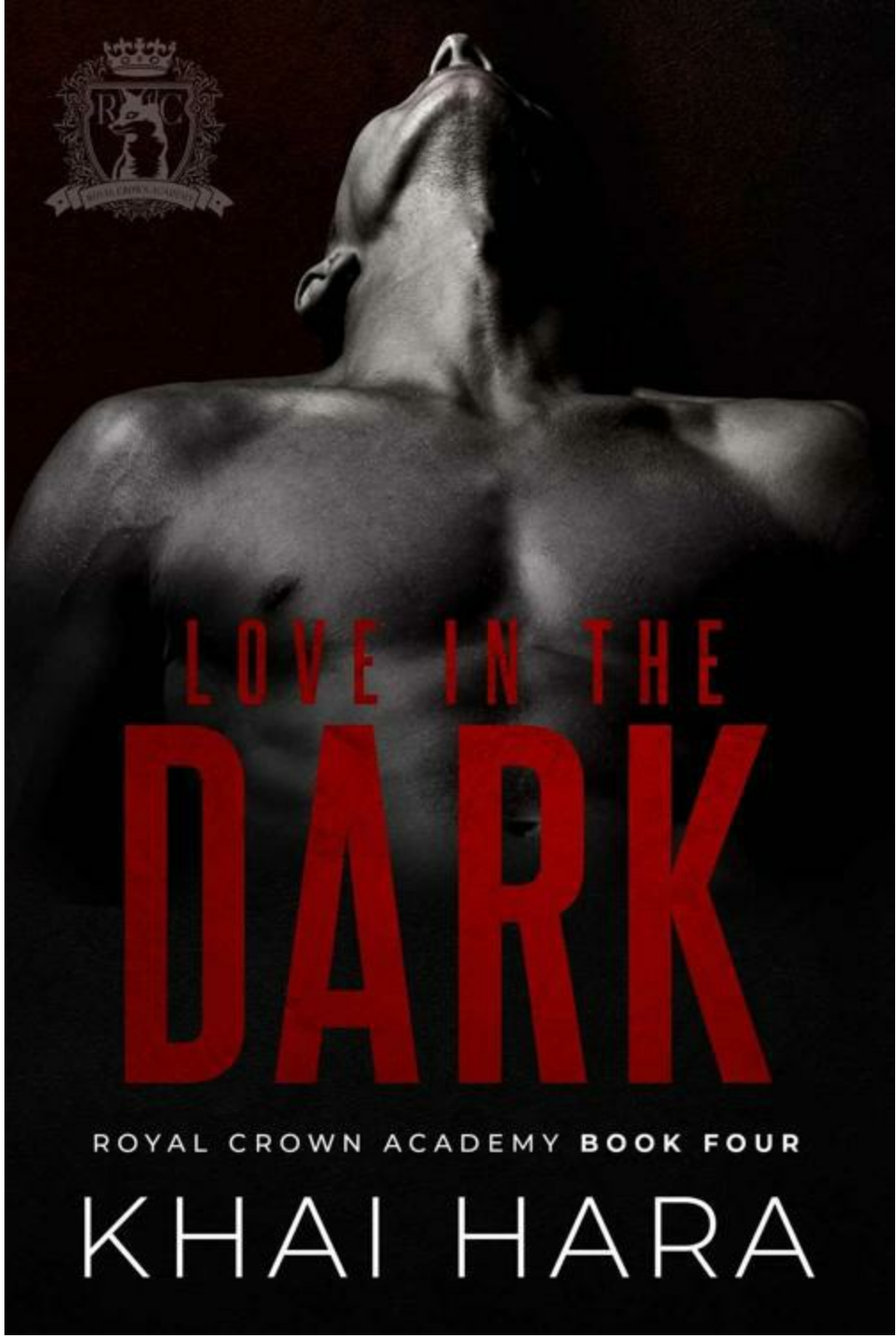




LOVE IN THE
DARK

ROYAL CROWN ACADEMY BOOK FOUR

KHAI HARA



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Royal Crown Academy Book Four

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This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual personas, living or dead, events or localities is entirely coincidental.

To those who have as many demons as they have dreams and ambitions.

TRIGGERS!

This book covers subjects that may be troubling to some readers such as discussions around mental health, eating disorders, mentions of drug and alcohol use, physical abuse, and more.

Addiction – in whatever form it takes – is an incredibly personal experience and I do not presume to be representative of anyone’s lived experience, let alone everyone’s. That being said, I hope that some of you find comfort and solace in this story, as I have, and I welcome any and all feedback, always.

Other triggers include a student-teacher relationship, domestic violence, violence, primal play, breath play, dubcon, anal, light bondage, spanking, and general rough sex scenes. Readers beware, be prepared, be excited.

In keeping with the rest of this series, if you do not like possessive heroes then this book may not be for you.

BLURB

I've been banished to Switzerland with a fake name, forced by my father to spend a year teaching spoiled rich kids as punishment for humiliating him. I'm supposed to stay out of trouble, to avoid scandals, to learn responsibility.

I'm not supposed to meet *her*.

I fucked up before I even set foot within the hallowed halls of RCA.

And there she is.

In the halls.

In my class.

In my veins.

Every fucking where.

She's going to be my downfall.

Or maybe, my salvation.

PLAYLIST

Scheming – Ace Savage

The Light – The Album Leaf

Broken Love – The Him

Blood In The Wine – Gestalt

One of the girls – Ikingaamir

Left Outside Alone – Anastacia

Don't Be so Hard on Yourself – Jess Glynne

Madness – Tribal Blood

Chapter 1

Tristan

“Tristan. Tristan! Wake up.”

Through the haze of sleep and the throbbing headache I have courtesy of the very bad decisions I vaguely remember making last night, I’m distantly aware of the angry voice that hisses my name, demanding my attention.

All the whisky I downed yesterday has addled my brain to the point of near uselessness, making it impossible for me to recognize the voice’s owner. The throttled syllables of my name in combination with the strict tenor of the delivery let me know that whoever needs me is furious.

That’s not enough to wake me. I was in the middle of a particularly vivid dream consisting of me, a supermodel and some whipped cream, and I’m intent on seeing it through to what I’m sure will be a very satisfying finish.

I groan and turn away from the noise, dead set on going right back to sleep and ignoring the unwelcome interruption.

The first clue that something is wrong comes immediately. Instead of being cushioned against my memory foam mattress and cocooned within my one thousand plus thread count Egyptian cotton sheets, my shoulder hits a hard surface.

I crack open an eye and realize that I’m not where I should be. Instead

of seeing my white walls, I find myself staring at baseboards and the start of a massive wall of windows through which I can see the skyline of a city I know well.

What am I doing waking up in an office building?

More importantly, what am I doing waking up on the fucking *floor* of said office building?

I'm suddenly awake as I try to piece together the fragments of memories I have from last night. I sit up, facing the windows, and immediately clutch my head in agony at the sudden head rush.

"Fuck," I mumble, dropping my head into my hands and massaging my tender temples.

As I look down into my lap, I realize that I'm stark naked. The only reason my dick isn't on display is because a creamy white leg is thrown between my thighs.

I follow it slowly up to its owner and find an equally naked blonde girl sprawled out to my left, still passed out.

Next to her, an older brunette with tanned skin. Her tits are bursting out of the cups of her bra, which makes sense. I don't remember much but I do remember pushing it hastily to the side for quick and easy access to her massive breasts.

Memories flashback through my mind like a 1920s film, a veritable carousel of the bad decisions that I made last night.

Attending my father's company's annual start of summer party against my will, fueled by anger and resentment.

Tipping the bartender a healthy stack of hundred pound notes to hand me bottles instead of drinks.

The innocent blonde flirting with me from below fluttering lashes, the uninterrupted stares of the more knowledgeable brunette from across the room.

Grabbing them both with the plan of giving my father the ultimate 'fuck you' by fucking them in his office.

Being too drunk to make it to his office and settling for the boardroom with its floor to ceiling windows instead.

Eating out the brunette and doing a line off her pussy as the blonde sucked me off.

Finger fucking the blonde as the brunette offered me her body for my use.

Powering into each, one after the other, until they'd begged me to stop.
I don't remember their names, I don't know if I ever knew them.
I don't care.

"Tristan," the voice thunders again from behind me, and unfortunately, this time I do recognize it.

Fuck, I think, it's time to face the music.

There's no escaping the thrashing I'm about to receive.

But when I turn and my eyes collide with my father's enraged gaze, I realize the true severity of my situation.

It's one thing for him to find his son naked, post-coital after what I'm sure was a fantastic threesome from the little I remember of it, in what I now recognize as the boardroom of his ninety-floor office building in central London, and a totally other thing for the rest of his board to discover me along with him.

The seven men stand there, mouths agape, with expressions ranging from disbelieving to apoplectic, taking in the scene before them. There's a woman there as well, but her look is more interested than anything as she stares me down, craning her neck to try and get a peek at what's under the blonde's leg.

I shift to give her a little teaser, uncaring of my nakedness or how continuing to goad my father will further worsen my situation. She flushes as she takes in the intricate tattoos on my chest and the defined V of my abs leading down to my thick shaft, now at least partially on display for her appraisal.

She licks her lips, approving, and it'd be enough to get me hard again if a small voice didn't sound from beside me, uttering one word and unknowingly sealing my fate.

"Daddy?"

I turn towards the blonde who's now half seated, one hand rubbing the sleep from her eyes, the other thrown across her chest to hide her tits. I want to tell her she's too late, that she's given every man in this room enough material to wank to for the next fiscal year, but my gaze pings back to the group of executives and I watch fresh outrage etch itself across the face of one of them.

"*Katie?*" He asks, as if doubting what his eyes are telling him he's seeing. "Katie, put your clothes on and come here," he hisses. "We're leaving."

“Yes, Daddy,” she answers, clearly mortified.

My cock mistakenly twitches in response, thinking he’s being called up for the next round of action. I’d had her screaming those very same words to me last night.

She scrambles to grab her clothes and stands, revealing my entire naked body and rousing the brunette in the process. She rushes over to her father and they walk stiffly out of the room, but not before he throws a vitriolic look at my father.

The rest of the board stands there, shell shocked. It’d be comical to me if it wasn’t starting to drag out at this point. An older man takes a step forward, his brow creasing as he looks down at the prone brunette, now stirring awake beside me.

I stay as I am, legs spread and extended, resting my weight on my elbows, my dick on display for all, but unashamed of my nude body as I stare them all down.

“What have you done?” My father asks, his face marbled red. A vein I’ve never seen before stands out angry and throbbing on his forehead and I fear he’s going to have an aneurysm if he doesn’t take a breath soon.

Well, “fear”.

He could drop dead in front of me and I *fear* I wouldn’t actually give a shit.

Before I can answer, the older man speaks. “Venetia?”

I recognize him. He’s the president of the board, second only in rank to my father.

The brunette turns towards him, the easy smile she’d been aiming at me slipping off her face as she takes in our audience.

“Honey,” she answers and my eyes close as I stifle a frustrated groan.

Fuck.

“You know him?” I ask her.

“He’s– he’s...” she splutters, looking around her for anything to hide her nakedness.

Unfortunately for her, she’s been on exhibit long enough for every person in this room to have had the time to see all the depraved things I’ve done to her body.

The hickeys, the bite marks.

The streaks of cum dried on her tits.

A dark smirk pulls at the corners of my mouth. Very soon, my father is

going to make me regret every decision I've made over the past eighteen hours, but for now I can't help but revel in my handiwork.

In how it humiliates *him* specifically.

"Get up," the man seethes, his eyes burning with embarrassment as he stares at Venetia.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her dress hanging from one of the boardroom chairs to my left. I grab it and throw it at her. She catches it without a word or a look in my direction, but as she puts it on and stands she throws a look behind her as if to check if she forgot anything, and gives me a saucy wink in the process.

There's a round two promised in that gaze if I want to take her up on it.

Unfortunately for her, I never go back for seconds.

"Keep your degenerate son away from my *wife*," the man barks at my father as he grabs her wrist in a vicious grip.

I'd feel worse if I didn't know for a fact that he's been fucking his secretary for years in this very building. This whole act is merely an effort to hold on to some measure of dignity in the face of his humiliation at his wife's hands.

I wouldn't go so far as to claim that what Venetia and I did was a feminist act of retribution, but female rage really is a beautiful thing.

"I apologize on his behalf," my father tells him, inclining his head slightly, and I know those words cost him.

I know he's going to be laying awake for many nights to come thinking about how he had to humble himself down from the high pedestal on which he likes to lord himself, and that in it of itself makes whatever punishment he's going to unleash on me after this worth it.

"No need to apologize for me, I'm right here," I quip from where I sit. The three of them turn back towards me. "I can apologize for myself if I feel it's warranted."

I give them a slow, arrogant smile and let the silence drag out after my statement, making my position clear and enjoying the way my father foams at the mouth at my obvious provocation.

I didn't know who those two women were when we fucked, but I'm not mad at the unintentional consequences. I hope it creates upheaval within the board, I hope his company falters and eventually crumbles.

Anything to keep me from being forced into following in his footsteps within this corporate nightmare.

Realistically though, I know that's a pipe dream. I've learned over the last few years that the more I resist, the more my father tightens his leash around my throat, the more he forces me to bend to his will, the more he enjoys crushing the life and freedom out of me.

But I can't stop. I refuse to resign myself to a soulless life like my father's but he, in turn, refuses to see reason. He's dogged and unyielding in his plan to have me succeed him as CEO even though he has to know what a disastrous decision that would be.

This entire situation proves my point, but he'll ignore it like he has in the past. He'll temporarily restrict my access to my trust and will likely force me on some apology tour of the board. This will all be brushed under the rug in a fortnight and it'll be back to business as usual after that.

There is no evading the life that he's mapped out for me since the moment I was born, no matter how hard I try. I know where I'll be when I'm thirty, who I'll marry when I'm thirty five, and what I'll name my kids.

Hell, I'm sure he's even picked who my mistresses will be because Nobles only marry heiresses to have blue blood heirs, they certainly don't fuck their wives for the fun of it.

I know all this because he's already made those decisions for me. They're all laid out in a folder named 'Tristan' he keeps in his office, now with a digital copy on his desktop and in his cloud storage.

He learned the lesson to backup his files the hard way when I set the only existing copy on fire on my eighteenth birthday.

"I won't stand for this," the man hisses at my father before stalking out of the boardroom, dragging Venetia behind him.

"Everybody out," my father roars at the remaining onlookers.

The men seem relieved that a third woman doesn't pop out of nowhere at the last minute and they leave seemingly pleased to have their wives, daughters, and sisters safe back at home.

I ignore the woman's searching gaze as she leaves, my own fixed on my father's tense back. When the last person is gone, he turns slowly back towards me and I think that maybe I've done it now.

He's nearly incandescent with rage, his face mottled and nearing purple, his jaw locked tightly, and his fists clenched at his sides. He's angrier than I've ever seen him and maybe now he's finally realized that the more he tries to force this path on me, the more I'll fight him.

Maybe he'll admit defeat and give up.

But looking into his furious eyes, I know I'm wrong. My father doesn't ever lose, and certainly not to his son. There's a sadistic glint in his gaze that tells me my antics will do nothing but redouble his efforts.

"You are a disgrace," he says, his voice even, his temper now under control as I see the beginnings of an idea forming in his eyes. "Your provocations are nothing more than mild irritants I have to deal with, but you will come to heel. I. Will. *Make*. You," he announces.

I stand and put my suit trousers back on, keeping them low on my hips as I cross my arms and stare at him.

"There's nothing you can do to me."

"To you, maybe not," he chirps back, his intent very clear.

I keep my face carefully blank, but on the inside my stomach twists. I have one vulnerability, one he knows exactly how to exploit, but he's never played that card before.

I see now that I miscalculated.

He isn't going to give up or change his mind. The only person who's going to lose here is me.

Chapter 2

Tristan

“Morning, Clive,” I tell the family butler as he opens the front door and lets me in.

“Morning, Sir. Your father is waiting for you in his office.”

I grind my teeth together to stop myself from telling him I don’t give a fuck where my father is or if he’s waiting for me, and nod instead, walking past him into the living room.

I let myself drop into one of the comfortable armchairs and pull out my phone, deciding to waste some time on the apps and make my father wait.

After the debacle at his office, he’d ordered me to meet him at the house the following Monday and had promptly walked out of the boardroom. Stretching this out over a few days was all part of his plan, the psychological torture of making me wait before he delivered my sentence.

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t the prodigal son himself,” a teasing voice calls out from behind me. I turn and find my sister, Tess, sauntering into the room. “I heard all about your exploits, little brother. You really outdid yourself this time.”

I grin and stand, pulling her into a tight hug. “I’m sure whatever you’ve heard has been exaggerated.”

“A daughter *and* a wife? No, that’s quite the feat, even for you. You put in overtime on this one.” She laughs, returning my hug with equal affection.

“What if I told you it wasn’t intentional? I didn’t know who they were.”

She gives me an unimpressed look, her brows raised up near her hairline. “You were at a company party attended only by senior employees and their families. Did you think you were hooking up with members of the janitorial crew?” She pats my shoulder. “Come on, you knew.”

She has a point.

As much as I want to claim innocence in this situation, subconsciously, I did know. I barreled head first into self-destructive behavior like I always do. Although this time I have a feeling the consequences are going to be significant.

I head over to the bar in the corner of the room and pour myself a whisky, neat, before turning back to face Tess. She gives me a shrewd look, assessing everything about me from my facial expressions to my outfit, down to the drink I apparently have to have before noon.

Tess is far more brilliant than I’ll ever be, as proven by her Cambridge degree and MBA from Wharton. Beyond her academics, she’s astute, sharp-witted, and clever, and she sees straight through me in a way that no one else does.

While I’m far from being unintelligent, I’m not driven by the same things she is. She loves acquisitions and P&Ls and vigorous discussions about yearly forecasts. She’s the analytical left brain to my creative right brain and a much more obvious choice to take over The Noble Group from my father than I am.

She only has one flaw according to him, and it’s a fatal one in his eyes – she’s a woman.

We’re both tied unhappily to the same fate, each on the wrong side of the coin. Me, desperate to avoid the role being forcefully foisted upon me. Her, desperate to claim the role she’s rightfully earned a thousand times over.

If I could take it and give it to her, I would.

“Maybe you shouldn’t drink if you’re about to go in with him,” she suggests, careful to keep her tone light.

“That’s exactly why I need to drink,” I say, downing the entire glass and placing it back on the counter. I pour myself another one. “Where’s Mum?”

She frowns at me but wisely chooses not to comment further. “Upstairs in her rooms, she’s getting ready for a charity brunch.”

I nod in acknowledgement. “I’m going to go say hi and deal with dad, but I can make us lunch when I’m back if you want. Assuming I’m still

standing after he rips me a new one.”

“Fuck yes to you making us lunch. Can you make that pea and fennel pasta from last time?”

“You got it.” I walk out of the living room with my drink in hand. “See you in a bit, Tessticles.”

I hear her curse from the hallway.

“If you call me that *one more time*, Tristan—” she calls out as I head up the stairs.

I chuckle to myself. At twenty-four to her twenty-five, Tess and I are only Irish twins but as close as actual twins. Nicknames and jokes from when we were kids hit just as hard in our twenties as they did back then.

On the third floor of my parent’s five story townhouse, I call out for my mother. “Mum?”

“In here, darling,” she answers from her boudoir. I follow the clear and light sound of her voice and find her sitting at her vanity.

I lean down and kiss her softly on the cheek as her hands come up to cup my face. Her eyes search mine for a moment.

“You’ve really angered him this time, darling,” she tells me, softly.

The sleeves of her robes fall down her arms as she holds my face, revealing fading bruises on her right wrist. They’re blue, yellow, and green in color, and they look incredibly painful and tender to the touch.

Anger slams through me and steals the breath from my chest. I clasp her hands gently and lower them from my face, inspecting her bruises quietly. I try to rein in my temper before it erupts out of me and scares her. Years of living with my father have made her skittish and easily frightened.

“Did he do this to you?” My voice rumbles under the weight of my barely controlled fury, but I’m glad I’m at least able to speak.

She looks down at her wrists and nervously pulls the sleeves of her robes back down to hide the bruises.

“Oh! That’s nothing, nothing at all...”

“When?”

“Really, Tristan. I hurt myself—”

“No, Mum,” I interrupt her. “When did he do this? Was it after the party last week?” I demand, and if she says yes... I don’t know what I’ll do if I learn she had to suffer the consequences of my idiotic actions.

Nausea churns in my stomach and she must see the anguish in my eyes because she cups my face again, forcing my gaze back up to meet hers.

“No, darling. These are much older than last week.” She kisses my cheek. “You had nothing to do with these.”

I stand abruptly, needing to expend the energy that’s screaming to be let out of my body in the form of violence. Racking my hands through my hair, I turn back towards her.

“Why, mum? Why won’t you leave him, I don’t understand.”

I do understand, to some extent. She was raised to be an obedient wife and accessory to a powerful man. She was taught from her teen years that she’d live in the shadows, at best ignored but more likely repeatedly humiliated, forever at the whims of her husband.

Her parents were rich, so she’s independently wealthy, and still she can’t leave. He’s careful, my father, careful to make sure the bruises are never visible, that she’s never in *too much* pain, because she’s still a representation of him and his power.

Real influence doesn’t need to be beaten out of people, but he wouldn’t know a fucking thing about that.

I’ve never seen her bleeding, just bruised, but the thought that he might take it too far one day and kill her has crossed my mind before. The responsibility of her continued safety and wellbeing rests heavily on my heart.

“It’s not that simple, darling. He’s all I have.”

“No, you have Tess and me, mum. And we’re tired of seeing dad beat the shit out of you. Think about the example you’re setting for Tess.”

The second the words are out, I want to take them back. They sounded like I was blaming her, and that wasn’t my intention. I’d just wanted a way to get through to her, to make her understand how important, how *necessary* it is for her to leave.

She pulls her hands from my face and turns away from me, towards her vanity.

“You should go, Tristan. Your father is waiting for you.”

“Mum—”

“Please go.” She powders her nose and smiles weakly at me through the mirror. “I’ll see you at brunch next weekend.”

I stalk out of her rooms, downing my drink and setting the glass on a hallway table, before taking the steps two at a time to my father’s office on the fourth floor.

He’s signing paperwork when I march in, clearly unbothered by the

nearly thirty minutes I've made him wait.

His cold eyes – the same color of clear blue he passed on to me – lift to meet mine but no emotion flickers in their vast emptiness as he takes me in. He looks back down at his desk and finishes signing the remaining documents.

“Sit,” he orders.

“Just tell me what you plan on doing to me so we can get this over with. No need to draw this out like I enjoy being in your company,” I snarl.

A smile curls the corner of his lips as he closes his folder and I know I'm fucked.

“I called in a favor,” he announces, settling his elbows on the armrests of his chair and leaning back to look at me.

He's going to make me ask him, the asshole.

“From whom?” I bite out through clenched teeth.

“Robert Royal.”

We've never met, but I know the name. More importantly, I know the reputation. He's a certified psychopath and, if the rumors are true, he knows more about the dark art of conjugal violence than even my father does. My back is up just hearing his name in relation to mine.

“He's on the board of the Royal Crown Academy in Aubonne. You've heard of it?”

Of course, I have. In an effort to forcefully mold me into the stuffy businessman he wanted me to be, my father had put me through the British private school system and we often played against RCA.

Back then, I still thought he cared about me, about this family. I'd bent the knee, suffocated my own dreams and passions, and I'd tried. I'd had a successful first year and when I'd come home for the summer, I'd caught my father slapping my mother across the face.

He'd seen me. Instead of apologizing, he'd given me a terrifying smile and told me to “watch and learn because I'd need to discipline my own wife one day.”

Then he'd hit her again.

I was fifteen and I went off the deep end. Drugs, alcohol, parties, limitless access to money, and zero impulse control had become my life. I'd gotten kicked out of three schools before my father eventually threw enough money at the problem that a fourth let me graduate. I graduated from UCL but only because I hid from my family the fact that I took as many art classes

as I did business ones.

I'd done anything and everything to rebel, to piss him off, because even then I'd understood that the worst thing I could do to him was ruin his name and plans for succession.

"I'm a little old to go back to secondary school," I tell him, my tone mocking.

"You're just old enough to teach," he declares, delivering his punishment with the swiftness of a gavel on a sound block.

I audibly laugh at that one, but it's a humorless sound. The smile slips off my face when his remains impassive. "You're joking."

Whatever I was expecting, it wasn't this.

"You start in September."

"You want me to go teach *kids*? Me?" I scoff. "How does that help in any way? What am I supposed to learn from this?"

"Responsibility," he answers, contempt dripping from every word. "Humility. Maturity. How to clean up your act. How to avoid the press. I want you to fucking disappear, Tristan. I don't want to hear from you for the year you're there."

"A year?"

"A year," he repeats, his tone uncompromising. "I've had enough of your childish rebellions and I won't have you destroying the family name or reputation any longer. Your apartment has been sold and your things are being moved out as we speak. I'm also revoking access to your trust. You'll live out the year on your teacher's salary." He pauses, smirking at me. "You should thank me for sending you to a private school instead of a public school where you would have been making minimum wage."

I shake my head, voicing my refusal. "I won't do it. If you force me to, last week's performance will look like child's play compared to what I'll do in Switzerland." I add, my threat clear.

"You'll do it if you want to see your mother again."

I stiffen, my gaze slamming into his dead one as the true horror of his chosen punishment slams into me.

"What?"

"You want your mother safe? Then you'll go to RCA and you'll be the best damn teacher they've ever had. You'll behave. You'll stay far away from the front page of the tabloids."

There it is. The card he's always had in his back pocket but has never

played until now.

The answering rictus on his face is downright sinister, revealing the true evil of the man. He's getting off on this, on the power he wields over our family and how he can use it to get me in line.

"Why are you doing this?" I demand, "Tess can carry on your legacy, she's ready and she wants it." He narrows his eyes at me, his mouth flattening into a tight line. "I can fall in line if you just let me—"

"No son of mine is going to work in the back of a restaurant like a blue collar pleb," he rages, losing the flimsy hold he had on his temper. "You will inherit this company and you will *grow up*."

The only passion I have in life, the one thing that gets my blood pumping and my creative interest flowing, is cooking. Growing up, my parents went out of town often and left us in the care of our household staff, so I used to spend afternoons with our chefs. At first just watching and taking everything in, then getting my hands dirty with the fundamentals like omelets and mixed salads, to eventually working side by side with them and learning more intricate recipes and how flavor profiles work together.

I'd been careful to hide it from my father, intuitively knowing that he wouldn't like it. But then one day, the same summer that I'd witnessed him hitting my mum, he'd come home early from a business trip and he'd caught me in the kitchen, with my sleeves rolled up to my elbows, my hands in fresh pasta dough, and a contented smile on my face, and he'd gone postal.

He'd grabbed me by the throat and flung me across the room like I weighed nothing because back then I hadn't. He'd fired the chef on the spot, banned the next hire from interacting with me, and made sure I never came near another kitchen again.

He continues. "You will have no contact with your mother or your sister for a year until you learn some discipline."

I open my mouth to argue, to curse him out, but he carries on. "If I find out you have," he elongates every word, stretching the unmistakable threat in his tone until he's sure I'm hooked on every word, "you know what I'll do to your mother."

The cruelty of his intimidation tactics almost takes me out at the knees. I see no way out of this and I'm trapped between feelings of fear of what he'll do to my mum if I step a toe out of line, and rage that he's won.

That no matter what I do, there is no escape for me.

The inevitability of my fate grabs me by the throat and chokes me,

making it hard for me to speak. “If I do what you say, you’ll leave her alone?”

“You’re finally starting to understand how this works,” he says with a smug grin and I’m itching to wipe it off his face with my fists.

“Fuck you,” I spit.

I turn on my heels and head for the door when he strikes one final blow.

“And one more thing, Tristan.” I square my shoulders and face him once again. Whatever he’s about to say, I know he’s kept it as the final reveal for a reason. “No more scandals means no more girls. You’ll keep your dick in your pants while you’re in Switzerland. Thornton, the principal, will keep an eye on you to make sure you stick to this condition. Knowing you, you’re going to need the babysitting.” The smile on his face is sick with twisted pleasure as he continues. “Who knows, celibacy might do you a world of good.”

Chapter 3

Tristan

“Another,” I call out. The bartender needs no further invitation to come over and refill my glass.

I stare aimlessly down at the rich, brown liquid, swirling it around the contours of my glass as I think back to the clusterfuck of the last two months.

After putting the noose around my neck and metaphorically tightening it to the point of near suffocation, my father had delivered on his promise to evict me from my home. I’d been unceremoniously ousted from my Chelsea pad and my things dumped in storage.

I’d refused to set foot in Aubonne or even acknowledge that a move, even if only temporary, was happening. Instead, I showed up at Tess’ place carrying only a duffle bag. When she’d opened the door, I’d barged past her and made myself at home, invoking my younger sibling privileges as the reason why she had to let me stay with her.

Given that I was penniless, I’d traded free accommodation in return for delicious home cooked meals and we’d spent the last two months rooming together and behaving like we used to when we were kids. It was fun and it’d helped me take my mind off the upcoming year and what was at stake if I fucked up.

I didn’t tell Tess about the extent of our father’s threats. Her outrage would have made her try to intervene on my behalf and the last thing I

needed was her putting herself in harm's way. She'd escaped my father's notice this far and I was desperate to keep it that way.

I'd told her that he was forbidding all contact between us and her temper had flared so suddenly in response that I'd almost had to restrain her to keep her from marching into his office and confronting him. The more gruesome comments about our mum, I'd kept to myself.

Once she'd accepted that these two months were the last time we were going to see each other for a while, she'd focused on quality time, including helping me with my lesson plans. Because, to add insult to injury, the subject my father had selected I teach to the next generation of Europe's brightest minds was *business*.

If that wasn't a gigantic 'fuck you' to me, I don't know what was.

I'd created the basic plans and she'd helped me craft them like the perfectionist she was. If I'd had any lingering doubts about my lack of interest in business or running a Fortune 500 company, this little experiment of my father's had put those to bed. I'd been bored to tears by the very lessons I was supposed to teach starting a couple of weeks from now.

Yesterday, I'd kissed my mum on the cheek, hugged Tess, and said my goodbyes. I'd arrived in Switzerland and, still in denial over being banished to what was essentially the countryside, I'd decided I'd stay in Geneva until the night before classes started.

Today, I'd ventured into Aubonne to meet Thornton and to take care of a few administrative tasks. The place was as expected. A beautiful, historic building, but in the middle of nowhere. I was going to be surrounded by obnoxious, entitled, posh secondary school assholes – I knew for a fact because I'd been one of them – with no escape.

I was going to need to stock up on liquor to even make it through the fucking year with my sanity intact.

I down my whiskey and stand, buttoning the jacket of my tailored suit and quickly appraising the half empty bar as I do so. Pointing down at my empty glass, I motion for the bartender to get me a fresh drink.

My phone rings as I head across the bar towards the smoking area. I pull it out of my suit pocket and see Tess' name splashed across the screen.

"Hey–," I start, reaching into my pocket again and pulling out the joint I rolled before coming down to the bar.

"If you call me Tessticles again, Tristan," she interrupts, cutting me off. "I'll come over there and murder you myself," she pledges. "Women don't

statistically go for manual strangulation but I'm more than happy to bump up our group average if you test me."

I chuckle with the joint between my lips and light it. A couple sharing a cigarette at the other end of the area give me a disapproving look. I flip them off.

"I know how much you care about statistics. If they say you shouldn't kill me, I say you listen to them." I reply, taking a drag and pulling the smoke deep into my lungs.

"It's not that I *won't* kill you, it's that, historically, I'm much more likely to poison you."

I lean my head back against the wall and close my eyes as I feel the tension leave my shoulders.

"Can't do that from a distance."

She's quiet for a second and I know she's choosing her words carefully. "How are you?"

I sigh. "Fine."

"You should come home. You can stay with me, we can split my trust—"

"No," I cut in, "I need to do this." I'm talking about more than just the year in Switzerland. I've started to resign myself to the fact that the office threesome was my last stand in this short-lived war against my father. "There are worse fates than taking over a billion-dollar company," I joke, grasping for traces of mirth in my tone.

She's silent again, but it's different than the first time. This silence hides something, I know her well enough to know that.

"What?" I ask.

"Speaking of worse fates," she starts, before audibly swallowing, "Dad brought up marriage today."

My blood freezes in my veins. It's been the unacknowledged elephant in the room this year that my sister is approaching arranged marriage age, at least in our world. I don't want her meeting a fate like our mother's.

"I hope you told him to fuck off," I growl.

"Those weren't my exact words, no," she says, and I hear the hint of a smile in her voice. "But I told him I'm busy with the merger and that we'd need to revisit."

I grin at that. Classic Tess to be levelheaded and rational in the face of a potential crisis.

"Listen, I have to run. The negotiations took a major step back this

morning so it's pandemonium over here. I'll be right there, Julie," she tells her assistant before coming back on the phone. "I just wanted to wish you good luck and tell you I'm going to miss you. I'll see you in a year I guess." Her voice pitches down an octave in energy on her last sentence.

"Never thought I'd say this to anyone but have fun with the merger. I'll see you soon." I go to hang up but add, "Hey, don't be in an arranged marriage to some stuffy prick when I get back, okay?"

"Not if I have anything to do with it," she promises darkly, and the determination in her voice is almost enough to make me wish our father would betroth her to someone just so I can watch her run circles around her future husband.

I crush the butt of my joint with my heel and head back in, crossing the bar to my waiting drink with purposeful steps. I sit, wrap my fingers around the glass and take a sip.

One year.

One year with a fake name. Tristan Novak, the International Business teacher.

One year without my friends, sister, or mother. One year without wealth, in the middle of nowhere in a country where nothing ever fucking happens.

One year of not fucking anybody.

I rub a hand over my face. Fuck, I'm not ready.

Along with the crates of liquor, I'm going to have to invest in anti-chafing lotion for my hand.

In conclusion, one very *long* year.

I hate to admit it, but my father really has outdone himself with this one.

My hand drops slowly from my face because I smell her before I ever see or hear her. Her scent, a lethal combination of powerful vetiver and sweet vanilla, floats up to my nose and supercharges my senses.

"Excuse me," a sultry voice speaks from just behind me. Goosebumps break out at the base of my neck as if she caressed the area with her fingers. She leans in close enough that her chest presses against my arm.

Without moving my body, I slant my face to the side and look down at her from below my eyelashes.

My gaze connects with a pair of dark, shining eyes that stare boldly back into mine. I'm distantly aware that my breathing deregulates itself momentarily and that I miss an exhale, but I'm too taken by her eyes to give

it any real notice.

‘Beautiful’ is much too tame a word to describe her.

She’s striking.

Black, pin straight hair parted right down the middle frames a heart-shaped face and falls to her chest. Her intense, almond eyes sit over a small nose and thick lips painted with red lipstick. She’d look almost fragile in her beauty but there’s an underlying sadness to her that adds edge to her face. I know it because I recognize the same sadness within myself.

She’s taller than average, I’d say the top of her head reaches just below my shoulder, but I barely register that as my eyes rake down her body and I realize I’m about to be severely tested for my sins.

She’s wrapped like a present on Christmas morning in a hot pink dress that ends mid-thigh and accentuates what feels like miles of long, toned legs that I instantly picture bent on either side of my head as she sits on my face.

She wasn’t in the crowd when I scanned it earlier, I would have noticed her.

I would have remembered her.

“Excuse me,” she repeats, because apart from silently ogling her, I haven’t actually acknowledged her yet. I flick my gaze up to meet hers. She gives me a seductive smile. “Do you want to have sex with me?”

Chapter 4

Nera

“Excuse me, do you want to have sex with me?”

Given a second chance at asking my first question again, I’d rework my choice of words. Unfortunately, they’re out and that’s how I decided to phrase them, so it is what it is. No use in second guessing them now.

To his credit, he’s not bowled over by my declaration. In fact, he has almost no reaction to it at all, save a slight arch of his eyebrow.

I wonder if maybe this has happened to him before.

Actually, I’m sure it has. The way he’s sitting alone at this bar, nursing his whisky, perfectly comfortable with his own company and unbothered by the world around him. It invites curious gazes, specifically those of the women in the room. I’d noticed a few of them imperceptibly craning their necks to get a look at the brooding man in the suit.

I’d been one of them, staring at him from the shadows of a covered booth in the corner. I’d hoped that when he revealed his face to the room it’d turn out to be as pleasing as the strong lines of his broad shoulders. He looked like he carried the weight of the world on them.

And then he stood up and I got my wish. He marched across the room and I felt a current of physical attraction in my lower belly that I’d never felt before.

Piercing clear blue eyes that I could make out even from across the room sat below full eyebrows and even fuller hair. It was artfully messy, almost

like he'd paid someone handsomely to style it that way, but I instinctively knew it came from running his hand repeatedly through his hair. His jaw was firm and sharp, his mouth tight, and I'd wanted to kiss him just to see if I could get him to relax his lips.

Based on my physical reaction to him, I knew I'd found what I was looking for.

See, I'd decided after careful consideration that I wanted – no, *needed* – someone to absolutely rail me.

Not have sex or make love, but really fuck me. Face down on the mattress, hands pulling my hair as his cock powers into me and he whispers filthy things in my ear. As I make him lose his mind and he makes me believe in God. As he hopefully makes me come, *hard*.

Asking him to fuck me right out of the gate had felt too aggressive, but now I was regretting asking for 'sex'.

Too clinical.

He settles into the back of his chair, crossing his arms and casually leaning closer to me. My nose picks up the scent of his cedar cologne.

He's not laughing at me, nor is he immediately agreeing to my proposition. I'm good at reading body language, but his gives nothing away. He's an enigma wrapped in a mystery and one I'm apparently desperate to solve.

"I thought an escort in a five-star hotel would have a touch more finesse in her one liners."

His voice moves over my body like a feather teasing along my skin.

Maybe he's too much, too potent for me.

I set out to find a one-night stand, someone who could make sex enjoyable for me when my previous experiences have been anything but. Sex with my ex had been tolerable at best, but mostly miserable. Missionary only, over in less than two minutes, with no skill, expertise or frankly any care for whether I was enjoying it or not. And I wasn't, mostly because he'd never managed to make me come.

Never. Not once.

Frankly, I wondered whether my being conscious or not would have made any difference to Rex, but I'd never asked him.

We'd only dated three months before breaking up last year and since then I'd grown tired of touching myself to get some relief. Getting myself off worked but it never felt completely satisfying. After six months of

frustratingly unfulfilling orgasms and no one catching my eye, I'd started to spiral and had pondered jokingly aloud to Six that I might be asexual.

My physical response to the man at the bar tells me I'm not, but with one look and one reply from him, I suddenly feel dangerously out of my league. He's definitely older and his lack of reaction to my shock and awe approach makes me feel like I accidentally skipped a couple levels in this game and went straight to the final boss.

"I'm not a prostitute, but I have watched every season of *Diary of a Call Girl* which means I know *exactly* how much work goes into being a high-class escort, so I do accept your compliment." I shrug, before adding simply, "Women have needs."

His eyes drop to my lips as I speak and it's distracting. He knows exactly what he's doing. He knows how to seduce a woman and he's doing it with barely any effort at all.

"And what needs are those?"

I inhale and his gaze flicks down to where my breasts push against the neckline of my dress. A flash of heat passes through the limitless depths of his eyes. It's the first sign that I've affected him in any way and I grab on to it.

"To put it quickly and bluntly," I tell him, "I need to be cracked like a glowstick. I need to be fucked in a way that sets feminism back at least a couple hundred years. You seem like just the guy to do it. Interested?"

That pulls a smile out of him. Or at least that's how I interpret the lifting of the left corner of his mouth.

He takes a sip of his drink and nods at me.

"Go on."

"I just need one night of back breaking sex to get me out of my funk. That's it really." I set my own drink on the counter and look over my shoulder at the lounge area behind us. "It was dead in here earlier so I didn't have high hopes that I'd find anyone, but then I saw you marching across the room like you owned the place, and maybe you do. Who knows. But something about the way you walk tells me you know exactly what you're doing in the bedroom and I want a turn."

His hand comes up to brush his jaw, covering up his lethal smile as he considers me. Unlike earlier, I can see more clearly behind his gaze now. He's intrigued and tearing me apart with his eyes like he's sizing up if I'm a predator or prey.

“Are you always this blunt?”

“Blunt?” I say with a cool grin, affecting pure confidence. “This is me at my best.”

His eyes flash in challenge and an excruciating shiver shoots down my spine in response.

He likes to play, I can tell.

He tilts his head at me. “Then do your worst.”

Pushing the chair next to him aside and clutching onto my false confidence with both hands, I wedge myself between him and the bar.

To a casual observer, it looks completely innocent, like I’m leaning over the bar to order a drink.

For the two of us, there’s an added thrill in the air.

I lean over slightly and place my hand on his thigh, moving it slowly up his leg until I feel the length of him in his suit trousers. He’s hard and thick and throbbing against his thigh and I hesitate, my touch somewhat tentative as I cup his cock.

I flick my gaze back up to his and I don’t know what I was expecting – maybe that his eyes be closed in pleasure or his head be thrown back as he savored the feel of my hand on him – but instead I find his eyes pinned on me. He’s pushing a piece of ice around his mouth with his tongue, his cheeks hollowing in turn as he continues to stare.

He moves his hand over mine and I pause, transfixed by the size disparity between his and mine and the nearly audible crackle of chemistry when he touches me. I expect him to push me away, but instead he closes his larger palm over my hand and presses it more confidently on his dick, making me squeeze his length.

“If you’re going to touch my cock, don’t be shy about it.” A throaty groan falls from his lips and I can’t help but stare at his mouth as he licks them. “Touch me like you mean it.”

I’m definitely out of my depths with him and the color in my face goes to prove it. His thumb comes up to gently caress the pink hue of my cheeks.

“Adorable,” he breathes as if to himself.

I’m desperate to regain the upper hand somehow, or at least the element of surprise.

“What do you do?”

He chuckles and I find myself momentarily entranced by the sound.

“Weird question to ask me while you’re palming my dick.”

“Let me guess,” I say, making a show of perusing him from head to toe while simultaneously rubbing him from tip to base. His lips part slightly and I can’t help the smug smile I give him. “You’re a lawyer.”

His fingers wrap around my wrist, stopping my movement.

“What gave me away?” His tone is nothing more than a seductive whisper.

“The perfectly fitted suit.” I tip my chin at his wrist. “The sleek and simple inconspicuous watch that's actually thirty thousand pounds. The brown liquor. The broodiness. The general look of disdain for the world.”

I’m ensnared by the way his chest moves as he takes in even breaths. There’s humor shining in his eyes now and I wonder if I got it wrong.

“You got me,” he answers, and his thumb brushes against the sensitive skin of my wrist, leaving blazing heat in its wake. “What do you do?”

Shit. I didn’t think about him turning the question back on me. The glancing touches are enough to frazzle me as I search for an answer.

He’d shut this down if I told him the truth.

“I’m a graphic designer.” It’s not far from the truth, it’s just not how I earn a living. “I love to draw. I actually designed my first tattoo this summer.”

He hums, making his interest clear. His eyes drag slowly down my body. “Where is it?”

I squeeze his dick again and his eyes darken as they drop to look at our entwined hands in his lap.

“I’m trying to get you up to my room so I can show you,” I whisper, looking up at him from below my lashes.

He lifts a brow at me, exactly like he had when I’d first walked up to him.

“You have a room?”

“I came ready,” I say with another shrug.

“How old are you?” He asks.

“Twenty-two, why? How old are you?” I hope I play it off naturally. I think he’d run for the hills if he knew the real answer.

He raises his glass to his mouth and takes a sip. He takes his time, savoring then swallowing the liquor before placing his glass back down on the counter. I watch his Adam’s apple work as the liquid slides down his throat.

“Making sure I don’t go to jail tonight.” He licks his lips. “I’m twenty-

four.”

A warm hand wraps around my hip, startling me. I didn't even see him move and now he's using his hold to pull me closer against him. He turns slightly, parting his legs and positioning me between them.

We're as close as two people can be, my hand on his dick, his on mine, and the rest of our bodies pressed up against each other indecently in this trendy hotel bar.

“Tell me your name,” he demands, the order falling darkly from his lips and wrapping itself around my throat like a vise.

“Tell me yours first.”

His eyes fall to my lips again and I really wish he wouldn't. Not while we're still in public.

“I'm Gary.”

I scrunch my nose in response. “You lose some hotness points for that, sorry.”

“I assume I still have enough to be your first choice for tonight,” he answers cockily.

I just know he's going to do bad things to me and I can't wait.

“Hmm, you're lucky it's a slow night.”

The smile he levels at me reminds me that I'm a minnow playing footsie with a great white shark.

“Keep that attitude while you still can. It'll be fucked out of you soon enough.” My heart seizes in my throat as liquid heat pools in my stomach. “Now give me your name.”

“Jenny,” I lie. I think if I heard this man groan my name in my ear, he'd ruin sex for me forever.

It's already off to a rocky start, I don't need it dead and buried before I've even hit my twenties.

His lips stretch into a slow grin and now I'm the one staring heatedly at his mouth. “Not exactly the most unique name either.”

I lean in so I breathe my next words against his lips, emboldened by the scorching chemistry between us.

“You'll be moaning it regardless.”

He sucks in a rough inhale, stealing the breath from my lips when he does so. His fingers dig into my hips, the touch near bruising in its intensity.

“Careful,” he replies, and my throat works at the guttural rasp of his voice, “I haven't actually decided that I'm going to fuck you tonight yet.”

My eyes narrow slightly at his reply, going back and forth between his as I try to figure out if he means it or if this is a game he wants to play. There's something there in his gaze, something like hesitation, and it confuses me.

Does he... does he not like what he sees? Moments ago he'd looked like he was barely holding himself back from fucking me on the bar in front of all the people still here, and now he's hesitating.

That's the last thing I want or need from my hookup tonight. If he's uncertain, then I'll turn to another option. I'm not one to give people multiple chances, especially once my walls have come slamming down around me.

I lean away from him, removing my hand from his cock and stepping back from between his legs. My eyes sweep across the room until they land on a trio of what looks like finance guys sitting at the bar, talking loudly and obnoxiously clapping each other on the back.

Not ideal, but one of them will have to do. I won't let this handsome, indecisive stranger ruin my carefully laid plans.

I turn back towards him with an easy smile and a 'tough luck' lift of my shoulders.

"You're not my only option tonight," I say. "I think I'll go try my chances over there."

Chapter 5

Tristan

Just as unexpectedly as she approached me, she steps back and forces me to watch her walk away from me and towards a group of guys sitting just around the bend of the bar.

The first one to notice her taps his friend's shoulder repeatedly and tips his chin in her direction, urging him to look at the siren coming unexpectedly but decidedly towards them.

My fist clenches around my glass when I see the way they leer at her. They shouldn't be looking at her. She should still be pinned against my chest with her hands on *me*.

She blew in like a fucking tornado with her perfume, her fuck me eyes, her sinful dress, and her greedy hands on my body and that's where they should still be.

Not across the bar heading towards those wankers.

I'm desperate to have her. I can feel it in my hard cock, in the twisted knots of my belly, in the vein throbbing at my temple.

In the way my blood pumps furiously through my body, creating throbbing energy in its wake that remains trapped in me with no immediate outlet.

I want to call after her, to order her to come back here, but I grind my teeth and watch her go instead. My eyes never look away, locked in on her progress as annoyance rises in my body with every step she takes away from

me.

Two months into the year and two weeks before I've actually even started teaching and I'm about to fail the first condition of my banishment in spectacular fashion.

If I go after her, a stranger – a tempting one, but a stranger nonetheless – then I'm repeating the exact same cycle of behavior that landed me in this situation of having a noose around my neck and no free will.

But she was so desperate to have me before she bolted at the first sign of my uncertainty. She treated me like some random dick, perfectly replaceable with just about anyone, and that alone makes me want to collar her throat and bring her to her knees before me. I could have her gospelizing her submission to me within the hour.

I'm not used to being on this side of a one-night stand. I'm the one who usually sleeps with nameless and sometimes faceless girls. *I'm* the one who doesn't get attached, who lives by the words 'out of sight, out of mind'.

This is new for me and I don't like it. My ego has taken a hit and he doesn't like it either.

There's something about her that's alluring and spellbinding, more than just the initial physical attraction. It calls me closer, making me want to find out exactly who she is. Urgent need claws at me to get her number, to not let her slip through my fingers tonight. That I would regret it.

The voice in my head, the one with zero impulse control, screams at me once again to stop her before she reaches them.

My frustration bleeds into my legs as my foot taps an anxious rhythm on the floor. I'm powerless to subdue it but it stops abruptly seconds later when she reaches the other men at the bar.

I straighten, my muscles corded and tense.

She rounds the corner and gives them a coy smile that makes my jaw clench. She plays with a strand of her hair, twirling it around her finger as she giggles at something one of them says and I know it's fake. Even based only on our short repartee, I know it's not her. She's putting on a performance and I want to rip that mask off her and reveal the real Jenny.

I think back to how she approached me, the confidence with which she daringly delivered her opening line. How she brazenly fisted my cock and pumped up and down my length until I stopped her.

Is she offering them the same thing? Is she over there asking one or all three of them to fuck her like she begged me to not ten minutes ago?

I stare unflinchingly down the bar at her. At how she flirts until one of them stands and folds his arms so he can show off his height and the thickness of his muscles.

A screw pops loose inside me when she turns towards him and places a small hand on his bicep.

When he uncrosses his arms in response and takes a step towards her, something goes haywire in my brain and I'm up. I'll be damned if I sit idly by and watch as he touches what belongs to me for the night.

My impulse control is thrown carelessly to the wind as I stalk across the bar towards her, not taking even a second to ponder the shortsighted stupidity of my actions.

Regrets, that's what tomorrow is for.

Right now, I'm lost to everything around me except the thumping need in my veins to claim her.

Chapter 6

Nera

“I’m glad you like the tie, I have a couple of other designs from the same collection upstairs.” Kevin says, an overconfident smile on his face. “I’d be happy to show you if you’d like.”

I pause at his words but hide my reaction behind a vacant smile. It’s the offer I’ve been waiting for and yet disappointment churns in my stomach.

Kevin and his friends are unskilled in the art of seduction. I may be limited in my own sexual experience, but even I can tell that much.

I recognized how easy of a mark they’d be as I walked up to them so I’d gone for a softer opening than what I used the first time around.

Gary had gotten my heart racing and my blood pumping by not immediately taking me upstairs and bantering with me instead. That’s what was missing here.

As much as I want to be fucked tonight, I also want to work for it a little bit. I was hoping to find the same flirty repartee, the same electrifying quips that there’d been with *him*.

He-Who-Shall-Not-Be-Named-Or-Acknowledged because now that I’ve walked away, I won’t let myself look back.

Instead, after brief introductions, Kevin opened by bragging about his new house on Lake Como.

Within two minutes, he stood and flexed his muscles like a peacock spreading its feathers, his version of a modern day mating call. And now by the third minute, he’s asked me to come up to his room with him.

He's too eager and his obvious enthusiasm reveals that if I go upstairs with him tonight, he'll definitely enjoy the ride, but my time will likely turn out to have been better spent at home with my vibrator.

I want to roll my eyes and tell him that I'm a sure thing if he can just make it hot for me a little. I mean is that too much to ask for?

I open my mouth to say just that when a large body comes up behind me and presses intimately against my back. His warm hand splays possessively over my lower stomach and tugs me against the hard planes of his chest and into him in a domineering display of ownership. Ever so casually, his fingers brush the top of my pussy. My stomach flips in response.

Adrenaline shoots through me as his face comes down against mine. He turns his mouth into the mass of my hair, heated breaths coming from his lips and falling hotly against my cheek.

"Enough," he orders, mouth pressed menacingly against the shell of my ear.

My heart lurches into my throat and a swell of goosebumps erupts along the column of my neck and on down my spine.

I don't need to look up to know who it is.

Gary curls me into his body, his large arm enveloping me easily, and walks me away from the three men without even acknowledging them.

Distantly, I hear Kevin call out indignantly after me, but I've already forgotten about him.

Gary doesn't take me back to where he was sitting. Instead, he heads straight for the elevator bank.

He leans forward, keeping my body still securely clutched to his side, and presses the 'up' arrow on the panel.

"Gary?" I ask, looking up at him.

Nerves rumble in my lower belly when he doesn't answer or look at me. He continues staring straight ahead.

He's tense, his body coiled as if he's poised to strike and, briefly, I wonder if I should be scared. The only applicable knowledge I have of how to defend myself is via swordfight so unless he's got a loose épée laying around up in his room, I don't have a recourse for defending myself.

