, is building a network of safety across America. It is providing care, protection, and relief. Every cent Gideon left is being poured into creating a haven for survivors. It is securing knowledgeable legal services to prosecute the guilty. Day by day, step by step, we will begin to erode this disease. But we need your support, and your guidance and influence to help petition lawmakers.

“When the system is set up to protect the guilty, we have to push back, question everything, and be the change needed to usher our country into a new world.”

My phone flashes.

FOX

They are eating out of the palm of your hand. Go for the kill, firecracker.

I lick my lips and scan the audience. “What gives me the authority, the knowledge, the power to make such sweeping statements? Experience. I am a survivor of domestic abuse, and it is my intention to change the world—starting with the people who helped me when I had nowhere to turn, the people who have already formed a network dedicated to keeping survivors safe, and who now have the financial backing to expand.”

A collective gasp rises from the crowd, and murmurs echo throughout the room. I turn to the side and hold my arm out toward the people waiting in the wings. “Mel and Louise—our joint directors managing a network of safe houses in each and every state.” The women smile at me as they come to stand on my left.

“Tony, our head of security.” Tony strides out and nods at me.

“And Anthony.” My eyes tear up as Anthony hobbles onto the stage with a cane. He didn’t escape unscathed. Mike broke both of his legs, and he’s still struggling with the limp in his right leg. “Anthony is heading up a program where alarms can be raised, much like asking for an angel shot in bars. These will be in key locations where survivors often frequent, like hairdressers.” Anthony stops next to Tony and gives me a big smile.

“The effects of living in these nightmares linger on long after you’ve escaped. Please welcome the two people that saved my life in a spiritual sense. Without them, I wouldn’t be standing here today. Fox and Helen Alderidge.” They both stride onto the stage and stand at my right as a rumble of applause echoes around the room.

“The Alderidges are matching your donations here tonight, so please dig deep and enjoy your evening, knowing you are ushering in the New Year while also fighting suffering. We will claim our power back.”

There’s a pause, and then the room erupts into applause. I nod and turn to Fox as I drag my bottom lip between my teeth. He smirks as I lead the way off stage. The rest of the gang give

me hugs and tearful support as we set about using Gideon's money to combat the very crime he was guilty of. The cat is out of the bag now, and people will draw their own conclusions.

Gillian came forward very quickly with the truth of Mike's attack and the pressure and threats Gideon put on her to blame Fox. She's here tonight, an example of how power can influence the world.

After my reappearance, I spent no more than a few hours answering questions about my whereabouts during the months I was gone. I tried to stick to the truth as much as possible by explaining how I had run away due to the abuse I suffered at my husband's hands. I ended up seeking sanctuary with a kind woman, and I had no knowledge about my husband's death. He had made plenty of enemies over the years by locking up dangerous criminals, and it was entirely possible one of them was out for revenge.

Fox's big hand splays at the base of my spine as he urges me through the room. We stroll through the conservatory, admiring the stunning plants at The Botanical Gardens, who agreed to host the charity event tonight to launch the foundation.

Fox holds my hand and drags me deeper into the unoccupied area, the sounds of chatter and laughter diminishing behind us. "Where are we going?" I ask.

"I can't wait. Not with you looking like my every fantasy in that red dress." He spins me into his arms and crashes his lips on mine, stealing my breath. "What are you wearing?" he murmurs as he backs me up against a tree.

"The black," I whisper.

He drops his forehead against mine and breathes me in. "You smell like peaches and coconut. It's fucking intoxicating, and knowing what I'm going to find when I peel off your panties is destroying my self control."

I quirk a brow. "I'm not wearing any panties."

He growls and drops to his knees before me. He inches the flirty below-the-knee skirt of my dress up and groans as he finds me bare. His tongue darts out and flicks against my clit, making me gasp as my core floods. My head smacks the tree as my breathing falters as he works me into a frenzy. He tugs on the butt plug in my ass, and I grit my teeth to stop from screaming.

He leaps to his feet and kisses me, letting me taste myself on his lips.

“You are so fucking beautiful, it hurts to look at you,” he rumbles. “Now turn around and grab the tree. Don’t let go, firecracker.”

I turn, giving him my back. It’s not something we’ve done before, but he somehow knows this is a difficult position for me. It’s why I’m so blessed to have Fox in my life. He just knows.

“You ever been fucked in heels, Honor?”

“No,” I whisper.

He kicks my legs apart, lifts my dress, and puts pressure on my spine to push my ass out. He pulls on the plug, then pushes it back in, repeating the process until I’m pushing back and making sounds of desperation.

I hear his zipper undo and he lines himself up against me and grips my hips. “This is going to be intense,” he utters. “Try not to scream.”

“Aren’t we cocky tonig—”

He slams home inside of my body, stretching me impossibly full. Full of him, full of love, full of joy for the future. Rain patters on the glass above us, each drop a promise of freedom and the many memories waiting to be made.

“Behave,” Fox says against my ear as he holds himself inside me. I squirm beneath him, desperate for him to finish what he started. “I want my truth.” The plug makes his piercings rub against me in a maddening way.

“What truth?” I gasp out.

“Your name.”

A smile stretches across my face. “What’s it worth?”

He slides out of me and inches back in, making us both groan. “You decide.”

“My name is Honor Alderidge.”

“Never fucking forget it.”

Interested to see where Ghost and Hunter’s story goes?

[Preorder here.](#)

A NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you enjoyed Honor and Fox's story. Honor is fighting against society, power, pressure, and a screwed up system that needs to be rebuilt. If you have been affected by any of the issues raised in the book, please feel free to reach out to me or the support groups listed below.

To keep up with my latest news, please sign up to my newsletter here:

www.adalinewinters.co.uk

Support Groups

I've included groups for the areas covering most of my readers. For the rest of the world, please seek help using your local services.

UK

[Refuge](#)

Tel - 0808200247

USA

[National Domestic Violence Hotline](#)

Tel - 1.800.799.7233

Text - 88788

AUSTRALIA

[SARC](#)

Tel - (08) 6458 1828

CONTENT LIST

Beneath Your Beautiful is a dark romance. The main character is subject to domestic violence and abuse. This includes sexual assault, physical assault, and emotional abuse.

Specifically—suicide references, forced oral sex, non-con, dub-con, somnophilia, body shaming, forced medical procedures, food restriction, emotional manipulation, and financial dependence.

This is inflicted by the antagonist, not the love interest.

However between the MMC and the FMC, there is coercion and stalking/possessive behavior.

There are explicit scenes meant only for readers aged 18 and over.

Beneath Your Beautiful features:

Stalker

Bodyguard

MF romance

Hunted FMC

Possessive over-the-top grumpy Hero

Enemies to lovers vibes

Standalone

Dual POV

Pierced MC

Touch her and die vibes

Anal play

Breath play

A HEA

STANDALONE: A Dark Romance, standalone, full-length novel.

WARNING: 18+ only. Please read responsibly. THIS NOVEL CONTAINS DARK THEMES.

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