His arm is still wrapped tightly around me like he's afraid I'll walk away again, and his index finger taps a wild rhythm on my lower stomach.

My senses focus in on it until the foreboding tapping feels like a timer counting down to a bomb's explosion. The tension between us is taut and

ready to snap. My body feels like a live wire from the way he touches me and there's not even any skin on skin contact between us.

The elevator dings to announce its presence and I startle in response, nearly jumping out of my skin.

The doors open and we walk in. He releases me and I turn around in time to see him swipe a black keycard and press the button for the penthouse suite.

He stands stiffly beside me.

I can't take the silence a moment longer.

The doors start to close.

“What—”

Before I can say anything else, he slams me against the wall, swallowing my words with his mouth as his lips come savagely down on mine.

I freeze for only a moment before I moan and return his kiss with equal enthusiasm and passion.

My hands claw at him, first at the vest of his suit, shoving it off his shoulders, then at the knot of his tie, ripping it from around his neck, and finally at his hair.

His gloriously soft hair.

My hands drag through the thick strands, grasping at them to bring him closer, so much closer. I can't get enough as his mouth moves over mine, skipping any initial teasing in favor of a full-blown assault.

His lips ravage mine as he parts them with ease and shoves his tongue into my mouth. When I suck it in return, one of us moans but I don't know who. It might have been the both of us. He grabs my ass with greedy hands, palming my cheeks and using his hold to press me against his hard length.

I can feel him, hot and pulsing against my stomach, and his need matches my own. I arch into him and this time, it's definitely him who moans.

“Can you feel what you're doing to me?” He growls, not bothering to lift his mouth and speaking his words directly against my lips.

I nod emphatically and whimper my approval as my frantic hands reach blindly for the buttons of his dress shirt. Our noses bump and we share ragged breaths as his palms move to clutch my waist, roving over my hips and stomach like he can't keep his hands immobile on my body.

Already, this is far hotter than anything else I've experienced. My senses are fraught, my mind gone. All that's left is the unspeakable yearning in my

bones and my pussy for this near stranger.

I want him.

I *need* him inside me.

He's like a man possessed as he rips the straps of my dress off my shoulders and thrusts his face between my tits. He runs his mouth over the hot flesh, biting and licking and sucking at it like a rabid animal. The corset of my bodice keeps my breasts covered still, but they're bursting against the fabric, desperate to come out and be played with.

My hands are in his hair and I moan loudly as my eyes close and my head falls back against the wall behind me. I arch into his mouth.

Frantic. This whole encounter is frantic. Desperate hands and greedy mouths and unadulterated need.

The elevator dings, loud and disruptive.

In a heartbeat, he rips himself off me.

I open my eyes in time to see him fall almost drunkenly back against the wall opposite me, putting distance between us as the doors open.

The blood rush to my head and the arousal thrashing in my entire body dull my cognitive abilities. For long moments, I don't understand why he's put a stop to this.

I stare at him, dragging in ragged, gasping breaths. My tits are pushed so tightly against my dress that with the straps dropped around my shoulders and the way I fight for oxygen, they almost spill completely out of my top.

He looks at me like he's going to devour me. The exhilaration I feel at that prospect is as heady as a drug. His eyes burn with lust, his stare all-consuming as he physically restrains himself on the other side of the elevator.

A man walks in whistling a tune and thumbing his keycard between his fingers. His eyes immediately zero in on me, his whistling cutting off abruptly mid-note.

I can't imagine what I look like to him. My hair is disheveled, bruises are forming on my half-exposed breasts, and my legs are spread wantonly in my tight, short dress as I struggle to catch my breath. I look like a present that's already been half unwrapped and the state of my clothes doesn't leave much to the imagination.

If Gary thought I was an escort earlier, then this man must think I just finished a job with a very satisfied customer.

Gary goes unnoticed as the man stares lasciviously at me. His eyes rake

lewdly down my body and he licks his lips. I swallow thickly, a hint of fear rattling my confidence. I'm suddenly very aware of the vulnerability of my position.

He's so focused on me that he doesn't stop to consider that someone else might be in the elevator with me. I see the moment he makes the decision to approach, arousal blooming like a lightbulb going off in his eyes.

He lifts a foot.

I inhale sharply.

He doesn't get to take a step towards me before Gary's voice claps through the silence like a crack of thunder.

"She's with me," he growls. "Look the fuck away."

The threat in his voice is so clear and dark that the other man turns and jumps with a curse, immediately taking a step back and recognizing that he almost made a move on a very territorial predator's prey.

He turns away from me, standing between the two of us and inches from the door. He reaches and repeatedly hits the button for the next floor, anxious to leave this tight space where emotions are so volatile that the air feels suffocating.

His eyes are glued skyward as he waits for the elevator to crawl to the following floor. The doors open and he stumbles out, speed walking away without a backward glance.

When I drag my gaze back to Gary, he's unmoved. He stares single-mindedly at me like it's only been the two of us this whole time.

"Come here," he rasps, his arms spread to either side of him, his hands clutching the railing behind him and his knuckles white with effort.

I'm across the space and grabbing onto his shirt in less than five steps. His eyes darken as I clasp his cheeks and bring his face down to mine.

"Good girl," he purrs, before my lips meet his.

I arch into him, pleased at his praise and wanting more. He grabs the hem of my dress and shoves it up over my ass to rest on my hips as his hand reaches beneath my panties to my hot center.

I have no idea if there are cameras in this elevator. I assume there are, but I don't care. Not in this moment. Maybe when we're done the shame will wash over me, but right now all I can think about is getting underneath this man.

"I'm going to fucking ruin you," he growls, savagely biting my lower lip as his finger finds my entrance, pushing in and out once to test my readiness.

“I need to be inside you now.”

I hear the sounds of a zipper opening, followed by the telltale rip of a condom as he sheathes his cock and then before I can even process it, he’s pushing inside me.

He thrusts in to the hilt with one powerful move, extricating a feverish scream from my lips.

My mouth parts in agonized pleasure.

I feel like I’m bursting at the seams, like I’m one stitch coming undone away from being broken into a million pieces.

As much as I think I’ve reached my limits and that I can’t take anymore, I’m proven wrong and made to take it when he starts pumping into me.

He’s a beast, brutal and determined as he takes and takes.

He grasps my thigh right behind my knee and brings it up to his waist, changing the angle, deepening his thrusts, and unleashing even more madness as he drives into me.

He flips us so that I’m flat against the wall, his hand coming down to rest next to my face as he powers relentlessly into me, splitting me in two.

The elevator dings again, announcing its arrival at the penthouse. Gary grabs my other leg, hoists me into his arms and wraps my thighs around him. He walks sightlessly backwards off the elevator and into his suite.

We don’t make it far.

He has me up against the foyer wall within moments, pounding into my pussy like he can’t get enough of it.

“Your pussy’s so fucking tight,” he grits out against my neck. “I’m going to come.”

I stiffen when I feel his shoulders lock and hear his moans turn almost painful.

As much as I’m enjoying this, I’m not going to come.

Maybe I am broken. If sex this hot, this filthy and unhinged, can’t make me orgasm, then will I ever be able to?

Is something truly wrong with me?

Shame and doubt overtake me and I just want this to be over. I want to get out of his suite before he realizes how frigid I am. I can’t take the embarrassment after I talked such a big game.

But I know how men’s egos work. I know if I don’t come, he’ll at best be offended. It’s more likely he’ll get pissed and blame me. Stand over me and yell that there’s something broken with me. Anything not to question his

own virility.

At least that's what my limited experience has taught me.

So, when he thrusts into me one final time and I feel his muscles tense and then twitch, I make a show of moaning loudly and lewdly. I shove my face into his neck and clench my pussy repeatedly as I call out his name.

I know I give a good performance.

I've had some practice.

We stay silently like that for a few seconds before he pulls out and releases my legs, letting me slide down the wall until I come to stand on my heels.

I look away, avoiding his gaze as I make a show of smoothing my dress down over my hips.

He grasps my jaw and forces me to look up into his eyes.

"Did you just fake an orgasm?"

I stiffen, my face flaming red with embarrassment. Nerves roil in my belly and I want to throw up, my body desperate to get rid of these feelings. Bile rises in my throat but I smother it, clinging to my outward facing mask of calm.

I shake my jaw out of his grasp and try to move away, but he doesn't let me.

"No, I—,"

"You faked an orgasm," he repeats, this time as a statement. He tilts his head to the side, his eyes seeing too much as they inspect my face. An actual amused grin twists itself onto his mouth. "You think I can't make you come?"

There's humor in his voice, like what he just suggested is the most ridiculous thing he's ever said.

This isn't the reaction I'm used to. He makes me feel off-footed and something tells me that's much more dangerous for me long term than anger.

Good thing this is just one night of fun.

"Answer me and I'll let you go," he commands.

"I've been with..." I start before trailing off, unsure of what to say. "My ex-boyfriend, he couldn't make me...you know," I say, stumbling on the words. As comfortable as I am talking about anything sex related, when it comes to my inability to orgasm, I turn into a blithering fool. I don't like admitting to having another design flaw out loud. Some secrets you just keep to yourself. "You shouldn't take it personally. I don't think I... *can*."

He steps back as promised, casually removing and tying the condom before tucking himself away and disposing of it in a nearby trash. He turns back towards me and stares me down, his fingers going to the unopened buttons of his shirt that I spared. He starts to unbutton them.

I'm momentarily distracted, confused by what he's doing and then taken aback by the expanse of the tanned chest he reveals. He pulls his shirt from his trousers and takes it off, giving away rippling, mouthwatering muscles covered in tattoos. I want to get closer and explore.

My eyes move up to meet his and the smile he gives me is downright cocky now.

"Say it," he orders, clutching his belt buckle next and using it to jerk the strap clean through the loops and off. The *thwack* of the belt cracks in the silence between us and I swear I can feel the lick on the skin of my ass. "Your ex couldn't make you come."

He leans against the back of the couch and crosses his arms over his chest as he waits for me to speak. How can I form words when the way he moves has the unintentional effect of highlighting the thickness of his arms and toned six pack of his stomach?

Or is it eight?

"Well," I say, clapping my hands and looking away from him when I'm abruptly brought back from my ogling to the moment once his words sink in. "This has been fun. Thank you for, um, participating," I add, turning to look for the elevator panel so I can run out of here and go let the mortification kill me slowly somewhere else, far from his prying eyes.

"That first fuck was for me," he declares.

His voice brushes over me, the dark tenor of his words tickling my skin and buzzing straight through to the marrow of my bones. I turn back around to face him, but he hasn't moved. His jaw is tight, his eyes dark and intense.

"Call it punishment for walking away from me and leaving me with the most painful hard on I've ever had in my life. For making me chase you," he growls. "This next one is just for you. You can thank me when I'm done. Now, come sit on my face."

A gasp falls from my lips.

I must have heard him wrong.

"Excuse me?"

He straightens and walks over to me with slow, purposeful steps that have anticipation racing through me. My heart beats in my throat as the same

current that sparked to life when he'd first looked into my eyes passes through us once more.

"I haven't even started with you," he purrs. "You're not going anywhere until I've had your cum on my tongue and dripping off my face."

He's stubborn.

I am too.

"I'm telling you, I *can't*."

He fingers a strand of my hair, playing with it absentmindedly before his gaze comes back to mine.

"And I'm telling you that I'm going to have zero issue making you come. You'll be embarrassed by how quickly I make your pretty little pussy weep on my tongue." He releases the strand and drops his hand. "Come sit on my face. I won't ask again."

I knew I was right earlier.

I'm completely outmatched here.

I shake my head. "I'm too heavy."

He's either unwilling to listen to me any longer or he's had enough of me wasting his time, because he bends at the waist and threads his arms between my legs. He hooks my thighs over his forearms and hoists me high against his chest like I weigh nothing, turning us around and marching down a hallway towards the bedroom with me in his arms.

"Oh, my God." I shriek.

I hear more than see him kick a door open and then he dumps me on the bed. I bounce but he doesn't let me settle. He grabs my hips and flips me so that I'm face down on the mattress.

Before I can say anything, he grips the zipper at the back of my dress and yanks it completely down in one move. He's far from gentle as he tugs the fabric away from me, revealing my naked body clad only in a thong beneath it.

"Turn off the lights." I beg.

I've never had the lights on during sex and I can feel my mind wandering to all the imperfections he must see.

His palm comes down with a warning crack on my ass and I yelp.

"No fucking way. I want to see every inch of you." He says, definitively.

I blush in response.

"I didn't think anything could top your confidence but this shyness is

killing me.”

I shriek when he bites my right cheek, his teeth sinking deep into the skin as he palms my ass in each hand.

“Don’t you know it’s a bad idea to keep a man from his meal when he’s hungry?” He demands, his voice rough with arousal. “And I’m fucking *starving*.”

His finger brushes along my back, artfully tracing the sword I have tattooed down my spine. The hilt is covered in roses and thorns and sits perfectly between my shoulder blades. The tip of the épée ends at my lower back right above my two dimples.

“Beautiful,” he whispers. “You’re talented,” he adds, remembering my comment from earlier.

My cheeks heat at his compliment, a pleased smile tugging at my lips, but he flips me again before I can form a response.

My tits bounce as I turn and his eyes sharpen on me. The bed is low to the ground so he veritably towers over me as he inspects my body. I’m caught up wondering if he’s judging what he sees, if any parts of me are putting him off, but then he bends and licks my pierced nipple before sucking it into his mouth.

I squeal in response. The sensation of his wet tongue on the cold metal and my warm flesh makes stars shoot behind my eyelids. I got it pierced only a few weeks ago with my best friend Sixtine, so it’s a new and sensitive addition.

He grunts as his teeth rake over the piercing, the vibrations raising goosebumps down my flesh.

“Any other surprises?” He asks.

I shake my head, speechless.

“At a loss for words already?” He notices, fingers dancing over my skin. “Better find your voice quickly, I plan on making you scream.”

With that, he releases my nipple, rips my thong off me in one clean move, and lays on the bed beside me. He grips my hips and I yelp when he picks me up like I weigh nothing and positions my legs bent at the knees on either side of his face.

“Gary–, *oh, my God!*” I shriek when I feel the first lap of his tongue against my center.

“So wet for me,” he growls, then licks me a second time from my entrance to my clit. “You taste so fucking good.”

My eyes roll into the back of my head as he dives in, licking the soreness from the way he just fucked me away. As promised, he's like a starving man. His tongue slurps at my folds with so much gusto that the resulting exploding pleasure within me makes it almost impossible to remain upright. I bend forward, my hands desperately fist the sheets as the muscles of my stomach contract.

He palms my ass in his hands and uses his hold to press my pussy against his face until I'm sure he can't breathe. When I look down all I can see is his brow furrowed in concentration as he eats me and his crystal blue eyes pinned darkly on mine, taking in the mewls of pleasure falling chaotically from my lips. The contented purring noises he's making reveal just how much he loves this.

It's insane how easily he makes me forget my qualms so that all I can focus on is the roughness of his tongue as it abrades against my flesh.

There's something building inside me, the echoes of which feel somewhat familiar to the orgasms I've given myself. But I know that when this wave crests, the impact will be far more devastating.

I buck my hips in response to his assault until I'm arching into every sweep of his tongue and every graze of his teeth against my sensitive flesh.

"That's it, ride my face," he grunts against my folds and his dirty words are the spark. They keep me tethered in this in between as my muscles tighten. "Fuck my face just like that."

My stomach clenches, my toes curl, and my eyes close as I can scarcely believe that I'm about to come, and just as easily as he promised.

And then he pulls my clit into his mouth and suctions it between his teeth and that's the lit match that makes my world go blank.

Powerfully, voidlessly, blank.

Every atom in my body releases and explodes as I shatter on his tongue. I'm temporarily blinded as I fall into a bottomless oblivion.

I scream the walls down, incapable of muffling my pleasure or curbing it in any way as I grapple with the force of my orgasm.

I didn't know it could be like this and I'm not equipped to handle it. Sweat dots my brow and my thighs quake until I'm not sure I'll ever be able to walk again.

It takes long minutes, but I'm a trembling, shaking mess when I come down, the waves of my climax receding almost reluctantly.

I come back to reality only to realize that he's still licking greedily at my

folds, his fingers digging into my thighs just as firmly as when he started.

He doesn't show any signs of slowing down or stopping.

"What...what are you doing?" I ask with difficulty, still reeling from the orgasm and losing myself right back again as his tongue redoubles its efforts. That's all the time I'm given to process my first assisted orgasm because he already has me building towards a second one.

"One orgasm could have been luck," he drawls, his words muffled against my body, "but two is skill." His hand reaches up to palm my breast. He kneads the tender flesh and then flicks my piercing before pinching my nipple. Pain radiates from my bud and turns into delicious pleasure before I can even register it. "I don't want there to be any doubt about my performance here," he adds cockily.

I groan, my body overstimulated to the point of torment. Now that I've orgasmed at his hands – or rather, his mouth – I'm not sure if I can handle another.

I don't know if I'll survive it.

My mouth falls open on a loud moan when I feel his finger trace my folds. He runs it up and down my slit, tenderly grazing my sensitive flesh and collecting my wetness until I want to scream at him to stop teasing me.

I must say it out loud, my tone one of deep sexual frustration, because he chuckles, his warm breath caressing my pussy and setting me afire.

He places his finger at my entrance and pushes in, not stopping until he's inside me as deeply as he can go. My thighs tighten in response as I fight against the immediate need to come. I must be suffocating him between my legs because his face is now completely obscured by my body, but I can't process my concern.

I'm gasping for air as he strums me like a virtuoso on a guitar. I fall forward but the hand on my breast moves up to clutch my throat, forcing me to remain upright with just the strength of his arm alone.

When he pushes a second finger in next to the first, he shoves me off the cliff of my pleasure and straight into my second orgasm.

This time, my screams are silent. My mouth falls open on a ferocious cry, but the sound is muzzled as all my energy goes to riding out this rabid tornado of sensations. My thighs don't relax as he continues to eat me, greedily licking up the juices that spill out of me, and I wonder how I haven't accidentally killed him yet.

Finally, I buck and the noises erupt from deep within me. I cry out

endlessly, my voice sounding almost pained to my own ears. I fall backwards against his lower stomach, my head resting on his knee. My heart beats wildly, my chest pumping to match, and my breaths are strangled as I drag in lungfuls of oxygen.

I hear his own call for air as I finally release him. He sits up, wiping his nose and mouth with the back of one hand as the other reaches for me and clutches my hip possessively.

“I think that’s my point well proven, don’t you?”

Chapter 7

Tristan

She's splayed before me with her legs spread on either side of my hips as her pussy resting against my lower stomach. Her eyes are closed and she looks like she's about to doze off into a satiated sleep, but I'm not going to let her rest until she's come with my dick inside her.

She's turning out to be an addictive little find. Three orgasms between the two of us and my dick isn't showing signs of being repleted anytime soon.

I was planning on sexually torturing her. On drawing out her pleasure, stretching it out excruciatingly and then pulling back before she could come. Over and over, teasing her for hours on end, until she'd scream in frustration and I'd give her the climax of her life.

But then I'd felt her muscles spasming irregularly around my cock, followed by unnaturally boisterous sounds of pleasure.

It wasn't the volume that'd given her away, but the way she'd screamed.

I'd been intrigued, both by the fact that I'd never had a woman fake an orgasm before and that she'd felt she'd needed to do so. My initial plans of torment had quickly been replaced with another kind of torture.

An extreme amount of pleasure could be just as agonizing as withholding it.

There was going to be a come down from this. Once I was done with her

and the lust seeped away from where it was holding my rational thoughts prisoner, I'd probably realize the dangerous consequences of my actions.

But I couldn't seem to make myself give a fuck right now. Not when I still had so much I was planning on doing to her.

I glance my thumb over her clit and she shivers, her eyes peeling sleepily open. She gazes up at me from beneath her eyelashes. There's nothing affectedly flirty about the look and yet it sends a jolt straight to my dick.

"How do you want to take my cock next?" I purr, continuing to gently caress her bud. "Face down? On your back?" I suggest, "You did such a good job of riding my face, how about you show me how well you ride my cock?"

Arousal burns hot in her gaze at my filthy words. She reaches up to cup the back of my neck. I can't help but swallow thickly as she uses it to sit up, her bare pussy rubbing over my covered dick.

"Condom?" She breathes the question close to my mouth. Her hand is still wrapped around my nape and she's grinding on my cock, driving me wild.

It takes monumental effort to rip my hands from the top of her thighs and grab a condom from the wallet on my bedside table, especially when her other hand comes down to stroke the wide expanse of my chest.

I unzip, but she takes the condom from my hands. I watch through heavy lidded eyes as she tears the foil open with her teeth, blows out the corner, and reaches for the button of my trousers. She stares unflinchingly into my eyes as she wraps her hand around my length. I hiss and her gaze drops to my mouth.

She pulls me out and pumps up and down my shaft a few times, squeezing my length in her tight grip, before rolling the condom on me.

"Get up and take my trousers off," I order. I don't want anything getting between us when I fuck her this time.

She does as instructed and stands, then drops to her knees between my legs. I watch from my elbows as she undoes one shoe and then the other, taking them off, before grabbing the waist of my trousers and doing the same. Seeing her kneeling for me gives me all sorts of dark fantasies about fucking her mouth, but they'll need to wait until later. For now, I need to be back inside her.

I reach for her, grasping one full ass cheek in each hand as I lift and pull her back down on top of me. My length is pushed up against her and she

arches her hips, wantonly rubbing against me like teasing me isn't going to get her fucked until she passes out.

I clutch her hips, keeping her from being able to move.

"Enough," I growl and an answering smile stretches smugly across her face. "Put me inside you."

"Bossy," she whispers on a sigh.

I collar her throat, forcing her eyes to meet mine.

I think she tenses for a millisecond, but I blink and it's gone. She grabs my thick dick, her hand too small to fully close around my width, and places it at her entrance. She pauses, a mix of anticipation and apprehension flashing through her eyes, but I'm going to lose my mind if she keeps my tip snugly against her warm entrance any longer without letting me in.

"You love it," I counter. Wrapping one arm completely around her waist to hold her against me and keep her from moving, my cock parts her folds and I start to push in.

She moans when I'm three inches in, her head falling to rest on my shoulder as she works to take me. This angle has her stretched completely for me and my eyes roll back into my head as I'm able to go even deeper than before.

I play with her left tit as I suck her right one into my mouth. My dick continues its path inside her, spearing her with six inches now. She's fidgety, her arms wrapped around my shoulders as she bucks her hips, trying to get me deeper inside her. But this go around, I'm taking my time.

With two inches remaining, I thrust the rest of the way until I'm fully seated inside her. She screams and then bites my shoulder, the little banshee.

I cup the back of her neck as my mouth finds the shell of her ear.

"Do you feel me buried deep inside your tight cunt?"

I feel her nod against my shoulder.

"Use your words."

"Yes," she breathes. "You're so big," she moans, and I see sweat beading on her forehead.

I lick it up, relishing the salty taste of her efforts.

"Your pussy is strangling my dick." I say, punctuating my words with a thrust of my cock. "I'm going to take so much pleasure in stretching you out."

She cries out, her head falling back, her neck arching and her mouth parting as an intense shiver rolls through her.

“S-stop.”

“Stop?” I question.

She lifts her head and opens her eyes, peering at me with a gaze that’s nearly blinded by lust.

“I’m supposed to ride you, remember?” She tells me, placing a hand on either one of my shoulders.

Her tits move when she inhales a lusty breath. She bites her lip, and unlike the way she cupped my cock at the bar, this move is completely innocent and unaffected.

My eyes darken and a growl rips from my throat.

“Then ride me,” I command.

She needs no further invitation to do as instructed. Using her hold on my body, she arches her ass backwards and then back downwards. Inches separate our faces and she takes in every microscopic reaction on mine as she starts bouncing on my cock.

A garbled groan and unintelligible words of praise fall from my lips, one after the other as sensations overtake me. She slows her rhythm, her hands coming up to clasp my face as she brings her lips down on mine.

I suck on her tongue and she bites my lip and we maul each other. Our touches are frenzied, our mouths hungry, our bodies in overdrive as we try to sate ourselves with the other.

She pulls back to look into my eyes as she gyrates on my cock, her hips rotating from side to side and driving me wild. I growl when her hand wraps around my throat and squeezes, the pressure restraining the flow of oxygen. My head falls backwards as I look up at her through darkened and aroused eyes.

I’m not against being dominated by a woman.

It’ll just make her eventual submission to me that much sweeter.

She keeps her hand on my throat as she continues to ride me. The glazed over look in her gaze reveals that this moment of power over me only serves to make the flames of arousal burn hotter inside her.

She moans, the pressure on my neck releasing slightly as she throws her head back in total appreciation of the sensations rolling through her body.

She’s a goddess and I don’t think she even knows it.

“I need your number,” I breathe, my hands squeezing her thighs in a painful grip to make her look at me. I don’t know where the words came from, but I don’t regret them.

She shakes her head. “No.”

A snarl rips from my throat at her refusal.

Another first.

“What will it take for you to give it to me?” I demand, my thumb finding her clit.

Her muscles stiffen as she feels my grazing touch.

“One night,” she gasps, “This is just one night.”

I rip the hand off my throat and bend it behind her, pinning it with her other hand against the small of her back.

With my free hand, I flick her clit repeatedly. I’m far from gentle as my thumb jerks a wild rhythm on her flesh, but I want her to feel what I do to her.

I feel her muscles clench, the tide starting to rise inside her as she builds towards an orgasm. Her head falls forward and she buries her face into the crook of my neck, moaning something unintelligible.

“I want it.”

“N-no,” she stutters, head tossing from side to side in unadulterated pleasure.

I release her clit and she moans discontentedly. She arches her hips, searching for my touch, but I keep it out of reach. Frustrated mewls fall from her lips as she tries to get herself off on my cock.

“Try again.”

“Maybe,” she starts, pausing to catch her breath as she continues to ride me, “Maybe you give me yours. Depends how the rest of the night goes.”

I pinch her clit and she freezes mid-thrust. She struggles to free her hands, but I hold them tight against her back as waves of pleasure rake through her. She rides them out, screaming her release and tumbling against me, spent.

She lays on my chest, trying to catch her breath. Wrapping an arm around her to keep her from falling off me, I lean over and reach for the pen and notepad on the nearby side table. I scribble something and tap it with my pen to get her attention.

“This is my number. I’ve given you more than enough reason to take it,” I say, arrogance shining in my voice, “but let me continue to prove myself just in case.”

With that, I lay back down so my shoulders rest on the edge of the bed. My hips hang off the side in a bridge position, my legs planted on the floor.

She's sitting on me with my hard dick still inside her. I pull my hips back, this angle not limiting my range of motion or the depth of my thrusts into her pussy, and power back inside her.

She yelps, not ready and almost toppling right off me, but I clutch her hip and keep her firmly seated on my cock. I don't give her a chance to get adjusted before I start drilling into her at a maddening pace.

I grab her throat and hold her there as I pump furiously inside her, making her bounce and her teeth rattle with every thrust. Her nails claw at my chest as they desperately search for purchase, but I don't give her any breaks.

With my other hand, I gather her hair in a ponytail and fist it. I tug on it and keep it taught, forcing her spine to arch backwards away from me. She's prone and trapped in this position and I have my way with her as I pump madly into her tight pussy from below.

Faster than I'd like, I feel my shoulders bunch and my stomach muscles clench as a torrent of pleasure shoots straight to my cock. I have time to thrust only a couple more times before I come with a roar, my seed spilling into the condom.

I catch her when she falls and hoist us both back fully onto the mattress. Only once I have her comfortably settled on the bed do I pull out of her.

She whimpers and my cock twitches like he's been called. Her disappointment at losing my dick from between her legs calls to some primal part of me that makes me want to mark her.

I dispose of the condom, clean her and myself up, and go back over to the bed. She's asleep exactly as I left her. On her stomach, legs spread akimbo, her arms on either side of her face. She's turned on her left cheek and facing away from me, her disheveled hair flung around her.

In sleep, her face loses the sadness hidden behind her eyes.

She looks beautiful.

I grab the sheet and pull it over her hips, getting in beside her. I lay on my back and rest my head on my bent elbow, looking thoughtfully up at the ceiling.

There's something about her wistfulness that draws me to her. I want to know more, to understand if there really are shadows plaguing her or if I'm just imagining things.

"If you were given one wish, what would you ask for?"

I turn my face towards her and find her still laying with her eyes closed,

looking like she's dozing. I thought she was dead asleep. She sounds exhausted, her voice small when she speaks.

This close, I can make out a dusting of tiny beauty marks across her nose. I hadn't noticed them before. There's five of them spread like a constellation across the bridge of her nose with one resting just off center of the tip.

I think about her question, about whether to give a real or bullshit answer and I ask her as much.

"Real," she whispers, "Always real."

I think about it for a while, about how to articulate my greatest wish.

"Freedom."

"From what?" She asks, her eyes closed.

It's not something I can explain to a stranger, so I keep it simple. "From the things that stop me from being able to do what I want to do."

"A dream of yours?"

"Amongst other things, yeah."

"What is it?"

She's the first person apart from my sister who's asked me that. My path has been laid out for me since before I was born, so no one in my circle has ever bothered to ask if I wanted anything else, because why would I?

Supposedly, I already have it all.

"To own my own restaurant."

"Oh, yeah?" A soft smile touches her mouth, her eyes still closed. "That's awesome. What's keeping you from doing it?"

There's years-long worth of family trauma and drama I'd have to take her through to answer that question, none of which I want to share, so I settle for something tangentially true.

"I need to pay the bills."

She hums in approval. "Yeah, and you must earn a good living as a lawyer."

I have no idea, so I nod. I realize she can't see that, so I say, "Yeah."

We sit in comfortable silence for a few seconds before I ask, "What's yours?"

She sighs, sinking deeper into the pillow as she does so.

"To be truly happy."

I chuckle softly, not at her answer but at my own. "That's more inspirational than mine."

A small frown pulls at her brow and I realize I haven't looked away from her face in minutes.

I move my arm from behind my head and turn so I'm facing her. Even if she is half asleep still, in this position I get to watch her all the micro expressions as they develop on her face.

"Not necessarily," she whispers. "Sounds like we might actually have wished for the same thing."

She pauses and I can sense that she wants to add something else. She's hesitating, deciding whether to get this off her chest or not.

"I don't think I know how to be happy," she says, "I'm not sure if it's even possible for me."

Her tone is emotionless. Her words aren't delivered passionately or despondently, just matter of fact, but her voice is still small and I don't think it's just because of her need to sleep.

"You want to know a secret?"

"Always," she answers.

"I don't think anyone does. I think that's the Big Lie." Her eyes open for the first time since I laid down next to her. They immediately find mine, urging me with a look to keep going. I think about my words. "I think being happy takes hard work and doesn't come easy. You have to make decisions every day to get you there and sometimes it feels like you have to claw for every single inch of contentment." I turn onto my back once more and stare at the ceiling, running a hand through my hair. A sliver of moonlight hits the ceiling, its shape looking like a blade. "'Happiness' is built brick by brick with bloodied hands, that's the truth. But it's marketed to us as this thing that we're just supposed to *be* so that, when you're not, it feels like maybe *you're* missing something. Like you're the problem and it comes naturally to everyone else except you. But it doesn't and there's nothing wrong with you." I sigh, thinking about my own thoughts and feelings on the subject. "Being happy is fucking hard."

When I finish, I'm aware that my answer went far beyond the scope of what she probably needed or wanted to hear, but I'm no longer looking at her so I have no idea what she thinks of my rant.

"You must be a good lawyer."

She says it with a smile but her tone is also pensive, like I've given her something to think about. I chuckle instead of replying, not wanting to further the lie, especially now.

The silence stretches for long moments and I think maybe she's fallen asleep this time.

"Are you happy then?" She asks, her tone curious.

A humorless smile tugs at my lips but she can't see it in the darkness.

In this very moment, we're just two people who need to get some long-held darkness off their chests. We choose to do it with each other.

"No."

The moment feels heavy. Too heavy for what we're doing here and I shake my head.

Turning back towards her, I tell her.

"Your ex had no idea what he was doing." Her eyes fly open and meet my sinful ones. "Sleep. You need energy for round three."

They widen slightly at my words. "Again?"

I hum in approval. "You were so eager for my cock earlier," I say, reaching out and stroking her lips. "I want you to show me what that mouth can do."

I wake up hours later. It's still dark out but the beginnings of a sunrise are visible on the horizon. My cock stirs, awake and ready to pick up where we left off.

Next to me, the sheets are thrown back and the bed is cold.

She's gone.

I turn and look at my bedside table.

The top sheet of the notepad is missing, the paper ripped off.

Chapter 8

Nera

“Come on, Nera. Again! Stand up and go again.”

I’m bent at the waist, hands on my knees, struggling to catch my breath. Sweat drips from my brow and hits the mat below me. Coach Kravtsov stands five feet away, screaming.

Well, ‘screaming’. His volume never dips below irate army General regardless of the subject at hand, so I guess he’d argue that we’re just having a friendly conversation. His good morning greetings are enough to make you jump out of your skin if you’re not ready for them.

I draw in ragged breaths but it feels like no oxygen gets through to my lungs.

He doesn’t care.

“Stop standing there. *Move!* You’ll never win if you continue with this lazy, selfish attitude.”

Wiping my damp hands on my shorts, I squat and dig my fingers under the rim of the two-hundred-pound tire. My grip slips before I can lift it and I fall backwards on my ass.

“Again,” Coach Krav orders, uncaring of my exhausted state. “Embarrassing. The French champions can do this in their sleep.”

I squat and grab the tire again, clenching my stomach and digging into my heels as I work to get beneath the weight. I shift my hold to an underhand grip.

Sweat drips into my eye, blinding me. With difficulty, I get the weight over me. I just need to push it up and off, flipping it over.

This is the tenth time I'm doing this and I have nothing left to give. I feel weak. My head spins, my vision blurs, my muscles scream, but I won't fail.

"Failure isn't part of a Matsuoka's vocabulary, Nera. If you failed then you didn't want it enough, you didn't try hard enough."

My dad's words echo in my brain as I breathe into this deep squat, readying myself to flip the tire. I shake my head as if to physically remove the thought from my mind, but it stays there, loud and distracting.

"Are you going to stay like that forever, or are you going to do something?" Coach Krav sneers, leaning over so his face is inches from mine.

I hate that asshole.

My legs start furiously trembling under the strain of the weight, my hands cramping as they struggle to hold the tire. I go to the quiet place in my mind and tune Coach Krav out as much as I can.

Gritting my teeth with effort, I gather the last remaining vestiges of my strength, release an animalistic scream and push off from my heels.

My weight explodes off the ground, my arms extending as they shove the tire and I watch with a combination of smug satisfaction and relief as the tire flips, landing with a loud *thwack*.

I don't get a second's rest.

"Ten laps around the facility for wasting my time," Krav announces before walking off to check on another student.

I wipe my brow with my forearm, my hands coming back down to my hips as I watch him march leisurely off. I've already done an hour of calisthenics, an hour of technical training, and this last hour of footwork and weights. The thought of doing an endurance run, even a short one, makes something shrivel up inside me. I bury that feeling, locking it away with all the other feelings I don't let myself have, and will my legs to start moving.

I ignore the way my head spins and focus on putting one foot in front of the other. I go to that place in my mind where I can disassociate from the physical and mental pain and just *do*.

Coach Krav is new this year, paid for and brought on to the RCA staff by my father with the sole purpose of getting me gold medal ready in time for this summer's Olympic games. This is only my tenth workout with him and

every single one has ended with me in physical agony. He coached the gold medalist from two Games ago, so his track record is proven but his methods feel like they must be in violation of the Geneva Conventions.

No matter how much I give, it never seems to be enough. I've never once complained, never once shown him any weakness, and yet every second I'm not working myself to bleeding in front of him, he acts like I'm not taking it seriously.

My improving footwork isn't enough. My new personal best time in the 5k warmup isn't enough. My place at top of the leaderboard in victories within the team isn't enough.

I think even if I do win the gold, he'll find some fault in the way I did it.

I love fencing more than anything. When I'm on the piste with épée in hand, it's the only time where I feel strong and in lockstep with my body. When I'm fully suited up and donning my mask, I feel like a badass. I'm brilliant at it, but this pressure to be better than the best is suffocating.

My fists clench when I feel anxiety and dread start to balloon inside me.

No weakness, Nera. Failure is not an option.

I chant it to myself repeatedly until the mantra is the only thing left on my mind, those other unproductive thoughts smothered.

I'm pulled from the mental rabbit hole I've stuffed myself into when footsteps fall into pace next to me.

"Hey, babe," a voice drawls.

Great. Just what I needed.

I increase my pace to distance myself from him and my calves scream at me for it. It's not even worth it; he keeps up with me easily.

"Leave me alone, Rex." I say.

"Woah," he answers, putting his hand lightly on my arm, "That's not very nice, babe."

I don't stop, rounding the bend to finish my fourth lap. My jaw is clenched so hard it feels like I'm shaving the top layer of enamel off my teeth.

I decide to ignore him, certain that he'll lose interest and veer off back to where the boys' team is finishing their stretches.

But I'm wrong.

Instead of releasing me, his hand fists around my forearm and he drags me to a dead stop.

"Let me go, Rex." I say, my voice even, my eyes fixed on where he still

has my arm clenched between his fingers.

“Ask me nicely and I will,” he answers, his tone fake nice. Barely concealed behind his words is how much he gets off on any moment where he has power over me. “I just want to talk.”

He was never physically violent with me when we were dating, but the looming possibility of it was always there. It was there in the way he’d grit his teeth when I said something he didn’t like and would then endlessly berate me about it once we were alone. The way he’d yell and humiliate me when we slept together and he was the only one who got off.

Although, now I indubitably know that he was the problem, not me. Not only do I apparently have no issue with coming, but I can do it multiple times.

My mind wanders back to that hotel room with Gary like it has done more frequently than I’d like to admit over the past two weeks.

The raw passion and the vulnerability of that night haven’t been as easy to lock away in the dark corners of my brain as everything else.

I’d felt alive in a way I hadn’t in a long time. Maybe it was the anonymity and spontaneity of doing something that bold, something my parents would undoubtedly murder me for if they found out about it, but part of me thought Gary himself had something to do with it.

I wonder what would have happened if I’d stayed, what he would have done to me next when he’d already ruined me for every other man to come after him.

He would have taken my mouth, then probably flipped me so I was face down on the mattress as he...

A shiver ripples across my skin as I think of the possibilities.

When I snuck out, I hesitated halfway to the door, unsure if I should leave or stay. I’d turned around for one last look at his sleeping form, at the number he’d scribbled on the notepad.

And when I found myself ripping the page off and stuffing it into my clutch, I didn’t pause to question why I couldn’t just walk away without it.

Turns out, it wouldn’t have mattered if I’d left it behind.

When I got home and undressed for the shower, I found his sleek handwriting on my skin, his number memorialized in black marker just above my pussy.

It took a week to successfully scrub it off my body during which time I touched myself endlessly to the visual of him writing it on me while I was

passed out.

I thought about texting him several times since, but always stopped myself. What would I, what *could* I, say? There was no way to open that door back up without unraveling the lies I'd told him. That I was only eighteen, that I was a student, that my name wasn't Jenny...

His number burned a hole in my contact list instead, my heart skipping a beat every time I scrolled past his name.

"Babe?" Rex tugs on my arm to get my attention, like a child mid-tantrum calling for his mum's.

I keep my face blank as I turn to face him, knowing my lack of reaction is what will annoy him most. Trying to pull my arm out of his grip will get me nowhere and he'll enjoy my struggle too much.

"We have nothing to talk about, Rex."

"I disagree."

Something inside me starts to twitch at having his touch still on me, but I work to control myself. I'm a master at it, at controlling my emotions, my reactions, my entire *life*.

"I miss you," he purrs, getting closer. I hold back a flinch. "I want us to get back together."

My stomach roils at the thought. I only dated him because he was an appropriate choice for me, one that would make my parents happy. His father had gotten rich in the oil business and my mum had veritably crowed when I'd announced the news of our relationship to her. She could see the headlines of the society pages already, "*Oil Tycoon Marries Diamond Heiress in Lavish European Wedding.*"

I'd gotten high on her praise, her rare approval of me more potent than any drug, and it's what had allowed me to keep the relationship going for months when I should have ended it after that first time we slept together. When he took my virginity without a care for whether it hurt or if I liked it or not.

I held on for a couple more months until eventually I had to put my survival above her happiness. When I announced the news that I'd broken up with him, it'd almost killed her.

Or so she claimed.

She only calmed down once I promised that I'd find better. The next person I dated needed to be a prince or something, otherwise I'd have to bear continued comments about how disappointed she was in my partner for the

rest of my life.

“Nera!” Coach Krav calls out, his thick Russian accent cutting across the facility. “Have you finished your laps?”

“No, Coach.” I reply, looking at Rex with a sly smile.

“Stop distracting my athlete, Carrington,” Krav barks.

I pull my arm out of his hold and start jogging backwards away from an annoyed looking Rex.

“We’re never getting back together, Rex. Ever.”

I turn and start running, a newfound burst of energy powering me around my final lap. For the first time since he became my Coach, Krav’s militant approach to my training regimen has proven its usefulness.

Chapter 9

Nera

When I'm done with my post-workout stretches, I head for the locker room. It's got state of the art showers, with numerous shower heads and a dozen different pressure settings. It's one of my favorite places on campus and sometimes I'll sit in there for hours, letting my mind rest as the jets massage the knots out of my back.

Today, I'm in and out in under ten minutes. I have to get home in time to welcome our new American roommates, Bellamy and Thayer. They're coming to RCA for our final year and Six and I have been pretty excited about welcoming them to our apartment.

When I come out of the shower, my head spins so violently that my balance gives. I stumble and catch myself on the wall. I stay there for a couple of minutes as I wait for the wave of dizziness to pass.

My blood sugar is low. I need to eat something. I gather my things with shaky hands and head out towards the parking lot, thankful to not have had any other run-ins with Rex. I'm not naive enough to think that was the end of our conversation – Rex isn't overly familiar with the word 'no' – but if I can put it off for a few weeks, that's already a win.

The closest option near me is to go to *Bella's*, the American diner on campus. It's only greasy food and I'm sure I'll regret it later, but I'm afraid I'll pass out if I don't eat something right now.

Six borrowed my car to go pick the girls up from the airport, so I drive

over there in one of the campus golf carts and order. The first bite of the burger tastes like a perfectly ripe peach on a warm summer day.

Heaven.

I dig in, every subsequent bite after that making me realize how hungry I was. I haven't had a burger in...ages. I grab a few fries next and eat them greedily.

A text from Six pulls me out of my food bliss.

Six: we're five minutes away

Six: see you soon!

Shit, time got away from me.

I head back towards The Pen, one hand on the wheel, the other holding my burger. I pull over on the side of the road for a second to respond to her text when my phone starts ringing.

My back tenses when I see who's calling. I consider sending her to voicemail, but I know she'll just call again and again until I pick up.

Plus, I do miss talking to her.

"Hiya, Mum." I say, pulling up FaceTime.

"Nera," she says, her voice warm but her tone chastizing. "What have I told you about answering the phone that way?"

My shoulders tighten. "I'm sorry," I tell her. "Hello, Mother."

"That's better. You really need to start behaving in a more ladylike fashion. Anyone could have heard," she says, with a world-weary sigh.

"I'm sorry," I repeat, working to keep my voice even. There's really nothing else to say when she gets like this.

"That's alright, darling. Just... try and do better, okay?" I nod, shifting uncomfortably in my seat. A deep frown pulls at her brow line. "Is that a burger?" The horror in her voice is akin to her asking me if I'm snacking on a rotting animal carcass, not a burger.

I swallow around the mass in my throat. All of a sudden, the burger settles uncomfortably in my stomach, like pieces of cinderblock weighing me down. My self-destructive thoughts rise like the dead and pound against the walls of my skull, demanding action and demanding it now.

It's crazy how one word from her, one censoring comment, one disgusted look from across the world can pierce through to my core and cut me to the quick.

“My blood sugar was low, I needed to eat.” I hear how defensive I sound, but at least it hides the shame she makes me feel. “This is the closest thing I could find.”

“I’m sure it was convenient, darling.” Her words are kind but her tone is reproving. “But you need to be smarter about what you eat. You know how easy it is for you to put on weight and you don’t want to go back to what you used to look like, right?”

I look off into the distance before I answer. “No, Mother.”

She gives me a speculative look, like she realizes what she’s saying is hurting me. If she does, it’s not enough to make her stop.

“I’m just trying to look out for what’s best for you, darling. Actually,” she says, her face lighting up. “I just read this *amazing* article in Elle. This wonderful new diet that all the society girls are following, it’s so great you’ll see. Basically, you start with a ginger tea and a sugar free plain yogurt in the morning and then...”

I zone out as she continues talking. Leaving my burger on the passenger seat, I pull back onto the road and head for home, nodding and humming at key points so she thinks I’m still listening.

But inside, my heartbeat pulses in my temple and the itch starts to rise like a threatening tide in my brain. Every time I try to focus back on her words, the obsessive thoughts reel me back in like a fish on a hook.

I’m trapped in the worst place I know – the dark and twisted recesses of my own mind. The price I pay for the quiet place in my mind that I escape to when I need a safe space is a sadistic voice in my head. A hateful, unkind version of myself who seeks only to self-destruct.

I start tapping my left foot anxiously, trying to silence the voice. I pick at my nails, digging my thumb into the flesh around it and peeling back the skin. The pain is a welcome relief from my swirling thoughts. They scream at me that I’m worthless and unlovable. They’re unintentionally validated by every word my mum says.

“You better not be ripping your cuticles,” My mother’s reprimanding tone breaks through the haze.

You can’t do anything right, Nera, the voice screams.

You’re worthless.

An embarrassment.

I close my eyes against the tirade of self-flagellation the voice unleashes on me, hoping that if I squeeze them shut hard enough I can keep the self-

loathing part of my brain out.

A failure.

“It’s a disgusting habit,” she gives an exasperated sigh. “Really what’s the point in spending all this money on your clothes and hair if your hands are going to look like you dishwash for a living?”

Telling her that it’s hard for a fencer’s manicure to stay pristine will fall on deaf ears. She never wanted me to get into sports, it was my dad’s pet project to make me an athlete.

She wanted me to be a society girl, a debutante like her. She’s endlessly disappointed in anything that falls short of me being the perfect lady and gives me no grace for how her ambitions for me are in direct opposition to my father’s.

Failure is not an option for me, but neither is success when I’m stuck between the differing and often suffocating aspirations of my parents.

My stomach roils as I pull into the parking lot, choosing to park at the back where bushes and trees will give me privacy. I need to get off the phone before she finds fault in the way I breathe.

Like an itch in furious need of a scratch, the voice yells at me to eliminate.

“I have to go, I’m about to go meet my new roommates,” I tell her.

Her eyes soften, the first time she looks at me with anything other than judgement since I answered her call.

“You know I love you right, darling?”

I do, actually. In many ways, my mum is a good parent, she just has no interest in breaking the cycle of generational trauma. She parents the way she was parented, with criticism overshadowing compliments and emotional intelligence being ridiculed as something reserved only for hippies.

“I love you, too.”

When I’ve hung up, I rest my head on the wheel and try to breathe. I try to ignore the itch that crawls beneath my skin, to disregard the voice in my head that bullies me and controls me, spewing hateful words at me like some dark monster, but it’s too late.

I’m powerless to resist it.

It takes over my rational thoughts, pushing the real me to recede into the background as I fall into it once more.

I’m out of the golf cart and looking around. I can hardly do this with my new roommates upstairs. There are a few bushes off to my right. No one is

here, no one can see me.

I run for the bush and drop to my knees behind it. I don't need to put my fingers down my throat to do this anymore, but I do it anyway.

I watch with dispassionate detachment as the burger and fries come up with ease and hit the grass beneath me. I go again, wanting, *needing*, it out. I'll push through the dizziness. I have veggies and chicken upstairs that I can eat if I need. Acid burns my throat and bile chokes me. I go again. Something wet hits my cheek and I wipe it away with the back of my hand.

Relief is short lived and quickly washed away by crushing shame. I don't have time to feel those thoughts, not when I have to go meet the girls. Reaching into my duffle bag, I grab a pack of gum and pop one to get rid of the sour taste in my mouth.

Outside my front door, I take a breath to settle me. I look at myself in my phone's camera. I wonder why no one else can tell how broken I am when it's so painfully obvious to me.

I paint on a happy smile and open the door.

I walk in to find a brunette hugging my best friend as a second girl with silver hair says, "Seriously. You've been amazing, Six!"

I make sure that my smile is securely in place as I walk towards them.

"Are we best friends already?"

Chapter 10

Nera

The first time I made myself throw up, I was fifteen.

I spent the day shopping with my mother in Tsim Sha Tsui, searching for the perfect evening gowns for both of us to wear to a charity benefit that weekend.

For her, it had to be sexy enough to lure my father's business associates in by displaying how beautiful his wife is, without veering into slutty territory. Attention getting but not making her the center of attention, because a woman was not to outshine her husband.

My mother hasn't had more than half a grapefruit for breakfast, a dressing-less salad for lunch, and lemon tea for dinner since I can remember, so every dress fit her perfectly that day. We found the one pretty quickly, a beautiful green Valentino dress, and yet still I saw the uncertainty on her face when she put it on. She relentlessly picked apart her perceived flaws in the mirror.

We needed to follow a similar set of criteria for my dress. I remember running my fingers over the dozens of dresses the stylist pulled for me, until I landed on a beautiful, red satin Marchesa dress.

I tried it on and loved the way it fit me. I came out to show Mum, excited to see her reaction to it.

I remember the way she looked up from her phone. How her eyes had widened, then turned pitying. Without her saying a word, I could tell exactly

what she was thinking – that the fabric emphasized the pooch of my stomach, that my hip dips created a flawed silhouette, that the sweetheart neckline highlighted the extra skin on my arms.

She opened her mouth to say something, thinking about it and eventually settling on, “Don’t worry darling, we can make a plan so your weight gain doesn’t spiral any further out of control.”

I was in the midst of puberty and awkwardly growing into my body like any young teen.

The dress was a size six.

Nausea crawled up my throat at the way she looked at me. I never wanted her to look at me like that again, like I was ugly and deformed.

“Black,” she added. “We should find you something black.”

And so, we had.

A flowier, less form fitting, black dress.

Once we were home, I dropped the shopping bag in my bedroom and ran straight into my bathroom. I stripped off all my clothes and stood in front of the mirror where I castigated myself and my body for all its sins.

Tears streamed quietly down my face as I cursed my untoned arms, my flabby stomach, and my touching thighs. I grabbed the softest parts of me between pinching fingers, pulling and hurting myself as if I could rip them off me with sheer force of will alone.

I didn’t even try to make myself throw up. Powered by my self-loathing, it came barreling out of me on its own, forcing me to turn away from the mirror and fall to my knees, clutching the toilet bowl.

It’d been easy, and the relief immediate and shocking. I’d expelled weight off my body and felt physically and emotionally lighter, the instant impact like the rush of a drug. Looking down at that disgusting pile of half chewed food, smelling the acid residue almost threatening to make me sick again, it felt like I’d purged myself of the necrotic tissue she’d seen and wanted gone when she’d looked at me.

I got addicted to that feeling, to being able to control this in the way I controlled every other part of my life. To seeing the numbers tick down on the scale. To having clothes get looser on my hips. To feeling her eyes get softer as I got smaller.

I felt victorious, like I’d found a way to win this newfound war against my body. I was working out, eating less, relying on my teenage metabolism, and sticking my fingers down my throat when I needed to. I lost the baby fat

and got toned.

On the outside, I looked happy.

But in reality, I'd traded one monster for another.

Whatever I did, it wasn't enough. I'd lost fifteen pounds and yet still my mum managed to find imperfections to criticize. I started turning to food for comfort and purging for punishment. I got addicted to the emotional comfort food gave me and let the immediate shame I felt after overconsuming push me towards the bathroom.

Every time I promised myself it was the last time.

Every time it wasn't, the self-loathing grew until I was trapped in this vicious cycle with no way out. I was fighting an invisible opponent, waging a silent war on myself and all the while the outside world got to see me thrive.

To them, I was someone strong and accomplished. A perfectionist to whom everything came easily.

If only they knew how I was destroying myself in my own head.

What started as a need for control devolved into a complete lack of it. Rational thought was replaced by a cruel voice in my head that sounded like me but wasn't, and this mental itch that grew worse the more I tried to ignore it.

I erected walls around myself. To protect myself from the pain my parents caused me, from the judgment and outside commentary, but also to keep anyone from finding out about my most shameful secret.

Safe behind my walls, no one can hurt me.

No one can see the weakness that lies just beneath the veneer of phenomenal success.

Failure isn't an option, Nera.

I lost something that day in the bathroom. My innocence, my joy, my soul, I'm not sure. Whatever it was, I haven't cried in the three years since.

"Where's class?" I ask.

"Um, I'm not sure, let me look." Six answers, pulling out her phone and looking at her schedule. "Eleven am class is in...the Arc Lecture Room."

“Shit,” I say, looking at my own phone. “That’s the other side of campus. We need to run if we don’t want to be l— Sixtine!”

She’s jogged past me before I’ve even finished my sentence.

I follow after her with a laugh.

“This has already been a cursed week without adding getting detention for being tardy to it,” she calls out. “Come on, my little fencing queen,” she sings to the tune of *Dancing Queen* by ABBA, “I need to keep my record cleaaaaan, oh yeah!”

I laugh, because it’s easy with Six.

She’s my refuge from the many other pressures in my life.

I’ve never been able to tell her about my struggles. I’m afraid if I do, it’ll taint the little bubble around this friendship of ours and I’m not willing to risk it.

I was nervous about Bellamy and Thayer’s arrival. I find it difficult to be vulnerable and deeply trusting of people. I tend to keep them at arm’s length, only close enough that they can see the exterior face I present to the world.

But something about them tells me that they’re not ignorant to pain and their own internal struggles. It’s only been a few days, but I have an inkling they might belong in the bubble with Sixtine.

In any case, Six wasn’t lying. It’s been a rough start to the week and it’s only the first day of class. In that time, Bellamy’s made a dangerous enemy in Rogue, Rhys has developed an obsession with Thayer, and Phoenix has decided to acknowledge Six’s existence after two years without a word.

Let’s just say time has done nothing to soften his approach.

In conclusion, the girls are in turmoil and we haven’t even made it to lunch on day one yet. I’m glad to be free of the drama.

Although.

A very faint thought pokes at the deepest corners of my mind that it would be nice to have *something* to distract myself with.

Another thought flits by unwelcome, that maybe I should text Gary. I could see him one more time as Jenny and then delete his number...

No.

I don’t know why I’m hung up on thinking about him. It was just one night. And now that I know I wasn’t the issue in my relationship with Rex, I can just find someone else.

But it was his words as much as his touch that’d stuck with me after our

night in Geneva.

“There’s nothing wrong with you. Being happy is fucking hard.”

He gave me a more thoughtful answer than I’d expected. I wondered if he had his own demons, if he had spoken from experience and sensed I was someone who might understand.

“We made it,” Six exclaims, as we come to a stop in front of the still open classroom door. She bends at the waist and puts her hands on her knees as she catches her breath. *“Putain, I’m out of shape.”*

“That ass doesn’t look out of shape.”

She straightens and turns to face Felix — a fellow fourth year who’s on the football team — as he walks up to class. He blanches when he recognizes her and takes a step back.

“Oh fuck. Fuck. I didn’t realize it was y—”

He’s violently yanked back by his collar and shoved through the doorway into the classroom.

His flying body reveals Phoenix. There’s a thunderous expression on his face as he steps into the space previously occupied by Felix and pins his dark stare on Six. She looks away and down at the floor, refusing to hold his gaze.

He stares wordlessly at her for a couple more seconds before walking into the classroom. The moment he turns and walks away, all the oxygen comes flying back into the hallway.

I groan. “Great, so he’s in this class?”

“I told you, it’s a cursed week,” she answers with a resigned lift of her shoulders as she too walks through the doors.

I follow her and we head towards a row that’s halfway up the lecture hall stairs. Six walks down the row first and I follow as she stops in front of two seats.

My bag catches on the back of a chair and gets tugged off my shoulder, spilling its contents everywhere. The annoyance I feel is similar to when my hair tie snaps as I’m trying to brush my hair into a ponytail.

“The new professor is cutting it close,” Six says, looking at the time on her phone as I drop to my knees next to her and start gathering my things.

“He’s probably some dusty septuagenarian they’ve shaken out of comfortable retirement and placed in a shack at the other end of campus, give him a break.”

The previous IB professor had gotten a “once in a lifetime fishing opportunity” in Belize and had abruptly retired at the end of last year. Given

the average age of professors at RCA tended to be comfortably over fifty, all we could hope for this professor was that he be slightly more sprightly.

“*Oh, putain.*”

“Sorry, was that offensive? I’m sure he’ll be—”

“No, Ner,” she breathes and I look up, surprised at the unrecognizable tone of her voice. She’s standing, looking almost disbelievingly down at the front of the room.

I’m still crouched, picking up the contents of my bag. The front panel of the desk hides the rest of the lecture hall from my view.

“What?”

“He’s...he’s not a septuagenarian.” She seems at a loss for words.

“Really?” I ask, semi interestedly. I reach out and grab the yellow highlighter that’s rolled between her legs.

“Nuh uh. Nera, he’s *hot.*” She crouches down until she’s eye level with me, whispering excitedly at me as she helps me pick up my pens. “He’s gorgeous. *Too* gorgeous. There’s absolutely no way they can put him in a classroom this full of teenage hormones. The girls are going to fight to get his attention, the boys are going to hate him for being hotter than they are. Well, almost all of them,” she mutters, ruminatively. Her eyes dart to me and she blushes tomato red, clearing her throat and adding, “Ahem, it’s going to be pandemonium.”

I snort, grabbing my last notebook and shoving it into my bag as I stand up.

“There’s no way he’s that ho—,”

The words die in my throat when my eyes fall on the figure bent over the desk, writing something on a piece of paper.

He’s fully clothed but I flash back to seeing that very same back naked and leaned over the bedside table as he scribbled his number on a hotel notepad.

He hasn’t looked up and still, I know him.

Gary.

“I told you.” Six says, misinterpreting my silence. “Agree with me that he’s as hot as I promised he’d be, please.”

Gary.

I feel like all my brain cells collectively jump ship because I’m unable to comprehend what Gary from the bar, Gary the *lawyer*, is doing here.

He straightens and looks out into the crowd to my left where a couple of

the guys are getting rowdy. His jaw is just as defined, his eyes just as cold and sharp as I remember them.

Except when he looked at me. The ice in his gaze had melted around the corners then.

He's dressed in a navy suit and white dress shirt, similar to what he wore that night but without a tie. I wonder if he was able to salvage that shirt, I remember hearing a couple of those buttons hitting the ground.

"Settle down," he barks and Jesus, if I wasn't sure who he was before, I am now. He bossed me around his bedroom with a voice that sounded much the same, although it'd been more guttural and less controlled that night.

"Earth to Ner Bear." Six calls from my right.

"What?" I manage to rip my gaze from Gary with some difficulty to look at her. "What were you saying?"

She gives me a curious look and I realize I must be acting very strangely. I never told her about what I'd done in Geneva. She wouldn't have understood and she'd have cautioned me against being so reckless.

"That I didn't exaggerate how hot he is, right?"

I clear my throat. "No, you didn't."

Her reaction makes sense now. He's a lesson in physical perfection and the absolute antithesis of a secondary school teacher. Energy ripples off his shoulders along with a don't give a fuck attitude that screams 'doesn't take orders or tolerate bullshit well', and yet he's a *professor*.

Of spoiled rich kids at that.

He's not a lawyer. Like me, he lied about his life.

Although as shocked as I am to find him in this room, I think he's in for an even ruder surprise when he eventually notices me. Nerves swell in my belly, but I find I'm distracted by another thought. If he lied about his job, I wonder what else he lied about.

"What did you say his name was?" I ask Six, my eyes still fixed on him, tracking his moving body as he takes his laptop out and connects it to the TV via Bluetooth.

"I can't remember off the top of my head, but it was right below the class title on the schedule. Let me pull it up," she says, and it doesn't take her long because she still has the tab open from earlier. "His name is...Tristan Novak."

Tristan.

A shiver ripples over my skin.

My tongue moves around the Ts in his name like I'm whispering a sensual promise. That name fits him perfectly. He looks like a Tristan.

A womanizer.

A fuckboy.

I suddenly feel foolish for believing his name was Gary. It so obviously doesn't fit him.

My heart races at the upcoming confrontation, the undoubted collision that's about to happen between us, and my associated complicated feelings about it.

I'm not ready to face them or him.

From the hushed conversations around me though, I can tell I'm not the only one who's noticed our new professor. A hint of annoyance flares through me when I see the interested stare of the girls around me.

He was mine first.

I'm surprised by the swell of malice inside me at the thought of him getting with someone else.

He clears his throat loudly. "Alright everyone, settle down. I'm Professor Novak, this is my first year at RCA. I'll be teaching you the riveting subject of International Business." He says it like it's anything but. "You should have the course syllabus on the desks in front of you. This week's topic will be Globalization, starting with discussing how today's modern financial systems came to be and then moving on to the resulting impact on societal development." He sounds bored as he speaks, barely looking up from his screen. He's a far cry from the charming, charismatic, captivating man I met in the bar that night. "First, I'll start off by taking attendance. Please stand when I call you so I can put a face to the name."

Oh, fuck.

I swallow thickly around the mass in my throat. I'm thirteen letters away from him discovering me and I have this sudden urge to hide.

But there is no escape from this, and I'm frozen in my chair as I hear him make his way down the alphabet. Every letter feels like taking a step closer to the edge of a cliff.

Simultaneously, my blood heats and my skin blushes. I have no idea what's about to happen or how he's going to react and the anticipation makes my heart palpitate in a way it hasn't in a long time.

Except for that one night at the bar.

"Samsara Mahar."

She stands and he looks up, his eyes searching for her. When he spots her, he nods.

She sits back down, her cheeks red, and I want to scrub the color off her face. To make her immune to him.

“Felix Masterson?”

“Here,” he answers, standing.

“Noted,” Tristan answers.

Can I even refer to him as ‘Tristan’ in my mind? There’s no way I can call him Professor Novak. Not when he was the first man to make me come, let alone two more times after that with barely any effort. He probably would have continued if I hadn’t snuck out.

It’s my turn to blush now.

“Nera Matsuoka?” He asks, and my eyes momentarily flutter closed.

I savor the way he says my name. I never imagined that’s something my body could react to, and so viscerally at that, but I’m suddenly assaulted by visions of him groaning my name against the shell of my ear as he thrusts into me.

“Nera,” Six hisses from beside me. “He called your name, you have to stand up.”

She elbows me and I jump to my feet, bumping loudly against the desk and sending my seat scraping against the ground behind me in the process.

“That’s me,” I say, and watch as his eyes slowly rise from his attendance sheet and stare straight into mine.

I hold my breath as I wait for him to react, but...

He doesn’t.

For a split second, I think I see his eyes narrow but his face doesn’t move. It must just a trick of the light.

Because his eyes travel over me like they have everyone who came before me – disinterestedly, as if he’d rather be doing quite literally anything else.

The same way he didn’t react when I’d walked up to him and asked him to sleep with me at the bar, he doesn’t react now. I don’t if it’s because he truly doesn’t recognize me or if he’s that good at hiding his reactions.

It’s only been two weeks. There’s no way he can have forgotten me so quickly, right?

Right?

Unless he’s brought a girl up to his penthouse every night since then.

My stomach churns at the thought that maybe that's his move. Sitting at the bar looking all mysterious to ensnare women, then seducing them and taking them up to his room.

"Nice to meet you," he says, but he's already looking back down at his paper.

Nice to meet you?

How *dare he* not remember me? I'm suddenly angrier than I have been in a long time.

"Mhmm," I say loudly with an unimpressed huff, dropping into my seat and crossing my arms over my chest.

Out of the corner of my eyes, I see Six's eyes first widen and then heat the side of my face. At the same time, his gaze snaps back up to meet mine.

They slither down my body before coming up to my face where they narrow.

"Sounds like you need a cough drop for that tickle in your throat," he says, unaffectedly. But I see the tundra in his eyes freeze over, his words coming out on a knife's edge. "I suggest you go get one. Now."

I feel every head in the lecture hall turn to look at me. Embarrassment burns in my veins and blurs my vision. I can't believe he's doing this to me and singling me out in this way.

I walk down the stairs with measured steps and a ramrod straight back, refusing to reveal the extent of my mortification. I'm halfway to the door when he calls after me.

"And...Nera, was it?" I turn to face him, my humiliation complete. "Don't come back. Use the time to think about whether you want to succeed in my class or not."

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Six's mouth drop open in shock. I'd find it comical if I wasn't on the verge of losing my shit.

For the first time in my life, I'm thrown out of class.

I'm starting to think Six was wrong.

It's going to be a fucking cursed *year*.

I turn to food for comfort and scarf down a giant burrito from the cafeteria, eating every last bite even when I'm so full to bursting that I'm in

physical pain.

My stomach is distended but I keep eating, hoping it'll fill the emptiness inside and make me forget what just happened.

But all it does is give the voice in my head a reason to berate me, its punishing tone getting louder and louder with every minute the burrito stays in my stomach, until I'm running to the bathroom, clutching the toilet with shaking hands and throwing it all up.

I'm out of the bathroom as quickly as I ran in, afraid that my friends will wonder where I've gone and come looking for me.

Six gives me a long hug, apologizing for Tristan's behavior like she had anything to do with it.

"I can't believe he singled you out like that," she says with an angry huff.

I can't either. It's the very definition of adding insult to injury.

"Don't worry about it," I tell her, playing it off. "I'll just sit all the way at the back next time so he can't hear me breathe."

"I'll sit with you, obviously," she answers, putting her arm in mine as we walk to our next class.

What I need after a morning like this is a workout. My veins buzz with unspent, frenetic energy and I feel on the verge of crawling out of my skin for the rest of the day until I make it to the training facility.

I change into a gray tank top and my fencing pants, leaving the straps hanging at my waist instead of pulling them over my shoulders, and march out into the workout area.

I enter that hyper focused, competitive zone in my mind where the world around me falls away and I use it to focus on my training. I move up and down the piste, practicing a sequence of parries and ripostes against an invisible opponent.

Over and over again, I go, until sweat dots my forehead and my lungs burn. I focus on my footwork, on moving correctly with good balance, on extending my lunges and then retracting back into my form.

Glove game drill. Repetition based drill. Technical training. Three bouts. Ten laps around the facility. I do it all. I overwhelm my brain with physical effort and exhaustion until I can think of nothing else.

I'm barely conscious of the rest of the athletes leaving and heading home. They leave me alone. They know not to bother me when I get like this. Even Coach Krav slips out without a word. He doesn't need to inflict a

torturous workout when I'm already doing such a good job of punishing myself.

I put in my headphones and listen to music as I move over to the dummy to practice my sword skill and hand dexterity. There's something about listening to Megan Thee Stallion while skewering a dummy that makes me feel fucking powerful.

I start shaking my hips and then my body as I feel the beat move through me. My ponytail brushes against my back as I dance.

I tilt my head back and take a breath, feeling my shoulders loosen as I enjoy the effortless movement.

After putting my body through it, it feels good to just move for fun.

Awareness prickles the back of my neck. An ominous chill coils between my shoulder blades. I hear no noise outside of the music playing in my ears, but I feel the air shift behind me. There's someone there, I can sense it in the way the energy changes.

I wonder if it's Rex, come to intimidate me when there's no one to interrupt us. I wouldn't put it past him.

It's late, dark, and I'm alone, but I refuse to be afraid. I continue to dance as if nothing is wrong but imperceptibly, I change my grip on the handle of my épée. When it's clenched tightly in my fist, I rip my headphones out and whip around with my arm fully extended.

In an instant, I have the pointe of my sword up against the intruder's Adam's apple, my eyes momentarily locked in on that patch of tanned skin before I flick my gaze up to meet his.

Shock ripples down my back when an icy gaze connects with mine.

Tristan stands there, tall, furious, and so fucking handsome that my heart manages to flutter even through the walls of the impenetrable enclosure I keep it locked behind.

I don't know how long we stay like this, frozen in this moment, separated by a few feet with my sword at his neck, but the seconds stretch on excruciatingly by.

His eyes rake over my face, the anger in them searing my skin. I don't look away. My heartbeat thrums so loudly in my ears that for a second, I wonder if he can hear it.

But then he takes a step towards me, pressing the épée deeper into his skin. He doesn't flinch or give any sign that he even notices it, let alone feels it. My stomach pitches when he opens his mouth and finally speaks.

His jaw is tight, his voice rough with anger, his words delivered like an insult.

“Jenny, the graphic designer.”

Chapter 11

Tristan

“Jenny, the graphic designer,” I snarl.

Nera.

Her name is Nera. The beautiful woman who I’ve thought about nonstop over the past two weeks is actually a beautiful *girl* and my student.

My throat tightens, not because of the pressure she continues to exert on my neck with her sword, but because I suddenly realize how much I’ve fucked myself.

I’m supposed to be staying out of trouble, and specifically staying celibate, and I’ve unknowingly gone and slept with one of my students.

If there was a Fucking Up event at the Olympics, I’d have more medals in the sport than Michael Phelps in swimming.

Her lips part slightly when I speak, the one sign that my words have affected her in any way. She looks as delectable as she had naked and laid out on my mattress.

Then her mouth flattens into a thin line and her eyes narrow at me over the blade of her sword as anger replaces surprise.

“Gary, the lawyer,” she declares, grimacing like the words have a bad taste to them. “So, you do remember me.”

How could I forget?

I slap the thin blade of her sword away from my neck but with a quick and deft flick of the wrist that shows her adroitness in the sport, she has the

pointe right back up against my throat.

With a touch, she presses it further into my neck, a warning meant to make it clear that she's in charge here.

My cock hardens in my trousers, excited by her assertiveness as much as the last time we met.

My physical reaction makes me even angrier. My dick hasn't gotten the memo yet that I shouldn't and can't find anything about her attractive and very fuckable.

I followed her here after classes ended and waited hours until she was alone to confront her. To find a way to make her keep her mouth shut about what happened in Geneva.

Instead, I'm at her mercy, waiting for her to say something.

I could step back, but I won't.

Not in this game of chess we're playing.

I thought this conversation was going to be easy, that she'd give up quickly like she had during class, but I can see now that I was wrong. Without the threat of discovery and the power imbalance of a classroom setting, she's going to meet me blow for blow.

I'm faced with a different Nera and, in a tight gray tank top, tight white pants, and a sword in hand, I'm having a hard time reconciling her with the woman who wore pink. She looks fierce and cuts an intimidating and impressive figure against the black walls of the training center.

I'm even more intrigued by this part of her and fuck if that isn't exactly the type of shit I *shouldn't* be noticing right now.

"I could kill you, you know. Not with this one." She sounds almost disappointed. "It's blunted. Useless," she says distastefully, finally lowering the blade down to her side. "But good for you to know, should you ever be taken with the impulse to sneak up on me again."

Her chest heaves with every breath she draws, making her tits push up against the fabric of her tight top.

"You're a dark little thing, aren't you?" I say, tilting my head to the side slightly.

Fuck, why did that come out sounding so throaty?

Her eyes shoot daggers at me and her chin comes up stubbornly. "I'm not little."

"That's what you took issue with?"

She lifts her chin up. "Yes."

Don't look at her. Don't do i—
My gaze drops down to her body.
You fucking fool.

She is little. Not in height, but in size. If I hadn't watched her put in a superhuman multi-hour workout, I would have guessed that she was on the weaker side physically.

As it is, I'm surprised she was able to train the way she did. It must cost her twice as much energy as a brawnier athlete to accomplish what she just did. She's got to be completely exhausted and ready to sit or rest. Instead, she stands in front of me, shoulders back, posture rigid, and her chin tipped defiantly at me.

Grudgingly, I let her carve more than an inch of respect out of me.

As lean as she is, her aura gives off pure strength. She shines with a larger-than-life personality, although that hint of sadness I saw before still lurks underneath.

I remember how she told me she doesn't know how to be happy. I wonder why that is when everything about her looks perfect.

"I see that."

She brushes an absentminded hand down her stomach like she's trying to remove a piece of dust.

"What do you want?" She asks, turning away from me. I must be a glutton for punishment because I miss the connection that hate glaring into each other's eyes brought me.

"You lied to me," I manage to grit out between clenched teeth.

She whirls back around and I'm unable to control the pleased feeling that unfurls inside me at having her facing me again.

"You lied as much as I did. And then you humiliated me in front of my friends."

I take a step forward, crossing my arms to keep myself from grabbing her. "I didn't put your entire fucking future at stake," I spit. "The best case scenario for me if anyone finds out is that I'll get fired. That's the *best* outcome. Are you even eighteen?"

She hesitates and gives me a look from under her eyelashes.

"Don't play with me," I growl.

"Why not?" She asks, sounding genuinely curious. "You enjoyed playing with me last time we met."

"*Fuck,*" I bark, stepping back from her and running an agitated hand

through my hair.

I can't play these games with her. If I do, she's going to end up face down, ass up on her precious fencing mat.

As it is, I'm risking everything by being here. If Thornton walked in on us right now, I'd be done for and my mum...I don't want to think about what my dad would do to my mum.

"Are you eighteen or not?" I churn out, enunciating every word.

She gives me a long look, stretching out the silence intolerably. I want to bend her over my knee and spank her ass until it welts to punish her for her insolence.

"Yes."

I exhale a relieved breath, a fresh glare coming to shine in my eyes. She pays it no more mind than the previous ones.

"You told the exact same lies, Tristan. Don't act like the only injured party here."

"Don't call me that," I snap, "It's Professor Novak to you." But the hairs on my arms stand in response to her saying my name for the first time. My clenched fists shake with the effort of restraining my need to issue another command.

Say it again.

"I don't think so," she quips back. My hand twitches again with the need to spank her for that mouth of hers. "We were two consenting adults, I see no problem here."

"You're barely an adult and I'm your *professor*."

She tilts her head to the side in thought and I can tell I'm not going to like what comes out of her mouth.

"Does that mean you don't have any teacher-student fantasies?" She clicks her tongue against her teeth. "That's too bad, I would have been happy to put on a schoolgirl uniform for you."

In two large steps, I'm towering over her. I cover her mouth with the palm of one hand and fist her ponytail in the other.

"Shut up, Nera," I growl, vibrating with emotion at this point. They run the gamut, from anger and irritation to arousal and agitation.

She can't speak but the smugness in her gaze is almost more intolerable than her words. I pull my hand back and loosely cuff her neck instead.

"I like the way you say my name," she whispers. "I never got to hear you moan it."

“And I never got to hear you scream mine,” I grunt. “We don’t always get what we want.”

What the fuck, Tristan?

I have completely lost sight of the objective here. I’m off the rails and so far away from them, it takes effort to find my way back. Especially when I see her dark eyes darken further, like whatever dirty thoughts she’s thinking are blackening her very eye color.

“You could,” she answers, matter of fact.

“Stay away from me, Nera,” I charge. “This, us, it won’t happen again. No one can ever know. I’ll lose everything.”

I’ll lose more than she can imagine.

She smiles up at me and I want to wipe it off her face with my teeth and tongue.

“As I remember it, you were the one who was desperate for my phone number. So desperate in fact that you wrote it on me to make sure I didn’t leave without it.” Her eyes fall to where my hand cups her neck. “And you’re the one who can’t stop touching me. Seems I should be the one asking you to stay away from me.”

My gaze drops to her mouth. “That was before I found out you were a child, jailbait.”

Instead of backing away, she steps into me, molding her body against mine.

“Do I feel like a child to you?” She whispers.

I rip myself off her with a ragged groan and an angry growl.

“Stop. I can’t.”

“But you want to?”

“No,” I snap, bad-tempered. “I don’t want anything to do with you. You were right, it was just one night.”

“Your loss,” she says with an unaffected shrug. She puts her épée away in her bag and swings it over her shoulder, heading towards the locker room before pausing. She looks over her shoulder at me. “One thing about me though, *professor*,” she tosses out at me, her willing emphasis of the last word shooting straight to my dick and making me regret ordering her to call me that. “I know how to keep a secret.”

She walks out without another backward glance or waiting to hear if I have anything to say in response.

I don’t.

Chapter 12

Tristan

By the time I make it home, my head is absolutely scrambled.

If I'd met her for the first time in class, I would have been attracted to her but I wouldn't have had to push myself to the very brink of my control to be able to resist her.

But knowing I've been inside her twice and remembering how her tight pussy clenched around my cock as she screamed for me is the ultimate distraction. Every time I let my mind wander, I think of her.

I'm furious that she lied and put me in this position, because how am I supposed to go a year teaching as if she isn't there and I'm not dreaming of laying her flat on her desk and eating her out again.

I subconsciously lick my lips, an addict searching for a hit and coming up empty. She'd tasted so fucking delicious. I was craving another taste as much as a thirsting man in a desert craves water.

I open the door to my tiny apartment on the bottom floor of a two-story house. It's a small one bedroom provided by RCA and thankfully just off campus so I can have a modicum of privacy. It hasn't been updated in about fifteen years but it does the job. It's not like I have much of a choice.

Dropping my bag by the entrance, I go and sit on the edge of my bed, letting myself fall back onto the mattress.

What a fucking first day.

Seven classes a day of teaching the same boring ass course work to

students who are mostly as uninterested in the subject as me.

Among them, the class where I'm going to have to survive Nera's continued presence.

This year is going to crawl excruciatingly by. Yet again, I can't help but mentally congratulate my father for his creative punishment. One day in and I can already tell this is going to accomplish exactly what he wanted it to.

I want to go out with my mates. I want to talk to Tess and make sure she and my mum are alright. Hell, I want to wake up in my own bed in my own fucking apartment.

I grab an unopened bottle of bourbon and no glass from the kitchen and head for the couch, settling in and taking a swig straight from the bottle. Oblivion is on the agenda for tonight, as it has been most nights, and I can't wait for the sweet relief of feeling and thinking nothing.

I should cook myself dinner and do something that I enjoy, through which I can exert the creativity thrashing around in my brain, but I can't. The further away I get from making my dreams of being a chef a reality, the more I want to distance myself from cooking entirely. After all, why bother?

My phone dings and I reach for it unseeingly, my hand feeling the couch cushions next to me as I look for it. I find it and read the text on my home screen.

Unknown number: is it only the professor thing that's keeping you from doing this again?

I exhale a long-held breath and lean my head back against the couch. There's tension in my stomach and shoulders from all the lust trapped inside me with no outlet.

Her texting me is a risk. I should block her or answer her and tell her never to text me again. I should report it to Thornton and tell him this happened before we ever knew who the other was.

I should do a lot of things, but I do none of them.

Instead, I darken the screen and keep drinking. I turn on the TV, looking for something to watch on my sports streaming platform. I'm about to put on the Chelsea game when I see the suggestion right below it.

It's the final of the fencing championships from last year.

Before today, I'd never met a fencer. At least, not that I knew of. I'd been mesmerized by Nera on the mat, by the dexterity of her feet and hands

as she wielded her sword against her invisible opponents.

The raging hard on I'd gotten from watching her is still throbbing in my trousers, demanding a release.

I find myself putting on the bout and watching. When the video is done, it suggests a video from the juniors team and my breath catches when I see her in the background of the thumbnail.

I sit up and press play, captivated. Seeing her in a *juniors* competition just last year only serves as a reminder of how young she is.

Too young, even if I wasn't her professor.

I don't think I blink as I watch her match. Seeing her next to her peers only goes to confirm what I noticed earlier. She's much slighter than them.

What she lacks in raw strength, she makes up for in agility. Her footwork is quick and she's nimble when she moves. There's a grace to her, almost like a ballerina and I'm entranced as I watch her.

She's good. Really fucking good.

The bout is a back-and-forth affair, the two opponents pretty evenly matched in terms of skill. It all comes down to the last point. I find myself standing, bottle in hand, as I watch their swords clash.

I wish I could see her face, but the mask makes that impossible. I'm torn between wanting her to wear it in bed and knowing that there's no way I could come without seeing her expression as she falls apart for me.

She lunges, slashing her opponent but not getting the point. When she goes to retract, she stumbles. The other fencer sees her opportunity and takes it.

She dives and I watch as her sword hits Nera square on the chest. A red light goes off and sounds in the distance and the other fencer rips her mask off and screams, victorious.

Nera's head falls forward slightly and I can feel the bone deep disappointment pouring off her even as her face remains obscured. She straightens and takes off her mask.

I'm standing inches from the screen now and as the camera pans on her, I see the unfocused look in her eyes.

There's something wrong, I can tell.

She shakes her head like she wants to get rid of something and when she stops, the look is gone.

I know I didn't imagine it.

She shakes the other fencer's hand and nods, then unhooks the body

cord and walks to the edge of the mat.

An attractive but severe looking older man who wasn't there moments ago waits for her now. I watch the line of her shoulders stiffen as she sees him. She pauses almost imperceptibly mid-step before making her way over to him.

He places a hand on the back of her neck. She's so still that she looks like an inanimate object, even through the TV. The camera moves, panning over to the winner of the bout so that Nera and the mystery man are half obscured in the background, but I can see the harsh lines of his mouth as it moves against her ear. The way the muscles in his hands are rigid as he grabs her neck. The way she stiffens even further until I'm sure that she's not breathing.

I know for having been on the receiving end of my fair share of reamings that she's getting absolutely lambasted.

The channel cuts abruptly to a commercial so I don't see what happens next, but something about that exchange raises the hairs on the back of my own neck.

The screen goes dark for a second and reflects my own face back at me mere inches from the screen, the couch long forgotten, making me realize the absurdity of my actions.

Disgusted with myself, I turn the TV off and drop back onto the couch. I'm not going to make it to tomorrow, let alone June if I keep this up.

If I thought my lack of text back would deter her, I'm wrong. An hour after her first text, she messages again.

Unknown number: I never got to show you what I can do with my mouth :(

The groan that falls from my lips sounds almost agonized to my own ears. She's going to be the death of me if she keeps sexting me.

If I text her to stop and give in to the way she so obviously baits me, then she'll continue. I take my phone and toss it unseeingly behind me into my bedroom, happy to hear it land on my bed and not the floor.

But now all I can think about is her between my legs, her dark eyes pinned on me as she brings her mouth down around my cock.

My hand is in my trousers and gripping my throbbing length. The veins

along my shaft are distended and my entire dick angry with lack of use as I wrap my fingers around it.

I pump up and down my length with furious strokes, getting as much pain as I do relief as I jerk off to thoughts of her taking me in her mouth.

I'd wrap her hair around my fist and use it to control her. I'd let her have her way with me at first, letting her set the speed and rhythm, but eventually I'd take over. I'd push her down until she was choking on my cock, tears pearling at the corners of her eyes.

I'd give one last powerful thrust deep into the back of her mouth before coming down her throat. She'd slurp me greedily up and then thank me.

I throw my head back against the couch and look at the ceiling as those visuals overwhelm me. Her mouth is no match for my hand, I already know it, and my fist is a pale imitation of the real thing.

I better get used to rubbing out all my frustrations, because there will be no getting the real thing. I have to keep her at a distance, no matter how much I want to fuck her.

My abs clench as my climax approaches. I squeeze my length with every upward and downward stroke until I come with a frustrated grunt. Cum lands on my stomach and my jeans as I release my dick and catch my breath, pondering what a sad sight I must be, wanking to the thought of an eighteen-year-old girl who's all but throwing herself at me.

I clean myself up and decide to call it a night before I make any other bad decisions.

But turns out, I still have time for one more.

I do something foolish. In retrospect, I should have known that's when I'd gone off the deep end and etched my fate in stone.

I save her number in my phone.

Chapter 13

Nera

“This is quite delicious. Don’t you think so, Nera?”

I push the food around my plate absentmindedly, barely listening to anything my father says and only paying enough attention for him to know I still have a pulse.

“Yes, Father. It’s very good.” I reply, emotionlessly.

“The courses have all been excellent.”

“Sure.”

The food is actually phenomenal and not the reason why I’m in a foul mood. We’re at *Sambour*, a recently opened Michelin starred restaurant in Geneva. The chef is supposed to be this exciting young guy, coined the ‘bad boy of the cooking industry’ by all the tabloids. I’m sure that’s part of the reason why when my dad called my mum to tell her he was in town and taking me to dinner, she suggested this place.

Also, in true Michelin fashion, the portions are tiny so she knows there’s no risk of me overindulging and gaining weight.

But the real reason for my need to disassociate from this dinner is my father being here.

His visits are always like having forty-pound weights added to my shoulders that I’m meant to carry wherever I go without grimacing or showing any sign of strain. He’ll have a long check in with principal Thornton and an even longer one with Coach Krav to make sure I’m

progressing at the rate he expects.

He already visited the apartment this morning to make sure everything was in order. Mercifully, the girls were in class at the time so didn't have to witness his perusal and judgment of their home.

Thank God it's only the end of the first week of school, otherwise he'd check in with my professors as well. I shudder to think how that meeting with Tristan would go.

At the end of the week, he'll have exerted enough pressure on me that I'll need a couple of weeks to recuperate from the stress. He's a control freak who needs to supervise and manage me and my brother Jude's entire lives at all times. His random drop ins are just another way to exert control over us.

This visit is especially draining.

I saw him over the summer, of course, but the last time he came to Geneva was for the world juniors last year.

The championship I lost.

The anxiety and anticipation of waiting for my turn, of knowing I'd worked for this all year and it was finally *the* moment, had made me binge my entire welcome basket. Fifteen minutes before the final I'd still been up in my hotel room, purging.

I'd felt light headed walking out onto the piste. My hands had been clammy, my gloves wet before I'd even started. I fought the dizziness until the final touch when I dove into a lunge. Suddenly, black spotted my vision and I had a moment of extreme vertigo. In a split second, it was over.

I still remember my father's hand on my nape, large enough to be wrapped threateningly around half my neck. Taken out of the moment, what he'd said might not have seemed so chilling, but make no mistake, his words had been a threat.

"Failure is not an option. If you will not willingly improve, then it will be exacted out of you, inch by inch."

I feel sweat beading on my neck just thinking about it.

That's why Coach Krav was hired. To work me into the ground or until I'm a gold medalist, whichever comes first. The ends justify the means in my father's eyes, especially if it has to do with the Matsuoka name.

He didn't always used to be like this. When I was growing up, he put me into various sports to see if anything stuck. He came to my games and matches and cheered me on because he was the best dad.

Or so I thought.

Now I know that he was a concerned buyer anxiously checking in on his foal's growing value. I didn't particularly shine at anything, not until fencing. It came naturally to me for some reason.

When I was nine, he'd entered me in a ten and under contest as a Hail Mary, and I ended up winning the tournament. The football classes I'd taken had given me good footwork, the dancing good mobility. Boxing made my dodging and defensive skills shine so that when I picked up my rented épée that day, I impressed the room full of pros with my potential.

Sometimes I wonder how different my life would be if I'd just sucked that day. Would my father have given up on his athletic aspirations? Would I have been the perfect debutante and made my mother proud?

That second one is more likely than the first.

My mum is English, she grew up in a posh suburb of London. She more or less ran away from a tyrannical mother and absentee father and decided to move to Tokyo for a summer.

She was two weeks into her hostessing job in a popular restaurant when she met my father, a Japanese businessman.

Her pursuit of perfection for me comes from the large chip she has on her own shoulder, both from criticism she received at the hands of her mother and from not being the flawless society girl on my father's arm. She constantly had to prove her worth to his business associates – and, more importantly, to their wives – and fight to gain the respect of her peers.

Even now, almost twenty years after they were married – albeit only five of them happily – she still gets judging looks from across the ballroom like she's a mistress, not a wife. We left Tokyo ten years ago and moved to Hong Kong and still, the sharp tongues followed.

She was put through the ringer so she knows how cruel people can be. She doesn't want that for me. Her version of helping me is criticizing me before they can, making sure I'm not leaving anything open to their scrutiny.

Her efforts are misguided but not entirely bad intentioned and that's what makes it so hard to hate her, even when I really do sometimes.

So, unless we go back in time to before my mum left home and redirected her to Sydney instead of Tokyo, there's no changing that part of my fate.

"We should call for the chef, I'd like to speak to him," my dad says, snapping his fingers at a nearby waiter.

It's the peak of rush hour in a sophisticated restaurant and my dad wants

to call the chef away from the kitchen. It's the height of rudeness to even think about doing that now, but he doesn't care. Worse, he feels entitled to this man's attention solely because he sees him as being beneath him. Chef work is hand work and in my dad's world the only time you use your hands is to sign a contract or raise your paddle to bid on something.

He snaps his fingers again, twice. Loudly.

Mortification crawls up my neck. "Father, I'm sure he's busy, the restaurant is full. We shouldn't—"

"Boy," my dad calls across the room, and now I want a hole in the ground to open up and swallow me. Then I'd like to be shot down to the Earth's core and burned alive to ensure I don't have to sit through another second of this madness. "Bring out the chef."

"Father," I try again.

"Enough, Nera. If I want your opinion, I will ask for it. Just eat your food and be quiet."

Rage simmers hotly inside me, unbridled and impossible for me to control as I usually would.

"That's better," he says, taking a sip of his wine and smacking his lips. "So, tell me, how's fencing? Kravtsov will give me the unvarnished truth soon enough, but I'd like to get your take on it."

"It's going well," I say from between gritted teeth as I try to smother my temper.

"How many touches scored?"

"Two hundred and forty-six."

"Received?"

"One hundred and ninety-eight."

He huffs. "Needs to be better. What's your hundred-meter split?"

"Twelve thirty-four."

"You can get that lower."

I nod.

"How many official bouts have you played in?"

The vein at my temple throbs. I don't know why he's getting to me today when this is very much the same line of questioning he always asks me.

Maybe it's because he was rude to the restaurant staff.

Or maybe it's because I've had a rough week, even without him being here. I texted Tristan twice more and he ignored me both times. In class, it

was much the same. If I raised my hand, he pretended I wasn't there. If I asked a question, he answered but without looking at me.

I'm starting to think I preferred it when he called me out in front of the whole class.

I thought after the way he'd tracked me down Monday that he was interested in fucking again, that I could convince him.

It's not so much him that I want, as much as it is the feeling. I'm desperate to experience that kind of weightlessness, of temporary freedom from the pressures of my life, again. I'm starting to feel like I'm going to crack if I don't get it soon.

Instead, he seems much less affected than me. Aside from that first confrontation in the training facility, he's given no sign that I even exist.

"Nera?" My father cuts in sharply. "Pay attention for God's sake. It's no wonder you lost the championship if this is how your mind wanders." He clicks his tongue against his teeth and takes another sip of his wine. "How many bouts?"

Failure is not an option.

"Sixteen."

"How many victories?"

"Thirteen."

Failure is not an option.

He clicks his tongue against his teeth again, disapproving. The repeated sound is starting to play on a loop in brain like my own special version of dripping torture. It frays the ropes of my temper beyond repair.

"Not good enough, Nera. Remember, failure isn't an option."

Something finally snaps inside me.

"And what about repeatedly cheating on your wife? You don't consider that a failure?"

The words are out before I can second guess them.

It's like throwing a full can of gasoline on a raging fire. His eyes widen, popping almost comedically out of his face as it turns a deep shade of red.

"You little—"

"Hello," a voice smoothly interjects. "I was told you wanted to speak with me."

I look up at the voice's owner, saved by his interruption.

He's tall, with rippling arms covered in tattoos, and he's as beautiful as the tabloids said he'd be. Blond hair, green eyes, a smirk that promises

trouble. I just know he knows every single way to ruin a girl's life.

And his eyes are fixed on me.

"Yes," I say, clearing my throat when the word gets stuck. "My father wanted to offer his compliments on tonight's meal."

I flick a look over at my dad and see that he's regained his composure. He'd never show so big a weakness as to have an emotion in front of a stranger.

My ability to compartmentalize, both a gift and a curse, I get from him.

"Yes, congratulations..." he extends his hand towards him, "I'm sorry, I forgot your name."

This is one of his favorite power plays, reminding the other man of just how unimportant he is to him. But the chef looks completely unconcerned, his gaze not even moving over to meet my father's as he shakes his hand.

"Marchesani," he says. Finally, he meets his eye. "Luca Marchesani."

He looks back at me and I should be flattered by his interest, but his eyes are green instead of blue and I find myself comparing him to Tristan.

"The meal was delicious. I particularly enjoyed the deconstructed surf and turf. Very clever."

"I'm glad you enjoyed it," Luca says, calling over to a passing waitress. "Marie here will bring you a dessert, on the house. To thank you for being such excellent customers." He turns towards my father for the last part, pandering to and manipulating him in a way that he doesn't even realize.

He's too happy crowing about how yes, he is in fact an excellent customer, to notice that he's been effortlessly handled by Luca.

Something tells me he wasn't ignorant to the argument and impending explosion happening at our table when he walked up to it.

Luca excuses himself after a couple more minutes of obsequious conversation and gives me one last look before he leaves. Thankfully, my father's attention is so diverted by the promise of free dessert that he forgets that we were about to argue.

It's definitely better for me that he not remember.

Not long after that first time purging in my bathroom, I'd gone to my dad's office to meet him for lunch. I'd walked in to find him fucking his secretary on his desk, a photo of his family inches from his dick as he pounded into her. That'd killed the remaining embers of my fatherly affection for him.

Before today we'd never discussed his affair. I never brought it up to

him and he never acknowledged it. It was imprudently hot-blooded of me to confront him when I learned only too recently the extent of his rage and need to control. I know better than to lose the firm grip I have on my emotions around him, and yet I did.

Sloppy.

He orders an espresso and I excuse myself to go to the bathroom. I haven't eaten much tonight so I don't feel overly stuffed, but I want to see if I can get rid of some of it anyway.

With my father in town, Coach Krav will definitely weigh me this week and I dread having gained even a single ounce.

I walk past the open kitchen into the hallway and see Luca coming back from the men's bathroom, drying his hands on the white towel at his waist. He slows as he spots me, eventually coming to a stop before me.

"Thanks for the assist out there," I tell him, unsure what else to say.

"No problem. It seemed like he was about to lose his shit," he replies, lifting his shoulder and eyeing me with a calculated gaze. "That's typically not great for business."

I nod and take a step to walk away, but he takes a matching backward one, stopping me in my tracks.

"Go out with me," he says. "Let me take you to dinner."

I lift a brow at him. "You don't know me."

A charming grin curves his lips. "It's lucky that I know just the place where I can get to know you then. They have this char siu pork that'll make your taste buds weep."

I turn so my back rests against the hallway wall and consider it, both him and his offer.

"I don't date," I tell him, truthfully.

After getting a front row seat to the fiasco that is my parents' marriage, watching every one of my parents' friends cheat on their spouses, and experiencing my own terrible relationship with Rex, dating is off the cards for me.

Even assuming that love exists — and I have to because I've met Six's parents — I've seen what the people who love you can do. I've had enough of people's 'love' for one lifetime.

What I do want though, is physical connection.

His grin grows. "I'm happy to skip the dating part altogether if that's what you prefer."

I should say yes, I should go out with this gorgeous guy and let him fuck me into tomorrow. Taking just one look at him, there's no doubt in my mind that he knows what he's doing.

But all I can think about is, does Tristan know a hookup is all I want? Maybe he thinks I'll get attached if we keep sleeping together and want something serious.

All I can think about now is letting him know and seeing if that changes things. I've already told him I can keep a secret, Lord knows I have my own fair share, so if I make it clear I want this to be purely physical, I should be able to convince him. Right?

Apparently not someone easily dissuaded by silence, Luca pulls out a business card and hands it to me.

"Here's my number. I promise you'll have a lot of fun if you use it."

I look down at the beautiful design. "I've never been hit on via business card before."

He chuckles. "Hopefully that means you'll use it."

I look back up at him, tilting my head to the side.

"What about being friends?"

He nods, understanding that he's not likely to hear from me. At least, not the way he's expecting.

"I'm available for a friendship too," he says.

It's my turn to give him a small smile as I enter his number in my phone. "Good."

When I make it back to the table, my dad has already paid and is apparently waiting for me in the car. He doesn't acknowledge me when I climb in the backseat beside him and we drive silently to The Pen.

I think back to my conversation with Luca, to what I know I want. I pull out my phone and bring up my chat with Tristan, thinking about the best way to talk to him.

I don't know him. All I have to go on is that one night in his suite, so I rack my brains about what information can help me here. I think about how our conversation had started, abruptly ended, and how it'd started back up again.

Me: I wanted to make something clear.

Me: I don't need you to date me or fall in love with me, in fact I'd really appreciate it if you didn't. What I do need, and really want after last time, is for you to fuck me.

I could end it there, but I want to get a rise out of him.

More importantly, I want to get an answer from him. I think I know just the way to do that.

Me: I met someone else tonight. If you're not interested, just let me know and I'll text him next.

I hold my breath for long moments as I wait for him to text back. Finally, when I feel like my lungs are going to explode, I exhale.

My head drops back against the headrest behind me and I look out the window, watching the city lights as we drive by. There's something about an empty city at night that I find so soothing.

I really thought my strategy would work. I guess our night together didn't stand out to him like it did me, and why would it, I guess. I'm the one who did something very unlike me and who had everything to learn. Maybe he really did fuck a bunch of different women after me.

The car pulls into the parking lot of The Pen and stops in front of my building's entrance. My father doesn't bother with a goodbye, too absorbed in his emails to even notice I'm leaving.

I'm stepping out of the car when my phone vibrates.

Gary: Don't try to make me jealous, Nera. It won't work.

Chapter 14

Tristan

I walk into my eleven am class and lob my bag onto my chair from halfway across the room.

A couple of heads snap up at the loud noise.

I didn't sleep well last night. I want to say it's because of the stress of this year or just good old insomnia, but every time I closed my eyes, I saw images of Nera giving her number to another guy stamped behind my eyelids.

When I eventually fell asleep, I woke up covered in sweat. I blamed it on the late September heat — even though it wasn't overly hot — and the lack of air conditioning in my shitty apartment, and not the fact that I'd been dreaming about her on a date with someone else.

There was no way I was going to continue letting her haunt my dreams and nightmares like that. If I didn't have this damn celibacy clause hanging over me like some celeb fresh out of rehab, I could maybe think about finding someone else.

As it were, I was stuck replaying that night in Geneva on a loop in my mind. It didn't help that she'd gotten the last word after I'd texted her yesterday.

Me: Don't try to make me jealous, Nera. It won't work.

Nera: Seems like it worked pretty well at the bar that night.

I hadn't answered, not wanting to acknowledge her point. It wasn't jealousy that had propelled me to go after her that night. It couldn't be. I wasn't possessive of women, ever, let alone interested in anything more than one night.

No, it had been distaste at the thought of losing. That's it.

Now, I was forced to face her again.

Without looking out into the crowd and searching for her, I knew instinctively where she was sitting. Closer towards the front, the third row in a middle seat. Next to Sixtine, her redheaded best friend.

"Class will start in two minutes, so get seated," I say to the students still milling about and chatting with their friends.

My phone dings and I reach for it in my bag to put it on silent.

Nera: You should know.

Nera: I'm not wearing any panties.

My eyes shoot up to meet hers as my blood pressure drops. She's got a triumphant smile on her face but I barely register it because I'm too busy taking in the fact that she's wearing a fucking *skirt*.

The desk she sits at doesn't have a front panel so there's nothing to obscure her legs. When she sees me looking, she parts them ever so slightly.

I hiss in a breath as my blood pumps in my temples.

She's too far away for me to see anything except dark shadows, but just knowing her pussy is on display is enough to throttle the oxygen out of my lungs.

I turn away and claw at the neck of my tie for some type of relief so I don't do something stupid like drag her down to my desk and fuck her in front of all her peers.

"Alright, today we're going to talk about the political economy of trade and the role governments play in globalized trade," I say, forcing myself to look at my outline for the class. The words blur together, my mind unable to focus on them, and I'm silent for too long as I try to decipher what I'm reading. "Open your textbooks to page forty-seven," I finally say, pivoting to try to salvage this lesson before it's even started.

I wait for the students to do as instructed, my eyes involuntarily pinging back to Nera. Her book is open so I don't have a reason to reprimand her but I'm craving one. Her smug smile is still glued on and if I ever get my hands

on her again, I'll fuck it right off her pretty face.

"Who can tell me what globalization as it relates to trade means?" I ask, forcing my eyes to look away.

Several students put their hands up, including her.

"Nera," I say, my voice dropping an octave around her name. Only she understands the warning that comes with that one word.

I see her swallow and take a tiny breath before she speaks. "The opening of borders for economic and specifically commerce purposes so there's a flow of goods, money, information. Basically, economic integration of different countries."

"Good. Can someo—," my voice cuts off like a record scratch when a hand comes down on Nera's knee.

Large hand, small knee.

My vision tunnels dangerously.

My gaze moves to Rex who's sitting beside her, his head turned in her direction like they're alone together and not in the middle of my fucking class.

"Sorry," I finally say, clearing my throat loudly. He doesn't turn away from her. I shake my head with the hope of shaking some sense into myself. "Victoire, please read the first three paragraphs of page forty-seven."

She starts reading as I look up at Nera's face. Her eyes are pinned on me, her mouth parted on a surprised gasp. Rex leans closer to her, whispering something mere inches from the shell of her ear.

I can tell by the look on her face that he has no idea she's bare under her short skirt but that does nothing to quell the murderous impulses raging through me.

His hand is still on her knee, his fingers dancing along her skin, and something about seeing his fingers so close to her pussy when I know she's not wearing panties makes me want to rip him off her and tear him to shreds.

Outside of one or two darker fantasies, I'm not a violent man. I'm not moved to such strong emotion or extremes. I just don't care enough.

Right now though, I'm having highly graphic visions of my participation in a bloodbath.

His finger taps her knee and I see blood splattered on the walls.

His other hand goes to the back of her chair and I imagine myself tapdancing happily through fresh puddles of his blood, a real smile stretching my lips.

“The question...,” I start, realizing that Victoire finished reading and the silent class looks to me to lead, “The question is how do we regulate international trade when every party has a vested interest in influencing policy to benefit their country’s position?”

I can barely string two words together. I don’t even know if I’m making sense. I already don’t care about teaching this class well to begin with, and that was before I was forced to sit through this torture.

My eyes keep darting back to where he touches her, where she fucking *lets* him. Her legs are still open and I swear to God, if his hand moves up any further, I’ll end him.

I rub my hand over my jaw, trying to refocus on the lesson.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see her hand wrap around his wrist and then she shoves him off her.

Yes.

Good girl, I want to tell her.

“How do we avoid corruption on the global scale?”

His hand comes back, this time on her thigh, and I snap.

“How do— Rex, are we bothering you?”

He whips around to face me, his hand coming off her body. I’m made aware my eyelid was twitching only because I feel it stop when he no longer touches her.

“Sorry, professor. I was asking Nera a question about today’s lesson plan,” he lies.

“Ask *me* next time. That way you won’t bother your classmate or interrupt my class,” I say, my voice glacial.

His eyes flash with anger but he wisely chooses not to say anything except apologize once more.

“Come down here,” I say, pointing at a seat in the front row. “I want you right where I can see you.”

He reddens, not suffering his humiliation well, but does as I say. He places a hand on Nera’s shoulder as he walks past her and if I wasn’t so sure he has no idea about her and I, I’d say he was doing it just to taunt me.

He slumps into his new seat, his face promising retribution. I’m too busy glaring at Nera to register it.

Her eyes sparkle with excitement, like she’s getting off on watching me intervene. My stomach squeezes in response, the need to put my hands on her thrumming through my veins with a sick beat.

She's a temptress and I don't think she's even aware of it.

"As I was saying," I clear my throat.

What the fuck was I saying?

"How do we avoid corruption on the global scale? Unfortunately, we don't. You'll find that there's not a single regulatory agency that isn't corrupt. Ethics in the age of globalized trade isn't something that we've cracked yet."

Two of the girls seated in the second row right in front of Nera giggle when I look at them. They give me flirty smiles when I don't immediately look away. Behind them, I see Nera's jaw clench, irritation spreading across her face in response.

I turn away, already distracted enough. Secretly, I'm pleased to have seen her be as affected as me.

I teach the lesson for another fifteen minutes before clapping my hands and looking up at the students.

"Alright, we're going to use the rest of the class for a quiz." The class collectively groans. "Bad idea revealing how much you hate quizzes, I might have to give them every class now. Save myself the trouble of speaking to you all." They laugh as is I made a joke. They pass around the handouts I gave to the front row. "You have until the end of class, roughly twenty minutes, to answer the essay question on the paper that was just handed to you. No books or phones allowed, just that eighty thousand pound a year education of yours. Good luck."

I sit in my chair and throw my legs up on the table as I recline and watch them work. Nera is focused on her paper, her brow creased adorably in concentration, so I get to openly stare at her. She's wearing a pleated green skirt and beige skin tight top with red buttons along her right shoulder.

She looks like a Christmas present, one I'm desperate to unwrap.

I must stare at her longer than I'm aware because I'm jolted out of my study of her by the bell ringing, announcing the end of class.

The students stand in a cacophony of chairs scraping and loud talking.

"Drop your quizzes on my desk before you leave. I'll return them to you graded in a few days."

I make a show of organizing the papers as they're handed to me so I don't watch her approach. I'll be well rid of her once she leaves my lecture hall.

Who knows, maybe I'll be able to focus on actually teaching my next

class if she's not around.

"Babe," Rex calls and I immediately know who he aims those words at. "Let me talk to you."

I tense, my back and neck rigid.

Babe.

I fight not to look up at them as they approach. She comes up to drop her test and he follows her.

Why is he calling her babe? And why isn't she immediately correcting him?

"Nera, stay after class," I bark.

For fuck's sake.

Short of buying a shovel and digging myself a hole, I'm doing a near perfect job of burying myself alive here. I want to tell her 'never mind', but I also want to tell her never to speak to him again.

When she speaks though, I know I've made the right decision.

"I can't be any clearer, Rex. Please don't wait for me, I need to talk to Professor Novak."

I'd internally purr in victory if she'd actually said my name and not the cover name my father came up with to hide my identity while I'm here.

It should serve as a reminder of why I should stay away from her, but it only irritates me further.

The students filter slowly out of the classroom, the only exception is Sixtine who I hear whisper to Nera, "Do you need me to stay?"

She's anxious, I can hear it in her voice, and she's protective of her friend. She should be wary of leaving her here with me in my current state.

"No, it's fine. I'll see you at lunch."

The door closes softly and then it's quiet. It's just us left in this room, but I don't look up. I take my time organizing the papers and putting them away in my bag.

She's as patient as I am, unwilling to make the first move as I force her to wait.

Everything about her is a contradiction. She's a good student, but rebellious. Delicate, but powerful. Shy, but brazen.

Successful, but not satisfied.

She has wealth, beauty, brains, and success. She should be the happiest person in any room and yet, she's not.

It ripples off her, the melancholy. Like she has an invisible but gaping

wound that seeps sorrow instead of blood.

There's something hidden there, that much is obvious to me. She's someone whose real smiles need to be earned and I find myself hoping to get another unguarded moment from her.

At the same time, there's the part of me that knows going there again is tantamount to yanking the noose lethally tight around my neck.

But watching her with someone else isn't just intolerable, it's impossible.

Finally, I straighten and look at her. My eyes pin hers, but her gaze stares equally intently back at me.

"Is he the ex?"

The one she'd mentioned who couldn't make her come. But who'd been with her nonetheless.

She blinks, doesn't look away. "Yes."

I drop my gaze back to the desk, masking my grimace.

There's no hiding the sound of my clenched fist when it comes down on the wooden surface, however. I don't hit it hard, just sharply enough to let out some barely controlled anger because I can't lose my shit. Not without risking my mum's life.

I breathe deeply through my nose as I fight to keep the visions of her splayed out under him out of my mind.

Her legs around his waist.

His hand on her tits.

FUCK.

The jealous rage squeezes my skull like a band. I need her to leave.

"He's going to *stay* your ex," I order.

Anger distorts my words. I say it as a demand, not a question, but she answers it anyway.

"I'm not interested in him."

I nod, the muscle in my cheek jumping wildly. I'm going to have to make his new seat assignment permanent because there's no way I'm going to watch him hit on her in front of me for a fucking year.

"Stay away from him, Nera."

"Or what?"

I stare at her, silent. I'm afraid of what I'll say if I open my mouth. I don't think she needs menacing words to understand the threat in my statement.

She must see something in my icy gaze because she swallows thickly, looking away and down to cover her reaction.

“You seem to only want me when someone else does, Tristan,” she says, meeting my gaze unflinchingly. “You’ve unleashed a bit of a monster I’m afraid, and now that I know what it feels like when a man makes me come, I’m desperate to feel it again.” She leans in over the desk so she says the next part up close and personal, making sure I don’t miss a word. “I’m not going to wait for you forever.”

She pulls back and I hold on to the table, white knuckling my grip so I don’t reach out and grab her. She’s at the door when I speak.

“Are you always such a fucking tease?”

She turns to look over her shoulder at me.

“Only when I know what I want.”

She walks out, closing the door behind her. I’m getting really tired of watching her walk away, leaving me with my anger, a throbbing hard on, and no relief for either in sight.

Chapter 15

Nera

Less than a week later, I slam the paper down on his desk, my palm pushing it into Tristan's field of vision.

"A nine out of twenty," I declare, my voice trembling with anger.

He finishes writing a note on another student's paper, then takes his time putting the cap back on his pencil and placing it on his desk before he looks up at me, the bastard.

The effect of his gaze is immediate, as per usual. It pierces me with the force of a blow, leaving me momentarily breathless. Even when I'm furious with him, even when I'm so anxious about my failing grade that I've had painful stomach cramps since last night when the grades went live on the portal, I still have this reaction to him.

I waited until classes were over today to confront him. I wanted us to be alone; I could hardly scream at him in front of all of my friends.

"Maybe instead of wasting your time flirting in my class you should pay a little more attention to the course material," he replies, before turning his emotionless eyes on me.

I huff and take a step back.

"So, this is payback for what happened with Rex?" I ask, crossing my arms over my chest.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he says with a sinister smile, leaning into his chair and spreading his legs dominantly. He's seated and I'm

standing, but I'm the one who feels at his mercy. "It wasn't a good paper."

"It was a brilliant paper and you know it," I correct. "You need to fix this right now."

"I'm afraid I can't do that."

I think of my dad's anger when he finds out, and he will.

My mum's disappointment.

Another failure. A small one, but they like to keep a tally and I'm running up quite a meter in their eyes.

My dad just left and if he sees this reason enough to turn the plane around, I'll have to deal with him for another week. Who knows how he'll react if I'm within arm's reach of him when he finds out.

"You can't." I grit the words out through clenched teeth. I hear the quiet shake in my voice and I wish I could hide it, but I'm tired. I don't have quite as strong a control over my emotions right now. "I'll sit in the back of your class and leave you alone," I offer. When he doesn't answer, I think about the texts I kept sending, even when he wouldn't text back, one as late as last night. "I'll stop texting you as well, I promise. I understand you don't want me." I look him in the eye when I speak so he knows how important this is. "But you have to make this right." I pause. "Please."

He doesn't know what it costs me to ask for help, especially from someone I don't trust.

Or maybe he does because he sits up with a frown drawing at his brows.

"What's wrong?"

I suddenly hate him for sounding like he actually cares.

"Nothing, just fix my grade," I say, irritated and pushing the paper back towards him.

He looks down at it and then back at me. "I'm not changing anything. Tell me what's wrong."

"I told you, nothing."

"And I'm telling you, I don't believe you. I've only seen that look on your face twice and the other time was when you lost the world juniors, so don't pretend you're fine."

My eyes widen in surprise and his do too.

"How do you know about that?" He doesn't answer but his jaw twitches. "Did you watch my match?"

There's annoyance on his face and it's clear he didn't mean to reveal that he'd seen it. I don't know what to make of that news. How did it even

happen, I wonder. Did he go looking for videos of me?

Was he impressed with what he saw?

Why do you care, Nera?

“Yes,” he says, with a careless lift of his shoulder but a shrewd look in his eye. “Who was that man?”

He and I both know who he’s talking about.

“What man?” I ask.

“The one who spoke to you at the end of the match.”

“After I lost you mean,” I say with a humorless laugh.

“Losing happens,” he shrugs. “You can’t be perfect all the time.”

My dad would *hate* his attitude. A ‘loser mentality’ he’d call it.

“He’s your father,” he decides. It’s not a question.

“How do you know?”

He takes the pen from his desk and begins to roll it through his fingers. “I know the type.”

I look at him, really look at him. At the way his eyes glaze over in thought, how his brow pulls down and his mouth flattens. He might understand the pressures I face more than I initially thought.

“Is yours the reason why you can’t be a chef?”

He stiffens, his eyes moving hazily from his pen to my face.

“I didn’t say I wanted to be a chef. I said I wanted to own a restaurant.”

His voice isn’t censuring, it’s more... curious.

It makes me think I might have guessed correctly, even if he didn’t tell me.

“I’m sorry I got that wrong.”

He doesn’t blink. “You didn’t.”

I answer the question that goes unasked.

How did you know I want to be a chef?

“I just assumed that’s what you meant by owning a restaurant. I get the sense that you’re the type of person who wouldn’t do well only in the front of house. You’d thrive in the back, getting your hands dirty and letting your creativity drive you.”

His gaze is downright molten by the time I’m done speaking. The last time he looked at me like that, he ended up eating me out while I sat on his face.

“You got all that from one night?”

“I got the sense that you’re a man who likes to eat,” I answer, blushing

but keeping eye contact.

The words come out as suggestively as I'd intended. His eyes burn hot enough on me to scorch my skin.

"Nera," he warns, but his voice sounds conflicted.

I both love and hate that I can go from miserable and anxious to excited and unbelievably turned on within minutes of being with him.

That's too much power for one person to have over another's operating system.

He won't let himself be distracted.

"What did he say to you?"

I scramble to remember what we were talking about before we ventured far off track. When I do, the wave of anxiety hits me again at full force, like I've just kicked open the floodgates.

"He told me what he tells me every time I see him." I say, vaguely.

He taps the pen against his fingertip.

"And that is?"

It's not lost on me that he didn't answer my question about his father, even though I know there's something there. I don't want to answer his question at all, and especially not when he won't do the same in return.

I've never talked about my dad with anyone, and he's not the first person I want to tell this to.

"None of your business."

He nods and grabs my paper, handing it to me. "Have a good night."

He stands and starts gathering his computer and documents, placing them in his backpack. My test remains clutched in my hands.

"Are you serious?"

He zips his bag and gives me an emotionless smile. "You're welcome to challenge it with the review board if you'd like."

He knows I can't do that.

My teeth grit in irritation as I glare up at him.

"You're going out of your way to manipulate me into telling you personal information that I don't want to give you. You're being a real vindictive asshole for someone who claims not to want me," I snap. "If I tell you, will you change my grade?"

"That's getting increasingly less likely with each passing second," he drawls.

This close, I can smell the alcohol on his breath. I'm taken aback by it,

classes having just ended. I don't know if he's drunk, I can't tell.

He seems fully in control of his functions and he's certainly still fully capable of wielding his tongue with hurtful intent.

"I hate you," I vow.

And I do for basically forcing me to admit this out loud.

"I doubt it."

I shoot him a glare then bow my head, closing my eyes as if to gather strength.

"He told me 'failure isn't an option'. That's nothing new really, he tells me that at least once a day," I say through a clenched jaw, looking off to the right and refusing to meet his eye. "Only this time he added 'if you will not willingly improve, then it will be exacted out of you, inch by inch' and then he grabbed the back of my neck and crushed it so hard between his fingers that my airway closed and my vision went spotty." I whip my head back to face him. "Happy?" I demand and I know it's a shitty question.

He stares at me in a way he never has before.

I think if I was normal, I would cry. All I feel is a deep sense of loneliness and a hollow emptiness that I don't think will ever be filled.

There's a small piece of relief in finally having told someone, but I don't enjoy the feeling whatsoever. There's instant regret at having shown any kind of weakness.

I've exposed a sliver of vulnerability and now that it's out, I desperately want to take it back. To claw the words away from him and keep them to myself where I know I can control them.

"Has he ever hurt you before?" Tristan asks, and I'm surprised by the hoarseness of his voice.

His arms are wrapped around his torso, his face otherwise completely blank. I would say he was unaffected by my revelation if it wasn't for the sound of his voice and the way he holds his body, like he's physically restraining himself.

"No."

"Since?"

I'd tried to tell my mum about it, had mentioned he'd been a little rough. She told me that sometimes he gets carried away with his affections, but he only does it because he loves me.

They sounded like words he might have said to her in apology in a very similar scenario. She repeated them to me with the rote delivery of someone

who'd heard them more than once.

I'd felt the layers of ice thicken around my heart.

She couldn't very well save me if she couldn't even save herself.

The paralyzing fear I felt feeling his hand close around my neck and squeezing the air out of my throat had been very real. He hadn't gone far enough to bruise — we were in public and on national television after all — but he exerted all the power he'd needed to.

In an instant, I'd understood just how easily he could hurt me if he wanted to.

“No.” I shake my head. “But you can understand why I'm in no rush to give him another reason to deem me a failure.” I can't summon enough energy to make it sound like the joke it was intended to be.

I'm drained by the anxiety of the last twenty-four hours. By the stress and nonstop performance of the past week when he was in town. By the constant worry of the past six months.

By a lifetime of pursuing perfection.

I got out unscathed from this last visit and I'm not keen to have him back for another.

Tristan nods, staring at me with an indecipherable look. I'd give anything to have the keys to his mind right now to see what he's really thinking.

Whatever it is, I will not be made to feel small for having revealed a section of my metaphorical golden prison to him. He demanded it from me and I won't be ashamed of it.

After a moment that stretches for an almost unbearable amount of time, he looks away first. I exhale with a tiny gasp when he turns his body away, like a physical string connecting us is severed.

I watch him reach for a pen. Next, he grabs the paper from my hands and places it back on the desk with a *thump* of his palm. He adds a one in front of the nine at the top of the sheet, turning it into a near perfect grade. I know it's the highest that was given out on this paper.

He hands it silently back to me. My heartbeat flutters and the bands of stress wrapped around my stomach ease up marginally.

The instant relief is enormous.

My fingers close around it and I pull, but he doesn't release it. My gaze meets his, finding his eyes already fixed on me.

“Failure is a part of *life*. You can't get better without it. It's not

something to be afraid of and it's certainly not something to ever be punished for." He releases the paper and I clasp it to my chest with both arms, keeping my eyes on him. His gaze deadens and a mean tick in his jaw starts pulsing ominously. "And if anyone ever puts their hands on you again, you use the number I gave you and you call me."

He takes a step towards me, taking advantage of the fact that I'm still reeling from his words to crowd me. He towers over me and dips his head until he's inches from my mouth.

My heartbeat is loud in the silence and I'm sure he can hear it. I'm sure it's echoing against the walls of the classroom.

"And I do want you, jailbait." His gaze drops to my lips, his eyes darkening with lust. "I just can't let myself have you." He dips his head even lower and his mouth is so close to mine that I stop breathing altogether. I remember how I grabbed his face and brought his lips down on mine before. "If I could, I'd steal all of your secrets one by one until there was nothing left for you to hide from me."

He taps my nose with the tip of his finger and lingers for a breath, an erotic smile pulling at his lips.

Then I blink and he's gone, taking the only warmth I've felt in weeks with him.

Chapter 16

Tristan

Jab. Cross. Right hook.

Jab. Cross. Left hook.

Uppercut. Uppercut.

I call out the moves to myself in my head as I hit the bag with as much strength as I can muster.

My arms are screaming with exhaustion. I've been going at the bag for hours and still I throw my punch combinations. I don't take a break, using all the force I have in my body in the hopes that I'll get the anger out.

My gray t-shirt is drenched, large stains coloring the fabric over my abs, back, and armpits. It sticks to me and I yank it off, unwilling to deal with the added irritation.

My headphones blare songs that match my mood in my ears. Angry, loud music that fuels my need to destroy.

Nera's confession drove me to this. I barely made it out of that room without unleashing my rage. The alcohol had only served to charge the fury flowing in my veins and I'd needed to find an outlet for it.

Never before have I needed to find a physical outlet to expel the anger from my body. Typically, I'll smoke a joint and relax my way through it, but I knew that wasn't going to be nearly enough in this case.

I overheard a couple of the students talking about the old chocolate factory last week. Apparently, it'd recently been converted into an

underground boxing gym.

I'd gone from my classroom straight to seek it out, relying on the carry-on bag of workout clothes I always carried in the boot of my car. I hadn't expected much and that's exactly what had greeted me. It was a dingy, dark, and incredibly creepy location, especially at night, and the students had used the word 'converted' very liberally.

When I walked in, there was a main area with a shitty looking ring in the center surrounded by standing lights. In the corner, a makeshift bar.

I ventured down the hallways and through to the other rooms finding an out of use kitchen, derelict line machinery, drab locker rooms and a couple of pitiful looking practice rooms with a hanging bag in each.

I picked the one with the heaviest bag and got to work.

Jab.

I'd felt it.

When I watched that match, I'd felt the tension of that moment. The veiled danger of it.

Cross.

Imagining him putting his hands on her, having the fucking *balls* to do it when thousands of people were watching—

Jab. Cross. Right hook.

Thinking of Nera as being in any way as vulnerable as my mum had a kind of fury I'd never felt before exploding in my veins.

Jab. Cross. Jab. Cross. Jab. Cross. Jab.

Cross.

I will never understand men putting their hands on a woman.

Disgust roils in my stomach.

Jab. Cross. Left hook.

The bag bounces on its metallic hook under the force of my blows and I hold it, punching wrathful uppercuts into it like it's a sentient human being who can feel me fucking it up.

I shove it away and high kick it. I have no skill in the sport, just raw emotion. There's nothing pretty about what I'm doing right now.

Jab. Cross. Knee. Knee. Knee.

My knuckles are bleeding, the skin on my knees ripped. Sweat drips down my torso and I let out a roar that sounds crazed even to my own ears.

A hand comes down on my left shoulder. Without pausing, I turn and punch at the intruder.

I hit nothing but air.

Phoenix easily deflects the blow without even moving his feet like I didn't just throw my strongest punch at him.

My eyes narrow on him. Based on his reflexes and the way he remains completely unruffled, he knows how to fight. He looks at me steadily, not saying a word, waiting for me to take my airpods out.

"What are you doing here, Novak?" he asks, sounding almost bored by his own question, like the answer is of no interest to him whatsoever.

I don't know why my father thought sending me here was a good idea. These teenagers are as unhinged as I am.

I don't correct him on the way he addresses me.

I don't give a fuck about whatever bullshit hierarchical protocol we're both supposed to be following.

"I was looking for a quiet place."

"You've found mine."

There's no emotion in his tone. It's neither an invitation, nor a request to leave.

"You fight here?" I ask.

There's no awkwardness as we stand there, staring each other down. I'm shirtless and sweating, revealing the intricate tattoos on my chest that he would never otherwise see.

I see him catalog that information into his brain, a new piece of the puzzle as he tries to assess who I am. He doesn't seem bothered by my presence, far from it.

I'd think he would be.

If I told Thornton I saw Phoenix here, he could get expelled.

Maybe unlike me, he's free from the consequences of his actions.

He answers me honestly instead.

He nods, adding, "Have you noticed that your quiet place has become significantly less so?"

It's only when he points it out that I finally register the thumping of the music and the loud noises coming from deeper into the building, I'd guess where I saw the boxing ring.

"There's a fight tonight?" I don't mean to ask it as a question but it comes out as one.

Standing in front of me, his arms crossed over his chest as he analyzes me, he looks much older than his eighteen years.

“Phoenix, get warmed up. You’re up in twenty,” a man says, walking into the room behind him, clipboard in hand. He pauses when he sees me. “Who the fuck are you?”

“Someone who shouldn’t be here,” Phoenix calls over his shoulder, answering for me before I can. He tilts his head back towards me, his gaze examining. “Unless you want half the student body to see you at an illegal fight.” He pauses, giving me an insolent smirk. “What would Thornton think of that, I wonder?”

Fuck. These entitled, rich pricks are exactly the type of people who would narc to the principal if they caught me here.

“Is there another exit?”

“Nope.”

My shirt is unwearable so I toss it in my bag along with my wraps. I don’t have anything else in there except my laptop, a couple minis, a cap, and a tweed blazer that Tess bought me as a joke when she learned about our father’s plan. She thought it might make me look more pedagogic. Safe to say I’ve never worn it and I’m not about to start now.

But now I’m faced with walking out into the crowd shirtless. That’s going to bring attention to me any way you cut it. I doubt anyone else except the guys in the ring will be bare chested and I’m desperate to avoid attention so I don’t blow my entire life up.

I grab the cap and put it on under Phoenix’s watchful eyes before heading for the door.

“Novak,” Phoenix calls when my hand is on the handle. I turn around to face him. “What were you thinking about?” He takes a step towards me before I can answer, crossing his arms again. “Or rather, *who* were you thinking about?”

My eyes narrow on him, my jaw clenching. “What makes you think I was thinking of anyone?”

“I only hit like that when I’m thinking of someone,” he answers, and for the first time there’s a crack in his facial armor. It’s over and gone in a heartbeat, but it’s there long enough for me to see it.

Looks like Phoenix might have a weakness in the form of the ‘someone’ he just referenced. It’s my turn to store that information away in my own mind.

I wonder if I know her, if she’s in one of my classes.

“I wasn’t thinking of anyone,” I tell him. “Unless you count the fact that

I was taking out my frustrations at having to teach the same shit over and over again to classes of students who'd rather crawl on their hands and knees through fields of broken glass than listen to what determines exchange rates. Not that I can honestly blame them."

His answering smirk tells me that my speech, while true, doesn't necessarily convince him.

He bends at the waist and reaches into his own bag, pulling out a black hoodie. I snatch it out of the air when he tosses it to me. I bring my arm down to my side, surprised by this act of mercy. He simply doesn't look like the type.

Phoenix turns away, towards who I now understand is his coach. He shows him the clipboard, checks his phone, and announces that the previous fight ended early and Phoenix is up next.

I throw the hoodie on and draw the hood up over my cap.

If this wasn't a decrepit factory, I'm sure I'd look like I was trying to rob the joint but as it is, I think I'll fit right in.

"Don't come back here, Novak." I look up at Phoenix. "This place isn't for you."

It's my turn to grin. "You know fuck all about what's for me or not. See you in class, Sinclair."

I don't need to ask him to keep this meeting a secret and neither does he. We won't say anything. He tips his chin at me and I return it. I don't wish him good luck before I walk out.

Something tells me he's not going to need it.

Keeping my chin tucked so my face is hidden by the brim of my cap, I head out into the dark hallway. There are only a few people milling about and they all seem to be part of the different fighters' teams. No one pays attention to me.

I keep my head low and emerge into the crowded main room. It's completely unrecognizable from when I walked through only hours before. The energy is electric. People scream and cheer, pressing against each other as they try to get closer to their favored fighters.

I shouldn't stay. I should take advantage of the fact that everyone's eyes are glued on center stage to sneak out. But I'm powerless to resist this kind of atmosphere and I find myself pushing into the throng of people instead.

I stop in my tracks when I see the siren who haunts my nightmares

herself, come to try and tempt me away from my current righteous path.

And tonight, I'm in the mood to give in to temptation.

Her face is almost pressed against the ropes as she looks up into the ring. The look on her face borders on adoring as Phoenix steps onto the mat.

My stomach clenches in reaction. Is she there for him? Wait. Is she who Phoenix thinks about when he's fighting?

The thought takes venomous root and poisons everything around it. I don't have time to question the white-hot possessiveness that burns through me, not when it's already propelling me to her.

I'm only vaguely aware of my path towards her. I shoulder past screaming fans, my gaze hyper fixated on the back of her head, down the slope of her back, and to the curve of her ass. She's wearing a black crop top and baggy gray washed jeans. My dick pulses in my shorts at seeing those bare flashes of skin.

She feels too beautiful, too delicate to be in a place like this.

I know she'd rip my balls off if I said that to her though, I think to myself.

To my right, Phoenix knocks out the other fighter with one punch, dropping him to the mat in a pile of lifeless limbs.

The crowd goes absolutely wild.

I watch Nera jump up and down, screaming her heart out and maybe pinching mine in the process.

For the second time tonight, she makes me stop in my tracks. Long seconds tick by and I remain the only person standing still in a crowd that loses its mind as I stare at her.

I just stare at her.

Words were invented to describe her kind of beautiful.

She turns to smile at Thayer, a student from another one of my classes, and I've never seen her smile like that. Adrenaline shines in her eyes, exhilaration colors her cheeks, and disbelief and pure joy stretch her smile. She looks stunning and I don't know how anyone can choose to look at the fighters when she's right there. When they could be looking at *her*.

She's radiant and I want her for myself.

I clock all the people around her, all the students I teach that could look over and recognize me. I'm one false move away from blowing this whole thing up just because I can't control my dick.

I'm torn between knowing that I can't have her and being too far gone to

give a shit. As she settles down from the celebrations, clapping her hands happily, her cheeks still rosy from excitement, I decide that even if I can't have her, I can't stand the thought of anyone else having her either.

As the crowd begins to calm, I walk the rest of the way until I stand behind her. Thayer is still jumping wildly, palms hitting the mat of the ring as she cheers, so she doesn't see me.

I stay there for a couple of seconds, distracted by how well we fit, how easily I could wrap my whole body around her.

I close the distance between us so her back is pressed to my front and curl my arm lazily around her hip, draping my hand possessively over her bare stomach.

She stiffens.

"Go home *alone* tonight," I order, pressing my growled command into her hair.

I feel her instantly relax against me, nearly destroying my resolve to leave in the process.

But I can't stay.

I rip myself off her with difficulty and disappear into the crowd.

My temples pound with a thumping headache the next day, courtesy of my having hit the bourbon bottle before going to sleep.

Coming home to a shitty one bedroom, in a country I don't belong in, with a name that isn't mine and without the girl that is, only emphasized just how colorless my life has become.

So, this morning, my head is absolutely hanging and I'm in no mood to be fucked with. I've already written up two students and yelled at a third but it's when I see Nera walk up to Phoenix that I feel a violent yank on the reins of my temper.

I don't want her anywhere near him.

It snaps completely when she shoves him into an open classroom, follows him in, and then closes the door shut behind her.

I rake my hand through my hair and take a calming, albeit shaky,

exhale.

After last night, I don't want to think about why she needs to talk to him so urgently and privately.

If she ignored me, if she took him home...

I find that I can't finish that thought.

She'd warned me though.

"I won't wait for you forever."

I grind my teeth so hard, pain shoots in my jaw from the pressure. I can't go in there. Not unless I want to throw this whole year away.

No one has to know.

The selfish part of me urges me to take what I want like I always do, fuck the consequences.

Except the consequences aren't what they've been in the past.

Just one more time and then she'll be out of my system.

No one has to know.

I can't risk my family for a fling.

He's probably in there fucking her right now.

Selfishness wins and all rational thought immediately evaporates like the flame of a candle being blown out.

I see blood red.

It should be me in there.

I'm at the door and ripping it open in seconds, but I manage to get enough control on my fury that I don't send it crashing into the wall. Instead, I open and close it quietly, not wanting to draw undue attention to this moment.

By the time I walk into the classroom, my anger has morphed from angry red to a much more concerning icy white.

And when I don't immediately lay eyes on her, something cracks inside me and lets the crazed territorial beast out.

"What the fuck are you two doing in here?" I demand.

Phoenix steps back and she appears, finally.

Fully clothed, mercifully.

He hands her back her phone and my eyelid twitches. I wonder if she gave him her number.

The same one she wouldn't give me.

As my mood darkens further and further it sucks up all the oxygen in the room.

Phoenix lifts an unbothered brow at me. “Are you allowed to talk to students like that?”

“Get out,” I hiss.

Chapter 17

Nera

I find it hard to breathe.

Distantly, I hear Phoenix drawl, “This isn’t even your classroom, why do you care?”

There’s an absence of air in this room that chokes my lungs and quickens my heartbeat and it’s because of *him*.

Tristan stands with his arms crossed against his chest. His hands grip either one of his biceps with such force that the veins pop in his skin.

He *shakes* with anger.

I have no idea what set him off. When he interrupted, I was interrogating Phoenix about what he was doing in the women’s changing room with Six after the fight yesterday. He’s been harassing her for years but the expression I saw on his face last night was more obsessive than angry.

He’ll break her if he continues toying with her like this. And, if my hunch is correct, he’ll break himself right alongside her.

Based on the way Tristan’s eyes slide from me and thin murderously on Phoenix, I think he’s misunderstanding what’s happening here.

It’s potent in the air, his rage. And it electrifies and terrifies me at the same time. I’m not sure I want to be in a room this small with him when he’s like this. I don’t think it’s large enough to contain his anger.

“Let’s just go,” I say, pushing Phoenix forward with my hand. He’s locked in some sort of alpha male stare down with Tristan and not moving.

Tristan's gaze snaps to where I touch Phoenix and scalds.

My hand drops as if he burned me.

He who was so worried about his reputation and his job that he wouldn't touch me for weeks seems to suddenly care about neither. Phoenix can't be oblivious to what's really going on here. Short of peeing on me, Tristan couldn't be acting more territorial.

I have to get us out of here before he loses it and accidentally ruins his career and reputation.

I follow after Phoenix, keeping my head bent and my gaze averted. I feel Tristan's eyes burn against the side of my face, but I don't look up at him.

I'll text him later or somethi-

His hand extends in front of me, separating me from Phoenix.

"You stay."

My heart lurches.

Out of the corner of my eye, I see Tristan's face turned completely to the left, chin angled down to look at me. I can see him in my peripherals when I look up at Phoenix.

He stops and turns around when he sees I don't follow. Tristan growls angrily in response. It's a dark rumble that crawls up his throat and falls sexily from his lips and it skates up the skin of my neck.

"It's fine, you can go. I'll talk to you later."

Phoenix walks away without a backwards glance and then I'm alone with Tristan.

Slowly, almost maddeningly so, he closes the door and then locks it, his eyes never leaving my face. His fingers linger on the bolt and something pulses in my lower stomach.

Finally, I bring my gaze up to meet his, the moment of our eyes meeting sending a jolt of energy through me. He brings his arm down to his side and I take a nervous step back.

His fingers wrap around my wrist, freezing me in place as I deal with the physical onslaught of having him touch me. My heart races, my breath hitches, and wetness pools between my legs.

My focus is so set on my wrist that it's only when he has his other hand wrapped around my neck that I realize he's even moved.

I stiffen in a mix of fear and excitement.

As potent as his anger is, he's throttling the violence inside him. His fingers are loose on my neck, his thumb caressing soft circles around my

pulse point.

His eyes are dazed with lust yet alert as they track over my face.

“Is this okay?” he asks, lowering his head and speaking the words softly against the shell of my ear.

Something softens inside me, something that isn't used to being disturbed by kind attention. No one around me ever asks me what I want or if *I* like something, it's always assumed for me or ordered to me.

I'm taken aback by how much more attracted to him it makes me, if that's even possible.

“Yes.”

“Good,” he says, tapping my nose.

The kindness disappears from his face and when his hand finds my neck again, his fingers wrap around the entire column of my throat and squeeze. I drag a breath in as my eyes widen slightly. This hold makes me want to arch wantonly into him.

“Because I'm not going to treat you like you're breakable when I know you're not.”

How wrong he is.

Regardless, wild exhilaration more potent than I've ever felt whips through me at the way he dominates me. Somehow that emotion still pales in comparison to the one I feel at his words.

He bends my wrist behind me and uses it to push the small of my back, pressing me against his body. We're glued to each other from thigh to chest, my neck tilted grotesquely back to look at him.

Like this, I'm completely at his mercy.

“Did you do as I asked?” His voice is pitched impossibly low, the tenor angry.

I watch his mouth move, entranced. Shivers ripple over my entire body in answer to the guttural words. The connection between us feels so thick and tense with inaction that I'm hypnotized by his lips and leaning closer into him.

“Remember what I said about you only wanting me when someone else does?” I manage to ask. “You're not exactly disproving my point.”

The truth is, last night I'd felt his touch long after his hand had left my skin. The warmth of him pressed momentarily against me combined with the domineering touch of his large hand had made something inside me go a little haywire.

Especially when I turned around and he was gone.

I'd have believed I imagined it if I hadn't placed my hand over where his had been and felt the heat from his palm still there, temporarily branded into my skin.

I still don't know what he was doing at the fight or how he so mysteriously appeared and then disappeared with no word except to tell me not to fuck someone else.

"Did you," he repeats, ignoring me and drawing out each syllable threateningly, "do as I asked?"

I goad him. "Remind m—"

"Did you fuck Phoenix last night?" He snaps.

I recoil instantly.

The idea of having sex with Phoenix is disturbing to say the least.

"Of course no—"

"He didn't want to leave you here with me," he snarls, bringing his mouth mere millimeters from mine. "Would he be so possessive of you if he knew how I fucked you a month ago?"

"Did you? I forgot, it must not have been that memorable," I jab.

His lips crash down bruisingly on mine. Momentary disbelief gives way to exhilaration, followed by adrenaline flooding my body.

The combination makes me dizzy.

I want to claw at him, but he keeps me trapped against him.

"Brat," he grunts against my mouth. "That'd be much easier to believe if the taste of you wasn't still on my lips from your multiple orgasms."

He uses his hold on my neck to angle my face up, giving him unfettered access to my mouth. His lips are hungry in their assault as they claim me, easily stealing my breath away.

Excitement thrums in my veins.

Finally.

There's bourbon on his lips and it's like adding gasoline to the flames of my arousal.

He walks us backwards until my ass hits his desk. Ripping his lips off me, he sends his chair flying out of the way with a vicious kick. I only have time to take a tiny breath before his mouth is back on mine.

He hoists me easily onto the desk and settles his large body between my legs, forcing them open. His hands clasp my waist and tug me against him. My arms wrap around his neck as I arch into him. At this height, my center

rests against the fly of his trousers. I rub my covered pussy brazenly against his hard length, enjoying the frustrated groan he moans into my mouth. An intense shiver racks through his body as his hands tighten demandingly on mine.

I love the way he reacts to my touch, like every movement of my body drives him crazed with lust.

He releases me and takes a step back, only to flip me so that I'm bent over his desk, face down with my feet planted on the ground. He wraps my hair around his fist and uses it to pin me in place as he leans over me.

His breathing is ragged, rough pants falling from his lips and raising goosebumps along my skin.

"Why were you in here with him?"

With his other hand, he shoves my skirt up over my hips. Cool air breezes over the bare skin of my ass clad only in a thong. It's in direct contrast with the heat of his hand when he places it on my cheek.

He palms my ass, squeezing the flesh possessively as he waits for me to answer. When I don't, too overcome with the way he touches me, he spansks me.

"Fuck," I hiss.

A pulse of heat shoots straight to my center.

He spansks me again and I clench my pussy in response, arousal leaking out of me.

"Don't make me ask you again, Nera," he warns, the tone of his voice like the edge of a sharpened blade.

"I was talking to him about something," I say, stubbornly.

His hand comes down on my ass again, this time blow after blow, heating the skin of my cheeks until they're raw. Every hit is a mix of pain and pleasure that races straight to my clit until I'm clenching my shaking thighs to keep from coming.

I'm embarrassed by how easily I'm on the brink. I need to hold off, the last thing I want is him realizing that he controls my orgasms like I'm a puppet on a string and he's my master.

"Tristan," I say, my voice trembling with the effort of holding it together.

He chuckles darkly against my ear, his mouth coming down to kiss the curve of my neck.

My skin stings as his hand comes down once more, this time hitting the

sensitive flesh where my thighs meet my ass. I go up onto my toes but he forces me back down, landing another blow on my sensitive bottom.

Two fingers slip beneath the band of my thong and down between my cheeks. They part my folds and slide through my slickened slit.

“You’re soaked,” he praises, his voice liquid heat and so smug it sends a deranged shudder through me. “But not enough. I want your cum dripping down your thighs before I fuck you.”

He presses down on my clit and as easily as if he’d pulled the trigger of a gun, he sets off an explosive orgasm. My knees fold as the unexpected but powerful climax hits me. I moan loudly, glad to have the desk supporting me as my body becomes weightless and limp.

One touch.

That’s all it took for him to break me apart.

Like last time, I’m trying to wrap my head around how he can make me come so easily while I’m still fighting through the physical assault of my orgasm.

My face flushes and I turn away from him, embarrassed that I came when he barely touched me.

Not one to miss an opportunity to gloat, he covers my body with his and whispers against my ear, “Your body craves my touch. *My* touch. All it takes is a couple strokes to have you coming so prettily for me.”

I want to argue with the gloating bastard, but I have no leg to stand on.

“If you want to come again today, you’ll answer my questions.”

I whip my face back around, pressing my cheek against the table as I look over my shoulder at him.

“You won’t fuck me?” I hate how needy my voice sounds.

He laughs darkly, like I’ve just said something incredibly funny. “Oh, I’m going to fuck you either way. But just as easily as I know how to make you come, I can withhold your pleasure if you insist on playing with me.” He nips at my lower lip and whispers, “Remember the elevator.”

I make a disappointed noise, writhing against the table and arching my hips back at him.

“Tristan,” I moan.

I can hear the frustration in my voice. I want, no I *need*, him to keep touching me.

“Jailbait,” he answers, teasing me.

“Please,” I beg.

“No,” he answers, peeling himself off me. I expect him to walk away, but I feel him drop to his knees behind me instead. I hear more than feel him rip my panties right off my body.

Self-consciousness stiffens my body as he runs his palms from my knees and up the back of my thighs. He must sense it because he smacks the still sensitive skin of my ass sharply, forcing me to relax.

His hands grab my cheeks, palming and massaging them as I hear him make appreciative noises behind me. He licks up the back of my thigh up to the middle of my left cheek where he sinks his teeth into my flesh. White hot pain follows and I yelp, my fingers gripping the edge of the desk above my head for purchase.

“By the time we’re done here, there won’t be a single part of you I won’t have tasted and marked.”

He parts my cheeks and my face flames. For excruciatingly long seconds, he simply stares at my soaking folds and my swollen clit.

“You were right about one thing,” he purrs darkly, his voice sounding intoxicated with lust, “I am a man who likes to eat.”

And then I feel his tongue come down back *there*, a place no one’s ever touched.

I shriek and arch off the desk, but he slams a hand on my lower back and forces me back face down where he wants me.

“Oh, my... Oh, *oh*,” I stutter, incoherently.

With my ass parted by his hands, Tristan easily buries his face between my cheeks. His tongue darts out and swirls around my tight pucker. The sounds of him lapping happily at my tight hole reach my ears and drive me wild.

The sensations are overwhelming and so powerful, I’m afraid they’re going to consume me. A combination of exhilaration and uncertainty at his forbidden exploration, mixed with the wild pleasure he unleashes with his adept tongue makes me lose my grip on reality.

I’m writhing like a caught fish on the desk trying to avoid his tongue, trying to push him closer to me, unsure what it is I want.

He eats like a starving man. The roughness of his tongue abrades against the whorl of my asshole, teasing and loosening the tight muscles with determined and almost forceful intent.

I nearly lose consciousness when I feel his tongue probe past my ring and into my ass. He darts in and out, keeping my cheeks spread to the

threshold of exquisite pain. I'm overwhelmed by the foreign but electric sensation and I'm on the verge of another orgasm.

My muscles start to spasm when he abruptly pulls away. As close as I was to the edge, I'm violently yanked away from it as my orgasm retreats.

"Tristan," I whine. Sexual frustration sizzles in my veins. I need him to make me come. I reach back for him blindly, but he grabs my wrist and pins it against my lower back.

"I never got to hear my name on your lips the first time," he recalls, irritation coloring his words. "But hearing you chant it now like I'm your God and you're praying for mercy is fucking making up for it."

"Why'd you stop?" I whimper.

"I told you," he rumbles against my ear, his voice husky. "you don't get to come again until you answer my question."

I keen discontentedly as my climax gets further and further away from me. I'm so frazzled by my arousal that I can't even remember what he asked me.

"W-what?"

"Tell me about Phoenix," he grounds.

"He doesn't want *me*," I answer. I won't tell him more than that, not when Six and I haven't talked about it.

Tristan leans over me, his entire body covering mine as I feel two of his fingers dip into my pussy. I moan, shuddering beneath him.

His other hand comes up to collar my throat, angling my face off the desk. He presses his lips against my skin, his warm breaths hitting my cheek and driving me crazy. He sucks my lobe into his mouth as he pumps his fingers lazily in and out of me.

"Then he's an idiot," he growls against the shell of my ear. "An idiot who'll live to see another day."

The compliment sears my skin. He has a way of ruining me body and soul with that mouth that makes the top layer of ice around my heart melt.

"You didn't bring anyone home yesterday?"

I want to tell him it's none of his business, I want to tell him I can do what I want, but I'm in no state to play games right now.

He was right, I am at his mercy.

"No," I whisper.

He rumbles approvingly, the vibrations in his chest reverberating through my back. He angles my face towards the rows of desks.

“Look up,” he commands, his finger leaving my pussy and dragging up my folds to my ass. I stiffen when I feel his finger rim my dark hole and then hiss when he pushes it past my ring and into my untried channel. “I want you to imagine sitting in your seat on Monday,” he purrs against my ear as his finger pushes deeper inside me. I suck in a breath as he gets in to the second knuckle, immediately pulling out just to bury himself all the way. “Remembering how you stayed bent over this desk and spread your legs for me so I could finger your ass.”

“Tristan,” I breathe as his finger starts a slow rhythm of pulling out and pushing back in. It burns and stings but behind it there’s twisted pleasure. My legs shake and I push my hips back into his hand.

“Remembering how you fucked your ass back on my finger like a greedy little slut.”

My cheeks flame at his degradation, but my body sings.

More.

A second finger pushes in beside the first as he speaks, eliciting a cry from my lips. The stretch is too much, the sensations too overwhelming. He caresses the skin of my tender rim with his thumb, his lips kissing the sensitive area behind my ear.

I think about the picture we must be painting right now. My professor bent over me, with his fingers in my ass as he whispers dirty things in my ear. The taboo nature of this entire moment lights my spine on fire until I’m craving more.

He peels himself off me and drops back between my parted legs with his fingers still inside me, his mouth finding my sopping center.

“Remembering how I buried my face in your dripping cunt and licked your sensitive pussy.”

He takes his fingers out of my ass, pushes them into my pussy, and then buries them back into my back hole to the webbing, his tongue never leaving my clit the entire time.

Holy fuck.

I try to shoot off the desk but his other hand keeps me firmly in place. When he puts me out of my misery and bites my clit, I can’t help but come with a garbled, unintelligible cry. My entire body spasms, at the mercy of the orgasm as it wrecks through me. He licks me relentlessly through the entire climax until I feel like I’m going to come again if he continues.

But then he pulls his fingers out of my sore ass and stands, and I hear the

telltale sounds of a belt being undone. He rips it through the loops and grabs my hands, pinning them on my lower back. He wraps the strap around my wrists and tightens it until they're trapped behind me.

"Remembering how I fucked you while your hands were tied behind your back," he finishes, his own hands landing on my hips in a claiming grip. He mutters jumbled praise as his hands caress the still red skin of my ass. "Are you on the pill?"

"Yes," I say, as I try to catch my breath. "But get a condom."

"No," he answers, categorical. "I haven't fucked anyone since we met. I'm clean."

I have no right or reason to be territorial over him, but knowing he hasn't slept with anyone since me has possessiveness filling my mind and drowning out all rational thought.

He takes my silence as uncertainty and continues, his tone luring and his freed cock rubbing up and down my folds.

"You understand the avalanche of shit I'll be buried under if anyone ever learns about this? If they find out how you let me tie you up, shove my fingers in your ass and fuck you bent over some random professor's desk?" He groans, getting turned on by his own words. "As much as I'm attracted to you, and fuck knows I am, this is just a one-time thing. It can't happen again after this."

"Don't worry, I won't get attached," I answer, flippantly. The combination of his dick rubbing against me and his words telling me this will never happen again is completely surreal. I can't let myself think about tomorrow, or even an hour from now, not when he has me teetering on the cliff's edge. "I told you, I'm not interested in anything serious."

He grunts behind me, the sound angry like I didn't just tell him exactly what he wanted to hear.

"I want to feel your tight heat. I want to feel how wet and warm your pussy is, how it clenches around me when I make you come. How it takes my cum," his voice sounds pained with the effort of restraining himself and it's pure venom when he speaks again. "Nothing's getting in between my dick and feeling all of you when this is the last time I get to fuck you, so no condoms."

Oh, God.

I want everything he just described, every salacious part of it.

I nod, tongue tied and delirious with lust.

“Ask me to fuck your pussy,” he demands, placing his hard cock against my entrance.

I twist as best I can with my arms trapped behind my back and look over my shoulder at him, my dark eyes finding his icy ones. A smirk curls the corner of my lips and his gaze drops to my mouth, entranced.

“Fuck me, Tristan,” I say seductively, biting my lip and softening my eyes.

His own blow wide in response, his pupils expanding until they drown out the color of his irises.

He digs his thumbs into the dimples on my lower back and his hands close domineeringly around my hips where they connect with my thighs. He drives into me with one slick move, burying himself deep inside me until his hips are pressed against my sore ass.

My mouth falls open on a silent scream.

He sends the scream flying out of my throat when he pulls out and shoves back in.

“Ahhh,” I yell.

He clamps a hand down over my mouth.

“*Shh*, pretty girl. I need you to be quiet for me.” He wraps an arm around my waist and uses it to pull me up against him so my arms and back are against his chest. He tilts my head to the side, forcing me to look into his eyes as he pounds into me. “I’ve never fucked anyone bare before,” he confesses, a dark, territorial gleam in his eyes. I’m chanting against his hand, my hums in time to the rhythm of his dick and my pleasure. “Sing for me just like that, baby.”

My eyes close when he calls me that and I shatter around him.

“Oh, *fuck*,” he mutters as my muscles squeeze his length in powerful waves. I bear down on him for seconds at a time as each flutter hits me, clenching his cock with an almost uncomfortable amount of pressure. “Look how well you come for me,” he praises, arrogantly.

He thrusts into me as my climax begins to fade, his hands holding me up against his chest. This way feels so intimate but also so, so dirty. His breaths hit my face and mine warm his hand as he fucks me with enough force that I’m bouncing like a ragdoll.

He releases my waist and grabs my left leg behind my knee, pulling it up and bending it over the desk. This new angle spreads my legs impossibly wide, giving him unrestricted access to thrust into me as he wishes.

And he sets a wild rhythm.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as I take what he gives me and try to hold on. He goes impossibly deep, deeper than anyone has before, and I can hear myself moaning lewdly for him.

Someone knocks at the door and tries the handle, but he doesn't stop. I don't even know if he hears them over the sounds of how he's fucking me.

I can't make myself care or panic in this moment. Instead, I arch my ass towards him, resting my head against his shoulder, and I look up into his eyes.

He hisses, his icy, fathomless eyes fixed on mine. His gaze moves from mine to my mouth and back, and I forgot how heavy it is. How all-consuming his stare is, how it engulfs me in heat and desire.

"Your pussy feels so good," he says, making me clench down on him. His teeth grind together and his head falls back, his features twisted in agony.

His hands clamp on my waist hard enough to bruise. For the first time, I find myself hoping that they do. I want to have a memory of this time together to look at after we leave this room, even if it fades by the end of the week.

His hand slides down to my pussy. He parts my folds and finds my throbbing clit, his fingers pressing down and drawing tight circles on it.

My legs shake and I almost lose my balance, but his free hand wraps around my waist to steady me. He enters me once, twice, three more times, each thrust more powerful than the next and I come with a loud cry. My orgasm steamrolls me until I'm panting raggedly and my muscles are spasming around his length.

I hear a strangled curse and then I feel him come, his warm seed shooting inside me. Rope after rope of his cum fill me as his climax goes on for what feels like hours, my pussy taking it all greedily.

This is also my first time having sex without a condom and the feeling of his cum dripping out of me and down my thigh feels almost pornographic. I shudder at the sensation and squeeze my thighs to keep it inside.

He pulls out and my sensitive walls clench after him, desperate to keep him where he is. I hear him pull up his trousers and zip them as arousal gives way to awkwardness. It descends between us and makes it so that I don't even want to turn around and face him.

But he grabs my skirt and shoves it back down over my ass, unties me,

and makes me face him. I rub my wrists gingerly so I have something to do with my hands. I feel his eyes track the movement fixedly.

“Do you have my panties?” I look down at the floor around us, but don’t see them.

“I do.”

My eyes flick up to meet his. His arms are crossed and he gives me an inscrutable stare.

“Give them back,” I order.

“You came for me while you wore them,” he answers. “That makes them mine.”

“You want me to go to all my classes this afternoon without any underwear on?” I ask, crossing my own arms over my chest.

His gaze darkens on me. “You had no problem doing so when you were playing your little games,” he growls. He takes a step towards me and whispers, “At least this time you have my cum dripping down your thigh.” He pats the pocket of his jeans where I now know he’s stuffed my panties. “I’ll keep these as a little souvenir.”

I tip my chin up and his gaze drops to my lips, our faces inches from each other’s once more. “And what do I get?”

He stares at my mouth through lowered lids. “Seven orgasms,” he says. “I think that’s a fair trade, don’t you?”

“You’re keeping count?” I ask, my lips curving into a disbelieving smile.

“I *kept* count,” he corrects, turning away from me and severing the connection between our gazes.

A rogue thought drifts through my mind that maybe he can’t make himself look me in the eye when he says it. I banish it to the place where I keep all the other things I can’t and won’t think about. It does me no good to let my imagination spiral on things that I know are impossible.

My eyes narrow on his back as he walks to the door. I’m not about to let him have the last word. “I’ll let you know when the next guy beats your record.”

He stops in his tracks and stiffens, his shoulders setting like a brick wall. I expect him to turn around and come back, but he simply looks ahead and calls out over his shoulder, “Don’t tell anyone about this.”

Annoyed, I click my tongue against my teeth and reply, “Don’t you think if I was planning on telling someone I wouldn’t have done so already?”

He nods once, tersely, and walks out, slamming the door behind him. He leaves me with a feeling of being both satiated and incomplete.

There's an ache in my chest that shouldn't be there. We slept together, I had multiple, reality-bending orgasms, and now we're going our separate ways.

Just as I wanted.

Then why is there a lingering...*something* that I'm not familiar with?

Irritated with myself, I walk over to the chair where I dropped my bag and gather my things.

When I hear the door open again and then close behind me, I whip back around, alarmed. Tristan marches decidedly towards me, a thunderous expression on his face. I barely have time to acknowledge my confusion before his hand is on my cheek and his lips are on mine.

He kisses me languorously, passionately, his lips parting mine and his tongue diving in. I cover his hand with my own and return the kiss with equal fervor, those feelings of frustration evaporating in an instant.

His hand moves down to cup my nape and he pulls me sharply against him. There's pure violence in this kiss — in the way he attacks and touches and claims — and instead of pushing him away, I lean in closer. I shove my tongue into his mouth. I fist his shirt in my hand. I claw at his back. I moan grotesquely into his mouth when he bites my lip and licks up the blood.

Bad idea, a voice warns as my head spins, *he's dangerous. He'll destroy you if you let him in.*

Just as quickly as he comes back, he rips himself off me. He places his forehead against mine as he pants, catching his breath. I do the same and for a moment we breathe as one.

Reckless. We're being so fucking reckless.

If my father knew I'd hooked up with one of my professors, he'd probably kill us both.

"One last kiss," he whispers gutturally, his fingers brushing over my nose. "I needed one last taste of you, jailbait."

And then he's gone.

Chapter 18

Tristan

“I find it interesting,” a voice drawls from behind me the following day.

I turn around and see Phoenix loitering in my doorway. An annoyed rumble starts in my throat.

“What, Sinclair?” I snap, turning back towards my desk. I’m not in the mood to deal with him. Not when my teeth still grind together at the thought of him anywhere near Nera.

She told me yesterday that nothing was going on between them, but I’m still wary. My fists clench at my sides just thinking about it.

Not that I have any right to be possessive of her. Yesterday was a loss of control, albeit a necessary one, and now I can put her behind me. I can do that just as soon as I stop having flashbacks, both physical and mental, of her lips on mine. Of how she’d clung desperately to me when I’d walked back in and claimed her mouth one final time.

“Your little one on one with Nera,” he says and I can hear the smirk in his voice without turning around. “It didn’t exactly exude professionalism.”

I turn towards him slowly, a muscle jumping in my cheek.

“Keep her name out of your mouth,” I snap.

God fucking damnit.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about,” I add, trying to recover from the slip up of my heated correction.

His smirk stretches into a full on grin now and my fists twitch with the

need to remove it from his face.

“Very interesting indeed,” he says.

“Get out of my classroom, Phoenix,” I bark. “What I talk about with another one of my students is of no concern to you.”

“It is if you’re fucking said student,” he comments, drolly.

Red hazes my vision and I work to strangle my wrath before it erupts out of me.

“I’d be very careful about what rumors I start if I was you.”

He gives a careless lift of his shoulder, looking as bored as he usually does. “I have no interest in spreading rumors.”

“Then why are you here wasting my time with them?” I take a menacing step towards him. “Unless you have a personal interest in the matter.”

I wonder if that’s what this is about. If he wants her for himself regardless of what she told me. If he does, I don’t know what I’ll do. Protectiveness and violence thrum in my veins, the feelings still completely new to me, and I’m afraid that whatever comes out of his mouth next will result in me getting fired and arrested for assaulting a student.

“I care fuck all about what you’re doing with her,” he says, emotionlessly. But then his shoulders stiffen and his spine straightens, his eyes darkening until they snuff out all the light previously in them. “But if your interests stray beyond her to someone else,” he gives me a sinister smile, “then we’ll have a problem.”

My brows furrow. “There’s nothing going on between Nera and I,” I repeat, “And what are you talking about?”

His teeth grind. “Stay the fuck away from her friends,” he sneers. “Your secret’s safe with me if you do that.”

Something loosens in my chest, something I didn’t realize had been incredibly tight before. It unfurls, bringing both physical relief in the way the tension in my shoulders smooths out and mental release in the way the anger immediately recedes.

“*He doesn’t want me,*” she’d said. Emphasis on *me*.

That notion is simultaneously inconceivable to me and a fucking relief.

It’s my turn to grin now. “Which friend?” I ask, enjoying this turn of the tables. “Thayer?”

“You’re off base, Novak.”

“Bellamy?”

I don’t investigate why I know who Nera’s best mates are. I don’t think

I'll like admitting the truth of why to myself.

"I said—"

"Six?"

"Her name is Sixtine," he snaps, his glare pinned on me. His left eyelid twitches dangerously. "I suggest you use it."

I chuckle, not letting myself be intimidated. Phoenix may know how to fight, but he doesn't unnerve me. There are other ways to destroy people.

"Very interesting indeed," I say, throwing his own words back in his face.

"Fuck you," he bites out.

I outright laugh now. I think in another life, he and I could be good mates.

I drop my arms and extend a hand out to him.

"You have nothing to worry about," I tell him. Nera is buried deep enough into my thoughts that my only priority is finding a way to dig her out.

His eyes drop to my hand and back, his gaze contemplative. His hand folds into mine and we shake on it, an understanding passing between us.

You don't mess with what's mine, I won't mess with what's yours.

Even though from what I've seen, Phoenix and Sixtine despise each other.

Even though I can't let myself have Nera.

He nods and leaves wordlessly, leaving me alone with thoughts about how to get Nera out of my brain before she makes a permanent home for herself there.

I brace myself and blow out a ragged breath.

"Ten...eleven...twelve," I call out loud, setting the dumbbell back on the weight rack.

My biceps are screaming from the effort but I only allow myself fifteen seconds of rest before I pick up the next weight up and go in for my next set.

"One...two...three," I churn out.

I've always been more of a runner. Whenever I need to get any emotion or nervous energy out, I run. I've always been able to focus solely on putting one foot in front of the other until I'm lulled into being completely disconnected from my thoughts.

But running is no longer enough. In fact, it stopped being enough two weeks ago when I first went to the factory and boxed, and it's only gotten less effective since.

Focusing on putting one foot in front of the other no longer works. I need abject pain to pull my thoughts away from the dark-haired, dark-eyed temptress that haunts my dreams. It's only when I punch the bag that I had hung in my apartment until my hands and wrists are swollen, or lift weights until my muscles feel like they're going to snap in two that I get a brief moment of respite from the torment of seeing her every day and having to pretend she's just another face in the crowd.

True to my words from when I walked out of the classroom after the hottest fuck of my life, I haven't approached her since.

The problem is, neither has she.

She's been everywhere I look and never looking at me.

It's what I wanted and I'm enjoying it about as much as being stabbed with a hot poker.

Hence the need to exercise the anger and bitterness out so I don't do something stupid like break into her apartment and kidnap her. At the rate at which I'm going, I'll be proficient to expert level in four to five new sports by the time the year is over.

The door to the professor's-only gym opens and the woman herself walks in like I've summoned her.

She freezes in the doorframe, her dark eyes looking at me.

Finally.

A breath rattles loudly up my throat and falls from my lips before I can catch it.

I cover it with a scowl.

Two weeks of hard work ruined in one infuriating, exciting moment.

"This is the professors' gym," I growl, rising from the bench I was laying on and standing.

Her eyes drop to my bare torso and widen. I look down, realizing that my chest and abs are glistening with sweat from my workout. I probably shouldn't be shirtless in this communal gym, but the rest of the staff is

ancient and no one uses this space except me. I've come to think of it as my own private gym like the one I had back home.

One thing's for certain though, it's not open to students.

She swallows thickly like her mouth is dry and flicks her gaze back up to meet mine. She flashes me a keycard she must have used to get in here.

"I have access," she says, looking away from me and stepping into the room. Immediately I want those magnetizing eyes back on me.

"Why?" I ask. This gym is in an RCA owned facility closer to my apartment than the campus so it's my go to most days. I've never seen her here though, not until today.

She shrugs off her jacket and stands in a sports bra and biker shorts before me. Except she has her back turned as she bends over and looks for something in her sports bag, so she gives me a look at her toned, round ass defined in that tempting, revealing fabric. She might as well be naked for how little those shorts hide her curves and all I can think of is how I had my fingers in that tight ass of hers just a couple of weeks ago.

My cock hardens instantly. I reposition myself while she looks the other way so she doesn't turn around to find my thick length tenting my shorts.

She stands and gathers her long hair into a ponytail, revealing that sexy as fuck tattoo that drives me crazy and the lines of her muscled back. She's slender, but the strength is there in the way her body moves with easy grace.

"Athlete's privilege," she answers, her tone uninterested.

She doesn't even glance over her shoulder, speaking to me without looking in my direction. The ease with which she dismisses me rankles the dominant side of me that demands her attention.

I goad her where I know the hit will land. "So, you're not here to try to get me to fuck you again?"

She whips around, her ponytail flying, and I realize my mistake when I see the front of her tight body wrapped in even tighter fabric. Her tits are pressed up against the neckline of her sports bra, flushed pink skin peeking out appetizingly above it. Her nipples are pebbled and pushing up mouthwateringly against their cotton prison, the piercing highlighted and distracting me. It makes me want to rip her bra off with my teeth before sinking them into her flesh.

"I'm not here for you, you arrogant bastard. I'm here to train," she hisses. "I have access to this gym for night workouts so I don't have to cross campus alone."

“Put a top on,” I snap, distracted. My jaw is tight and I can’t look down at her when she’s standing with her fists clenched on her hips looking angrily up at me.

She huffs out an amused breath. “You’re wearing less than I am. How about you put something on? That way we’ll be even and you won’t come off like such a hypocritical asshole. Yet again.”

I bite my lip in response to keep myself from kissing the attitude off her. Her eyes fly to where my teeth dig into my flesh and her mouth parts slightly. I wonder if she knows everything she does is a turn on and I live in a constant state of agony at the mercy of the way she teases me with her micro expressions.

I groan and take a few steps back, adding distance between us so I don’t reach for her. I catch what looks like disappointment in her eyes but it’s quickly gone, replaced by a scoff falling from her lips.

She turns away and walks to the leg press in the corner, ostentatiously and insolently playing with the shoulder strap of her bra to taunt me. She pulls it down her shoulder and makes a show of scratching her bare skin before pulling it back up.

I drop onto a bench, rendered completely useless by my throbbing erection. I fuck around on my phone for a few minutes while I internally will it to go down. I dart quick looks at Nera out of the corner of my eye.

She said she came here to work, and she wasn’t kidding. I watch her put in a monster workout. It’s almost punishing in its intensity, her face completely awash in concentration as she pushes herself to what I know has to be past her limit.

I move easily between different machines, keeping a watchful eye on her as she goes between stations. She barely takes any breaks and she definitely doesn’t notice I’m still there. I’m almost awestruck by seeing the blind drive and dogged tenacity in her that I know only high-level athletes have. It makes her look far older than her actual years.

When I’m supposed to be finding ways to excavate her from my brain, I realize that I’m only burying her deeper. I’m more impressed after spending an hour in a room with her than I have been with anyone else in my life.

I should leave, but I can’t. I should look away, but I can’t. Instead, I do what I can to not openly stare at her. It’s the best I can even attempt right now.

Seeing her push herself this way reminds me of her dad’s reaction when

she'd lost the world juniors. My fists clench menacingly around the band in my hands. I wonder what role he plays in the punishing discipline with which she pushes herself.

"What did your father say about your grade?" I hear myself ask.

She seems as surprised as I am to hear me speak. Her eyes snap to me, the haze of focus drifting away as she realizes I'm still here, unmoved in the corner from which I've been watching her for the last twenty minutes.

She gives me a wary look, like a suspicious prey that smells a trap. Clearly, she doesn't want to talk about him.

Her eyes rake questioningly over my face for a few seconds as she catches her breath.

"He was happy."

I wait for her to expand, but she says nothing.

"And have you been?" I ask, softly.

It's barely noticeable, but I catch it. Her breath skips a beat.

"Have I been happy?"

I nod, wordlessly answering her clarifying question.

Her eyes bore into mine quietly for so long that I start to think she's not going to answer me. I let it drag on further until I'm just about ready to break the silence myself when her head shakes imperceptibly. It's barely a movement, her answer communicated more by her eyes than anything.

"Me neither," I answer, even though she didn't ask me. But then I realize that's not entirely true. "Except for a couple of notable moments." I don't look at her when I say it.

"Why do you teach if you hate it?"

Fuck, that's a question with a complicated, impossible answer. It's simpler to lie, so I do. I keep it vague, not wanting to create a whole fake backstory. I still want to be me when I talk to her.

"Family business."

"Your parents were teachers?"

"Yeah," I say, hiding my wince.

She nods thoughtfully, getting a faraway look in her eye.

"The weight of our parents' aspirations and expectations is so crushing," she muses. "I hope you get to make your dream come true."

She turns to look at me when I don't immediately speak.

"I hope you get to make yours come true too." She turns away but I'm not ready to let her go yet. "Remember what I said about choices. You should

do something that makes you happy tonight.”

She stops, looking over her shoulder at me. “Like what?”

The corner of my lip lifts and I shrug. “Anything really, but only you know the answer to what makes you happy.”

She bends to pick up a heavier kettlebell and drops into a deep squat with it held against her chest.

“Give me an idea.”

“I don’t know, doing something you wouldn’t usually. What about going for a midnight swim in the pond?”

Her lips curl and she turns to look at me, a genuine smile pulling at her mouth. I find I’d be willing to take on a couple Herculean tasks to make that happen again.

“I’m not kidding,” I say, my tone light. “Try doing something exhilarating like that, something that’ll make you feel alive.” I tilt my head, examining her. “I was going to suggest doing something illegal like stealing or breaking and entering, but you don’t strike me as someone who breaks the rules often.”

“I don’t know, you’re a pretty big rule break,” she points out saucily. “I assure you, I don’t often go around fucking my professors.”

I take a step towards her. “Often?”

She drops into a squat. “Ever,” she says, coming back up. “But don’t worry, I’m done with teachers. That was a fun experiment while it lasted but, in the end, your lot are just too complicated. I don’t have time for that so I’m going to stick to age-appropriate men from now on.”

“You mean prepubescent boys who have no idea how to make you come?” I growl, my temper flaring.

Her gaze narrows on me, her tongue as sharp as mine.

“I don’t know,” she bites, her tone taunting. She squats, my eyes tracking her compulsively down and back up. “I think you’ve taught me a thing or two. I’ll just make sure they go down on me first, that seems to do the trick.”

I’m across the room in the next second, my hand wrapping warningly around her throat. It turns out I’m there just in time to catch her as she stumbles on her way up from a squat.

Arousal is easily snuffed out by concern as I grip both of her arms and hold her against me. She’s so small she fits into my body like a glove. Her eyes are dazed and unfocused as I peer into them.

“Nera?”

The moment passes like it never happened and she rights herself, pushing my chest to get away from me.

“I’m fine,” she says. “Just let me go.”

My hands trail off her hips slowly as I make sure she can hold herself up once more. She looks pale and unwell. She shakes a little, almost imperceptibly. I wonder if her blood sugar isn’t low.

“Here,” I say, reaching into my duffle bag and pulling out one of my muscle up protein bars. “Eat this.”

“I’m okay, thank you,” she says, trying to hand the bar back to me.

I cross my arms, my tone and stare on her firm. “You looked like you were seconds away from passing out just then. You need to eat.”

She looks the bar over like she’s looking at the branding and flavor, but I see her eye the nutrition label. My brow furrows on that one detail.

“Thanks,” she says, brightly. “I’ll eat it on my way home.” She reaches for her bag and drops it into the front pocket. She picks up her water bottle and shirt and heads for the door, looking very much like she’s running away for some reason. “I’ll see you around.”

“Nera.”

She pauses at the door and looks back at me.

“If you let one of those boys touch you,” I pause, stretching out the menacing silence so she knows just how serious I am, “there won’t be anything left of his corpse once I’m through with him.”

The protective and territorial side of me comes out swinging, hungry to defend my claim on Nera.

She opens the door, pausing on the threshold.

“I told you I’m not interested in dating you, Tristan.”

I smile, a quiet chuckle falling from my lips. “Eat the protein bar, jailbait. I want to be able to dig my fingers into the meaty flesh of your ass the next time I fuck you.”

“I don’t sit around waiting for you to decide if and when you want to sleep with me, Tristan. You said that was the end of it last week, and turns out, I agree. There won’t be a next time.” With that, she steps out, letting the door slam closed behind her.

I almost don’t hear the noise over the sound of my grinding teeth. Resisting her isn’t a viable goal long term. Every single one of our interactions is laden with sexual tension, innuendo, and outright advances.

I feel my control slip with each passing day. Whether I like it or not, I'm eventually going to break.

It turns out I can't stay away.

If she can keep her mouth shut about us, then we can continue our extracurricular activities for a while longer. She's not looking for anything more than physical and God knows I shouldn't even be doing the physical, let alone the emotional, so it could work.

Now, all I need is to convince her.

No matter what her mouth says, she'll be desperate for it in a few more days. I know because I'm starting to feel a bothersome fire in my veins that I'm sure is spreading similarly through hers. Mine unleashes a need that calls for her, to have her submissive beneath me, to finally have her mouth on my cock when I've been haunted by the desire for weeks.

I know just when to do it. And maybe I'll have a chance to satisfy one of my long-held fantasies at the same time.

Chapter 19

Nera

“Do you think Dami really likes Indiyah? Or is he just playing a game?” Thayer asks.

Bellamy blows out a breath dejectedly. “If I knew how to tell the difference, my life would be so much easier.”

We’re sitting in our living room, eating popcorn, and watching *Love Island*. Like true fans, we’re dissecting every relationship on the show and whether the boys have good intentions or not.

“Look at you getting all wistful,” Thayer says, teasing her. “Those period hormones really have you all emosh.”

“You try keeping up with Rogue’s mood swings and then tell me if you don’t feel like you’re on an emotional rollercoaster,” she answers, flicking a hair tie on her wrist at Thayer’s head. “He’s impossible to read.”

“As someone who’s known Rogue a long time and has been witness to his international reign of terror since childhood, I’m telling you this is different. He’s never been like this,” Six says, jumping in.

“Yeah, but is that a good thing or a bad thing?”

Six gives Bellamy a hopeful look. “I’m wishing for good.”

After a very rocky start, Rogue and Bellamy have recently evolved from sworn enemies to enemies with benefits. All of Rogue’s emotional maturity in romantic relationships equates to about the size of a single grain of rice, so Bellamy is going through it.

She decided to spend the night with us tonight for some much needed girl time.

I pick at the popcorn in my bowl. I've already had two full bowls and I'm resisting a third. There's the familiar pulsing in my head and I know that means the voice isn't far behind. It's currently muffled but only minutes from breaking through.

It's fine, it's just popcorn.

I worked out for three hours today.

You ate that protein bar.

The voice punches through into my consciousness with the ferocity of a white man voicing his opinion.

Coach Krav is going to weigh you. If you're heavier, who knows what the punishment will be. Dad will come and Mum will remind you how disappointed in you she is.

Toxic thoughts swirl in my head as nervous energy thrums in my veins. I pick at the skin around my nails to try to bury the voice by focusing my attention on something else.

"Nera?" Bellamy asks, her voice questioning.

"Sorry?" I say, snapping out of my spiral with a breathy laugh. "I zoned out for a sec there."

"I was just asking you what your thoughts were on the Rogue thing."

Internally, I give a relieved sigh. This is a safe topic, one I'm happy to discuss.

"I think I'm hard pressed to find another example of a guy more obsessed with a girl than he is with you, babe."

She blushes happily and looks down at her phone, but I can see she's still thinking about it by the way her forehead creases.

"Except maybe Rhys," I add, teasingly.

"Don't even go there, Nera," Thayer says, grumpily.

"Or, now that I'm on the subject, Phoenix."

"Obsessed with putting me in an early grave, maybe," Six replies, dryly.

"Don't think we haven't noticed you texting someone lately, Nera. Before you try denying it, please know you have a smile on your face every time you do," Bellamy says, raising a brow in my direction.

"I smile when I text a lot of people," I say defensively.

"Not really and not *that* smile."

“Our little Nerita’s got a secret man,” Thayer teases.

Six laughs in the background but gives me a look that says *you’re on your own*.

“I don’t have a secret man. It’s nothing worth talking about, I’m serious.” Thayer opens her mouth to say something, but I change the subject before she can say anything. “And I think that Dami really does like Indiyah. He was just an idiot in Casa.”

Thayer gives me a small grin but thankfully understands that I don’t want to talk about it and drops it. Bellamy presses play and we keep watching the end of the episode, but my thoughts are elsewhere.

Walking into the gym and being assaulted by the visual of Tristan’s naked, sweaty torso, his chest heaving from the effort rendered me deaf and mute for a moment. Thoughts of licking up his sweat, swirling my tongue around his nipples and biting his neck had overwhelmed me.

I’d wanted to drop to my knees and beg him to fuck me. But as much as I had a physical need for him, I also had some pride. I wasn’t going to be at his beck and call waiting for him to stop fighting the attraction between us.

But I’d been on the brink of giving in.

The only times I’ve felt anything other than profound detachment recently was with him. Even when I spend time with my friends, the shadows lurk not far above me, waiting to descend like they do now.

He makes me too aroused, too exhilarated, too frustrated, too angry, too *distracted* to think about anything else.

“I love Tasha and Andrew,” Six says.

“Yeah, they’re cute but I’m Ekinde supremacy all the way,” Thayer replies.

“I think they’re going to win. They’re so cute,” Bellamy says, wiping a tear from the corner of her eye. Those period hormones really are getting to her.

“I’ve seen the spoilers so my lips are sealed,” I tell them.

Bellamy yawns. “You guys feel free to continue without me. I’m going to rest for a bit, I’ll be back out later.”

It takes everything in me not to go to the bathroom at the same time to get rid of this popcorn. I don’t like the way it’s settled in my stomach, like a brick weighing me down.

Just go get it out, you’ll feel so much better.

I stare at the screen and try to focus on the episode. Outwardly, I’m sure

I look like I'm locked in to the show. Inwardly, I'm barely catching every other word.

There's a knock at the door that startles the three of us, effectively quieting my thoughts of self-loathing. Six, Thayer and I give each other a look as I reach for the remote and pause the show. We're not expecting anybody.

The knock sounds again, louder this time.

"Coming," Thayer calls out, heading towards the door.

She's got it open barely an inch, peeking over the side to see who it is, when Rogue slams a palm on the door and shoves it open. He barges in and marches straight to Bellamy's room without a spare glance in our direction. He opens her bedroom door like he owns the place and slams it closed so loudly, the walls rattle.

The three of us stand there frozen for a couple of seconds, Six's glass raised comically halfway to her mouth.

Thayer looks over her shoulder at us. "What was that?"

"He must not be thrilled she broke the sleepover rule," Six comments.

Rogue manipulated Bellamy into spending six weeks sleeping over at his place. She should have been there tonight, but she decided to stay with us instead.

"I'm desperate to listen at the door, aren't you?" Six says, cheekily.

"That would be highly inappropriate," Thayer replies.

"So...you're in?"

She rolls her eyes. "Obviously."

Six claps her hands happily. We throw back the blanket and get up but only have time to take two steps when Bellamy's door opens again and Rogue comes out. He closes it behind him and yet again marches right past us without acknowledging our presence.

He's out the door and gone before we can say anything.

There's a moment of silence and then Thayer whips around and gives me a wide-eyed look. "What was *that*?"

"No idea."

"Do you think he's going to come back?" She asks.

"My bet would be yes," Six answers.

"Should we check on B?" I ask.

"I don't think so. She'll come out if she needs us."

Distantly, I hear them keep talking as we hang around the kitchen. That

moment of adrenaline got my blood pumping and I don't want to go back to watching TV. I'm afraid if we lay back down, my thoughts will just continue to spiral. I know how this story ends if they do.

I think back to Tristan's words.

You should do something that makes you happy tonight.

Part of me wishes I'd never asked that question in the hotel suite. I'd meant to tell a secret to a stranger, to get it off my chest in a moment of total anonymity. I hadn't meant to expose a vulnerable part of myself and have it follow me around, becoming a subject of conversation with him.

And yet, the other part of me finds myself wanting to listen to his advice. He's listened without judgment to the little I've told him thus far and been surprisingly thoughtful in his answers.

I want to be happy.

"We should go skinny dipping," I hear myself blurt out.

Two heads turn to look at me.

"What?" Thayer asks, a smile starting to stretch her lips.

"I just want to do something a little crazy tonight. Something different, you know? I never do anything impulsive." I don't tell them that the last time I did, I fucked a stranger in a hotel room. "We can jump off the pontoon into the pond. I don't think it's against the rules, *technically*, but no one will catch us if we go at this time of night. It'll be too cold if we wait until next week, but we can go tonight." I pause. "I know it's random but...that's kind of the point."

"Say less," Thayer replies, ever the spontaneous one. "I'm in."

I look at Six, the more cautious one. She chews on her lower lip as she looks at me.

"We can be there and back in twenty minutes," I tell her, then move to my next approach — bribery. "I'll make you hot chocolate when we come back."

There's a defiant look in her eye that I'm not used to seeing. Something's changed since we've been back for our fourth year, but I'm not sure what.

"Hell yes," she answers.

Excitement swells in my chest as a real smile takes over my lips.

Twenty minutes later, we pull into the parking lot closest to the pond and jump out of the car.

Six shivers and puts her hands in her pockets. "It's freezing out," she

says, and I'm afraid she's going to change her mind, but she starts running. "Come on, let's not spend more time out here than we need to."

Thayer runs after her, her peals of laughter roaring in the wind as I follow after them. My heart pumps and my breaths are frozen and I'm so aware of my hair as it whips around my face and of the wind as it blows against my skin, rosyng my cheeks.

"This is going to be more of a polar plunge than anything!" Thayer yells, and I hear the adrenaline in her voice.

"We can do this!" I yell back, catching up with them.

My feet pound on the wet ground, softened by the cold mist of the night. I extend my arms out as I run, letting the giddiness of the moment take over and clear my mind.

We reach the pontoon and jog all the way to the end, the sounds of feet slapping against hardened wood mixing with our heavy breaths and jubilant laughter. There's something electric in the air as we stop and look at each other.

Then we're frantically reaching for our laces and kicking off our shoes. Unzipping jackets, removing shirts, and shimmying trousers down our legs.

"We have to be in and out, otherwise I think I might freeze to death," I say.

"I can't believe I'm doing this," Six says, jumping in place to keep warm as she removes her socks.

"I can't believe I didn't do this sooner!" Thayer cheers excitedly. She drops the pile of warm towels we brought onto her jacket, protecting them from the wet ground.

Thankfully it's completely dark out, the only source of light coming from the moon and its reflection on the water, so when I remove my bra and drop my underwear, I'm not thinking of my body.

I banish those thoughts with a shake of my head.

I reach for Thayer and Six's hands on either side of me. I hear their teeth chattering in the dark and feel them bouncing on their toes to keep their feet from getting too cold.

"Ready?" I ask, squeezing their hands.

"Born ready," Thayer whispers enthusiastically back to me.

"On three?" Six says.

"One..." we start.

We take a step back so we have some room to jump.

“Two...”

I squeeze their hands one final time and when I turn to look at Six, my smile is reflected on her face.

“Three!”

With what sounds almost like a harmonized scream, we run to the edge of the pontoon and leap off. There’s a second there where we’re stuck in the balance, our feet off the ground, our bodies hung in the air, and I experience total peace. It’s fleeting but it’s so still and restful.

Then I hit the water and all of the breath expels from my lungs. I go under, noticing how the water envelops every inch of my skin and swallows me whole. I sink into the dark depths, my hair floating around me as I enjoy the weightlessness of my body.

The initial shock wears off and the cold hits me all at once. It’s freezing. My bones feel brittle, my skin taugth. My extremities scream at the iciness of the water. My lips turn blue.

But then my heart beats and I hear it.

More importantly, I *feel* it.

Stubborn and strong, it pounds in my veins, the only sound in the dark and silent depths. The rhythm is animated and loud, proudly announcing my presence to whatever life lives below the surface. I’m certain each beat causes an aftershock of ripples in the water.

I’m alive.

It’s not often that I feel it.

I smile underwater and let myself float seconds longer. When I’m ready, I kick my legs and pull myself to the surface, erupting with a vocal inhale of breath.

“That was amazing!” Six screams when she sees me.

She and Thayer are treading water. They’re shivering from the cold, their teeth chattering.

“It was so f-fun, but let’s get out of here b-before I f...freeze to death,” Thayer says, heading for the pontoon.

The cold is there, but it’s secondary to the feeling of lightness in my chest.

We swim to the ladder and get out, throwing towels at each other and wrapping our jackets over our shoulders as we try to warm ourselves.

“Last one to the car has to do the dishes tomorrow,” I yell, darting past them with my clothes clutched against my chest.

“Cheater!” I hear Six yell from behind me.

We’re laughing and running and screaming happily. I’m so out of breath, I feel like my lungs are going to explode. My body hurts as I make it to the car and jump into the backseat, but I feel it. That feeling of joy.

It flickers on and off hesitantly in my chest, unsure if it's welcome. I want to cup it and hug it tightly against me. To hold on to it tenderly, knowing I might not experience it again for a while.

Six screams with laughter as she jumps into the passenger seat, somehow beating Thayer to the car.

“She slipped on a mud patch,” she says, tears streaming down her face from laughing so hard.

The driver side door opens and Thayer gets in with a grumbled curse. She’s competitive and hates losing, even something as trivial as this.

“We need a redo,” she mutters, crossly.

“We need heat asap, that’s what we need. Turn on the car and blast it before I lose all function in my toes,” Six replies.

She does as instructed and I groan when I realize where she’s seated.

“Listen, we’ll cancel the dishes thing if you let one of us drive home.”

She flips me off without turning around and now it’s my turn to laugh.

“I don’t know where I got this frankly libelous reputation but I’ll have you both know that I am an *excellent* driver.” Six and I erupt into more laughter at that. “Luckily for you, I hate doing the dishes so I agree. But I want it noted for the record that that is the *only* reason I’m accepting!” She adds, vehemently.

“Noted,” I say, still laughing.

We trade spots and I get behind the wheel. We sit silently for long minutes, checking our phones and rubbing our hands over the heaters to get warm.

I shouldn’t text him, but I find that I need to tell him. It feels weird not to and I want someone to know I was happy tonight.

Me: I did it. I skinny dipped.

I darken the screen, expecting not to hear from him in response, but his answering text comes through immediately.

Gary: I said jump in, not skinny dip.

Gary: Fuck.

Gary: Every time I walk to work now, I'll imagine you swimming naked in that pond.

Gary: Tell me you were alone.

Me: I went with the girls.

There's a minute before his next text and I can almost see him as if he's in front of me. He'll be frowning, looking down at his phone, thinking about the fact that I skinny dipped. Wishing he could wrap his hand around my throat and make me bend to his will.

Gary: And?

Gary: How was it?

Me: My skin is on fire and my face hurts from smiling.

Gary: Take a picture and send it to me.

I look around at the girls inconspicuously. There's no way I can take a selfie in here without the Spanish Inquisition coming down on me.

Me: I can't right now.

Gary: Why not?

Me: With my flatmates.

Me: I'll send it when I'm home.

Another couple of minutes pass and I find my attention fixed on my phone, hoping he texts back. The feeling is foreign and uncomfortable. I chalk it up to remnants of adrenaline from our jump in the pond, and not anything any more emotional than that.

Gary: How did it feel?

Me: I don't know how to describe it.

Me: Amazing?

Gary: Like the first taste of ice cream in the summer. Like reading a good book with a surprising ending. Like the exact moment when you realize your favorite song is playing in the bar. Like fresh rain on your skin when you're caught in a storm at night.

Gary: Like that?

My breath hitches as I read his words. He captured the feeling so perfectly.

Nera: Yes.

Nera: Exactly like that.

Gary: Good girl.

I don't know why my face flushes reading his words. I'm not sure what he's praising me for, but I like it.

I feel more than see Thayer look over my shoulder at my phone, and then I hear her ask, "Who's Gary?"

My heart momentarily stops in my chest. Relief crushes me when I realize I never updated his name in my phone. In this situation, I thank my lucky stars for that bit of luck.

"No one," I say, darkening the screen.

"See we knew you were talking to someone," she says with a smirk before putting her hands up. "You don't have to tell us anything, but we'll be here when you're ready."

Six nods and gives me a wink.

Both of them are keeping their respective Rhys and Phoenix cards close to their chests, so they know not to push.

"Come on, let's go home. I promised you hot chocolate."

Six squeals happily in response. I zip my jacket over my towel to keep my bits covered so I don't end up tits out behind the wheel.

I park in front of our apartment and we grab our things and get out. I check my phone and see I have a missed text from Tristan.

Gary: Did you have dinner?

My heart lurches at the question. He'd been unusually insistent about me taking his protein bar earlier. He has no reason to suspect anything is wrong with me, and yet something about that interaction made me feel like he was watching me.

I decide to deflect with humor.

Me: Yes I did, Dad.

Gary: Don't give me any ideas about making you call me Daddy.

I swallow thickly, my throat suddenly dry. The door hitting my arm as it closes snaps me out of it.

“Oh, careful! Sorry Ner, I thought you were looking,” Six says apologetically as she opens it back for me.

“My fault, I was distracted,” I say, easily.

I’m not going to answer. I follow them up the stairs and to our apartment when my phone dings again.

Gary: Where’s my picture?

“I’m going to take a steaming hot shower,” I tell the girls, heading to my bathroom.

“Fantastic idea, I’m doing the same,” Thayer replies. “Meet in the kitchen in thirty for hot chocolate?”

“Deal.”

Once I’m in there, I wrap the towel around my chest and ruffle my hair slightly, taking it and moving it to one side over my shoulder. Positioning the phone above my head, I look up into the camera and smile. It feels unnaturally big and not like me so I soften it. My skin is flushed from the cold and my hair is tangled from the water and matted in places. I don’t have a stitch of makeup on and am only covered in a towel. It’s not the type of picture you’d want to share with a guy you’re talking to, but my eyes shine bright, the dark color more vibrant than I’ve seen in a while so I send it anyway.

I don’t want to admit to the fact that I wait with bated breath for his answer. If he doesn’t answer or thinks I look terrible well...who cares what he thinks anyway? He’s the one who wanted a picture of me fresh from a swim in two-degree water.

My phone dings and my breath catches in my throat. I bend over the screen to look at the one word answer he sent back.

Gary: Beautiful.

I straighten, holding the towel against my chest as I look at his message. My eyes flick up to stare at myself in the mirror. I wish I could bottle the nameless emotion that alights my nerve endings and has warmth seeping into my chest. I’d put it on a shelf and keep it for when I need it.

When I get in the shower, I find myself humming along to a song in my

head. I can't remember the last time I did that.

Chapter 20

Tristan

My gaze tracks Nera as she moves about the room, my eyes never leaving her as she flits between groups of people.

There's a tightness in my chest looking at her that I can't explain. She's sinfully wrapped in a gorgeous orange ball gown, the cut modern and bold and one that only she can pull off. I clench my fists, throttling the need to put a possessive hand on her waist so everyone knows who she's going to go home with tonight.

I need to be careful about this. I need to be smart even amidst this folly of mine. Especially with Thornton's keen, watchful eyes on me at this event.

We're at the grand opening of the Mackley library, donated to the school by one of my students, Rhys, in honor of his parents who tragically passed away in a car accident a couple of years ago.

The entire school is here and dressed to the nines, including Thornton, the RCA headmaster and the warden of my metaphorical prison. I know he's keeping an eye on me, even as he pretends not to. That's why he mandated I chaperone this event with him.

But I'm done resisting Nera. All it took was a picture of her, bare faced and rosy cheeked, and I was done for. I want her and as fucking stupid as I know it is, I'm willing to put my future and my family on the line to have her, even if only temporarily. I know I'll eventually have to fall in line with the plan my father has for my life, but for now I just want to enjoy her.

To enjoy all the things I plan to do to her.

As much as I want to, I can't take unnecessary risks. That's why I'm standing over here on the other side of the room, staring helplessly at her as she gets progressively further away from me.

She's been mostly with her friends tonight, so I haven't had to watch her dance with someone else, thank fuck. I've needed to get my hands back on her ever since she mentioned going skinny dipping a few days ago, and the thought of someone getting there before me does ugly things to my mood.

I take the flask out of the jetted pocket of my suit and take a large sip. My eyes don't leave her as I tilt my head back and let the liquid pour down my throat, enjoying the way the bourbon burns on its way down. It feels like a punishment for not being able to control myself where she's concerned.

I see her edge towards the end of the room and then she's hidden from my view. Something twitches dangerously inside me when I lose sight of her. I step to the right, making my way nonchalantly through the crowd, shaking hands and nodding at people I know. On the inside though, I'm keenly focused on getting her in my sights again.

I move off the main floor and skirt the wall. That's when I see her. She stumbles out from behind a large group of students that had been obstructing my view of her. There's a man draped over her shoulder and she struggles to hold him up. She takes a couple of steps backwards and reveals Thayer who carries the other half of the guy's weight.

My brow furrows, a protective part of me surfacing rapidly. I take a step towards her.

"Tristan," someone calls from behind me.

I know who it is before I've even turned around. I roll my eyes as frustration tightens the line of my shoulders.

"What?" I ask, insolently.

Thornton flicks his tongue against his teeth, admonishing me for my ill-mannered answer.

"We haven't had much opportunity to check in with each other since the beginning of the year. Be assured," he says with a sly smile, "I have been watching."

My blood freezes in my veins at the way he watches me. Between cornering Nera in the fencing facility, reprimanding her publicly in class, and fucking her in a lecture hall, I haven't been as careful as I should be. But no one has seen us, no one even suspects a thing aside from Phoenix, so there's

no way Thornton can know. Right?

Uncharacteristically, my first thought is for her, not myself. Something tells me her father wouldn't react well to the news she'd slept with her professor.

Twice.

With the third time not far on the horizon if I have anything to do with it.

A secret smirk pulls at my lips but I stifle it before Thornton sees it.

"And you've been impressed by my professionalism and continued dedication to my scholarly duties?" I ask him, sardonically.

He gives me a self-important look and I can't help but pity him. He's enjoying the modicum of power he has over me, possibly the first time he's ever had any sort of power over anyone, and it'd be tragic if it wasn't so fucking annoying.

"My progress reports to your father have been positive," he confirms. "So far. That could change."

I laugh and he frowns, thrown off by reaction. He probably expected me to fall in line. "Power tastes good, doesn't it?"

He stiffens, straightening the flaps of his outdated suit jacket. His voice trembles with anger. "I suggest you keep to the straight and narrow, young man—"

"Let me stop you right there," I say, grabbing a low ball glass off a passing waiter's tray and taking a step towards him. "I think your deal with my father has you under the mistaken impression that you have some sort of hold over me, so let me gladly disabuse you of that notion. This is between me and him. I'll see this year through and move on with my life. Long after I've left this place, you'll still be here. Playing the administrative bitch on your knees for every rich, uninterested parent with deep enough pockets to keep your board happy and you in your role. I suggest you refrain from ever giving into the impulse of trying to intimidate me again. Next time I won't react so graciously. Copy?"

His eyes flash and his teeth grind together. His gaze pings between the corners of his eyes, furtively checking to see if anyone heard me.

I clap his shoulder once, hard. He jerks, taking a step back to take the hit. "Good. I'm so glad we had this talk, Phil," I say disingenuously. "Have a good night now."

I turn on my heel and walk away.

Not my finest moment, all things considered. It's a stupid, impulsive move to have made an outright enemy of him, I just couldn't fucking help it. Anyone trying to exert any sort of control over me has the effect of waving a red flag in front of a raging bull. My temper flares and then lashes out.

Plus, in my defense, he'd interrupted me in a particularly vulnerable moment.

I head towards where I saw Nera last, but she's gone. I mutter a curse under my breath and scan the crowd for her. She's not in this room, there's no sign of her dark gaze or her bright dress anywhere.

I should stay here.

I should do my job and chaperone these kids. Maybe bust a couple of them for underage drinking. I should do a lot of things, but instead I head down the dark hallway in search of a beautiful girl with haunting eyes.

The school is a real spiderweb of hallways with endless doors and places she could be. If I have to search the entire building, I should be done just in time for the library's first year anniversary celebration.

It takes me going through four hallways and coming up empty handed for me to decide to just cut to the chase. I take my phone out and make a call.

"Why are you calling me?" Nera answers, her voice slightly breathless.

"Hello to you too, jailbait," I say with a smile in my voice as I move to the next corridor. I stand at the entrance, stilling to see if I can hear anything or pick up on any movement, but there's nothing. I close the door and move on to the next. "Where are you?"

"Who's asking?" Her tone is sassy and my palm twitches with the need to heat her ass once more for her impertinence.

"Me."

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to see you." I move down the next hallway and turn right. Another empty corridor awaits.

"You're going to have to get in line, I'm very busy--"

"Where are you?" I repeat. My voice purrs, the vibration in every word carrying through the phone to her ear.

She's silent for a couple beats and I can just imagine her swallowing thickly, her mouth suddenly dry.

"Tristan, I..."

"It's good news for you that you're in the mood to be chased," I whisper. I jog down a wrap-around staircase, my expensive shoes slapping

against the historic marble tiles.

I arrive at a three-point crossroad, faced with multiple hallways. Left, right, or straight ahead.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” She asks and I hear her actual voice in the distance.

I pause, waiting to see if she’ll say anything else. The marble creates an echo and the sound of her voice bounces off the walls making it hard to tell where she is.

She waits for me to speak so I do.

“Why aren’t you in the event room dancing with everybody else?”

“I was,” she says, and I take off to my left. “But then I had to help Thayer with Carter. He’s drunk and passed out so I’m getting him some water for when he wakes up.”

I come to a door with glass windows leading down a semi darkened hallway. The only lights are the ones at either end indicating the exits, and one just above Nera’s head spotlighting her like some kind of halo around a deity.

She’s resting against the wall on one shoulder and facing away from me, holding the phone up to her ear with her free hand.

“Who’s Carter?” I ask, opening the door. She doesn’t spot or hear me, distracted by my question, and I head down the corridor towards her.

“Thayer’s boyfriend.”

“I thought she was dating Rhys,” I say from behind her but speaking into the phone at the same time.

She startles and whips around, her hand dropping to her side, the call forgotten. Our heated gazes clash as I slowly bring down the phone and tuck it into my jacket pocket. The reflection from the light shines in her eyes as she looks up into mine. I find myself wishing I could take a candid picture of her.

She gives an amused smile and now my hand really itches with the need to lift my phone and immortalize this moment.

“What’s so funny?” I ask.

I’ve never spoken with Rhys or Thayer one-on-one, but based on my third-party observations, I thought it was obvious they were dating. He can’t seem to stay away and he makes sure no other guys ever hover around her, so it comes as a shock to learn she’s dating someone else.

Nera shakes her head, but the small smile is still there.

“Nothing,” she says.

My eyes flick down her body and finally drink in a close up of her in the dress. I take a step back and rake my gaze luxuriously slowly down her form, taking in every illegal inch of her body wrapped in silk, and back up to settle on those eyes of hers. They manage to communicate so much and yet nothing at all.

“What I wouldn’t give to crawl inside that dark little mind of yours,” I tell her.

Her eyes widen, startled and suspicious. Something comes down behind them, obfuscating any vulnerability in them if I thought I’d seen any.

“Weird way to tell me I look pretty tonight,” she says, deflecting with the same fake laugh I’d seen her give those three guys at the bar. I hate that she uses it with me now.

She jumps ever so slightly when I place my hand on her waist. I tighten my hold until my fingers dig firmly into her flesh and pull her closer to me.

I’m doing it again. Gambling recklessly with my future because of the pull between us. We’re in the middle of a hallway with a literal light shining down on us and my hand inappropriately on her body and all I can focus on is the fact that I’m about to do many more unprofessional and immoral things to her.

I bend my head and watch her skin pebble as my breaths fall against the column of her neck. Her face is turned away from me. With a touch of my index under her chin, I guide her to look back at me, our faces now inches from each other’s. The silence grows heavy as her eyes fall to my parted lips, her pupils dilating more with every one of my passing breaths.

I dip my head and nudge my nose against hers. She inhales a soft gasp and my lips brush against hers.

“You’re the most beautiful woman in any room you walk into, ballgown or not.” My lips move as I speak, touching hers. Her eyelids flutter to half mast, her breaths turning shallow. She leans in and my mouth captures hers in a fiery kiss. I push her into an alcove, my one semi-rational thought of self-preservation as my hands find her tits over the fabric of her dress. I growl in frustration at the lack of access and pull back. She pants as she hangs on to my shoulders for dear life. “But I’m equally as interested in breaking into the fortress that is your mind and taking a look at all the secrets you’re keeping in there.”

She lowers herself back down from her toes, her eyes shadowed and

guarded when they find mine.

“That’s off limits.”

“Hmm,” I hum, rubbing my index casually along the line of her defined jaw. I can feel how stubbornly she sets her teeth against me. “We’ll see about that.”

She grabs my wrist, stopping me short. Her hand is so small that she can’t close her fingers all the way around my arm.

“Don’t even try, Tristan,” she says. “I’m not interested and it can’t be done.”

I move my palm down to collar her throat, her hand still wrapped around my wrist. She holds me as I hold her. I use my grip to pull her closer to me, so her front is pressed entirely against mine, my erection digging into her stomach.

“That’s what you said about me making you come,” I state, an arrogant smile pulling at my lips. My free hand wraps around her waist to grab her ass, palming it greedily and possessively. “Remind me, how long did that take me to disprove?”

She flushes, her cheeks heating adorably, and shoves at my chest. I don’t release her, I’m not ready to let her soft body go quite yet.

“Meet me in the back garden near the Roman statues by the tree line in twenty minutes,” I demand.

She pushes me again, in vain. A small, discontented noise erupts from her lips when I don’t even move.

“No,” she says, blowing a strand of hair out of her face.

This time, when she presses me back, I release her. I watch her ass sway as she turns and starts to walk away from me.

“Twenty minutes, Nera.”

She stops and looks at me over her shoulder.

“Why should I?”

I close the distance between us and clasp her hips. My hands are low enough that my fingers trail over the top of her pussy. I pull her back against me, my hard dick splitting the cheeks of her ass. He twitches, excited, sensing his future home is near.

I brush her hair behind her ear and then over her other shoulder, loving the way she shudders at my touch. My mouth finds the shell of her ear, but not before I glance at her face and see her gaze fixed unseeingly into the distance, entranced by the arousal that roars between us.

“Because you want to feel the way you felt when you jumped into that water again,” I whisper seductively. “That roaring in your belly, that fire in your veins.” I graze the shell of her ear, scraping her flesh with my teeth. “I’m the only one who can give you that.”

She flicks her gaze up at me and the emotion in them freezes me. Lust. Excitement. Fear. Anticipation. Uncertainty. They all war for dominance in the one look she aims at me.

I cup her nape and crush my mouth down on hers. An unrecognizable guttural groan crawls up my throat and thunders into the thick silence. She’s driving me crazy and she’s not even trying. I can barely go a couple minutes without touching her when she’s in front of me.

She bends an arm back and holds onto my neck, returning the kiss like her life depends on it. When I rip myself away, she sucks in a rough breath, her eyes dazed and unfocused.

“I’ll be waiting, Nera. Don’t be late.” I brush my thumb over her nose and then release her, stepping back and letting the darkness of the hallway envelop me.

She better show up. Although it makes no difference whether she voluntarily comes here or if I have to track her down. I’ve always had darker sexual fantasies and today I get to make one a reality.

Tonight, I hunt.

Chapter 21

Nera

I'm determined to ignore Tristan's orders and just go back to the party, leaving him waiting long into the night for me. Consequently, I'm surprised when I find my feet taking me not up the stairs and back towards the library, but down the steps in search of the back gardens.

I never did end up getting Carter a bottle of water. After Tristan left, I'd veered into the first bathroom I could find and stumbled against the wall to catch my breath like I'd just escaped a hunting predator.

Even now, my heart still beats rapidly thinking of the way he'd touched me, the way he'd kissed me. The dirty promises he'd whispered in my ear. My skin tingles almost uncomfortably, my body left unfulfilled.

He teased me, drove my nerves into a tizzy, and then walked away. He knows exactly what he's doing, the bastard.

I open the door and my breath catches as the crisp air assaults me. I wrap my faux fur shawl around my shoulders and step outside. Adrenaline thrums in my veins as I walk down the terrace stairs and step down onto the grass. The forbidden and secretive nature of these meetings, of our affair in general, are so off brand for me. The taboo aspect of it only serves to make me more aroused.

The glowing moon is the only source of light that guides my journey as I walk down the perfectly manicured gardens. It's a full moon tonight which adds a frenzied element to the air that only heats my skin further. It sits large

and looming above me like it's watching me.

Tristan is there, standing at the end of the dark path.

No.

He's pacing.

A lock of his hair falls onto his forehead as he bends his head and checks his watch. He flicks his wrist a couple of times, clearly irritated, and stuffs his hand back in his pocket. He pushes his hair back from his face and paces back in the opposite direction.

I *am* fifteen minutes late. I wasn't going to give in to his orders without a little power play of my own. But fifteen minutes was the most I could push myself to wait, both because excitement propelled my body to go find him and because a part of me was afraid of what he'd do if I left it any longer.

I step on a leaf and it crunches loudly in the silence of the night. His head snaps up, his crystalline gaze finding mine immediately, causing my breath to catch for a completely different reason.

He looks deadly in a tux. It hugs his broad frame, folding around the large lines of his shoulders and the tight expanse of his waist. It emphasizes the slope of his long legs. He hasn't worn a tie since that night in the hotel and seeing him wear one tonight brings back all sorts of dirty memories.

Standing alone, illuminated only by silver moonlight, he looks almost other-worldly. Definitely not a mortal like the rest of us. His face is wasted in his profession; he belongs in expensive perfume commercials and on the front page of magazines.

He doesn't wait for me to walk to the statues. His hands come out of his pockets as he closes the distance between us and comes to me. And fuck, *his hands*. I didn't know it was possible to be sexually attracted to someone's hands but they're one of the things that turn me on the most about him. Every time he grabs my hip, dwarfing me in his hold, every time he cups my throat, enveloping it almost entirely between his fingers, every time I watch him grade my homework and write 'well done' before handing it back to me, wetness pools in my lower belly at the way the veins in his hands thicken and work.

I can't even imagine watching his hands move as he cooks, as he does what he loves. It's got to be a straight up pornographic experience to witness. I think if he kneaded dough in front of me I'd have to excuse myself to another room for an emergency session with my vibrator.

Unbidden, a thought comes through to the front of my mind.

I wonder if he'll ever cook for me.

I shake my head internally to banish those thoughts. The last thing I need is him getting within point blank range of my secret. Plus, I'm not looking for a relationship anyway.

And yet.

He stops less than a foot away, towering over me.

"You're late."

Instead of answering, I take my nude lipstick out of my purse. I uncap it and reapply, looking at Tristan.

"You're lucky I came at all," I say, moving to trace my upper lip. "I told you; you don't get to want me only when it's convenient for you."

His eyes track my hands hotly, his gaze searing on my lips. He's so fixated on my mouth that I'm not sure he hears me. I roll my lips together and then smack them, snapping him out of his haze.

"I thought you weren't trying to date," he growls, the words coming out choked around the arousal in his throat.

"I'm also not someone who's an easy option for you." The words are in exact contradiction to the fact that I want to throw myself at him and beg him to fuck me.

He eats the remaining distance between us in one step, forcing my head to tilt all the way back to look at him.

His Adam's apple works as his eyes darken impossibly on me.

"Then let me chase you."

Fire erupts in my veins as nerves rattle in my belly. I heard him wrong; I must have.

"What?" My voice comes out timid and unlike me.

Animalistic sexual tension flares between us and a dark smile tugs at his lips. He nods at the tree line behind me.

"I'll throw in a five-minute head start."

I look over my shoulder behind me at the terrifyingly black forest. He's serious. I whip back around to stare at him, my pulse pounding in my chest.

"That's why you asked me here?" My voice outright shakes now, but I think it's trepidation and anticipation, not fear.

I feel like my mind and body have gone mad. I can't make sense of what I think or feel, if I'm afraid or if I'm excited, if I want to run away and hope he leaves me alone or run and pray he comes after me.

"Run, jailbait," he threatens.

Adrenaline wraps around my heart and squeezes. My blood thrashes, powerful waves beating against the walls of my veins.

“Let’s talk about this,” I try to rationalize. Everything my upbringing taught me, everything my mother has driven into me daily since I was a child, tells me that I should be appalled by this. Instead, I’m rubbing my thighs together to keep my arousal from leaking down my leg.

The promise of a total lack of control is enticing in a way I can’t articulate. The promise of a few minutes of freedom is alluring beyond words.

“Sure, but you’re just wasting your time. Literally,” he adds, looking at his watch. “Four and a half minutes.”

“I can’t.” His eyes flash. “Not in this dress,” I add.

His gaze flicks down to my gown in appreciation and then he drops to his knees before me. More of my arousal pools at my entrance. How am I meant to feel anything but uncontrollable desire watching him kneel at my feet. I can’t help but reach out and cup his nape, playing with the hair at the base of his head.

The look he gives me is downright orgasmic. No one should look this good on their knees for someone else.

I find myself hoping that he never does this with another girl again.

I manifest clawing her eyes out with my fresh manicure if he does.

The sound of fabric tearing loudly rips through the night and I gasp. My eyes go to the hem of my dress, now approximately two feet shorter than before and hanging crudely above my knees.

A half-tormented, half-lustful groan falls from my lips.

“That was couture,” I say, breathlessly.

His fingers trail up the back of my calves in a tantalizing caress. “I’ll buy you another one.”

“I don’t think you can afford it,” I sass back, my eyes closing and my legs arching into his touch. There’s no way a professor, even one at a school as prestigious as RCA, can spare the expense of purchasing this custom-made gown. But then again, his salary wouldn’t cover a penthouse suite at a five-star hotel or an AP watch either and he managed both of those things.

A frown pulls at my brows as I think of that.

His hand crawls under the newly shortened hem of my skirt and slaps my ass sharply. I yelp, my eyes flying open and dropping to stare into his crystal-clear irises, now darkened with arousal.

“Four minutes,” he says with a smile that sends a heated shiver down my spine. He cups my right heel and lifts it, removing my stiletto and setting my foot down on the cool grass. He repeats the same motion with my left.

“Why are you smiling?”

“Because you’re going to pay for that sass in less than ten minutes,” he says, giving me a sharp toothed grin. Danger rushes up my skin and over to the sensitive area at the back of my neck. It’s met there with exhilaration and a fresh wave of adrenaline, the exact same potion of emotions I’d felt running and jumping into the pond with Six and Thayer.

His fingers are back on my legs and cupping the back of my thighs. He looks up at me, his eyes shining with excitement. His pupils are so dilated with desire that he looks almost unrecognizable. The sight of them blown wide like that makes my throat tight.

He rises slowly. His hands run up my body, touching every inch of my curves on his way to standing. He brushes his nose against mine.

“Your safe word is ‘colors’,” he whispers into my mouth before claiming it with his. He ravages me with carnal skill, his lips tasting like alcohol and making the kiss even more dizzying.

My spine tingles and I tilt my mouth away to suck in a breath. “Why do I need a safe word?”

He gently brushes a loose strand of hair off my face and curls it behind my ear. “Because I’m going to chase you through that cold, dark forest. I’m going to run after you and use your scent and your sounds and the smell of your fear in the air to hunt you like an animal.” He presses a rough kiss against my mouth, finding it parted on a shocked gasp. He bites the corners of my lips. “And when I find you, I’m going to force you to your knees and finally shove my cock down your insolent little mouth. I’m going to fuck your throat like I’ve been dreaming of for weeks and I won’t stop until you’re gagging loudly around me.” A powerful shudder zips through him, shaking his shoulders. “Fuck, maybe I’ll even record it, use the sound as my alarm to wake me up in the mornings.”

“Tristan...”

“That sounds an awful lot like a needy moan, baby,” he whispers, moving to nip my jaw. There it is again, that word.

Baby.

I wish he’d stop. I wish he’d say it again.

Baby, baby, baby.

He runs his thumb leisurely down the middle of my mouth, tugging my lower lip.

“Once your hot mouth has my cock nice and wet, dripping with your saliva, I’m going to shove you down onto your stomach and do you know where I’m going to put my dick?”

His thumb moves to brush over my rosy cheeks, reddened equally by the cold and the heat of his words. Trepidation lances through me and I shake my head.

“I’m going to bury it in that exquisitely tight ass of yours and I’m going to fuck you until you scream for me. And I mean, *scream*. So loudly that you shake the trees of their leaves and make the moon hide behind the clouds.” He leans in and bites my lobe. He rasps against my ear, “So loudly that the rest of the forest creatures know who the apex predator is and exactly how he’s claiming his prey.”

I stiffen, wide eyed with unexpected panic, and try to step back but he yanks me against him.

“That’s not happening,” I attempt feebly, my voice shaky. “You’re not doing...that.”

One hand closes around my waist as the other moves down to grab my ass, fingers digging harshly into my skin. A throaty groan falls from his lips.

“Tell me, has anyone taken your ass before or will I be the first?” He licks his lips like the thought of being the first to plunder my untried hole is delicious. “I assume no one has, given the boys you fucked couldn’t even handle your tight pussy.” His grip hardens on my ass as he rubs his erection against my stomach. His lips are curled excitedly around sharp teeth. “You’re fucking a man now, Nera, and I won’t have any more difficulty making you come from a dick in your ass than I did with my tongue in your pussy.”

I’m terrified and trembling in his hold, but my juices already leak down the inside of my thigh and inch towards the edge of my dress.

“Two minutes.”

He bites my lip, drawing blood and sucking it into his mouth like an unhinged animal.

“The only way that doesn’t happen is if you use your safe word,” he purrs. “But something tells me you’re as desperate to open your ass for me as I am to take it.”

“No, no, no,” I moan, overcome with frazzled emotions.

“No?” He whispers, lips stretching in a dark smile over his teeth. He

lowers his head until his eyes are level with mine and whispers, “Then, *run.*”

I stumble back a few steps, my stunned eyes meeting his raptorial ones, then turn and run for my life.

“And pray to whatever higher power you believe in that I don’t catch you.” Behind me, I hear him laugh darkly. “Or maybe pray that I do.”

Chapter 22

Tristan

I watch her stumble once more over her feet, her body not yet caught up to her brain's frantic commands. Dark energy pulses through me, a kind of frenetic excitement that I haven't felt in a long time. I'm like a wild race horse restrained behind the starting gate, pawing feverishly at the ground as I wait for the gunshot to go off.

It takes everything in me to wait those two minutes I promised her, but I know it's in my best interest to do so. I want to draw the chase out, to stretch the pursuit into the depths of the forest. There's really no fun in this hunt if it's over too quickly.

I watch her transform before my eyes. Gone is the stumbling girl from moments ago as her athleticism takes over. In her place is a powerful force who quickly taps into her physical abilities to get herself gracefully back to her feet. It takes her barely five seconds to accept that this is happening and to turn into a fierce competitor.

She runs, her strong legs immediately gaining ground even though she's still barefoot. A pleased smile pulls at my lips. She's not going to be an easy prey and that makes me even harder for her.

She disappears beyond the tree line and my heart lurches. Something about no longer having eyes on her doesn't sit well with me, even when I'm the one telling her to run. My fists clench and I take a deep breath, loosening my shoulders. Keeping my eyes fixed on the trees ahead, I undo the buttons

of my jacket and shrug it off, discarding it next to the remnants of her dress.

I grab the knot of my tie and pull it, releasing the tails. It too falls to the ground. I undo the neck of my shirt and unbutton my sleeves, rolling them up to reveal my forearms.

“Much better,” I say to myself.

I check my watch and see that time has run out on her two minutes. A slow rumble starts low in my stomach and rolls up my throat until it curves my lips into an animalistic snarl. I’ll give her fifteen more seconds and then it’s time to hunt.

Fifteen...

I take advantage of the last moments of silence to listen for any noises she might be making but no sounds come through.

Ten...

I wonder how far she’s gotten. I wonder what strategy she’s chosen, if she’s hiding or if she’s running.

I wonder if she knows she can even have a strategy.

Five...

I don’t let myself fantasize about what I’ll do when I catch her. There’s no way it can compare to what the real thing will be like because make no mistake – there isn’t a world where this ends any other way than with her writhing under me, begging me for mercy.

Zero.

I’m running before I can even finish the thought. My long legs take me to the tree line much faster than hers did. Adrenaline spikes as my palm hits the first tree and I pause. I can’t hear anything over the sound of my own excited heartbeat. Tuning it out, I focus on the noises of the woods. On listening for a slight disturbance or particularity that feels other.

There’s nothing. Not a sound. Even the other animals are quiet, as if they’re all watching this game play out. Arousal shoots through me and hardens my cock to the point of discomfort. Blood pounds in my length, calling for me to find her and fuck her rough.

Something tells me that she ran, not hid. She wouldn’t choose to be a sitting duck when she has a chance to outsmart and outplay me.

My gut says that she’ll have run straight into the woods to put as much distance between us as possible, forgetting that the deeper she gets into the brush, the more at my mercy she is.

A hundred meters from the edge of the forest, I find traces of her

passage. There's a footprint in a soft part of the earth. I can't help but think about how her feet must be hurting now. How she's still running anyway.

My dark little thing.

Every day around her, every moment spent with her, surprises me. She keeps me desperately hooked, keeps me guessing, wondering what's in that pretty little head of hers. I'm afraid she might drive me to beg if she doesn't let me see behind those sad eyes soon.

There's a dark energy pulsing in the forest and it invigorates me.

"Where are you, jailbait?" I call out, the tone of my voice gritty. I don't speak loudly, but in the emptiness of the night my words ring clearly.

I run again, heading deeper into the woods. I'm quickly covering ground and there's only so far she can run before she has to stop and catch her breath. She won't have hidden at the first stop, so I keep running.

A flash of color catches my eye in the near distance and a bolt of electricity thrills through me. There she is, my prey. Almost too easy, but it can be forgiven for her first time. Desire pounds in my dick, rendering me almost mindless with confusion. Everything calls to me to find her and fuck her down hard.

She's unmoving, clearly hiding behind a tree. It's a small corner of her orange dress that gives her position away.

That fucking dress. I'd almost given myself away telling her I could buy her another one. Actual professors don't have a second account their sister has dropped a large sum of money into for emergency purposes like I do. But for a foolish moment getting her another one of those dresses had felt like a real emergency.

I get closer, silent as the most terrifying of predators. I wonder what face she'll make when I reveal myself to her. Whether she'll scream or freeze in place.

Something feels off as I move quietly between the trees towards her. I don't *feel* her. There's no tingling in my nerves, no tightening of my stomach like when she's usually there. It doesn't matter that I can't physically see her. I've never needed to in order to know when she's in my space.

I straighten to my full height and walk around the tree to where she's hiding.

Except she's not.

Hanging from a low branch is the fur shawl she was wearing to keep her warm. Next to it, intentionally placed to catch my eye and misdirect me, are

the remnants of her couture dress.

Something like wonder and pride squeeze my heart and hold tight. She ditched the colorful dress so she could blend in more with her surroundings, and she used the opportunity to mislead me.

Clever girl.

I pull the dress down and bring it up to my nose, inhaling in deeply. I'm hit in the senses by a tidal wave of her addictive scent, one so strong that my eyes flutter closed to take it in.

She took her clothes off in late fall temperatures just to thwart me. She's in the dark and damp forest nearly naked, running and hiding from me.

Fuck, she's perfect.

I should have known someone who walked boldly up to me in a bar and asked me to fuck her dirty would make me work for it.

My cock throbs painfully now, pre-cum leaking from my tip as I grow desperate to be inside her. I no longer want to draw this out, I want to find her and claim her, *now*.

My eyes roll into the back of my head as I take another hit of her aroma. Deadly, so fucking deadly.

Turns out even when I think I've got her figured out, I've still underestimated her. She doesn't just use her discarded dress to confuse and mislead me.

She uses it to distract me.

She uses it to focus all of my senses onto my find so that I don't notice her behind me, so that I don't feel her getting closer.

She understands exactly how to play me while still hiding herself so that I never see her coming.

And when she suddenly appears in front of me, in a tight lace slip and nothing else, she doesn't scream and she doesn't freeze.

Instead, she pulls a leg back and aims a lethal blow at my nuts. She connects with the precision of a future Olympic gold medalist and watches with an arrogant smirk as I fall to my knees in front of her.

Hot pain hits me and I fold. I clutch my bruised balls as I search for air that isn't there. Finally, I rip enough oxygen into my chest that I'm able to sit back into my heels as I inhale.

Nera takes advantage of my prone position to lean cockily close to me, gambling recklessly on the fact that I'm still likely semi-paralyzed from her blow.

With heavy-lidded eyes, she runs a thumb softly over my bottom lip. “Got you on your knees before you got me on mine, didn’t I, *baby?*”

My throat tightens at the pet name, at how she taunts me with it, her tone equal parts lustful and victorious.

I’m suddenly reminded that this is the girl whose family motto is ‘failure is not an option’.

A warning growl leaves my lips and her confidence stutters, her foot moving backwards in response and then immediately back to where it was previously to hide the slip. My eyes flick up and connect with hers. They widen in response, uncertainty rocking her irises when she sees the slow smile stretching my lips.

My hand snaps out and clutches her wrist. A small, surprised gasp falls from her mouth and she tries to kick me again. It’s not as easy when I’m already on the ground. But that position also limits my range of motion and when she yanks on her wrist, I have no choice but to let her go.

She learns her lesson faster than I do and doesn’t stick around to find out how much longer I’m going to be on the ground. She runs in the opposite direction as before, back towards RCA and the party. Back to safety and victory.

Fresh excitement surges through me as I catch sight of her pale skin against the dark night. Those long legs, those toned arms pumping as she runs from me. I can feel it again, her trepidation. And it belongs to me, I want it.

The feral, primal side of me takes over and I swear my eyes blacken to midnight. Visuals of the depraved things I intend to do to her flash behind my eyelids and power me back to my feet.

“Run for your life, Nera,” I thunder after her, my voice nothing more than an animalistic growl. “That’s what you’re doing, so run *fast.*”

Chapter 23

Nera

I'm running on pure animal instinct.

A cold mist wets my face as branches whip my bare arms. He calls after me, but I keep running. The hairs on my neck rise at his lowered, throttled tone. It's more menacing than anything I've ever heard from him.

Exhilaration sizzles through me, making me feel almost superhuman. With the way the adrenaline takes over, I feel like I'm running and weaving faster than I ever have before.

I'm so aware of the world around me, of the emotions going through me, that I feel almost high. So many of those feelings are new and nameless to me. The rush of being chased, the delicious fear of not knowing if he's on me or far behind me, the feeling of the wind in my hair and the rough ground beneath my feet, I don't know how to define them but they combine to make me feel like I'm flying.

I know that if I let him catch me, I'll be sucked into a tornado of sensations that I'll be powerless to resist. Plus, I'm not ready for him to fuck me...*there*.

That's too taboo, too depraved for me to even imagine. Even though my body trembles when I think back to how he'd stretched me with his fingers and licked me with his tongue. But being stretched around his huge cock? That's too much.

But then there's the other part of me. That unanswered darkness that

made me trap and confront him instead of running. The one that taunted him and crowed happily over him, boasting my victory. That part of me knew that I was egging him on, that I was driving him crazier, wilder, more unhinged. And still, I pushed.

Knowing that when he'd catch me, he'd make me pay.

A furious roar tears through the night and freezes my spine. He's coming after me. I run faster, pumping my arms high. My legs tear through the brush. My feet scream in pain at the harsh ground. Freezing wind ices my lungs. Still, I sprint. It makes those endless laps Coach Krav has me run worth the pain.

I see it in the distance, the tree line. I'm going to make it. Victory pounds in my blood and thrills me, more potent than the triumphant feeling I get in competitions. Tristan promised it and he delivered. Part of me hates him for it, how easily he seems to know exactly what I need when no one before him ever has.

That thought makes me run faster until I'm less than fifty meters from the edge. I feel him right behind me. My breath quickens as he closes in. I'm going to make it.

A palm wraps around my arm, the warmth of his body heat jarring. A small, disappointed cry falls from my lips. It's lost in the wind as he whips me around.

His hand tangles in my hair, he yanks me close and then his mouth comes down brutishly on mine. Heat explodes between us. Our teeth clashing, our tongues fighting for dominance. My heart is in my throat; fear, excitement, and anticipation coming together to block my airways.

"Caught you," he growls against my mouth, pulling away only long enough to grunt those words before he's back on me with a full-on assault. Soft lips part around sharp teeth as he bites me.

I shove at him, fighting hard as both his hands close around me, keeping me pinned to him. I rip my mouth away and scream. He chuckles darkly in response, the sound exploding terrifyingly in my ears.

"Go ahead, scream. You can be as loud as you want out here, no one will hear you."

My nipples tighten painfully in response, my flesh squeezing around the metal of my piercing. He kicks my legs out, forcing me to my knees. His hand stays in my hair, gripping it and angling my head back to look up at him. He's perfectly illuminated by the moon, his teeth sharp and his

shoulders tight as he grins almost maniacally down at me. He's going to be merciless, I can feel it. I want it.

I hear the jangle of his belt followed by the sound of his zipper being ripped open, but I don't look away from his gaze. We're stuck in a battle of glares and wills and I refuse to back down.

Out of my peripherals, I see him pull his length out and fist it in his hand.

"You're going to apologize to my cock," he grits through clenched teeth. "Open that pretty little mouth of yours and show me how sorry you are."

My lips part on command, answering to his will instead of my own. He doesn't wait for me to open wider, pressing his thick head into my mouth and stretching it himself instead. A warped groan erupts from deep in the back of his throat as he makes contact with my wet tongue for the first time.

"I already know you're going to kill me with this mouth," he mutters roughly, pushing his cock in further.

Drawing him in, I hollow my cheeks and suck his hard shaft. I feel him shudder at the delicious pressure. He groans his approval when I circle my tongue around his length in repetitive motions and wetness floods to my entrance in response.

His head is thrown back, his Adam's apple bobbing, his bare, veiny forearms reaching for me. One hand is still in my hair, holding me prone for him, and the other cups my jaw possessively.

I push my mouth down further on his dick until it feels like I'm going to unhinge my jaw. I'm so full of him and yet his thick, throbbing cock is only halfway in.

"More...you can take more," he gasps, eyes shining with dark intent as he brings his head down to look at me. "Open up your throat for me."

My skin heats at his orders. Saliva drips down my chin and he wipes it away with his thumb, sucking it into his mouth with a manic sound of pleasure. I relax my jaw and the muscles of my throat and work to take him in deeper. He murmurs encouragingly, sweet words that are in stark contrast with the rough way he chased me down.

But he's only patient for so long before his hand tightens in my hair and he thrusts forward, bottoming into the back of my throat. I tense, gagging a moment as wetness pools in the corner of my eyes.

"So deep," he mutters, his eyes rolling into the back of his head. "But not enough. Take me deeper."

He pushes still further, past what I thought was my limit, until I'm sure he's going to suffocate me to death with his dick.

What an obituary that would be.

I pull in desperate breaths through my nose, my lips tightly wrapped around him, my jaw completely loosened as his cock settles halfway down my throat.

"That's a good girl," he purrs, and my pussy clenches in response. I bring a hand down and rub my aching clit. Arousal leaks out of me and onto my hand reminding me that as rough as he's being with me, I fucking love it.

He makes a disappointed noise when I retreat, letting his head come completely out of my mouth, but it's swallowed by another groan when I push back down, taking him back entirely in one go. My hand wraps around the base of his length and squeezes. I move it up and down, my grip twisting and alternating pressure along with the movement of my mouth.

With my other hand, I keep rubbing tight circles around my throbbing clit, pushing myself closer and closer to the edge.

His gaze is hooded with desire, his breaths coming fast as I pump up and down his shaft. He doesn't let me take the lead for long. He gathers my hair into one hand and yanks my head back so only the tip remains between my lips. My wide, innocent eyes meet his dark, sadistic ones and I shiver.

"I don't think you're sorry enough," he says, and then he shoves viciously back in, mercilessly hitting the back of my throat.

I gag violently, fully stuffed. He pulls out and thrusts back in just as roughly. I've never experienced this level of intensity or insanity. He takes my mouth with little regard for whether I can breathe or not, but the competitor in me won't let him see how much he affects me.

My hands go around his waist to grab his ass, my fingers digging in roughly, and my eyes flick up to meet his. I hold his glare as he pounds in and out of my mouth and let him sate his pleasure.

"Say you're sorry," he says, emphasizing his demand with a thrust. I blink at him and open my jaw wider until I feel my lips crack. "Say it, Nera." *Thrust.* "Say it with your mouth stretched wide around my cock." *Thrust.*

He's unapologetic in the way he takes what he wants, but I don't give in. Wetness runs in rivulets down my cheeks and mixes in with my saliva and his pre-cum. I can see my lashes as I look up at him and I know my mascara is running lewdly down my face.

Thrust. "Tell me you're sorry and I'll go easy on you." *Thrust.* He uses

me for his own pleasure, driving harshly, selfishly into me. I tighten my hold on his ass and pull him against me, challenging him wordlessly to do his worst. He roars, his pace turning frenzied again.

“You don’t want that, do you? I mean look at you,” he whispers, darkly reverent. “With your makeup running sloppily down your cheeks. You look used up and well fucked already and I’m only on the first of your three holes. So perfect,” he praises. “You *want* me to fuck your mouth like this. Drooling and choking on my dick, on your knees for me in the dark while you rub your tight cunt. You really are a little slut, aren’t you?” I growl around his length and he shoves deep inside me, a punishing thrust for the shiver I send coursing through him.

I hum again, trying to push him towards the edge and his eyes flash with brutal purpose.

He reaches down and pinches my nose, effectively blocking both my airways. My access to oxygen cuts off and my eyes widen. He deepens his thrusts as the carbon dioxide starts to build up in my lungs. I fight the panic that swells alongside it and narrow my eyes up at him.

Thrust.

Thrust.

The muscles of his stomach tense, even more defined than usual. Incoherent expletives fall from his lips aimlessly like he’s chanting some witchcraft, not praising me for having a hot, wet mouth.

Thrust. Thrust. Thrust.

His teeth grit under the effort. “Apologize.”

Tristan punishes and punishes and I can’t breathe. With his other hand, he keeps my head from moving back. Black spots blur my vision. I’m in complete physical turmoil. I’m still rubbing my clit, closer and closer, higher and higher, towards a massive eruption and I don’t know what’s going to come first, my orgasm or me passing out.

I pinch my clit and buck, my muscles tensing as I climb the mountain. Time stops and I crest over the edge... and he yanks me violently back. He slaps my hand away roughly and the orgasm recedes with the speed of a Formula One race car.

“Apologize.”

“Sahhhy,” I mumble brokenly as best I can around his dick, finally giving in.

“Fuuuuuck,” he shouts, a garbled cry of pleasure. He tenses with his

dick all the way down my throat and simultaneously releases my nose, letting me inhale a desperate, ragged breath of air.

Tristan comes for what feels like forever, jet after jet of his warm seed coating my throat. I swallow it but shoot him a glare, annoyed that he interfered in my own orgasm. He rumbles a final time, his stomach working sexily, his thumb brushing softly against my nose, before he pulls out of me. I take in my first real breath in long minutes and my brain thanks me.

He must see the discontent on my face because he tugs on my hair, forcing me to look back up at him.

“You come only when I tell you.”

Then he slams his lips down on mine, his tongue thrusting into my mouth like his dick wasn't just there, like I'm not still swallowing his cum. The casual dirtiness of it makes fresh arousal seep from my needy, ignored pussy.

He shoves me to the ground, his body coming down on top of mine to crush me with his warmth. The polarity of the cold at my back and heat at my front drives me wild. His fingers brush against my sensitive nub almost lovingly. It's not what I need and he knows it.

I writhe against his hand, searching for his touch. Each time I get close, he pulls away, eventually giving me a sharp slap when I moan discontentedly. It zaps through me and stops my whines on the spot.

He places himself on his side, raising his torso and balancing it with the forearm he sets down just above my head.

“You make me want to play new games,” he purrs, inches from my mouth. His arm frames the halo of my hair, his face so close to mine that I can feel his breath on my cheeks. “The latest one is how many different ways I can make you come, knowing that each will be your first time. We've already gotten a few out of the way, but tonight,” He brings his mouth down on mine again as his fingers push down with pressure this time, making me jolt. “I'm going to make you come only with my fingers on your clit and my mouth on those gorgeous tits of yours.”

My eyes flash in excitement and he smirks, self-satisfied. I eagerly grind against his hand, needy and impatient. His mouth comes to my chest and he grabs the lace fabric between his teeth. His eyes flick up to meet mine before he yanks it, tearing at the fabric with his sharp incisors. It rips loudly, the sound making me moan. He's an animal as he goes back for a second attack at the offending garment.

His tongue laps at my nipple, still covered in lace. The combination of his wet tongue and the abrasive fabric scratching against my nipple has zaps of pleasure shooting through my lower stomach. My muscles coil and I arch into him, searching for more contact.

He rips the material away, freeing my nipples. A violent look of desire passes through his gaze, so possessive and dark that it should scare me.

Instead, I breathe, "I'm waiting."

He grins cockily, his eyes meeting mine as his mouth *finally* closes around my taut nipple. I yelp, then squeal when his teeth graze against the throbbing peak.

My hands come up to grab his hair, both of them roaming through his thick strands and pulling him closer. He moans around my nipple, turned on by the way I touch him.

His fingers rub continuous, rough circles around my clit until it aches painfully with the need to come. His mouth moves over to my other nipple, his teeth grazing against the cold piercing. His tongue comes out to push it, the edge of the barbell coming up against the left side of my nipple. He twists and flicks the metal rod from the other side so it's now snug on the right. He teases me incessantly, driving me wild with need but never quite pushing me over the edge.

My empty pussy pulses, desperate for some sort of attention, but he ignores it. He focuses only on my clit, tormenting me.

Finally, he slaps my pussy. Once, then a second, and finally a third time. After the last slap, he presses down with his hand and simultaneously bites my nipple. My mouth drops on a loud moan and I come gratefully, my legs squeezing his hands to keep him touching me as the waves roll through.

He runs a finger through my slit, collecting my wetness and then brings it up to his mouth, sucking it in deep.

"Mhmm," he groans, eyes blown with lust. "You taste so sweet."

My chest heaves as I breathe in harshly, but he doesn't give me a second to rest. His fingers move to my entrance and he penetrates me with two thick digits. I buck my hips against him, happy to finally have him in my pussy.

He smiles sinisterly. "Get them nice and wet."

I still, uncertainty defined in my gaze. He sees it because he says, "That's right, you know where they're going next."

I clench down as hard as I can to try to keep them in my pussy where I want them. My muscles spasm with the effort to keep them inside but he

pulls out easily and slaps my thighs harshly. I cry out.

“Thank you for the reminder about how tight your pussy is,” he purrs, “But I won’t be fucking it again until I’ve had your ass.”

With that, his index finger parts my cheeks in search of my forbidden hole. He finds my tight pucker buried and hard to access so he grabs my leg and folds it at the knee, planting my foot on the ground. He does the same with my other leg until my cheeks are tilted up and away from the ground.

His finger finds me easily this time and I mewl, my eyes closing. He coos when he feels my tight rim. Muttered encouragement leaves his lips as his finger swirls around the tight bundle of muscles. He returns to my pussy and collects more of my juices before finding my hole once more.

My mouth dries as he adds pressure and pushes in, just slightly spreading the muscles for his passage. His finger sinks easily to the first knuckle and I hiss. His eyes flutter closed like he can’t believe how tightly I’m squeezing his digit and it makes me clench down on his finger.

“Even tighter than I remember,” he praises heatedly.

I flush, caught off guard. My muscles loosen in response and he pushes in deeper with limited resistance. I yelp and close my eyes. I can feel the knuckles of his other fingers parting my cheeks, that’s how deeply he’s shoved inside me.

It feels so tight and so sensitive, but there’s no pain. At least not yet. Instead, there’s a dark kind of taboo pleasure. He grunts and my eyes fly open, finding his eyes pinned on me. He’s so close, I could lift my head and kiss him.

“This is why I wanted to shove my fingers inside you this way,” Tristan explains gutturally, pulling out simultaneously. He pushes back in, parting my muscles in one slick thrust and making my mouth fall open. Small, panting breaths erupt from my lips. “So I could watch your face as you stretch to accept me in your tight asshole. Fuck, look at you blush.”

He starts pumping inside me, driving me into a tizzy. I forgot how good this felt the last time he did it.

“Your cheeks are red, your lips puffy, your mouth parted, your eyes, your fucking eyes,” he mumbles, worshipfully. “They’re animated and exhilarated and so fucking *alive*.” He thrusts inside me now, his wrist moving frantically back and forth between my cheeks as he finger fucks me. “I should only chase you and fuck you dirty from now on.”

“We’re only...casual...,” I manage to get out between his savage

thrusts. “No...dating.”

Tristan’s eyes flash angrily and his jaw tightens. Instead of answering, his thumb finds the entrance to my pussy and shoves in.

“You’ve never come with a finger in your pussy and one in your ass,” he snarls, viciously.

His fingers thrust inside me simultaneously, the double penetration stealing my breath. He finds my g-spot and bumps against it repeatedly until my head thrashes side to side. The finger in my ass presses down, rubbing against a sensitive spot that surprises me. I arch away in shock, the sensation too much, but he pins me down by throwing a leg over both of mine.

When he rubs his fingers together through the thin wall that separates my pussy from my eyes, stars explode behind my eyelids. I shriek and my body shakes until I’m almost seizing in place as he rides out the waves of my orgasm. I’m panting loudly now, my face turned into his chest to hide the vulnerability I feel.

His thumb leaves my pussy but balance is immediately restored when I feel a second finger push into my ass next to the first. I freeze, unsure. He breaches through my resistance, his thumb now working to soothe my tender rim. The discomfort is almost too much, my poor ass stretching to accommodate him with barely any lube.

As if he hears my thoughts, he leans back and looks down between my legs. I watch him spit, then feel liquid touch my pucker. The cold sensation sends a ripple of pleasure through me, one he doesn’t miss. He smirks and barks out a command.

“Spread your legs.” I do as he asks, but he’s not satisfied. “Wider, slut.”

I open them as wide as they can go, self-consciousness beating in my temple. I’m laid on my back in a ripped slip and nothing else, my legs splayed obscenely wide as my professor presses two of his fingers further up my ass. Thoughts about what my body must look like and whether he’s judging what he’s seeing flit through my mind and then immediately away, banished by the heated and territorial look in his eyes.

His saliva aids the passage of his fingers and he pushes them to the first knuckle inside me. He thrusts, in and out, faster, slower, he scissors his fingers, he curls them, he rubs them against that sensitive spot that drove me wild for my last orgasm. He drives me mad with desire.

Arousal wets the splayed cheeks of my ass and it feels like the moon shines a direct spotlight on it. Just when I think I’m getting accustomed to the

stretch, Tristan shoves them in to the second knuckle and then straight to the webbing. My mouth parts, delayed in processing the agony. Then his thumb finds my pussy once more and thrusts in equally deep.

“You’ve never come with a finger in your pussy and two in your ass,” he grounds out, voice dangerously low, words echoing his previous ones.

He only has time to pull out and thrust back in and then I’m coming with a cry so loud that birds fly out of a nearby tree.

He chuckles and thrusts again, and again, shoving me off the cliff and into a violent orgasm. My moans are continuous, the pleasure agonizing. My entire body spasms around his fingers. When I come down, he brushes the hair back from my forehead.

“You’re doing so well,” he purrs and in a moment of weakness, I turn my cheek into his hand instead of away.

Tristan takes advantage of my unguarded position to place a third finger against the entrance of my ass. I’m staring into his eyes as mine widen in alarm. He grips my jaw before I can move and brings his mouth down on mine, simultaneously pushing in with three fingers. He kisses me sloppily, hungrily, stealing my breath and my focus for long seconds before he pulls away.

“You’ve never come with three in your ass either,” he growls, his voice distorted by pleasure.

I whimper in pain and he removes his thumb from my pussy to give himself more room. He doesn’t get far, his fingers twisted up just past the entrance of my tight sphincter, my ass refusing to give.

“Remember your safe word?”

I nod wordlessly, eyes still locked tightly on him. Fear and anticipation swirl inside me, almost drowning out the physical sensations.

“Will I need it?” I ask, my lip trembling involuntarily.

His eyes snap down to watch me dig my teeth into my lip nervously, lust blooming even deeper in his already demented gaze.

“No baby, you’re going to take it.”

The moment of care is over and done before I can take it in, his eyes darkening evilly. He intrigues me with the gentler side of him that he shows me flashes of sometimes. It makes me feel safe even as he brutalizes me the way I need.

He presses in harder with his fingers and my eyes flutter closed in mortification as I hear the squelching sounds coming from my ass. My

multiple orgasms have a mess of my juices dripping down onto my hole and covering his hand. His jaw tightens in concentration, his dick hard again and throbbing against my thigh. My own face scrunches up in twisted pleasure and definite pain as I try to loosen up the muscles of my ass and accept his intrusion.

“Oh God... Oh! Oh, no. *Please...*”

My hands clutch at his chest, fisting his shirt in delirious agony. He lowers his head and takes one of my nipples in his mouth. They're so tight that one lap of his tongue has me on the edge once more. The sense of fullness is all consuming, to the point where it feels like I can't take a breath for fear of coming undone. His fingers aren't even all the way in. They're stuck at the first knuckle, my ass refusing to let them through.

Tristan doesn't let that discourage him. Instead, he takes the opportunity to play with and stretch my rim. He mini thrusts his fingers in and out, barely moving at all but sending wave after wave of pleasure shooting up my hole. He changes the angle, flattening his fingers to one side with the tips still inside and then rolling them in a full loop around my ass. He takes sadistic pleasure in the way I'm squealing into the night, pinned and thrashing beneath his body.

“It's too tight! It's too much, too— oh, God.” I yelp when he removes his fingers from my ass altogether. The immediate feeling of emptiness makes me feel unmoored from reality. How can I miss his fingers inside my most taboo place?

But I don't miss them for long. He runs them sleekly up my slit, collecting all the wetness there and then shoves them back into my ass, now to the second knuckle.

This time, I scream.

“Tristan! Please, oh *fuck!*”

I throw myself to the side, my upper body twisting away from him so that my top half is face down on the ground.

He growls warningly behind me.

“We can do it this way if you prefer.”

He grabs my legs and flips them over so that I'm fully on my stomach, face down and inhaling the fresh dirt. He slams a hand down on my lower back and keeps me pressed into the ground, his other hand coming free of my stretched hole to slap my ass harshly.

“Uff,” I groan, my mind addled. I no longer know where the line

between pain and pleasure is, where reality ends and fantasy begins.

My clit vibrates with need. He runs his fingers up from my pussy to my ass and thrusts all the way in. My bent legs shake and clamp together, my toes scrunching together like a retracting blowfish to ride out the onslaught of pleasure.

I don't know if I'm coming or not, all I know is my body can't take this. The wet sounds of my arousal combined with his pounding fingers is too filthy for me to even process. His intrusion burns, my rim raw and white from stretching and it feels like I'll never go back to the way I was before. And still I know I need to stretch more because his cock is twice as wide as his fingers grouped together.

He pulls out and spits on my asshole. He watches the saliva hit my hole and then I feel it slide down the skin between my ass and pussy until it rolls through my slit and ends on my clit.

I'm distracted and unready for him to push back in. He bottoms in, then pulls out. Bottoms in, pulls out. Over and over and over again until I'm begging him to just put me out of my misery.

Merciful, he does just that. He plunges back in. His fingers curl, brushing against the soft area inside my ass. I purr in pleasure, arching my back against him.

"You like that?"

"N-no," I lie.

"Then why are you shaking? Why do you only tremble when I rub up against this exact spot?" He rubs against it once more and my eyes roll into my head. He grabs my hair and uses it to yank me backwards until I'm sitting back into my hips. His fingers piston up into my ass at a new angle and I writhe in pleasure. I grind down into his hand wantonly. "This isn't going to be like your last orgasm," he mutters against my ear, voice raw and rough from his own arousal. "Your ass is going to come without any help from your pussy. Look at how wide your eyes just got. Don't be nervous, you'll see just how fucking delicious an anal orgasm can be." With his other hand, he grabs my jaw and angles my face towards him. He licks my cheek like a rabid animal and I squeeze involuntarily around his fingers in response. He groans. "I can't wait to feel your hole spasm around my fingers, knowing you're a dirty little whore who came only because I played with her ass."

He releases me and shoves me back down onto my stomach, his thrusts into my bottomhole turning downright vicious. I'm screeching and screaming

into the night like I'm being murdered, the pain of his intrusion battling with pleasure for dominance. It doesn't matter who wins; either way I'm heading for an earth-shattering orgasm.

At long last, he shoves one final time deep into my asshole. He spreads his fingers until he stretches me wider than he ever has and then he curls them.

"Ah! Oh, my...God, yes. Yes!"

Bright light explodes behind my eyelids and my legs give way as my pussy hits the ground. He chases my hole as I fall, his fingers never leaving me, never pausing their dominant assault, not even when I clamp down so hard on him that I hear him hiss in pain.

"Fuck yes, Nera. Clench that tight ass around my fingers. Squeeze just like that. Good girl. Good little whore."

I buck my hips into his prodding fingers as he milks the longest orgasm I've ever had out of me. I'm splayed entirely on my front and completely prone, my slip shoved around my hips and my creamy white ass on display as he finally comes to a slow stop. I groan when he pulls his fingers out of my used ass, his retreat through my sensitive walls agonizing.

"Fuck," he says, pressing a kiss on the back of my neck, "I love this game."

I'm panting and trying to come down to Earth, but he doesn't give me any time to do so. I can feel his cock, angry and aching against my thigh. He grabs the sides of my thighs and brings my hips back up and off the ground. I whimper sluggishly but jolt awake when I feel him part my cheeks and look at me there.

I tense and immediately try to crawl away. My legs are dead and I won't get far, but I at least have to try. His fingers flex on my hips, keeping me in place easily. He spans my cheek harshly and I start to yelp but the sound dies in my throat when I feel the head of his cock touch my asshole.

He doesn't press in. He rests it against my entrance like a threat and I hold my breath.

"You want to know a secret?"

"N-now?" This hardly feels like the time to chit chat.

"I fucking *hate* that someone has been inside your tight cunt. That I have to look at him every fucking day and resist the violent urge to cave his face in," he snarls, the lowered pitch of his voice raising goosebumps on my neck. "But this ass is mine. I'm going to claim it tonight and it's going to belong to

me.” My stomach clenches at his possessive tone, my skin heating. “After we’re finished, you won’t ever let anybody else have it again. Do you understand me, Nera? I’m the only man you’re letting into this perfect ass.”

He doesn’t wait for a response. Behind me, I hear the sound of a cap opening followed by liquid dripping onto my hole.

I gasp. “You have lube?”

“Why do you think I needed twenty minutes before I met up with you.”

“Oh God,” I groan. “Why didn’t you use it earlier?”

He growls behind me, his slickened cock rubbing up and down the wet pathway between my cheeks. I’m drenched, the combination of lube and my own arousal creating a mess.

“I loved seeing your ass struggle to take my fingers,” he mutters heatedly. “This is my one kindness of the night. You better relax that tight asshole of yours otherwise this is going to be very painful for you.”

“I-I can’t. Please, just... don’t. Fuck my pussy instead.”

“No.” His voice is harsh, devoid of any emotion.

“I don’t want it.”

“Safe word,” he asks, and then he’s pressing in.

“Ahhh,” I cry out, face twisting in agony.

Fuck, this hurts. It burns as he pushes in the most miniscule of amounts, his head barely starting to part my muscles. I pant, rapid, shallow breaths that linger uncomfortably at the top of my lungs as he adds more pressure.

My ass doesn’t give in, doesn’t let him enter. Even after all the time he spent stretching me, my muscles clamp down on him and refuse him entry.

He spans my ass again, issuing harsh commands.

“Relax and open your ass. Do it. Open for me now.”

“Stop,” I whimper. “It won’t fit.”

He gives a sharp, shallow thrust of his hips. It’s a punishing blow and enough to shove the head of his cock slightly into my impossibly snug sphincter. I cry out when he hits resistance and my back hollows at the sudden, unwanted intrusion. Pain tears through me, assaulting my senses.

“It’s fitting just fine,” he answers, heartlessly.

“You’re hurting me,” I whine.

His hands come down to part my cheeks wide, his thumbs reaching to brush my taut rim.

“Safe word,” he demands once more.

I clamp my lips together, gritting my teeth. The pain is nearly

unbearable, but I'm used to it. Pain is my life. I can compartmentalize past him tearing into my asshole, I'm just not. I can't. Because then I'd have to admit that the dark part of me that I keep carefully hidden away actually loves this. It means admitting that there's immense pleasure woven into the pain and it's unlike anything I've ever felt. It's dirty and taboo and so wrong.

"That's what I thought," he declares, victoriously. He reaches down and grips the back of my neck, pressing me down into the ground until my face is forced to the side. "You can pretend you don't want it. You can writhe and kick and scream at me to stop, but you don't actually want me to."

His dick pulses violently inside me, his head resting just past the entrance of my ass. It's the worst place for him to stop because I'm stretched impossibly wide with no relief from him advancing or retreating. His hips pump mini strokes against my resistance, driving me cross-eyed with the duality of pain and pleasure.

"I do," I lie.

"Then use your safe word," he taunts. He smirks when I say nothing. "You can't because you want me to own your ass, just like I knew you would. Your mouth can lie to me all it wants though, that's fine. I'll enjoy your ass fucking either way. But your body... your body fucking loves it. Your pussy is so dripping wet that you're making a mess of the forest. Can you hear it?" He asks, and I almost pass out when he reaches down and shoves two fingers into my cunt. He thrusts in and out savagely, the wet, sloppy noises of my arousal echoing lewdly around us. "Yeah, you fucking love it. So, open your ass and bear down on my cock so I can show you how good I can fuck you."

His speech lights a fire down my skin until I feel like every part of me is exposed and sensitive. My breaths come fast as I feel him push against me. It's as if his words release me from my doubt and I feel my ass open to him. The muscles of my back tense as I work to submit. My clit aches, ignored and begging for attention.

"Come on, jailbait. You can take me," he purrs, rubbing my upper back in an owning touch. "Open up and welcome me into your tight ass."

With another thrust of his hips, he presses through and finally breaches past my firm ring of muscles. The head of his cock slips into my ass and with it comes a combination of relief and more pain. He hisses loudly, the sound agonized.

"Fuck, yes. Good girl, just like that. I'm in now, I'm in." His voice

shakes with effort.

I rip at the grass. My arms are outstretched above my head, my hands clawing desperately at the ground for purchase. My fingers dig into the earth as my lower stomach clenches in response to his intrusion. Additional arousal gushes from me. The burn in my pucker lessens slightly, but the relief is short lived when he starts pushing in.

Another inch slips into my stretched hole and I mutter incoherently. He's equally affected, the tiny spasms in my ass squeezing his cock painfully and making him mutter garbled words of praise.

"So fucking tight, I can barely think. Come on, take me. Just like that. Fuck, that feels good."

He's gentle, for now. His hand strokes my hip softly, easing his passage into my untried channel. Another inch slips in and I arch my back. I didn't know such pleasure was possible from this type of fucking. The discomfort recedes as pleasure takes over and I want him to go faster. To kick me out of this purgatory he currently has me in where his dick is only halfway in my ass.

"Fuck," he grits out, his voice on the exquisite line between pain and arousal. "I really do have an anal whore on my hands."

My ass clamps down on him in aroused response. He cries out and slaps my cheek. I clench around him and release, my loosened muscles allowing him to slip two more inches inside. I hiss at the unbelievable stretch.

"You like it when I tell you what a dirty girl you are." He parts my cheeks again and watches with savage, gleaming eyes as he presses in further. "God, your tight hole is swallowing my whole cock. Wrapping around it and squeezing it even tighter than that mouth of yours."

I mewl loudly, squirming below him. I'm so impossibly full of him that I don't think I can move. My legs shake from the pressure, his hands on my hips the only thing keeping me off the ground. Is that all of him? There's no way I can take more and not pass out. As it is, I'm afraid that the moment he starts moving, he's going to fuck me into unconsciousness.

I have my answer moments later when he pulls out until only the tip remains inside and then shoves inside me. His entire length spears me so deep that it feels like he's in my throat. His hips rest against the cheeks of my ass, his hands caressing the skin.

He sighs with pleasure and my pussy clenches, my body completely in tune with him.

“You look fucking obscene taking all of me this way,” he breathes, staring down at where his cock is entirely swallowed up by my ass. He pulls out and every nerve ending in my body feels like it’s on fire. I can feel his eyes on the place where we’re joined as he pushes back in. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Terrible,” I say, my voice trembling.

He thrusts in sharply, all nine inches of his dick piercing my bowels. I cry out.

“Liar,” he says, evenly. “I want to know. Tell me how it feels to have my cock stretching your ass.”

“It’s...good. Oh, my... yeah.” I can barely answer as he starts thrusting inside me. “It’s t-ti..ght. So tight. Right there, Tristan,” I pant the last order, my mouth parting lewdly when he changes directions. His cock curves and hits that sensitive spot inside me that drove me wild earlier. The same spot he shamelessly fingered until I came all over his hand.

I throw my head back and to the side, trying to look over my shoulder at him. His previous gentleness morphs into the savage brutality I crave from him. He thrusts harder, faster, rougher, his taking of my ass punishing. Every retreat causes my muscles to tighten and every advance is a fresh onslaught of pleasure and pain.

He pounds into me with so much force that my knees and forearms scrape harshly against the rough ground. I’m barely conscious of it, my entire focus on the way he brutally claims my ass. A buzzing builds from my toes and fireballs through my veins. My toes curl, my pussy.

“All your friends are over there,” he growls gutturally, hand still necklacing the back of my neck, forcing me to look at the lights of the RCA building in the distance. “Warm. Together. Drinking and having fun. Probably wondering where you are.” He leans forward slightly, whispering close to my ear, “If only they knew you were face down in the dirt, legs spread, getting your ass fucked by your professor.”

He reaches around and pinches my clit and a blinding orgasm races up my spine. It steamrolls through my body and hits me with a tidal wave, taking me under. My hips buck into his hand and onto his cock and I come with a throat destroying scream.

Chapter 24

Tristan

Slap. Slap. Slap.

I continue spanking her clit, forcing her through her brutal orgasm. She thrashes around me, her ass clamping so hard down on my cock that she stops the blood flow. I clench my own muscles and look up into the night to avoid coming on the spot.

Her ass is even better than I imagined. Chasing her down, fucking her mouth, both of those pale in comparison to stretching her untried hole with my hard cock. She vibrates around me, her tight ass wrapped greedily around my length and refusing to let me go. As much as she tried to pretend she didn't want this, her body has accommodated every one of my intrusions.

Her entire body shakes, her hips still elevated only because I hold on to her with one hand as the other punishes her pussy. Another time, I'll find a way to stuff her in both holes so her needy cunt doesn't go ignored, but for now I want to make sure she knows who owns this hole of hers always and forever.

I pound into her at a savage, brutal pace. Her head falls forward between her shoulders. Her hands claw desperately at the ground.

I push her down until she's flush with the soil, her face twisted to the side. I see the dazed look in her eye as I get closer, laying my body down over hers with my cock buried entirely inside her. My hands come down over hers, our fingers intertwining as she makes fists. My weight on top of her

adds a new dimension to the pleasure and she writhes beneath me.

“No *boy* can fuck you like I do. Can make you come like I do,” I spit, my mouth flush against her ear. “Fucking remember that.”

I punctuate every word with sharp thrusts and she answers with high pitched whines.

“Yeah, right there. Just like that, *yesss*.”

She nods frantically, unseeingly, and I know that she’s in a different plane of reality right now. Somewhere stuck between the pleasure and pain of my possession and only barely able to communicate.

Even from beneath me, she manages to arch her ass. She thrusts against me and my eyes flutter shut in agonized pleasure. She’s so eager for it, my dark little slut.

“This ass is *mine*, Nera. Mine.”

Thank fuck she walked up to me and not past me that night in the hotel. I wouldn’t have known just what I’d almost missed out on if not.

I straighten and bring her back up onto her hands and knees. She moans discontentedly, exhausted, but gets in position as I continue to work that still ridiculously tight hole.

“Your ass is perfect, but especially when it’s full of my dick,” I praise. I part her cheeks once more, pausing mid thrust and pulling out until only the tip remains and stretches her rim. “You look unbelievable, Nera.” She twitches in response then cants her hips, urging me to start fucking her again. When I don’t, she looks over her shoulder at me.

“What are you doing?” She whines.

I circle her entire rim with my thumb and she shivers wildly. Keeping my hands on either one of her cheeks, I look up and meet her gaze.

“Fuck your ass back on my cock.”

“W-what?”

“Show me you love it. Fuck me with your ass.”

Her eyes shine on mine. She keeps the contact as she slowly pushes her ass back down on my length, taking control. Her mouth slackens as she pulls back and then snaps shut when she shoves down, harder this time. Her eyes glaze over, losing focus even as they stay on me, and her rhythm picks up. She pants, needy, whiny little breaths that drive me fucking wild.

She seems even more turned on now that she’s in charge, if that’s somehow possible. She looks like she loves the control, her thrusts turning just as brutal as mine were. I bite down on my lip as my muscles clench once

more and my cock throbs, demanding a release I've been denying myself for a while now.

Not yet, not if she's enjoying this.

I wrap an arm around her waist and lift. Her weight falls back against me as I rise to my feet, easily carrying her with just the one arm.

"What are you— Tristan!"

She yelps and then groans loudly at how deeply impaled she is on my cock with me standing.

I sit back down, my back now propped against a tree, and bring her down with me. Her legs are bent and angled back past my hips as she faces away from me. Her ass is still stretched around my cock, my hand pushing down on her shoulder so that she's fully speared with my balls resting against her pussy.

She's still shaking uncontrollably, having a hard time sitting upright with the assault of sensations I'm unleashing on her. She holds on to my thighs, her fingers digging into my skin. I part her cheeks and stare at where I'm buried inside her.

"Last first of the night," I promise. "Take your own pleasure and ride me. I want to watch your ass stretch, open, and close around my cock. I want you to make yourself come this way."

I rip the remaining shreds of her lace slip off her body and toss it to the side, revealing her sexy tattoo. My palms come back down to wrap around her waist.

I expect her to rock back and forth uncertainly, too shy or tired to try anything more than the bare minimum. But yet again, she surprises me. I watch, transfixed by the sight of her bare, pale skin, as she brings her hands up. She buries her fingers in her hair wantonly and moans loudly, almost pornographically. She collects her hair messily into her hands, turns her face to the side and looks invitingly over her shoulder at me. All the while, she rides me. She pumps up and down my entire length, at first slowly, then faster, rougher, she adds in a circling of her hips, a bounce of her ass, a clenching of her muscles and I know I'm not going to last.

"Come on," I grit between clenched teeth, encouraging her. I force her up and down roughly on my cock, setting a faster pace. "*Fuck me.*"

"Mhmmm, yes." Her eyes close. "That's so good, Tristan."

"Harder. *Harder!*"

My eyes are transfixed on her ass, on how well it takes me, but my gaze

snaps up to her face, mesmerized by her. By how she takes her pleasure amongst the discomfort and pain, how she bounces back on my dick with heated thrusts and even hotter moans.

Her cum drips down her thighs and onto mine. We're surrounded by the noises of our fucking, the wet, slapping noises sounding loudly in the night. My fingers dig into her hips and I thrust upwards as she bounces downwards. We meet in the earth-shattering middle, her ass impaled so deeply on my cock that her cheeks are spread open on either side of my stomach.

"There you go, take it all."

"Ahhh."

She screams like I've never heard a woman scream her rapture before. Throatically, unbridledly, and for so long that I marvel at her lung capacity. Watching her come undone is a mesmerizing sight and as always, I find myself staring at her unblinkingly.

She clamps down on my dick and then her tight heat spasms repeatedly, sending blinding pleasure up and down my shaft. I bury myself deep into her one final time as my mind goes numb with an orgasm that reduces me to nothing but the all-consuming pleasure that rattles through every inch of my mind and body. I thrust lazily, following the jets of my climax as hot seed erupts from my cock and coats the used walls of her ass.

Her entire body relaxes and she goes to fall forward, but I wrap an arm around her and pull her back against my chest. My still hard dick stays in her ass as I lean against the tree trunk. She follows me, laying bonelessly on me, completely spent.

I tilt her head back onto my shoulder and brush her hair behind her ear. My mouth presses into the thick strands right above her ear.

"Twelve," I whisper, proudly.

"Thirteen," she corrects.

A smirk pulls at the corners of my lips. "Just making sure you're paying attention."

I feel her shiver against me and I'm suddenly reminded of the cold temperature and her nakedness. I shift her to one side and place my arm under legs, scooping her up against my chest as I stand. Her sleepy mumbles morph into small, whining ones when I set her on her feet.

I rip my shirt off and wrap it around her. She's really shivering now, her lower lip trembling and turning blueish.

Protectiveness tears through me, the sudden need to get her warm almost

blinding. I pick her up once more and head towards the tree line, my steps brisk as I hold her against my bare chest to bring her some warmth.

My lust is temporarily sated, freeing me from the dark haze of desire that had me unilaterally focused on having her, and now I wonder if maybe I played too hard and pushed her past her limits. As much as I know she loved it in the moment, she's now quivering against me in a way that makes my stomach clench.

She tilts her head slightly and looks up at me.

"Where are we going?" She asks, her words drowsy.

"I'm taking you home."

"Okay, thank you," she says, burrowing her cheek back down against my chest. I wonder if she can tell how quickly my heart is beating. She looks so...soft.

"No, not your home. My home."

"Why?" She asks, startled. "You don't have to do that."

I parked my car at the edge of the forest when I came back, so it's a short walk to it. I open the passenger door and set her down gently on the seat. My cock hardens again when she winces slightly, the need to have her apparently not as sated as I thought it might be. I take the keys that are miraculously still in my pocket and reach over her to turn on the ignition. I fire up the heat the second the engine is on and stand over her as I wait for the warm air to surround her. She stares at me almost suspiciously, like she doesn't trust my intentions. Like she's not used to anyone caring for her.

"I fuck you and then I take care of you, that's how this goes."

"But—"

"Non-negotiable."

Her eyes are guarded when she blinks, but she doesn't argue with me.

"Where's your coat?"

"I checked it."

"Wait here and get warm, I'll go get it and your shoes. I'll be right back."

I get a black shirt from my bag and put it on, closing the trunk behind me as I head towards RCA. I walk around the back of the building and pick up Nera's shoes and my jacket where we left them in the garden. I put it on and button it so my appearance doesn't stand out as much. I'm covered in dirt and my trousers are creased more times than a piece of origami, so I'm asking a lot of this jacket.

I circle back around to the front of the building and run up the stairs towards the main entrance where the coat check is situated. The door flies open before I can reach for the handle and a dark-haired girl bursts through.

She crashes into me unseeingly, hair and limbs flying as we collide, our combined momentum making us twirl dangerously fast. My hands close around her upper arms and yank her back just in time to stop her from tumbling down the stairs.

When we're both stable, I blow out an adrenaline filled breath. The sound of a soft sob pulls my gaze down to hers and I recognize the face partially obscured behind the mass of hair.

"Bellamy?" I ask. "Are you alright?"

She looks anything but. She's clearly distraught, tears running down her blotchy cheeks as sobs rack her body.

"Professor," she gasps brokenly between sharp inhales. "I'm sorry, I... I can't talk right now."

She's a student in another one of my classes and I know she's one of Nera's best friends. I've never seen her like this, distressed and crying so hard she can barely breathe. I wonder what happened, if she's hurt. I don't see any obvious signs of physical distress, but that doesn't mean hurt isn't there.

The last thing I want or need is to get in the middle of teenage drama, but she's Nera's friend. Annoyingly, I find that means I can't just let her walk away.

"Do you need me to drive you back to The Pen?"

She snuffles, trying to pull herself together. She wipes at her cheeks with her palm, her hand coming away covered in tears.

"No, that's okay. Thank you. Just pretend you never saw me like this."

Her eyes blur with tears again and she turns to go. Something nags at my stomach knowing how vulnerable and easy of a target she is right now.

"Stop," I bark and she turns back around, wide-eyed. "I'm not letting you go home alone in your current state. I'll get you a car, stay here."

"Professor—"

"If you leave, I'll flunk you on the half term exam next week."

When I started the year, I didn't realize threatening my students would be such a routine part of my job, but the method has been effective.

I turn on my heel and walk into the building without waiting for her confirmation. I retrieve both of our coats and head to the valet service that

was hired for tonight's event. I have a black town car organized for Bellamy within moments and am pleased to see her still standing exactly where I left her when I return. I wait next to her for the five minutes it takes for the car to get there.

"Thank you for helping me."

She's still crying quietly, so focused on whatever's causing her pain that she doesn't notice the state of my trousers or the fact that I'm holding her friend's coat and shoes.

She drops down to sit on the stone steps, her ballgown billowing dramatically around her. I join her, sitting a few feet away so I can keep watch but not close enough that she'll feel uncomfortable. I know she's dating Rogue, the last thing I need is his psychotic ass coming after me for interacting too closely with his girl.

Something tells me threatening his grades won't have quite the same effect on him.

I wonder where he is tonight, why he's not with her.

We sit silently, the only sound disturbing the quiet night the ragged inhales she takes as the tears continue rolling down her cheeks.

When the car is there, I open her door and wait for her to get in the back. Leaning over, I look down at her.

"Are you going to be okay?"

She nods, suddenly awkward and self-conscious. She's calming down and what I recognize as embarrassment is seeping through. It's unwarranted, but I don't bother saying it. "Yeah, I have my friends. Thanks again."

I give her an imperceptible nod and shut the door, tapping the roof twice as a signal to the driver.

My mind is torn between telling Nera or not. She'll definitely want to know that her friend isn't doing well but the selfish part of me doesn't want to give her up for the night. Not yet at least.

Especially not when I walk back up to my car and find her fast asleep, head resting adorably against the window. She looks innocent and untroubled, her chest moving up and down softly with every breath. Her lips are relaxed and puffy and I resist the urge to rip the door open and claim them with mine. I find myself looking at her for a couple of minutes, just watching her sleep peacefully.

I get in and drive, looking over at her every so often. She's curled into a ball against the window, completely knackered. She's still only in my dress

shirt, her legs bare and exposed. At a red light, I reach into the backseat, grab her coat and lay it over her. It slips off because of how she's seated, so I hold it up with one hand and continue driving with the other until I pull into the parking lot.

I'm loathe to wake her up when she looks so peaceful but she'll be much more comfortable inside.

"Hey," I say, palming her cheek. "Wake up, pretty girl."

I stroke the side of her face down one way with the tips of my fingers and up the other with my knuckles as she wakes. She looks at me with bleary eyes and this time, I can't resist. I lean down and claim her mouth in a needy kiss, using two fingers under her chin to keep her in place.

She pulls back after a couple of minutes and blinks the sleep from her eyes. Her gaze turns surprised and skittish when she peers out of the window.

"I thought you were taking me to your place," she says, mistrustingly. She looks away from me and up at The Pen, speaking into the window. "You changed your mind?"

"No."

She turns back around to face me.

"Bellamy needs you," I say through gritted teeth. Selfish me from a few months ago would have put myself first without even thinking about it. I don't know why I let what I think Nera would want guide me instead.

"What?" She says, alarmed. Her eyes are wide and her hand is on the door, ready to run out. I hit the automatic lock button on my side and keep her here.

"I ran into her when I went back to RCA and she was crying. She said she needed her friends," I tell her, before adding, "I'm giving you one hour and not a second longer with her and then you're mine. I'll be back here parked in this exact spot in fifty-eight minutes and I expect you to come down and meet me so I can take you to my place."

"Like I said, it's not necessary."

"And like I said, it's non-negotiable. Do we understand each other?"

She nods quickly and I hit the button again, unlocking the doors.

She opens it, then pauses. She seems to be weighing something, but then makes a decision. She flips around and reaches over to kiss me, her mouth coming shyly down on mine. I groan and grab her waist, but she's out of the car in the next breath. I track her through the windshield and then my window

as she runs up the front stairs, rips open the door and disappears into the building.

Chapter 25

Nera

When the elevator doors close behind me, I gasp. I get my first look at myself in the reflection of the metal doors and I look filthy in every possible sense of the word.

My hair, usually iron straight and well kept, is a tangled, disheveled mess. My makeup is smudged down my face. I'm covered in dirt and scrapes and slowly appearing bruises and my fist desperately clasps Tristan's shirt closed over my chest, the tails of it landing mid-thigh and revealing my bare legs. Anybody looking at me would know the truth – that I was fucked rough and dirty.

I'm still reeling from everything that happened tonight, my body having a hard time coming down from the massive adrenaline high of being chased and then brutally fucked. My lips are cracked and my ass is incredibly sore, but my pulse beats a wild rhythm in my veins.

I saw a different side of him tonight and it in turn brought out a different side in me. A side that's maybe braver, definitely darker, and absolutely more alive. I want to hold on to that person for as long as possible.

I swipe hastily at my cheeks, trying to fix my makeup as much as possible given the mess caked on my face. When the doors open once more, I rush out and run down the hallway to our apartment, fumbling with my keys to open the door. I push it open quietly, happy to find it bathed in darkness.

Distantly, I hear Bellamy crying through the closed door of her

bedroom. My heart lurches in my chest. It calls to me to immediately go to her, but I can't, not looking like this. I force myself away from her room and into the bathroom where I take a quick shower in scalding hot water. I'll take another one later once I've seen to Bellamy.

When I come out of the bathroom in a sweater and shorts loungewear set, I find Six and Thayer home as well. Thayer is sitting on Bellamy's bed and Six looks on from the doorway with an anguished look on her face.

Bellamy is distraught, her face wet with tears and her cheeks reddened with emotion. I inhale a sharp breath when she tells us that Rogue betrayed her and lays out exactly how. What he did is unforgivable in my opinion and the depth of her heartbreak makes sense now. My own heart splinters further hearing her story and her sobs, my theories on relationships only further reinforced by her distress.

After we comfort her, Thayer gets in bed next to her. Six and I close the door behind us, leaving them to what I know will be a fitful night's sleep, and we each head for our rooms.

I lay on my bed with a tired groan and look at the time on my phone. Seventeen minutes until an hour since he left. I drum my fingers on my stomach as I think about meeting him again, especially in the context of everything going on between Rogue and Bellamy.

"I fuck you and then I take care of you, that's how this goes."

Another first. I'm not used to being cared for, ever, let alone after sex. Self-preservation and the guard I have up tell me to be distrustful of him and this whole situation, even as a part of me yearns to believe his good intentions.

I find myself counting down the minutes until he's here, unsure if I'm annoyed he's forcing me to go to his place or secretly pleased. The lines are blurring between casual and...*more*. I don't want them to, I can't afford for them to. I need to remind him of it, for my own sanity.

I feel an intense pull to him and I can't let myself fall into it.

Time drags by, fifteen minutes crawling like it's fifty. The antsy feeling moves up my body until I can't take it anymore and I stand. I walk to my window and stare out into the parking lot. When I look down, I see his car there, in the same place he promised it would be. My phone tells me there are five minutes left until the hour.

I wonder if he's been there the entire time.

I wait until the time hits the hour and then I wait some more. Two

minutes. Five minutes. Seven.

My phone dings.

Gary: Don't make me come get you.

Me: Sure, because having my professor show up at my home in the middle of the night isn't going to raise any eyebrows.

Gary: There are other ways to get you out of that building.

I frown at his text and then a photo comes through. It's a top down shot of his hand placed in his lap. Clutched in his palm, his thumb pressed down on the igniter, is a lighter with a burning, bright orange flame.

My stomach drops even as excitement – which the sane part of me will question later once she's regained control of my mind and body – thrills in my blood. After the side of him he revealed tonight, I believe he's capable of just about anything.

I put on my slides and grab my phone, keys, and wallet. Stealthily, I sneak out of my room and then the apartment until I'm crossing the front door of the building and standing on the top step, staring down at him. His eyes are fixed darkly on me through the windshield and that uncontrollable, unexplainable electricity I feel when I'm near him buzzes to life once more.

I glare at him as I walk over to the passenger side and get in.

"You're fucking crazy, you know that right?"

"Apparently," he says, cheerfully. He pulls out of the parking lot and onto the street, his right hand coming down to rest possessively on my bare thigh. "It's a rather new development," he adds pensively, looking at the street ahead. "Seems to manifest only in relation to you."

"Lucky me," I say, dryly, but my stomach clenches happily, the traitor.

"No, lucky *me*," he purrs, his thumb rubbing soft circles on my leg.

My throat dries and I stay silent, unsure what to say.

But my hand comes down quietly on top of his and stays there the rest of the drive to his place.

It's a nondescript two-story house and I recognize it as one of the homes RCA keeps for its staff. He walks around to my side of the car and opens my door. When I get out, he takes my hand and guides me towards the ground floor apartment.

My gaze is locked on where our hands are joined, transfixed by how easily and naturally he holds me in this intimate way. I know I should pull

away but instead I find myself interlocking my fingers with his. It's his turn to look down at our clasped hands and then he meets my eyes and gives me a corner smile that melts something inside me.

The rotten, broken part of me that refuses to leave me in peace, that rejects letting anyone in or being vulnerable in any way makes me rip my hand out of his. I fold my arms across my chest and avoid looking at his face again when I know seeing his dismayed expression will only stab at my insides.

He opens the door and gestures for me to walk in ahead of him. I do so, coming to stand in an open space that's both kitchen and living room. To my left there's the open plan dining area and to my right, the couch and TV. At the back, I glimpse the door to a bedroom.

I look around me at the space. It has all the potential to be cozy and homey but it's sparse. There's no sign of life, no sign of his personality. The walls are bare, there are no trinkets or gadgets decorating the space, or even boy stuff strewn across the place. He is new to RCA but we're far enough into the school year that this should feel more like a home.

Tristan watches me carefully from the doorway, shoulders tense.

He must misinterpret my appraisal of his place because I hear him say from behind me, "It's no penthouse suite, but it does the job." He shrugs his shoulders carelessly, going for affected nonchalance. "I don't need much space anyway."

I turn to face him. "I think it's lovely." The crease of his brow smooths in response and I realize part of him was expectantly awaiting my reaction. "I'm just surprised you haven't done more to make it feel like home."

Something passes over his features and he closes off.

"It's not exactly a priority of mine."

There's a tension in the air that wasn't there seconds before and I turn away. A small shiver rattles my bones at the cold breeze that wafts through the apartment. He marches past me to the opposite wall and I watch him up the thermostat a few degrees. Warm air blows into the room from a vent above my head and my heart squeezes at how easily he seems to always know what I need.

"Come on," he says, tilting his head towards a closed door next to the bedroom. "Time to shower."

"I already showered," I sputter, crossing my arms over my stomach. The last thing I'm ready for is being that exposed around him. It feels too

intimate.

Ignoring me, he reaches for the hem of his sweater and pulls it off over his head, revealing the taut expanse of his muscled chest, defined abs, and that mouthwatering V that tapers off into his trousers.

“Not with me.”

“I don’t need—”

He drops his trousers next so that he’s standing before me in nothing but his briefs. The words die in my throat seeing his thick, strong thighs on display and the defined outline of his hard length.

He cocks an eyebrow when he sees I haven’t moved.

“I’m happy to chase you again and rip these new clothes off you if you’re not in the mood to comply. I assume those shorts aren’t couture?”

I point a warning finger at him. “First of all, they’re H&M and secondly, they’re my favorite so don’t you dare.”

Tristan chuckles, taking leisurely steps to close the gap between us until he’s standing in my orbit once more. I tilt my head all the way back to keep eye contact, his own gaze hooded and playful when he meets mine. His hands come down to rest on my hips, one of them circling around to palm my sore ass.

“Come on,” he whispers, his tone cajoling. “Let me take care of you.”

His fingers tug at the hanging string of my shorts, deftly untying the knot as his eyes track mine. I feel the band loosen as we keep staring at each other and then my shorts drop past my ass and fall to my ankles.

For a second there, we’re caught in a moment in time.

Tristan waits for my decision and I hover on the line until, finally, I shake my foot loose and step out of the fabric. The other foot quickly follows. His lips stretch into a smirk that manages to be both pleased and heated and I find that I’d be willing to do a lot of things to have him smile at me like that for a while longer.

Keeping his eyes on mine still, he crouches slightly but only to grab the back of my thighs and hoist me into his arms. My tired muscles groan as he closes my legs around his waist, but he walks us quickly into the bathroom where he sets me down on the vanity.

Wordlessly, he reaches into the shower and turns on the water, testing the temperature with his finger and then turning the knob even more towards the red. He’s back standing between my legs in a moment, his palms rubbing up and down my thighs to keep me warm.

He stares at me for long seconds, his breaths heavy and his expression unreadable. His eyes darken when I stare back and his mouth comes hungrily down on mine, surprising me.

The familiar taste of bourbon explodes on my lips and I clasp his nape to bring him closer to me as my other hand caresses the bare expanse of his chest. He's so warm, his skin so smooth and soft but his body so wonderfully hard that I start to get annoyed by the barrier my sweater puts between us. I push at him with both hands and he takes a reluctant step back, his gaze confused and intoxicated with lust.

When he sees me clasp the hem of my sweater he steps forward with a heated grin and grabs it, his hands closing over mine. He rips it off in one smooth motion and tosses it to the side. I barely have time to register the fabric going over my head before his mouth is back down on mine.

I'm powerless to resist the pull between us and I arch into him, my hands coming up to stroke his back as our mouths continue their mutual assault. Steam fills the bathroom around us and goes ignored as we grab at each other like we've gone feral.

When I part my legs even more and grab his ass to press him and his hard cock even closer against me, he utters a muttered curse and hastily shoves his briefs down his legs.

He reaches for and grips the top of my thighs, angling my center up towards him.

"I'm sorry, this wasn't the plan," he mutters, breathlessly. "But I have to have you. Right now."

He rips my panties off and shoves two fingers into my tight heat. Having gone largely ignored the rest of the night, my pussy is so needy for him that he finds me completely drenched and ready.

"I don't think you've ever been this wet," he praises, his tone almost manic, his eyes certainly so. His fingers thrust in and out, the noises of our joining loud and sloppy. "I'm obsessed with your pussy, jailbait."

"I'm not jailbait, you know. I'm eighteen," I remind him between ragged gasps.

"Don't remind me," he growls angrily, his forehead coming down on mine. His lips find mine once more, kissing away the uncertainty that flashes through me at his words.

He pulls his fingers from me and quickly replaces them with the head of his cock. He tugs me until half of my ass hangs off the counter and my arms

come to wrap around his neck for purchase. He pushes in slowly, taking his time. His invasion is continuous, his thick length spreading my walls to within an inch of bursting.

When he bottoms inside me, his head falls completely back as an animalistic groan rips from his mouth. Pressed against him like I am, I'm inches from his face and captivated by watching his teeth sink into his lower lip in rapturous agony. His Adam's apple works as he swallows thickly.

When he lifts his head and opens his eyes to look down at me, they're completely molten with lust. The color is one I don't know, like the clearest ocean waters in the Maldives with patches of darkness hidden just beneath the surface.

"Hold on," he warns through gritted teeth.

Tristan barely gives me a second to process the words before he pulls out and thrusts back in to the hilt. A shocked gasp falls from my lips and he captures it with his mouth.

He sets an insane pace, his hips pistoning back and forth inside me. I moan continuously, loudly, brokenly, into his mouth as his lips remain on mine. I'm chanting my pleasure, my soreness, as he fucks me roughly. His cock takes what we both need even as his hands are gentle. One weaves into my hair, cupping my nape to angle me into his mouth. The other rubs circles on my hip with his thumb.

My own nails rake down his back, extracting another groan from him. He pulls back and hisses when they dig into his flesh, leaving marks I know will be there for the foreseeable future. The hand in my hair moves to my throat and we stare at each other breathlessly as he continues powering inside me.

"I love how well you take me," he mutters.

I clench around him at his words and his abs contract in response.

"Fuck, that feels good," Tristan moans, falling forward and draping his chest over me. I clutch him against me with both arms, holding on in the only way I know how to.

"So good," I breathe, clenching around him again. A powerful shudder racks his body and leaves goosebumps in his wake. His back moves under the effort of holding it together.

The sounds of his hips slapping against my center and our feverish moans ring lewdly around us. The steam is thick and combined with the potent arousal swirling in the closed space, I feel like I can barely catch my

breath.

A tidal wave builds inside me, threatening to drown me. My skin feels like it's sizzling, my every nerve ending attuned to how this man fucks me. I clench around Tristan's cock repeatedly, my pace matching the frantic nature of his until I can feel that we're both on the edge. I'm nearly blinded with lust, my brain completely addled.

He straightens and wraps my legs around his waist so that I'm half laying on the counter. My hands reach back behind me for purchase, my palms leaving harried stamps of my presence on the steamed glass.

I'm fighting the need to come so I can draw this out more, but when his thumb comes down to roughly circle my clit, there's nothing I can do. I'm lost to the sensations, to the fifty-foot tidal wave rising, rising, rising right above my head, and finally cresting.

My orgasm hits me with such force that my screams come out more as howls. I clamp down so hard on Tristan that I feel stabs of pain shoot up my walls. There's nothing I can do except ride the wave and hope I'll survive. My walls pulse violently around him until it feels like I suck his own orgasm out of him.

He follows my release with his own, coming with a loud cry, shouted praise, and undefinable, garbled pleasure. Hot jets of his seed spurt inside me and coat the walls of my pussy.

His climax feels like it lasts long minutes as we both pant, his face burrowed into my neck. I feel him place wet kisses on my collarbone, the column of my neck, the sensitive area behind my ear. He moves to the line of my jaw, the tip of my nose, the curve of my lips. He's smothering me with kisses and it's overwhelming.

Finally, he pulls out. My entire body is sore and I can't move. I think I could easily fall asleep even in this twisted up position if it weren't for him.

"Come on," he says, scooping me up and stepping with me into the shower. "I promise not to have my way with you in here." He sets me down and stands behind me. His hand comes over my shoulder to direct the shower head so the jet of water falls on me. "At least not today."

I'm about to tell him there's no guarantee there'll be a next time, but his hand comes around my front to my chin where he tips my head back. My eyes connect with his as he brings the detachable shower head up over my head, the water cascading down my hair. I find that the words dry in my throat as his fingers weave into my hair, gently massaging my scalp.

My eyes close and I lean back into him, letting him support my weight. All of a sudden, the exhaustion hits me. Physical, from everything he's put me through tonight, but also emotional, from having to flawlessly hold it together all the time, at least for the persona I show the world.

I hear a cap open and then feel liquid ooze down the top of my head. He takes care to work the shampoo until it foams and then his fingers are back in my hair, lathering the strands in the floral scented gel. He starts massaging me again and a small groan leaves my lips.

I'm too embarrassed to open my eyes and see his reaction so I keep them shut. He doesn't comment on my reaction, he simply keeps working.

He rinses out the shampoo, his hands deftly moving the jet of water through my hair to make sure the strands are completely clean.

"Head up," Tristan orders, throatily. I open my eyes and find his are dark with desire once more, the mesmerizing orbs pinned on me.

I do as he says and hear another cap open. It's followed by a fruity smelling product being applied to my hair starting from the ends.

My shoulders bunch and my muscles stiffen when I realize he's applying conditioner.

Floral shampoo and fruit scented conditioner aren't exactly staples in a single guy's toolkit and yet he had both readily available tonight.

Is this his move, fucking girls and then pretending to care for them? Is he using products on me that he's used on countless others?

"Why do you have conditioner?" I snap, taking a step forward to try and put some distance between us, a ridiculous endeavor in this small shower.

He doesn't let me get far anyway.

His hand wraps around my front and splays over my lower stomach, forcing me back against his hard chest. He presses a kiss against the side of my face.

"I bought it for you while you were with Bellamy," he says, voice tinged with something I can't quite recognize. "Why? Are you jealous?"

My stomach clenches.

"No," I lie. "We're not dating, you can do what you want."

The minute the words leave my lips, I want to rip my own tongue out. I don't want a relationship, but the thought of him touching anyone else has bile rising in my throat and violence pulsing in my hands.

My words are greeted by thick silence. I wish I was facing him so I could see his face. I have no idea how to interpret his lack of response.

After a couple of seconds, his hands come back down into my hair. I release a deep, relieved breath.

For a second there, I thought I'd said something to piss him off. I wouldn't know what to do if he was mad at me. I don't know why the thought is more terrifying than my dad's rage, in a completely different way.

I don't think I'm anywhere near as ready to let go of Tristan as I thought I might be.

When I feel his hands move up to the top of my head, I reach back and place mine over his, halting his progression.

"Conditioner only goes on the ends, not all over my hair," I tell him.

"Oh, okay," he says, softly.

Possessiveness rips through me, washing away the vestiges of anger. I love that he doesn't know that, that no other girl has taught him that.

He finishes applying and then his hands leave my body.

Seconds tick by and when I look back over my shoulder, I find him reading the backside of the bottle, his brow creased adorably.

"Are you reading the instructions?"

"Yeah, I'm not sure what you're supposed to do next."

I laugh and his eyes snap to me, fixating on my mouth as it parts on a giggle. "You leave it in a few minutes and then rinse."

He doesn't react, gaze still fixed on my face.

"Tristan?"

"Sorry," he says, snapping out of it. "Got it."

He grabs the soap and a washcloth and drops to his knees behind me. He washes me meticulously, lifting one foot and then the other, moving over my legs, my ass and pussy, my stomach, my breasts. His touch is anything but sexual, even as he cleans the most intimate parts of me.

His hands knead the sore muscles of my shoulders as he washes my back and I can't help but tilt my head back against his chest. The warmth of the water combined with his gentle, massaging touch relax me like I haven't been in years. Tension I didn't know I was holding in my shoulders loosens until I feel as limp as a noodle. I'm barely holding my own weight up, most of it resting against him as I fight the encroaching need to sleep.

He quickly washes himself then rinses the conditioner out of my hair. He steps out of the shower first and heads to his bedroom. When he comes back, he's wearing gray sweatpants and a black tee and I swear I feel drool physically pool in my mouth at the sight. He's carrying a chair and the effort

makes the muscles of his arms strain against the fabric, mesmerizing me.

He grabs a perfectly folded and brand new, lavender-colored, fluffy towel and rips the tag off, tossing it in the bin. I swallow thickly seeing yet another proof of his thoughtfulness.

Reaching over, he turns off the water and wraps me in the towel, lifting me in his arms like I'm both fragile and precious. I feel completely weightless as he sets me back down on the vanity where we just had sex.

I expect him to leave me to get changed, but instead he sits in front of me and reaches for something in the cupboard beneath the sink. He pulls out a box full of bottles, cotton pads, band aids, and other first aid kit related items.

He reaches for my leg, bending it at the knee and setting my foot down on his thigh. He inspects the cuts there, turning my foot over in his hands as a discontented rumble rolls up his chest.

And then he gets to work, head bent and hands focused. He applies ointments to the bruises and gently wipes a cotton ball dipped in alcohol over the rough scrapes on the underside of my feet. His touch is tender, his gaze unwaveringly concentrated.

A nameless emotion tightens my throat as I watch him continue to care for me long after anyone else would have given up. It's so unexpected, so overwhelming, so damn confusing that my body riots in an uproar of uncertainty, unsure whether to push him away or pull him closer and never let him go.

I whimper in pain when he brushes over a particularly sensitive scrape and he freezes. Dark eyes snap up to meet mine before dropping back down to my foot.

Slowly, he leans forward until I feel his warm breaths fall rhythmically against the top part of my foot. I find myself holding my own breath, inexplicable tension suddenly in the air around us.

He brushes his lips over the sensitive skin next to the wound, right below my ankle.

"Sorry, baby," he whispers, looking up at me with his mouth still on my skin.

I exhale a tremulous breath as his lips linger on me, my heart pounding, my mind spinning, my soul on fire.

My eyes flutter shut and I hold on tight to the walls I've spent years fortifying around myself. They metaphorically shake under the force of his

assault and I scramble for objectivity, for distance of some kind. Because I have a feeling that heartbreak at Tristan's hands isn't something I would survive.

Chapter 26

Tristan

When I'm done cleaning the cuts on her feet, I leave her to get changed in the bathroom and head to the kitchen to make her dinner.

I don't have much in the fridge nor do I have the time to prepare something really intricate, but I find that I want to impress her. I stare at the contents until an idea forms. I'm not going to be awarded any Michelin stars for this dish, but it's perfect comfort food so I get to work.

I cut my sourdough bread and put a couple of slices in the toaster. In parallel, I throw some mint, feta, frozen peas, and lemon juice in a food processor. In a pan, I drop a few strips of Canadian bacon I got from a foreign supermarket and cook them until they're perfectly crispy. When the bread is done, I brush olive oil over each slice and rub some garlic on them. I add the pea spread and spoon it around until it fully covers one side. Next, I add some radishes I pickled last weekend, crumble some additional feta, and add the bacon on top. I thinly slice a beefsteak tomato and place that as well.

I'm reaching into the fridge for some ham when I hear the bathroom door open and feel Nera walk into the kitchen behind me. Throwing a look over my shoulder, I motion at the small table in the middle of the room.

"Have a seat."

The sleeves of her sweater drop below her hands and I can see her fingers playing nervously with the fabric. She looks off to the side, towards the front door, and I can tell she wants to run.

“Nera.” She looks at me when I call her name, the sound of my voice even and confident. “Sit.”

She’s in her head. I’ve come to recognize when she’s swirling in a spiral of her thoughts and I see it now. Those shadowed eyes of hers look at me speculatively as she weighs her options. There’s only one, although she doesn’t seem to realize it yet. If she moves to walk out that door before I’ve fed her, I’ll get a belt from my dresser and tie her to the chair.

She pulls a seat back from the table and drops down into it. Part of me is disappointed that I have to shelve the tying her up idea until later. The larger part is appeased that she chooses to stay.

“What are you doing?” She asks.

Happy to see her settled, I turn back around towards the counter and finish assembling the sandwich.

“Making you dinner.”

“I’m not hungry,” she says, and I hear a tinge of... *something* in her voice. I can’t quite place it, except that it sounds exactly like the tone she used when I gave her my protein bar in the gym.

“You’ll eat anyway.” I add the top slice of bread and cut the sandwich diagonally before placing it on a plate. I place it down on the table in front of her and sit down in the chair opposite her. “My take on a BLT, with Canadian bacon and a pea, mint, feta sauce.”

She eyes it with hunger in her gaze but doesn’t reach for it. I’m starting to suspect there’s something going on there.

I’m going to make it my mission to find out what it is.

I reach across the table and place my fingers under her chin, turning it up so that she’s looking at me.

“You have to be hungry after the way we fucked tonight,” I tell her, rubbing my thumb softly along her jaw. “Try it.”

“I just—”

“For me.”

She stares at me, her eyes veiled. I’m near desperate to rip through that veil and make myself at home in them forever.

Finally, she lifts an arm and pokes her hand out past her sleeve, reaching down to grab half the sandwich. Her other hand comes up to hold it closed and she brings it to her mouth. She hesitates ever so slightly, her eyes flicking up to meet mine, and then she takes a bite.

There’s something about watching her mouth close around food I made

that makes me hard in a way I never have before. Pride and possessiveness rush to my brain, making me lightheaded. I'm holding my breath as she chews carefully and it feels like I'm seconds away from giving myself an aneurysm.

She swallows and I open my mouth to say something, but I'm stopped when she brings the sandwich back up to her lips and takes another bite.

And then she moans.

And something inside me turns violently proprietorial. It frightens me how forcefully the feeling thrums in my veins.

My eyes shine with raw need, my dick throbs, desperate to be inside her again.

"This is so fucking good, Tristan."

"Yeah?" I play it cool but on the inside I'm restraining myself from leaning over and licking the small dot of dip lingering on the corner of her lips.

"Yeah, it's the best BLT I've ever had by far." She extends the half in her hands towards me. "Here, try it."

I bite into it directly instead of taking it out of her hands, staring into her eyes as I do so. Her gaze heats and she swallows thickly.

"Pretty good," I tell her. I actually think it's just fine. If I'd had more than ten minutes, I could have made something truly special. "Missing a bit of spice and an additional level of texture like something crunchy."

"You're too hard on yourself."

"You're one to talk."

Her eyes widen but she doesn't acknowledge my words otherwise.

"I think it's perfect," she says, taking another bite. "If this is how you make a sandwich, I can't imagine how good your actual cooking must be. If you opened up a restaurant, people would line out the door for you, I'm sure of it. I know teaching is your parents' thing but wouldn't they understand if you went after this?"

I reach for her sandwich again, ignoring the half that's still on the plate between us.

"No, they wouldn't."

"And you can't go against what they want?"

I break eye contact and look off to the side before replying and choosing honesty. "I don't fight for things."

She waves me away when I try to hand the sandwich back to her and

cocks her head to the side. “What do you mean?”

She only took three bites but I don’t push her to keep eating.

“Just that. I’m not a fighter, I don’t fight for the things I want, ever. I know what I want but I’m not going after it because I don’t have the balls to risk it.” I laugh, humorlessly. “Turns out I’m a coward.”

“You are absolutely not a coward,” she snaps, her voice all of a sudden so firm that it surprises me. “It’s so hard to go against your family. Being trapped by your parents’ ambitions is its own type of prison and I know from experience that it feels like there’s no way out.” Softer, she adds, “Don’t call yourself a coward because if you are, then what does that make me?”

“I’m starting to think the most intriguing woman I’ve ever met,” I tell her.

It’s her turn to laugh hollowly. “You must not know many women.”

“I do and you’re not like any of them.”

She shifts uncomfortably in her seat, like the way I’m staring at her makes her self-conscious.

“I’ll shatter that illusion for you very soon, don’t you worry,” she says, voice toneless. “Anyway, we got off topic. You should try to find a way to continue cooking while still keeping your job at RCA.”

“It’s not that easy,” I tell her. “Breaking into the industry is hard without any formal training, even if it is just to do an apprenticeship, and it’s even harder when I don’t know anyone in Switzerland. It’s fine though, I’ve given up on that dream,” I tell her honestly. “I’m happy just cooking at home and developing skills that way.” That part is a lie, but I can’t tell her that my life has been planned out for me since I was born and not only is there no room for a hobby as blue collar as cooking, but there’s no room in it for *her*.

Not casually, or otherwise.

Not that she even wants a place in my life long term, but I’m finding that the thought of letting her go anytime soon is even more painful than never picking up a knife again.

“What’s the deal with your parents?” I ask.

Nera stiffens and a wall comes slamming down behind her eyes. She has the most visible walls up that I’ve ever seen. And yet, it doesn’t seem like anyone can see them but me.

“Come on, I shared. It’s only fair.” Her silence doesn’t dissuade me. “Is your mother as hard on you as your father?”

“Different methods, but yes.”

Getting my wisdom teeth extracted was easier than pulling information out of her, but every word, every little tidbit of her life that she gives me is worth its weight in gold. I store them away for later like individual pieces of a puzzle set on a table to form the full picture of who she is. I only have two sides of the outer frame done, but I don't see myself stopping until the image is complete.

"What's their end goal? Why was your dad so pissed that you lost last year?"

"He wants me to win a gold medal at this summer's Olympic games."

I give a low whistle, impressed. Leaning back into my chair, I fold my arms over my chest and spread my legs comfortably. I cross my ankles behind her leg, loosely locking her at the table in case she tries to run away from our conversation.

"Like I said, the most intriguing woman I've ever met. And potentially the most talented."

She scoffs. "Anyone can be good. They need me to be great. Or else."

I don't miss the fact that she says 'need' instead of 'want'.

"Or else what?"

She shrugs and my shoulders tighten. If I ever get my hands on her father, I'll wring his neck for ever putting his hands on hers.

"Do you want to win?"

"What?" Nera asks, eyes wide as they snap to meet mine.

"Is that your dream? Your goal? Are you pushing yourself every day because if you don't win this summer, it'll crush *you*? Or because it'll crush them?"

She stares and stares like she doesn't understand what I just asked her.

"What?" I ask.

She shakes her head. "No one's ever asked me that."

I know the feeling. "Then give me an honest answer."

Nera thinks about it for a second, running her finger along the edge of the plate before looking back up at me. Her eyes shine with the competitiveness I've come to know well.

"Yes, I want to win. I want it more than anything." There's a kind of ferocity in her voice that leaves me in awe of her. "I want it so badly that some days I spend more time in my head dreaming of winning than I do actually living." Her gaze softens small degrees but it's more vulnerability than she's ever shown me. "But I don't...I don't think I want to win for the

right reasons.”

“Go on.”

“When I daydream about it, I don’t see myself with a medal around my neck. I don’t see myself waving at a crowd and holding a bouquet of flowers in my arms. I see my parents smiling. I see my dad finally being proud of me. I see my mum loving me unconditionally for once.” Her throat works like emotion holds her hostage, but her eyes are no wetter than before. “I feel relief, not triumph. This is something I’ve worked my entire life for, that my coach is driving me into the ground to achieve, that my dad won’t rest until I get, no matter the cost or sacrifice along the way, this one thing that *I* desperately want and I can’t even muster up any excitement about it. In my daydreams, I just feel the same kind of relief you feel when you’ve finished a chore. Because hopefully then it’ll be done and I’ll get to move on without this immense pressure in my life.”

I have an almost visceral urge to shove the table aside and take her in my arms but I know she’d run for the hills if I did.

I lean forward instead, resting my weight on my elbows. Underneath the table, my calf presses against hers, a silent show of support and the only one I know she’ll accept.

“Why do you think that’s what’s driving you?”

She looks down at her hands where they lay in her lap and thinks for a moment before her gaze flits back up to meet mine. “Because your family is supposed to love you. Hundreds of years of scientific research say so and I can’t rationalize away why mine can’t when I feel like I’ve only ever done exactly what they’ve asked of me.” Softer, so soft that I only just catch it, she adds, “And if I can’t make my own parents love me, then who else will?”

Protectiveness beats furiously in my veins, the need to shield her away from the cruelty of the world almost animalistic in its ardor.

“Sometimes the people who are supposed to love you the most are the ones who hurt you the most,” I tell her. “That says everything about them and absolutely nothing about you.” I lean forward ever so slightly, entranced by the sadness in her eyes. “It’s complete madness to me that you think you’d be a hard person to love,” I whisper, my thumb brushing absentmindedly over her cheeks, my hand cupping her face.

I clear my throat to lend light-heartedness to my words. They came out almost like a declaration, which certainly wasn’t what I intended. I’d only meant that I was captivated by her so I could only imagine how easily and

quickly a guy open to something long-term would fall in love with her.

The thought makes my fists clench.

A thick silence hangs between us after each of our family confessions. The metal legs of my chair make a sharp noise against the floor as I shove it back and stand. She watches me approach with guarded eyes but when I bend at the waist, cup her face, and bring my mouth down on hers, she returns my kiss.

She stands, our mouths still fused together, and wraps her arms around my neck.

“You’re incredible,” I mutter heatedly against her mouth. “And your parents are twats if they can’t see it.”

She gives something like a breathy giggle that has my already hard cock so stiff I’m afraid it’ll snap in two. Cum leaks from my dick as primal need for her takes over the rational part of my brain. My forearm locks around her lower back and I hoist her into my arms, wrapping her legs around my waist.

She whimpers and I stiffen, some awareness piercing through the haze of lust to remind me that I brutally fucked her only hours ago.

“Why is it that I can’t get enough of you, hmm?” I ask, between bites along her jaw as I move up to her ear and suck her lobe into my mouth. “I already need to fuck you again. I want to see your eyes widen as I push into you and hear those breathy sounds you make every time I bottom inside you.”

I shouldn’t be doing this. I’m knowingly and willingly fucking a student repeatedly. Knowingly putting her reputation and my own in danger. Knowingly choosing to put my needs over my mum’s, knowing that with every time we do this, the chances of us getting found out and thus the chances of her getting hurt are increasing exponentially.

I know all this and I do it anyway.

It’s starting to be a sickness almost, this obsession with having her at all costs. I don’t care about the implications or the potential repercussions, not if it means I’ll have her even just one more time.

Her hands play with my hair, her nails sinking into my skin and sending delicious shivers down my spine. She arches into me, neck completely back and eyes closed as she rubs her needy center against my hard cock.

Fuck this. I’m not waiting until she’s not sore.

Leaning over, I swipe the contents of the table off with one savage move of my arm. The plate goes flying and shatters against the nearby wall. The

sound makes Nera's eyes fly open. She looks dazedly around, taking in the scene as I lay her down on the now empty table.

Her eyes find mine again as I stand between her bent legs, my hands cupping her thighs possessively for a moment before I rip her shorts and panties down her legs and off.

“Anyone ever tell you you're very unhinged for a professor?”

Her eyes twinkle with mischief and excitement and I know she's as into this as I am.

“Blame it on this one gorgeous, mouthy teenager who keeps me up at night with dreams of her hot pussy and tight ass.”

I shove her sweater up roughly over her breasts, groaning when those tight peaks come into view.

“And her perfect tits,” I continue, twirling my tongue over her hard nipple before sucking it into my mouth. She moans, clutching my head against her chest and arching into my touch.

“And her greedy mouth,” I finish, moving up between her legs to slam my mouth back down on hers. My hands rove continuously over her body, never stopping for more than a couple of seconds in one place, like they can't believe I get to touch her again.

She groans into my mouth when my fingers come down to her slit, caressing up and down her wet heat as I continue laying claim to her mouth. I sink two fingers inside her and a violent shudder racks through her body.

“So responsive,” I praise approvingly. “Is your pussy sore?” I start pumping inside her, my fingers shoving roughly in and out as I look down into her eyes.

“A bit,” she breathes, holding on to my shirt.

“As sore as your ass?”

She shakes her head aimlessly, eyes fluttering closed.

“Use your words.”

“N-no.”

“Too bad.”

My other hand comes down between her legs and my index finger rims the tight puckered opening. She stiffens, eyes opening and clashing with mine as she gives me an apprehensive look.

“Don't worry, I'm not going to take your ass again tonight.” Relief flashes in her eyes and she swallows thickly, gaze still pinned on me. I continue my soft caresses around her used hole, aided by the arousal that

gushes from her pussy and drips to lubricate her rim. “But I will, soon. Better get used to it, Nera. I’ll be fucking your ass hard and often and you’ll scream for me louder and louder every time I do.”

She flushes, eyes rolling into her head with pleasure as I alternate thrusting my fingers in her pussy with rubbing her sensitive muscles.

“I can’t believe you... did *that*,” she says, shy all of a sudden.

I straighten, grabbing her leg and holding it up high as I start kissing a path from her ankle and down her thigh, eventually settling her leg on my shoulder.

“You did ask me to set feminism back a couple hundred years and I’m not one to disappoint.” I grab her other leg and repeat what I did with the first. “In this one case, failure really wasn’t an option.” I place it on my other shoulder, pausing to look down at her like this for a moment. She looks obscene, pussy on display as both her legs are pinned against my ears. “Now let me knock a few more years off.”

I drop to my knees and my mouth finds her center. When the first swipe of my tongue hits her pussy, her hips go canting off the table. I press her back down and tug on her thighs to bring her to the edge. Dipping back between her legs, I lick at her center again, this time starting at her asshole and going up her entire slit until I flick her clit with my tongue.

“Oh, my *God*.”

I pull back and look at her. She’s on her back, arms desperately clutching the edges of the table, face twisted in lust. Her eyes open, dazed, confused, and completely overcome with desire as she looks down at me.

“Why did you stop?” She whines and fuck if seeing her desperately needy for me isn’t my favorite version of her.

“You called out for me,” I answer with a smirk. “You can just call me Tristan, you know. No need for the formalities.”

“You’re so— *ahhh*,” she starts, cutting off into a strangled moan when my mouth comes back down on her. I reach up between her legs to tweak her pierced nipple, my tongue dancing around my thrusting fingers as I bring her closer to the edge.

I feel her walls start to spasm around me, her thighs clenching my body tightly as if to trap me between her legs forever. She doesn’t need to do so; I’ll happily stay there for all eternity just eating her out and watching her fall apart.

When I suck her clit into my mouth, she comes with a soft cry, back

arching off the table and hands reaching out blindly to grab my hair. I keep licking her through her orgasm, my tongue swiping furiously at her slit until her calls of my name start to sound like a broken record playing the same two seconds of a track.

I stand and pull my fingers from her wet pussy, bringing them up to my lips and sucking them into my mouth. Her eyes shine as she watches me feast on her juices.

“So fucking sweet,” I groan.

I reach into my sweatpants and pull out my hard cock, placing it at her opening. I rub up and down her slit, teasing her and gathering her juices to ease my entrance.

“So wet for me,” I muse, pressing in. “So tight for me.” She mewls so softly, a hot little sound that gets my blood going as she closes her legs around my waist. “So fucking *eager* for me.”

I push at her thighs, unlocking her ankles from my waist and opening her legs wide. When she’s spread for me, I thrust inside to the hilt until I’m deeper inside her than I’ve ever been, my hips completely flush against her pussy. Her scream turns into a garbled groan as she works to accept me.

“You’re so big,” she pants, brokenly.

“You’ve taken me in tighter places,” I say, proudly.

Fuck. If I keep thinking about what it felt like sinking into her unbelievably tight ass, I’ll come on the spot.

I pull out until only the head remains and sink back in. She squeals like this is her first time getting fucked and I know I’m not going to be able to extend this. It’s going to be short and sweet.

And rough, if I have anything to do with it.

I lean over and wrap my hands around her waist, hoisting her into my arms. She yelps then groans when I wrap her legs back around me and settle her on my dick.

Her hands come to my neck as she holds on for dear life. One of my hands stays where it is, keeping her locked against me, and the other moves to cup her nape. She’s staring into my eyes, hers wide, shocked, overrun with lust and pleasure, and I watch them roll into her head and her mouth drop open as I pull my hips back and drive into her.

“I think I’ll fuck you like this from now on,” I declare through gritted teeth. “So, I can see the expressions explode on your face as you take my dick. You don’t need to say anything, your eyes are saying it all right now.”

“Oh, yeah?” She manages to say between ragged pants. “And what are they saying?”

“That you fucking love this. That you can’t get enough. That you want more, harder, deeper, faster.” I thrust viciously. “Rougher.” She bounces on my dick, the only thing keeping her in place my hands on her hip and neck. I twist my fingers in her hair and grab the thick strands. “Over and over until you come so hard your juices drip down on my floor.”

She’s like a ragdoll as I throw her around with the power of my hips alone. She’s squeezing me so tightly with her pussy that I feel like she’s cutting off blood flow. But her body also holds me, clutching me desperately against her as she takes it.

“Tell me, Nera,” I demand, using her hair to angle her head back so she’s looking at me.

“I’m going to come,” she moans. “You always make me come so hard, I can barely take it.” She starts bouncing herself, meeting me thrust for thrust like she can’t get enough. “I love the way you fuck me.”

A possessive roar rips from my throat when she bends her head and her teeth close around my shoulder. They sink into my flesh as my fingers pinch her clit and she comes, muscles shuddering with every assaulting wave of her climax. I thrust one final time inside her before I follow her over the cliff’s edge, shooting my load into her stretched pussy.

Goosebumps erupt over my skin and my entire body shudders as my orgasm stretches endlessly, my cock comfortably at home inside her tight heat and wanting to mark every inch of it with my seed.

Finally, I set her gently back down on the table and pull out.

“Fuck, that was good,” I say, glancing my thumb over her nose before pulling my sweatpants over my still hard cock. I brush my lips against hers. “Think it might be time for another shower,” I say with a smirk.

She averts her eyes quickly.

“I’m actually going to go,” she says, pushing at my chest so I’ll free her legs. The change is abrupt, but I’ve gotten used to recognizing when her walls slam down. It’s always when she feels most exposed, especially after she’s revealed something vulnerable about herself.

I stiffen. “No.”

“I have to. Bellamy’s going to need me tomorrow and the girls are going to wonder where I am. You don’t want me to have to answer those questions any more than I do.”

She's right.

And still, I don't want to let her go.

"Tristan," she says, pushing once more. "I have to go."

This time I take a step back and she jumps down from the table, grabbing her shorts and underwear and putting them on. I watch her silently as she busies herself around the room, grabbing her shoes and phone.

When she has everything she turns around and waves awkwardly like we just met and I didn't have my cock in her less than five minutes ago.

"Alright, bye," she says, heading for the door.

"Where do you think you're going?"

She turns back around with a frown. "I just told you, I'm—"

"You're not walking home in the middle of the night. I'll drive you."

"I can take an Uber, it's fine."

An angry growl rumbles up my chest. "You're not getting in a car with a stranger either."

"It's fine, Tristan. You don't need to do that for me."

"I'm doing it for me," I say, closing the distance between us. "You're freshly fucked and you look it. You barely have any clothes on and my cum is leaking down your thigh. I won't have a second of mental peace if I let you walk out that door into the dark of fucking night by yourself."

She gives me an inscrutable look. "Are you always this protective of your hookups?"

I want to tell her no, because I've never slept with the same woman twice before, nor, frankly, have I ever cared what happened to them after I was done fucking them.

"I'm not letting you go anywhere without me, Nera. Either you get in my bed and cuddle or you get in my car and let me take you home. Which is it going to be?"

She huffs at the finality of my tone. She grabs the car keys where I hung them on the hook by the door and lobs them at me.

I snatch them out of mid-air as she throws the front door open and stalks out.

"Careful," I say, calling after her as I walk out and close the door behind me. "You know how much I love to fuck the attitude out of you."

My grin widens as my words make her miss a step on her way to the car.

"You're insatiable."

“Yes.”

She whips around. “You’re not going to argue it?”

“What is there to argue?” I ask, closing the car door behind me and pulling onto the road. “The only time I’m not thinking about fucking you is when I *am* fucking you. Which is exactly why I’m not letting you put yourself in potential harm’s way.”

She rolls her eyes. “Nothing would have happened to me.”

“Maybe not. But what if it did?” I throw her a dark look. My next words are soft. “How would I live with myself then?”

My hand comes down on her thigh and she looks at it for a long time before looking out the window.

“Okay,” she says. Her hand lays on top of mine like before, her fingers burrowing under my palm to hold it. She doesn’t look at me as she does so, like she doesn’t want to acknowledge this small sliver of vulnerability.

I pull into The Pen’s parking lot and park in front of her building. She doesn’t immediately move to get out.

Progress.

I clasp her nape and angle her face towards me. Tired, unshielded eyes meet mine and the pull between us calls to me. I’m about to bring my mouth down on hers when she closes the distance and claims mine.

I groan loudly, satisfied, and her hand reaches out tentatively to cup my jaw. I unbuckle her seatbelt and pull her into my lap to get better access to her. My hands tangle in her hair as we kiss like we’ve been separated for weeks.

Finally, she pulls away, breathing heavily. Her eyes are glazed over and looking at me almost softly.

Does she know every little thing she does is making me want to keep her? Does she have any idea at all?

“Come back tomorrow,” I demand.

Surprisingly, she nods. “I can’t stay the night.”

My teeth grind together in frustration. Had you told me four months ago that I’d get annoyed when a girl refused to sleep in my bed, I’d have laughed you out of the room. Now, it’s downright turning into my biggest, most desperate fantasy.

“Then I’ll drive you home.”

She nods again, not fighting me any longer. “Okay.”

I kiss her one last time on the mouth and then once on the nose before

opening my car door. She unhooks her legs from either side of me and gets out, closing the door behind her.

“Sleep tight, pretty girl, and enjoy the time with your friends. I’ll be back for you before you know it.”

Chapter 27

Nera

I go back the next day.

And the next.

And the one after that until I blink and three weeks have gone by. Three weeks of spending the evening with my friends and sneaking out once they're asleep to go to Tristan's.

Three weeks of him fucking me every day, every which way, until I'm begging to come. True to his word, he's never sated. He never fucks me less than twice, almost like he can't go more than an hour or two before he has to have me again.

Three weeks of him cooking me dinner every evening. When I come back the second night, he has at least ten bags full of groceries and he's busying himself about the kitchen putting them away.

I watch him cook every meal with those attractive hands of his, mesmerized by the side of him that comes out. He morphs into a completely different person when he has a knife in hand, his true passion so visible it's undeniable.

He's a level of focused I've never seen him be in class and it warms the ice around my heart to see him bent over, brow creased in concentration as he plates dishes he made for me because he thought I'd like them.

It's delicious meal after delicious meal, everything from sous vide pork tenderloin in homemade zhoug to crispy tuna tostadas with a yuzu honey

sauce.

He watches me eat and at first, I think it's because he suspects something. But then I realize, he's just waiting to see my reaction.

I think he might even be nervous, his shoulders stiff and his breathing shallow, his hands playing with a tea towel as he watches me take the first bite. I find myself wanting to eat and letting myself enjoy it because I like the way his lips curve when I tell him this newest dish is my favorite.

I say it every time and I mean it every time.

He tells me that means he has to keep making better dishes every day, that he can't slip. That I'm unknowingly giving him the training he needs.

Heat thunders through my heart in response.

He's so talented and so dedicated when he's doing what he loves. I recognize the same drive, the same blind fixation I have with fencing as he does with his craft and it makes me feel closer to him.

Dangerously close. Far closer than I ever wanted to be. It takes work to stop myself from leaning in further and to pull myself back instead. When I do remind him that we're not dating, he kisses my mouth or my nose, appeases me with an "okay, baby", and returns to whatever he was doing.

It's three weeks of going home to my bed and secretly wishing I'd stayed over instead. Three weeks of convincing myself I'm doing the right thing not letting him get too close because he'll just disappoint me like everybody else has.

He's patient, never forcing me to stay or otherwise pushing me beyond simply insisting on driving me back to my apartment every night.

There's another reason I don't stay.

It's torture hiding my secret from him. When the voice comes for me — louder and more self-castigating than ever before because it can feel that maybe I'm starting to reach for a chance to escape its clutches — I have nowhere to turn.

His place is too small, I can't purge there without him finding out. The voice is furious that I don't immediately obey. Its booming tenor rips through my mind, pulling my attention over to it until I can barely carry the conversation I'm having with him.

My skin crawls and I'm on edge until I get out of there and get home. There, I run to the bathroom, the voice screaming at me the whole way there.

Why'd you eat that?

Fat pig.

You're disgusting.

A disgrace. An embarrassment to your parents.

I'm furious with myself, screaming, upset, depressed. Loathing of my mind and body both. How could I eat that food he made when I know it's going to make me gain weight?

Today it was beef lasagna. He said I needed energy for my three-hour practice tomorrow, that food is fuel.

You're worthless.

I'm on my knees shoving my fingers down my throat.

Ugly, stupid, broken.

Failure.

Vomit flies out of my throat and hits the water. Some of it splashes on the white of the seat, horrifying me.

Acid burns my throat. My head spins.

I'm shaking.

My stomach flips, unruly. Unhappy.

I scrub the seat raw. Scrub it long after the vomit is gone. Scrub it maniacally, cleaning the filth that I can't see. That I know is there.

No evidence.

No proof of how defective I am.

Flush. Swirl.

Chaotic water just like the chaos in my brain. It's an invisible war zone and I'm an everyday casualty.

The stain is gone, just like the food.

You're so fucking stupid.

No self-control whatsoever. You're no better than an animal.

I get to my feet and stumble.

Weak.

My legs shake, I'm trembling, looking at myself in the mirror.

Disgusting.

Contempt. Apathy.

I wipe the back of my hand against my lips and gargle some water in my mouth.

I'm holding on to the sink for dear life.

So lightheaded.

It won't even be worth it. If I'm not throwing it up immediately, I'm not getting rid of it, not really.

I'm getting rid of the weight of it, but the damage has already been done. The calories absorbed.

Everything your parents are saying is true.

I can feel my hips stretching, the fat at my stomach growing, repercussions of my inability to control myself.

Shameful.

Deep, burning shame.

That's all I feel.

You don't even deserve to live.

I shut off the lights and get in bed knowing the voice has me back in its clutches.

Nights are the worst. I don't even have the comfort of the outside world's noise to drown it out. No, it gets to yell at me until I beg for the escape that is the nothingness of sleep.

I close my eyes and let the thoughts of self-loathing take me into a fitful sleep, knowing that I'm going to wake up and do the same thing all over again tomorrow.

"Nera! Come here."

"Yes, Coach," I say, jogging over to where Krav is standing. I didn't sleep well after getting home last night, so I'm moving a little slowly at this practice.

This is the final hour of my workout and our only one-on-one time as everybody else filters out.

I was hoping Krav would go easy on me, but he seems intent on making this entire session painful. Sadism shines in his gaze when he sees me approach.

I falter, my eyes widening in horror before I mask the expression away quickly when I realize what he's holding in his hand.

A scale.

"Time to see where you are," he grounds, the tenor of his voice combined with the accent sounding completely merciless.

There's no use fighting him. He's just obeying orders. My father's or my mother's, I'm not sure. It doesn't matter. Today's one of those days where dread lives freely in my heart. The rest of this workout, hell, the next few weeks even, depend entirely on how this weigh-in goes.

He places it on the ground and I step on, holding my breath. Hoping that what I've been doing in the bathroom when I've come home from Tristan's will have balanced out my eating.

The numbers cycle through and eventually settle. The blood in my veins freezes over when I see the final weight.

I've gained half a kilo since he last weighed me a few weeks ago. I was supposed to lose that much in order to stay on target with the goals he and my father outlined for me.

I don't dare look up and meet his eyes. Not when I can feel the polar vortex rippling off him.

"You're not taking this seriously."

His tone is terrifying and I know I'm in for real pain. I fight to burrow myself in that place in my mind where I go for practices like these.

"No, Coach."

There's no point arguing, that'll just make it worse.

"Two hundred pushups."

Without hesitating, I drop to the ground and get started. He walks slowly around me, his feet staying ominously in my range of vision. My throat is thick with tension but I push past it. Seconds later, I feel a cold weight added to my lower back.

"Wha—"

"Keep going," he orders.

My arms shake under the added weight of the foreign object and I'm only forty pushups in. I go down and press up with difficulty, my muscles screaming.

"You've been distracted. Unfocused. You come to practice tired and not ready to work. I'm starting to think you're a lost cause."

It's not true. Okay, I have been more tired recently because of the time spent at Tristan's, but when I show up, I show up. It's a baseless, unfair accusation and he knows it.

But this isn't about what's fair.

It's about power.

It's about control.

And in this situation, I have neither.

I get through twenty more when I feel a second weight added to my back.

“Your father has okayed me to use some more... *hands on* methods if your lack of commitment continued. Those will be in effect until you learn some discipline.”

I whimper loudly, the pain excruciating. Every nerve in my body is screaming for release, begging me to just stop as I push past it once more, giving everything I have.

A third weight, even heavier than the first two, gets added.

I collapse to the ground under it, unable to hold myself up any longer.

I don't get to stop.

His hand wraps around my ponytail and he yanks it, wrenching my head back. I scream in pain but he forces me to follow. He holds me by the hair as I struggle to lift my body back up.

“You're not stopping until you're finished. *Keep. Fucking. Going.*”

I disassociate, my mind breaking.

I don't remember finishing the pushups, just like I don't remember the four exercises that come after, each more agonizingly painful than the next.

All I know is that when he finally walks away without a kind or acknowledging word, he leaves me sprawled on the ground in acute pain.

The ligaments in my arms are throbbing so badly that I can't bend either elbow. It's unbearable. Black spots cloud my vision as I roll onto my back, yelping when the emerging bruises make contact with the ground. A faltering breath pains my abused stomach, sore from where he punched my abs as I bench pressed under the guise of “strengthening my core”.

I won't crawl to the locker room. I won't let him do that to me.

I need to stand.

I know I can do it.

I'm strong.

I cry out when I attempt to sit up and fall immediately back down. My breath works like I just ran a half-marathon. It feels like large shards of glass are ripping through my entire body when I try again, but this time I get to a sitting position.

Next, I stand, and I'm proud that I'm only slightly limping towards the locker room. My progress is slow, each step costing me.

This was the worst punishment training session yet. They've happened

in the past, but never this bad. Never with the clear intent to hurt me, to bend the few remaining pieces of my soul that are still intact into submission.

When I'm just outside the door, a hand wraps over my mouth and someone pushes me inside the women's locker room.

For a moment, I think it's Tristan.

It's barely a half-second lapse in judgment before I realize that it's all wrong.

It's not the same large hand or wide shoulders pressing against my back. Not the same heat that spreads through my body when he touches me.

When I'm flipped around and a hand closes around my neck, real fear slams into me as my heart pounds against the walls of my ribcage.

Rex.

He's only bothered me twice since the first days of school and the last time was weeks ago. Truthfully, I'd forgotten about him and it'd lulled me into a false sense of security.

He stands between me and the door, pinning me to the wall with his hand. Alarm bells go off as my gaze clashes with his and I catch the violent glint in his eyes.

"Let me go," I snarl, fighting him.

But I'm so weak right now, I can barely muster enough energy to bring my hand up to cover the one he has around my throat. I dig at his fingers weakly and he swats me away like I'm a fly.

"What are you fucking doing? Let me go, *now*."

"I'm tired of being patient, Nera," he whispers, his putrid breath hitting my face. My heart beats a wild rhythm. He may not be as big as Tristan, but he's much bigger than me and I'm made aware of that terrifying fact when he gets even closer. I tilt my face to the side, pressing it against the wall so he can't touch me, but he's got me trapped. I hold back a whimper. "We're getting back together. You know it makes sense, especially when both of our families are asking for it, so stop fighting it." He traces my cheek with his other hand. I push unsuccessfully at his chest, my shoves nothing more than feeble attempts. Dread slithers from my heart and into my veins when I realize he won't budge. "I don't even know why you're making such a big deal of this. I'm the one who has to put up with your frigid pussy. Meanwhile, you get *me*. You should be thanking me."

Anger momentarily powers my strength and I shove him. He takes only a step back, but it's enough to get him off me.

“Yeah, I just get your limp dick and inability to pleasure a woman, lucky me,” I snap, furious and foolish.

He slaps me.

Hard.

I don't see it coming. The ringing explodes in my ear before I even process that he's hit me and I fall to the ground.

Shock freezes me as I look up at him.

My hair is in my face and I see terrifying images of him through my partially obstructed vision as he walks towards me. Adrenaline temporarily silences the pain in my muscles, my body sensing it has one mission now.

Survive.

I crawl backwards away from him on my arms, finding some kind of superhuman strength to get away from him, but I'm not going in the right direction. I'm headed deeper into the locker room and further away from safety.

His eyes shine with sadistic violence as he finally reveals the real person I've always suspected he was.

“Have you lost your mind?” I ask, incredulously, hoping to make him realize the folly of his actions before he goes any further.

But he's too far gone, I can see that.

I use the last remnants of my strength to get to my feet, clutching the wall for support to stay standing.

“I saw Krav and his ‘hands on’ approach. It seemed to work for your training so I'm thinking it'll work for getting you to see reason.” He looms over me and takes off his jacket. He rolls his sleeves up his forearms and real horror sinks in. He's going to hurt me. “If you won't do it willingly, I have no problem forcing you. I might even enjoy it just that much more.”

He lunges for me and I scream. I hate that he forces that weakness out of me, but terror takes over.

I scream when he slaps me again and I scream when he covers his body with mine, his hands feeling me up. Bile rises in my throat and threatens to make an appearance. I hope it does. I hope I puke on him out of fear and he's so disgusted with me that he walks away.

I have no such luck.

He grabs and twists my wrist so painfully, stars explode in my eyes. The angle is all wrong and pain shoots into my elbow. I'm afraid it's going to snap.

“I know this is your sword hand, Nera.”

His voice is glacial, the meaning of his threat clear. The coldest fear I’ve ever felt freezes my lungs and chokes me. He wouldn’t do this to me.

Not this.

“Not my arm.” I thrash against him but he twists it further. A pained whimper falls from my lips.

“Say goodbye to the Olympics, bitch.” He’s smiling broadly, the full evil of him out and proud. “This should make you fall in line.”

His eyes shine with crazed sadism as he tightens his hold even further and adds pressure.

One second he’s on me, the next he’s gone. He’s thrown across the room and his body crashes loudly into the nearby wall.

I blink in the direction of where he stood, my brain unable to process what just happened.

Tristan appears in his place. His large body looms over the scene, dwarfing me against the wall. His face is contorted in a terrifying rictus, the expression stamped on his features so darkly twisted it would scare the casual observer.

It nearly crushes me with relief.

Here he is, my very own avenging angel.

Come to save me.

Chapter 28

Tristan

When I heard screaming coming from inside the women's locker room, I ran in without a second thought.

But I never — *never* — expected to run in there and see Nera pinned up against the wall.

Never expected to see her entire body hidden behind the man holding her hostage, her arms thrashing against him to try and get him off.

If I live thirty lifetimes, I know it still won't be enough time to find the right words to describe the emotion that mangles my heart and crushes my windpipe when I find her trapped and in danger.

I short circuit for half a heartbeat.

I'm kicked back to life like someone uses a defibrillator on me when she screams again.

Raw fear slams into me, combined with fury and an animalistic need to rip this soon to be dead man's throat out with my bare hands.

She looks so small and vulnerable and this piece of shit has his hands on her.

I black out. I rip Rex off her and throw him aside with strength I didn't know I possessed, finally laying eyes on her.

She's huddled against the wall, looking at Rex's prone form. Shock freezes her in place except for the way her body shakes. Her arms wrap protectively around herself as she stares unseeingly back at me.

“What the fuck is going on here?”

My eyes zero in on the way her sleeve is unnaturally positioned on her wrist. Halfway up her forearm like he had his hand on her bare flesh. I couldn't see what he was doing when I walked in, just that he had her pinned. That in itself was enough to piss me off, but now I really take in the state of her.

He groans in the background but I barely hear him over the sound of the ringing in my ears as I walk up to her and gently lift her wrist.

The skin is mottled and beginning to bruise.

I frown and my eyes lift to her face. To the terrified look stamped on her features. To the deep red mark marring her cheek. To the blossoming pink line around her neck.

The horror of what I just walked in on slowly sinks in as I stare at her assaulted face. Images of her bruised and hurt intercut with very similar memories of my mother. They flash through my mind at blinding speed.

The ringing gets louder, my vision tunneling in dangerously on her.

“Did he fucking hit you?”

My voice is unrecognizable and she flinches. I want to be able to comfort her right now, but I can't. I sound completely demented, my tone crazed, and it's reflective of the tenuous hold I currently have on my sanity. I'm barely managing to hold myself back from the violent outburst threatening to erupt out of me. I'm about to snap.

She nods slowly, like she's still processing it herself.

“He slapped m— *Tristan, no!*”

By the time her words are out, it's too late.

He's just back on his feet and I dive for him, driving my shoulder violently into his stomach and slamming him back to the ground.

My fist cracks against his jaw. His face flies to the side with a sickening crunch.

He groans and turns his face back, and I hit him again.

And again.

And *again*.

My fist comes down with a viciousness I'm unfamiliar with as the primal need to protect Nera takes over.

“Tristan, please,” I hear her call from behind me.

“She's half your size,” I snarl inches from Rex's face. He cowers, lower lip trembling as he turns his face from me. I shake him viciously, roaring my

fury into his face. “*Half your fucking size. Do you like hitting women, you disgusting piece of shit?*”

I slam his head down against the floor and punch him again.

“Please stop. Please,” I hear distantly as I feel smaller hands pull at my shoulders. There’s nothing she can do, I barely register her being there, blinded as I am by my rage.

Her face comes down in my peripherals as I place my hands around Rex’s neck and squeeze.

“How does this feel, wanker?” I spit, enraged. “This is how I’m going to kill you. Snuffing the life out of you and snapping your neck in two for putting your hands around her fucking throat.”

“*Tristan,*” Nera begs now. Her voice is desperate. Pleading. She crouches next to where I’ve got Rex pinned to the ground and I hate that I’m forcing her to come within inches of him just so she can get through to me. “*Please. Please let him go, I’m begging you.*” She clasps my face in her hands, forcing my wild eyes to meet her scared ones.

Seeing the still terrified look in her eye brings me crashing back down to reality.

“I don’t want you getting in trouble over this, I won’t forgive myself if you do. He’s not worth it, so please let him go, okay?” Her tone is coaxing, her lips coming down on mine to emphasize her words. “For me.” She caresses my face and I can’t believe she’s having to calm me down when she was the one attacked. “Let him go for me. Take me home instead.”

I release him the minute she says the words.

I reach for her and crush her against my chest as I come to stand, my hands clutching the back of her head and her lower back.

Slowly, I feel her relax. Her arms come around my waist and splay at my back. I hold her against my thrashing heartbeat, reassuring the frantic organ that she’s okay. That she’s safe.

Relishing the feel of her curves against my body.

Trying not to think about what would have happened if I’d arrived minutes later.

If I hadn’t come looking for her at all.

“Thank you,” she says, words muffled against my chest.

I pull her head back, brushing the hair out of her face and angling it up to meet mine. She’s shaking like a leaf and a fresh wave of violence clobbers through me, demanding an outlet.

“How are you here?”

I drop a long kiss on her forehead, holding her against me as my eyes shutter. I’m only just getting my heartbeat under control.

“You should have been done with practice and at my place hours ago. I was worried.”

She trembles against me and I think maybe she’s crying. When I look down at her face, her cheeks are dry but the light in her eyes is gone.

A primitive need to protect her takes over. Rex is unconscious behind us, but I need to get her out of here.

She doesn’t fight me when I fold her into my arms. She settles against my chest like she belongs there, her eyes closing as the waning adrenaline gives way to the bone deep fatigue it temporarily shielded.

I stalk through the halls of RCA. It’s past nine pm on a Friday night so no one is here, but I wouldn’t give a fuck if there were a thousand students present. Nothing’s going to stop me from getting her to safety right now.

She’s asleep before we’ve even made it to the car. If I wasn’t so desperate to get her to my home, I’d just sit there and hold her.

I drive to my place and jog up my front stairs with her in my arms. I have to physically restrain myself from kicking my own door down so it doesn’t slow me down rather than taking the time to open it.

When I’m inside, I increase the heating by a couple of degrees because I know she’s always cold at the temperature I usually keep my place, and stalk to the bathroom.

She’s awake but her expression is near catatonic as she stares up into my face. I place her fully dressed under the jet of hot water and get in behind her.

She turns around when I join her and throws her arms around my neck, bringing my face down and crushing her mouth to mine. She’s assertive as she claims me and it has all the blood rushing from my head straight to my cock.

But when I grab her waist and back to pin her against me and she winces, I abruptly rip my mouth off hers.

She gives me a cautious look. Her eyes are heavy with secrets and I want to bleed every single one of them out of her.

I grab her workout top and pull it off over her head.

Fresh horror stabs me in the gut when it reveals giant, mottled bruises on her shoulders and back. They’re only still forming but are already red, purple,

and by the looks of it, incredibly painful. A sick, sour feeling churns in my stomach as roaring sounds in my ears.

I trace over them gently, my blood running cold. I feel it freeze in my veins, the need for retribution tunneling my vision.

“How late was I?” I whisper, tormented by the bruises I’m seeing. “How long did he have with you before I showed up?”

I imagine the worst, my insides gnawing at themselves knowing I didn’t protect her.

“Those aren’t from him.”

My eyes snap up. The fury that I’d been holding at a dangerous, unstable simmer erupts like lava out of a raging volcano.

“Who the fuck did this to you?” I growl.

“It doesn’t matter,” she says, cupping my neck and pulling me back down towards her. I stop her with a hand on her jaw.

“Don’t keep secrets from me right now, baby, I’m about to lose my shit. Tell me who touched you.”

Her eyes flick down to my lips. She takes in the way they’re stretched angrily around my teeth before she replies.

“My father thought it was time for a change of method in my training,” she says. Her eyes flick back up to mine. “Coach Krav executed those orders. Those specific bruises are from when he tied bands around two tires and strapped the other end to either one of my shoulders. He had me pull them ten laps around the gym.”

I recoil, shocked at the visual. “Why did you let him? Why didn’t you just refuse to do it?”

The words sound accusatory and I immediately regret them.

Nera whirls on me, face tight.

She’s angry all of a sudden, channeling all the rage and helplessness she felt earlier into a glare she pins on me. I reach for her but she slaps my hand away.

“It’s not that easy and you know it,” she snaps. “I’ve *told* you why. You don’t get to judge me or blame me for the things I have no choice but to accept. I’m the one who has to live with them, not you.”

Nera shoves at me, trying to move me out of the way so she can exit the shower. I block her path.

She’s not going anywhere.

“I thought you understood,” she cries out, shoving at me again. Her fists

come down on my chest, agents of her burning anger and lingering fear. “Clearly, I was wrong. You don’t get it and I won’t explain myself to you again.” When I don’t move, she redoubles her efforts. Her small fists carry no weight. They fall against my chest with barely any power, more for show than true aggression. “Get out of my way,” she demands through gritted teeth.

A cavernous hole opens up inside my chest knowing I’ve hurt her. That’s the last thing I ever intended.

I grab her shoulders and momentarily lock her arms at her side. To keep her from leaving, to keep her from pushing me away, physically or otherwise.

“Stop,” I say, the word ripped from my throat, raw and thick with emotion. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry. That’s not what I meant, it was a stupid, careless comment,” I repeat, begging her with my tone to stay. I shake my head, repeatedly. “I get it, I do. I just...I— my dad hits my mum,” I admit. Her body relaxes in my hands, her eyes widening at the information. “I’m not handling this well because of it and I’m so fucking sorry. Seeing you hurt... I blacked out. I reverted to seeing my mum hurt. I would have *killed him* for touching you if you hadn’t stopped me,” I vow, ripping in a ragged breath. “I didn’t mean to be insensitive, I just reacted like an asshole because I can’t think straight when it comes to you, especially you being in danger. Forgive me?”

I clasp her face like I’m afraid she’ll run. Her eyes are sad inky, shiny pools of black that pull me into their depths.

I place a soft, imploring kiss on her lips.

“Please, baby,” I rasp.

Her fingers close around my lower back, digging into my flesh. Pulling me closer instead of pushing me away.

She jerks her chin and immense relief washes over me.

“I’m sorry about your mum,” she says, real sorrow echoing in her tone. “I didn’t know.”

“I’m sorry I wasn’t there to help you.” My voice cracks. “I’m sorry I was late.”

“It’s fine,” she says, voice wobbly. “I don’t need you. I don’t need anyone.”

“Everyone needs *someone*, Nera. It doesn’t make you weak to need me,” I whisper into her hair. “I’m not afraid to admit that I need you.”

She trembles in my hold, her eyes bleeding and pleading as she stares at me.

“Fuck me,” she begs. “Fuck the pain away. That’s what I need.”

Chapter 29

Nera

Tristan's eyes shine with a rare ferocity. He crushes his mouth against mine and steals my breaths and my thoughts in one go. There's no room for anything else but zeroing in on his hands when he touches me like he does now.

He runs over my curves with greedy fingers, grabbing and fondling as he goes like he can't get enough. He rips his mouth from mine only long enough to tear his shirt off over his head and then he's back to kissing me.

He removes my shorts and thong and tugs my sports bra off. His hands are careful, like he's afraid to touch me. Like I'm a piece of fine china that could break into a million tiny pieces if he touched me a little too hard.

He's too careful, unsure almost. He's not grabbing my throat or palming my ass, his fingers digging into my flesh.

He's not flipping me around and ordering me about so he can do what he wants with me.

I hate careful. I don't want it.

"Touch me where he touched me," I breathe against his mouth, grabbing one of his hands and placing it at my throat. "Touch me like you usually touch me, Tristan. Don't let today change this. Us. Please." I grab his other hand and place it between my legs. "Don't treat me like I'm weak."

His hand clamps down on my pussy, his other fingers closing around my throat and tugging me within inches of his face.

“Weak?” he snarls, sharp teeth front and center as his face twists with anger. “You’re the strongest fucking person I know. Don’t misread my hesitancy as disinterest,” he says, before diving for my throat. He sucks and bites a pathway up the column of my neck to just below my ear. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

“Then don’t.”

He picks me up with one arm and then he impales me on his thick cock. My mouth falls open on a loud scream and he catches the sound with the palm of his hand, muffling it. I groan into his hand as he thrusts inside me.

His mouth replaces his hand but I turn mine away from him, suddenly overwhelmed by the intimacy. He grips my jaw and forces me back towards him. He doesn’t give me a choice. His mouth finds mine again, that same sharp and sweet taste of bourbon on his lips. He holds my jaw and keeps me in place.

“No one is ever touching you again, you hear me? Not ever.” He promises. “Not while I have breath in my lungs.”

My blood heats at his visceral promise. He sounds like he’s ready to single handedly take on my worst fears if I just ask him to.

I clasp his face in my hands, staring deep into his eyes.

“Thank you,” I tell him, voice shaking with emotion. “for saving me.”

He thrusts inside me again, once. Hard.

There’s no preparation, no niceties for what comes next, it’s just a man fucking a woman who desperately needs it. It’s hard and fast and nasty.

He ruts into me, muttering praise and threats of physical violence against anyone who hurts me. I hold on to the half open shower door for purchase and arch my back.

He grabs at my breasts and bites at my shoulders and powers into my pussy, his need for me as equally unhinged and violent as my own. He fucks the pain away like I wanted and leaves me as nothing more than a bundle of pleasure.

My muscles clench painfully, a sudden reminder of the incredible soreness of my body, but there’s nothing I can do. I try to fight the incoming climax but it’s like the pain makes it more powerful, makes it more potent.

I claw at his shoulders and rip at his hair. I bite his lower lip and lick the blood into my mouth, moaning dementedly as he drives into me. Our lips smash together as he thrusts one final time, bottoming so deep inside me that I swear I feel him in my womb.

We come together, panting and moaning into each other's mouths as we cling to the other. Warm cum shoots into my pussy, coating my walls as they spasm around Tristan's dick.

Slowly, he puts me down. He wraps me in my towel and stands me in front of the mirror and hands me my toothbrush while he brushes my hair.

It's standing there that I realize how many pieces of me I've left at his place.

No, not left.

Pieces that he's *bought* and made me leave here. The lilac towel from that first night. The toothbrush that was there when I came back the following day. The hairbrush that appeared magically a week later after I'd complained that I couldn't leave his house looking completely disheveled. Hair ties and face wash and the cream I use for the blisters on my hands. I'd mentioned them and slowly they'd started appearing.

I'm in his space and he put me there. I don't know how much of it is a conscious choice, but he wants me here. That realization tugs at the softest parts of me.

I look at him in the mirror and his eyes meet mine. They have the same manic shine in them from when we first stared at each other in that locker room. When I looked at him like he was a god come directly from the heavens to save me.

His hand comes around my front to cup my throat, tilting my head back in the process. His eyes gaze into mine from above with piercing intensity.

"Anything else you want to tell me?" he asks, softly. "You can, you know." His thumb rubs circles over my pulse point. He has to be able to feel it jump every time he speaks. "I'll slay your monsters, every single fucking last one of them."

He kisses me, once. A long, lingering kiss, our mouths pressed deeply against each other's and that's it. I cuff his wrist, holding him as he holds me, and press my lips greedily back against his.

I want to confide in him, to open myself up to him, but how can I ever make him understand that my brain is broken? That I have a pretty exterior but there's no hope of salvaging someone whose insides are as ugly as mine?

I shake my head softly and Tristan gives me a hooded look in return. He leaves, coming back with a t-shirt from his room and dropping it over my head. The fabric swallows me up, the bottom of the shirt coming to hang at my mid-thigh. It's so comfortable and even faintly still smells like him

behind the notes of detergent. I never want to take it off.

Wearing only his boxers, he pulls me into the kitchen and sits me at the table to feed me.

He texted me this morning that he'd attempted a beet cured gravlax that he was excited for me to try, but it's not what he makes.

Instead, I watch him pull out a pot and a couple of ingredients and fifteen minutes later he's serving me the most delicious looking simple mac and cheese I've ever laid eyes on.

Tristan comes over to my side of the table and motions for me to stand. I do and he takes my spot. His hands come up to clasp my hips and he pulls me back down on top of him so I'm sitting in his lap.

He lifts the fork instead of letting me take it and I open my mouth and close it around the steaming bite of food. I don't want to have to think about anything, not even something as insignificant as lifting my fork to my mouth.

I don't bother protesting the food he gives me. I want to eat; I need it to regain any semblance of my physical health.

He takes a bite every so often and when he brings the fork back to my lips, I look into his eyes before I take it into my mouth. His eyes heat suggestively, lust flaming his irises and I'm reassured that even after he saw what he saw, he's still attracted to me.

That my showing him a broken part of me hasn't driven him away forever.

When I'm done eating, he carries me into the bedroom. He throws back the sheets and lays me down on the mattress, tightening the duvet over me and sitting down on the edge of the bed next to me.

"Tristan, I—"

"Don't even suggest going home right now," he says, brushing strands of my hair gently back behind my ear. "I don't want to hear it. You're staying here tonight."

"Why?"

He sighs softly. "Because I need to make sure you're okay. Because I want to sleep wrapped around you. Because I want to wake up next to you. Take your pick of the reasons. Either way, you're spending the night with me."

Butterflies flutter in my stomach even as my eyes grow so heavy with sleep that I can't argue. The truth is, even if I could, I wouldn't. There's

nowhere else I want to be tonight.

I think in his bed and next to him is the only place I can sleep peacefully. It's the only place I feel safe.

"I want the other side of the bed then," I mutter sleepily.

He chuckles, the sound deep and rich. Warmth spreads in my belly knowing I made him laugh.

"I can live with that compromise."

I roll over and he gets in besides me, tucking me against his chest.

"You take up an ungodly amount of room," I snark. His big body eats up his entire side and part of mine, but mostly it makes me feel safe. Especially the way his arm wraps around me and his palm settles at my hip.

"You're welcome to sleep on top of me."

"I like my space," I say, turning away and making a move to get to the edge of the mattress.

"Too bad," he answers, lifting his arm and rolling me back down onto his chest with ease. He turns us over, lifting me like I weigh nothing, and folding me within his chest so that I'm the little spoon to his big spoon.

It's suffocating and wonderful. I can't even pretend to fight him as I melt into his embrace and drift off straight to sleep.

Minutes later, Tristan carefully extricates his arm and leaves the bed, waking me in the process. I pretend to be asleep as he stops at the door and looks back at me. I feel his gaze caressing my face before he ducks out.

I hear the front door open and close and then muffled speaking. I can't understand what he's saying, but I think he's on the phone.

He's back inside after a few minutes and peeking his head in to see if I'm still where he left me. Like I could have moved without him knowing.

He leans in, his hands coming down on either side of my body. He places a hot kiss on my forehead and pulls back, leaving the room and the apartment once more.

He's gone hours this time before he's back and sliding into bed beside me. I slept the entire time; I only know how long he's been gone because sunlight pokes in from behind the blinds.

"Where were you?"

He tenses at the sound of my voice.

"Getting some fresh air."

I turn on my side to face him. Tristan does the same, grabbing my ass and tugging me against him. He splays my leg across his waist, pushing his

hips and hard cock into my stomach. His hand rubs up and down my thigh, coming to rest on my ass.

“Don’t lie to me.”

Even in the darkness, his stare pins me. “I had something to handle.”

I reach out and cup his cheek, brushing my thumb tenderly along the defined planes of his cheekbones. His eyes are fluttered to half-mast as he stares down at me with an intensity I know I should be terrified of.

“What did you do?” I ask, softly.

“Nothing for you to worry about,” he says, clutching me even closer so that his chin rests on my head as my face presses against his chest.

“Tristan...”

“I’ll always protect you, that’s all you need to know,” he says, fiercely. “I won’t apologize for the lengths I’ll go to keep you safe.”

Chapter 30

Tristan

“Hello?” The rough voice asks when he picks up.

It’s said insolently, almost rudely, like how dare I disturb his peace by giving him a phone call.

I wait until my front door is closed behind me before I speak. I left a sleeping Nera in my bedroom and I don’t want her to accidentally overhear my conversation.

“Rogue? It’s Novak,” I say. “Tristan Novak.”

Silence meets my name. Rogue is likely caught off guard by the fact that I’m calling him.

I received a copy of all my student’s numbers at the beginning of term. I looked at the paper and put it away, never saving the contact info on my phone. I had to dig around for the paper in my things before I finally tracked it down. I’d never needed to use it before tonight.

Until now.

“What do you want?”

“I need a favor.”

Silence mutes the line once more and drags on for so long that I start to think the call failed and I lost the connection.

“You said my name so this doesn’t seem like a misdial,” he finally muses, “and yet I still feel the need to do an insanity check...Do you realize who you just called?”

“Yes.”

“So you’ve completely lost the plot.”

He says it like it’s a fact, not a question.

“I’m not exactly brimming with alternate options.”

More silence.

“Look,” I say, exhaling a frustrated breath. “If I had any other choice, I wouldn’t be making this call. Can you help me or not?”

“Bellamy told me what you did.”

I frown, but he can’t see it. “What?”

“At the grand opening for the library,” he clarifies. “You looked after her, you made sure she made it home safe when she was vulnerable. You didn’t touch her.” His voice vibrates with tension. After tonight, I understand more than ever the possessiveness I detect in his tone.

He pauses before adding,

“Seems I do owe you a favor after all.”

I didn’t think about the potential long term benefits that I could get when I helped Bellamy all those weeks ago but I’m happy to reap them now.

“I’ve gotten myself into a bit of a sticky situation.”

“How sticky?”

“You’re Chairman of the board of RCA aren’t you?”

It boggles my mind that he could be both a student and technically in charge, but he inherited the seat when his father died so he’s the boss.

“Ah. So ‘*royally fucked up*’ sticky?”

I wonder how he’d react if I told him his father is the reason I’m working here. We’re inextricably linked, him and I, and he has no idea.

His father helped set up this entire teaching farce and now he’s dead in an accident in which Rogue was involved.

Apparently, his father killed his mother. It’s exactly the ending I’m afraid of for my own parents, especially given our fathers were friends and shared the joint sadistic hobby of beating their wives in their free time. I don’t need my dad getting inspired by what Robert Royal did.

Hopefully the fact that the man in question ended up dead with a bullet in his heart will keep my own father’s imagination from running in too similar of circles.

“Yes. Are you or not?” I repeat.

“Yeah.”

“I need a student expelled and...,” I pause, thinking of the right words.

“...dealt with.”

“Who?”

“Rex Carrington.”

He whistles under his breath, the sound darkly impressed.

“They found him unconscious and barely alive in the women’s locker room. He’s in the ICU at a hospital in Geneva. You had something to do with that?”

I stay silent and he laughs, the sound taunting and cold.

“Color me shocked. I have to hand it to you, you hide the violent psychopath very well, Prof. I didn’t see that coming at all, and nothing fools me.”

“Can you deal with it or not?”

“Of course I can,” he huffs, annoyed that I would even ask. “Why’d you do it?”

His voice is more curious than I’ve ever heard it, like he’s intrigued by what could possibly have driven me to such violence.

“He touched someone he shouldn’t have.”

He’s not stupid, he has to know that if this someone is connected to Rex then it has to be a student. I don’t care that I’m revealing that possibility to him, it’s far less important than making sure Nera is safe.

I feel him still on the other end of the line. He’s not just silent, he’s unmoving.

“Someone who belongs to you?”

“Yes.”

“Then consider it done.”

It’s that simple for him.

“Another thing.”

He laughs again, truly amused. “What now?”

“I need an address.”

I know if I could see him right now, I’d see a dark grin on his lips.

“Is there going to be another body at that address tomorrow?”

“No.”

He pauses.

“Is there going to be another body at that address *tonight*?”

I roll my eyes. “He’s not going to be dead if that makes you feel better.”

He clicks his tongue against his teeth in dismay.

“Seems like a missed opportunity.”

“I’ll owe you one for the address.”

“Text me the name.”

I do and hear his phone ding with the notification of my text. I must be on speakerphone as he looks up the name in the school’s system. I hear him type and click a few buttons, taking a swig from the bottle of bourbon in my hand as I wait.

Eventually, he speaks. “33 Route de Chanivaz.”

“Thank you.”

He says nothing and I’m about to hang up when he cuts in. “I fucked up that night at the library. Badly. I’m lucky Bellamy ever forgave me. I keep expecting her to change her mind,” he admits, surprising me. He’s not the chatty type and this confession feels heavy. “You made sure nothing happened to her. That’s worth more than a couple of bodies so you don’t owe me anything.” He brings the phone back up to his ear and grumbles, “But consider my debt settled now. We’re even. I don’t like owing people anything.”

He hangs up without waiting for a response, leaving me with nothing but my reflection and the dark look it throws back at me.

He’s not prepared for me when I show up at his house.

It’s the middle of the night. I press his buzzer repeatedly, aggressively. I hear it ring through the door, its shrill echo terrifying in the dark of night.

I jam it over and over again until he has no choice but to answer and he does, the stupid fucking wanker.

A light flickers on in the hallway before the door opens. Valeriy Kravtsov stands there wearing flannel bottoms, a red t-shirt, and a ridiculously ratty robe.

He’s still rubbing the sleep from his eye when I swing the bat up from high heaven and bring it straight down onto the middle of his thigh with a sick, violent *thwack*.

The whites of his eyes explode and he squeals like a stuck pig, his screams echoing in the empty street as he falls to the floor in a heap of limbs.

I loom over him as he rolls around, desperately clutching his left leg.

I lift the bat again and bring it hurtling back down on the same spot, a gleeful smile stretching my lips when I hear his femur shatter. I think I even break a couple of his fingers along with it.

I straighten, casually vaulting the bat backwards so it comes to rest on my right shoulder. I take a swig straight from the bottle of bourbon I'm still carrying with me, the burn of the brown liquor against the back of my throat a welcome distraction.

He's still screaming.

How useless.

No one lives out here, no one will come for him.

No, the only thing he's managed to accomplish with his shrill wailing is giving me a migraine.

"Shut the fuck up," I snap, my voice terrifyingly cold.

He shrieks again and tries to crawl away from me. I step on his hand, keeping him from escaping, and crouch down next to him. I hear his fingers crunch under my weight and he squeals once more.

"Not so tough when you're not abusing teenage girls, are you?"

Fear widens his eyes further until the whites shine comically against the black of midnight. He's shaking, whether from the pain or the terror, I don't give a fuck.

I have a bandana wrapped around the lower half of my face, a baseball cap obscuring the top half. We've never met, never even crossed paths at RCA, but you can never be too careful.

"Who are you? What do you want?" His eyes are wild, frantic, as they roll around the walls of his eye socket. "Money? I have money, plenty of it. It's in my safe, the code is seven-two-five— ah!"

He screams when I dig my heel harder into his fingers, silencing his needless drivel.

"I need you to listen to me very carefully, can you do that, Val?"

He shakes in fear when I call him by his first name but nods vigorously. Tears and snot run disgustingly down his face and onto his t-shirt but he makes no move to clean it up.

"Good," I praise, perversely running the bat down his face and to his chest. "Nera Matsuoka."

"Wh—what about her?" He squeaks.

"What did you do to her?"

“Nothi–gggrglllg.”

He chokes on fragments of his teeth when I flip the bat and ram the handle side down his lying fucking throat. I hope the pieces rip open his lungs on their way down and he drowns in a bath of his own blood.

“Wrong answer.”

Red blinds my vision as the normal, functional side of me gets yanked to the background and sadism takes over. I’m trying to reason with myself to stop, to not kill him, but I’m shaking with the need to finish him in the most painful way possible.

“‘Er faher...,” he gags around the bat so I shove it in deeper. “‘Ease... s’op.”

I pull the bat out. He spits out saliva and pieces of tooth on his own doorstep.

No manners at all, this guy.

“Are you ready to talk?”

He nods, tears falling off his face.

Weak, sniveling asshole.

I take another drink from my bottle.

“Her father. He paid me extra.”

“To hurt her?”

“To break her.”

I’m not aware that I even move again until the bat crashes down on Kravtsov’s groin, fracturing at least his pelvis and hopefully his limp dick along with it.

Visuals of the pain she had to endure before Rex ever got to her flash through my brain like a horror film.

My fists clench. Sweat dots my brow.

My heart races so fast it feels like it’s going to rip through my ribcage and out of my chest.

Calm down. I need to *calm down*.

“Why?”

“I don’t know, man. Because he wanted to?” He’s curled into a ball, facing away from me. His mangled leg stretches out below him like a broken tree branch. “He didn’t give a reason, just that I should teach her a lesson if I felt she wasn’t taking this seriously.”

It doesn’t make sense. She practices every day, multiple hours each day. When she’s not in school or at practice, she’s studying opponents’ gameplay.

She couldn't be taking this more seriously.

"Why did you feel she wasn't taking it seriously?"

"She put on weight."

I draw back. What the *fuck* does that have to do with anything?

I think of her reticence to eat. The protein bar. The sandwich. All the meals I've made her.

She's slight for her height, I've always thought so. She needs to eat, to put on weight, not lose it. Her body must barely have enough energy to sustain itself through a regular day, let alone grueling workouts.

"She's small," I say aloud, more of an observation to myself than anything.

"Not small enough."

I drop to a crouch and crush his murdered jaw in my fist. "Say one more fucking word, I dare you."

He shakes his head violently, the whites of his eyes bulging. I shove his face away, wiping my now filthy hand on his robe as I stand.

Relief shines in his eyes like he thinks we're done. I put a foot on his throat and press until he gargles.

I stay there as I rake my brain through the past few months. About a week ago, I'd gone into my bedroom to get my watch and walked in on Nera, freshly out of the shower and on the phone with her mother.

She didn't seem to hear me come in even though I was hardly quiet. But maybe that's because she was focused on the chastizing words her mother was leveling at her. I'd been distracted by how good she looked – sitting with wet hair on my bed, wearing my t-shirt – and her mother's words had filtered into my ears with a ten second delay. She'd sounded exasperated and her tone of voice immediately had my back up.

"...no more than nine hundred calories. It's the holiday season, you need to be extra careful. We have important holiday events lined up for your father, you want to make sure you look acceptable for once..."

From behind, I'd seen how tight Nera's back muscles were, how high and close to her ears her shoulders had settled. She brought a hand up and started biting at the skin around her fingernails.

I grabbed the phone and hung up mid-diatribes, much to Nera's dismay. She'd blanched and gone for the phone but I'd tossed it to the other side of my bed, gotten down on my knees, and distracted her with my tongue.

When we were done and I'd asked Nera what the phone call was about,

she'd waved me off and demanded I take her home.

I'd brushed the conversation off as a tense moment between mother and daughter. Now, the words niggled at me.

I was slowly putting more of the pieces of the puzzle together. That picture of Nera that had once been so obscure was getting just a little clearer with every passing day.

As was my need to protect her.

I press down on Kravtsov's throat, the skin of his face veering to a deep tomato red.

"You're never getting within five hundred meters of Nera again. Nod if you understand."

He nods as much as is physically possible with my foot still pinning his throat to the ground.

"You're going to keep sending your reports to her father like nothing has changed. You'll give him glowing reviews about her performance, her skill, her dedication. Her weight if you have to," I say through gritted teeth. "You'll tell him you've never seen an athlete like her and you'll make sure that he doesn't suspect a thing. Still with me?"

He nods again.

"Good." I crouch back down, pressing the bat threateningly against his temple now. "If I find out that her father knows the truth. If I find out that you've told anyone about this little one on one we've had. If, God forbid, I find out that you've contacted Nera in any way, and for your sake I *really* hope I never do," I say with a demented smile. "This whole night will seem like an amuse bouche compared to the full meal of pain I will ram down your throat when I come back for you." I tap the bat cruelly against his broken femur, letting him howl for long seconds before I continue. "I will eviscerate you limb from limb until you're begging me for death, but I won't let you die. I'll sew the pieces of you back together just enough to drop you off alive at the nearest hospital where you'll spend the rest of your long, natural life eating out of a tube and pissing into a bag. I'll make sure of it, Valeriy Kravtsov. I'll pay you visits so you never forget about me and my little friend," I say, bouncing the bat menacingly in my palm.

He weeps openly, the smell of piss tart in the air as fear makes him soil himself.

I stand, finally done. I take another drink before hurling the bottle onto the floor of his house behind him.

“Have a shitty night, Val. Look over your shoulder once in a while, I’ll be watching.”

I take a step away before pausing and looking back down at him, crumpled and broken on the ground.

“Oh, what the hell. One for the road.”

I slam the bat down one final, blissful time and pulverize his knee.

I slide into bed next to her the minute I get home, hoping my absence will have gone unnoticed, but she’s awake and asking where I’ve been.

“I won’t apologize for the lengths I’ll go to to keep you safe,” I vow, unrepentant.

“Tell me.”

I stroke her hair, shaking my own head in response. “That’d make you an accomplice. You have a gold medal to win, I can’t risk it,” I point out.

“You can’t keep me safe if you’re in prison,” she responds, voice soft as she burrows her face into my neck.

“Depends. Would you come see me?”

Nera hums against my throat, the vibrations sending heat waves straight to my heart. “Only if they let us have conjugal visits.”

“Pretty sure I’d have to marry you to get access to those.”

She gives me an appalled look.

“What, you don’t want a prison hubby?”

“No, thank you.”

“Fine,” I sigh, dramatically. “I guess I’ll have to sign up for one of those civilian pen pal things to keep myself entertained then. Find myself a crazy cougar looking for a sugar baby on the inside.”

“No.”

I lift my brow at her. “What do you mean, “no”?”

She tilts her head up from the curve of my neck and nips at my jaw sharply in warning. “If you’re in prison for murdering *my* ex-boyfriend, you don’t get to write another woman about it.”

Her eyes shine angrily, my possessive little thing. I tighten my arm

around her and pull her even closer.

“Would you write to me then?”

She hides her face back under my chin.

“If you wanted me to.”

I hum, my heart beating faster.

“Dirty stuff?”

She tilts her mouth up to my ear. “The dirtiest.”

A violent shiver rolls down my body, stiffening my cock.

“See, but that’s a problem.”

“Why?”

“Because if you write me nasty little letters for me to wank to, then I’ll definitely have to wife you.”

She laughs, chest shaking against mine as her breathy giggles hit the shell of my ear.

“A prison wedding,” she mutters sleepily, her words groggy. She trails off and I think she’s fallen asleep, but then she speaks again, even more softly this time. “At least we know I look good in orange.”

I’m pretty sure I fall asleep with a grin on my face.

When I wake up the next day, Nera is no longer in my arms and the bed is cold next to me. I’m immediately brought back to the penthouse the morning after we met, when I woke with an equally cold bed and an equally gone girl.

I don’t love the moment of panic that seizes me when I realize she left without a word. *Again.*

My heart squeezes in my chest as I sit and toss the duvet off me. I throw on my trousers from last night, reaching for a pair of shoes and haphazardly putting them on as I think about what I’ll do when I track her down and get my hands on her.

Dragging her back here by her nape is looking like the winning option, my mood storming to black as I angrily rip open my bedroom door.

I come to an abrupt halt, rooted to the spot when I find her in my

kitchen, wearing my clothes, perusing the contents of my fridge as she stands on one leg with the other bent in a triangle, doing her best impression of a flamingo.

She looks over her shoulder when she hears the door opening, her eyes finding mine.

“Hi.”

“Hi,” I say warmly, my heart rate leveling out to normal speeds as I realize she stayed.

Her gaze drops to my trousers, to the one shoe I’m still holding in hand. “Where are you going?”

I throw the shoe in a corner of the room and kick off the one I’m already wearing in the same direction.

“Nowhere.”

Nera nervously thumbs the hem of the shirt I lent her between her fingers. She’s awkward and unsure about having slept over.

I walk around the table to her, wrapping my arm around her waist and tugging her against me. My lips claim hers, savoring the taste of her first thing in the morning.

I pull back and her eyes flutter open with that lust drunk look I love shining in them.

“Morning.”

“Good morning,” she says with a small smile. She inhales and releases a breath, her shoulders loosening. “I got up early to make you some breakfast but I’m hopeless, so here you go,” she turns and grabs something off the counter before extending it at me. “I poured you some cereal. You’re welcome.”

The skin of her cheeks flushes a pretty pink color as I grin and grab the bowl from her. Holding it with one hand, I pick up the spoon and take a bite.

“Mmm,” I moan, dramatically.

“What?”

“This is the best damn cereal I’ve ever had.”

Her brow smooths out and mirth twinkles in her eyes.

“Oh, yeah?”

“I think it’s because of the way it was poured. Not everyone can pour it just right, you know, it’s a real artform.”

She giggles, smacking my chest playfully. “Shut up.”

“No, seriously. It’s a real skill.” I bring my fist to her mouth, pretending

it's a fake mic. "Tell us, what is your technique?"

She laughs again, indulging me. "It's all in the flick of the wrist."

An aroused groan leaves my lips.

"You'll have to practice that move on me later," I whisper suggestively, closing the space between us. I cup her nape with my free hand and crush my mouth against hers.

The sugary taste of the cereal coats my tongue and she greedily sucks it into her mouth. I hoist her up with one arm and sit her on the counter, setting the bowl down next to her as I trap her with one arm on either side of her.

A small noise falls from her throat, somewhere between a breathy moan and a needy whine. I dig my fingers into her neck, pressing her closer.

"I'm taking you out tonight," I inform her. I dip my head down to reclaim her lips but she puts a hand on my shoulder, stopping me.

Her eyes question mine, but she doesn't say anything.

"I'm sick of being holed up in these two rooms. I want to take you somewhere where you can get dressed up." I nuzzle her neck. "Somewhere I can touch you out in public without fear of being caught."

"Where?" She asks, voice breathy with excitement.

"I'll think of a place."

"Okay."

I lift my head and look down at her. "Okay?"

I expected her to put up some type of fight. She likes to remind me every day that we're not dating. I was happily ready to fuck her into submission if needed.

She laughs, arms wrapping around my neck and fingers brushing through my hair. "Yeah, okay. I haven't been out in a while."

I rumble contentedly, dropping my face back into the crook of her neck. She giggles again when I press hot kisses up the column of her throat, tickling her with my breaths.

I'm obsessed with the sound, with the ease and frequency with which it's started falling from her lips when she's with me.

Obsessed with doing whatever's needed to make sure she never stops laughing.

"Will you wear a pretty dress for me, baby?"

"Mhmm," she shivers deliciously against me when I suck her pulse point. "What color?"

I move my face up to breathe my next words against her ear. "I want

you in pink.”

“I only have one pink dress.”

“I remember it well.”

“You would, you ripped the zipper off. I haven’t gotten it fixed yet.”

“Add it to my bill,” I growl possessively at the memory of her on her stomach in my bed. “And surprise me.”

Chapter 31

Nera

Tristan helps me out of the town car and onto the sidewalk in front of the bar. I stare at the doors for a second before turning my face up to look up at him, excitement shining in my eyes.

“Is this where we’re going?”

He nods, placing a warm hand on the small of my bare back and leading me towards the front double doors.

It’s our bar.

The same trendy place in the hotel where we first met all those months ago.

He opens the door and ushers me in, directing me to the hostess stand. Memories come flooding in, of the setting, of the place on the other side of the bar where I accosted him. Of that elevator bank on the far side that whisked us away to his penthouse.

He stands behind me, his chest heavy against my back, his head bent to my height, his hands resting casually on my hips as we wait for someone to show us to our seats.

“I wanted to take you to the place where I first saw you. When you were standing there, pressed against me in your pink dress with those dirty words on your lips.” His eyes drop to my mouth and heat infinite degrees. “I think about that night a lot.”

“You do?” I ask, butterflies fluttering in my stomach.

“I fucked up letting you go without getting your number. And then you showed up in my classroom and tortured me.”

“I wouldn’t say I tortur—”

“Tortured me,” he repeats. “Especially knowing I couldn’t have you.” He chuckles, the warm sound pressed into my hair. “I didn’t resist long, how could I?” He nuzzles my neck from behind, whispering in my ear, “I never stood a chance when it came to you.”

I blush at his words, but they also remind me of the risk he’s running bringing me here. “Are you sure it’s safe to be here? What if someone sees us?”

He drops a kiss on the top of my head. “It’ll be fine, don’t worry about it.”

“Hi, how can I help you?” A hostess asks, walking up to the stand. Her name tag reads ‘Cassandra’. She ignores me but gives Tristan a blinding smile, tucking her hair flirtatiously behind her ear and looking up at him from below her lashes.

He looks unbelievably handsome, dressed in a pressed and tailored black suit. His eyes are the color of the clearest oceans and his hair is artfully disheveled, rough strands falling loosely on his forehead. He looks almost otherworldly in his perfection, so I get her reaction — I’m still as awestruck by him today as I was that first night.

But Cassandra’s going to permanently lose that pretty smile if she doesn’t tone it down a couple hundred thousand notches.

“We have a reservation under Novak,” he tells her, looking down at me and giving me a small smile. His hand curls snugly around my hip.

Something about him saying that *we* have a reservation under his last name makes my blood sing in my veins.

“Ah, yes,” she answers primly, mouth thinning into a flat line. “I see we’re celebrating a special occasion?”

“What?” I say. My gaze snaps up to meet his, but he looks at her.

“Yes, very special. We’re celebrating her finally agreeing to go out on a date with me.”

“Oh, my god,” I groan, flushing a deep shade of red and avoiding the hostess’ judgy looks.

“How lovely.” She says it like it’s anything but. “Right this way,” she adds, turning sharply on her heels.

“I’m going to murder you,” I whisper to him as we follow after her.

Tristan chuckles softly, his chest heaving behind me. “I thought we could celebrate this momentous occasion.”

I feel eyes on us, eyes on *me*, as we cross the bar towards our reserved booth.

It’s the dress.

I’m wearing a mini metallic dress that shimmers brightly when it catches the light. It’s completely backless and just barely covers the top of my bare ass. I paired it with matching dangling earrings and equally silver strappy heels. I shine bright as a diamond under the few but twinkling lights of the bar.

The dress is a showstopper and I wore it hoping Tristan would like it.

When I stepped outside to meet him, he’d been leaning against the town car, checking his phone.

He glanced up and back down, then did a swift double take that had to have hurt the muscles in his neck. He straightened, his hand coming up over the left side of his chest like he was trying to clutch his heart. He swallowed thickly as he watched me.

I twirled for him, looking over my shoulder at him as I showed off my bare back.

His stare had darkened to midnight, his pupils blown wide until the icy blue of his irises were no longer visible. He’d taken the steps three at a time to get to me, his hands wild with undirected desire as he grabbed my face, grabbed my waist, grabbed my ass. Grabbed any and every part of me that he could lay his hands on, all the while muttering how sexy I looked and how painful it was going to be for him to watch other men want me all night.

Now he holds me possessively against him as we cross the bar. He tucks me into his side, pressing me against his hard body. His hand rests on my lower stomach, fingers brushing the top of my pussy in an overtly claiming gesture meant to signal to anyone watching that I’m his.

“It’s just a dinner you know,” I say, my fear of vulnerability rearing its ugly head again. I’m suddenly uncomfortable, uneasy in my own skin, in my own head. “Nothing serious.”

I don’t want to ruin this night but I recognize the warning signs.

His hand tightens on my hip, but his tone remains light. Unflappable.

“Of course, I’m just buying you dinner and then fucking you later. Not like a date at all.”

I’m saved from having to respond when the hostess stops and waves at a

booth away from the bar, further into the restaurant area.

“This is the area you’ve reserved. There’s also a private bathroom provided for the evening just down that hallway and to the right,” she says, pointing. “Here are your menus. We’ll bring you a complimentary glass of champagne soon.”

“Thank you,” I mutter, playing with my napkin to avoid his eyes.

His hand rests on my thigh. I look up just as his lips come down on my neck, right below the curve of my jaw. My pulse flutters under his mouth and he grunts, the sound thick with arousal as he moves from my throat to claim my lips.

“You’re so beautiful.”

My heart aches.

Even when I’m an asshole, he’s kind to me. It splinters something inside me knowing he might actually be one of the good ones.

I don’t deserve him. I don’t deserve his attentions or his patience.

I don’t deserve any of this.

“Every man in this room was staring at you when we walked in,” he whispers huskily against my throat. “Then at me, wondering how I got so fucking lucky that you chose me.”

His hand moves possessively up my thigh, his fingers approaching my center. My breath hitches.

“You’re the one who had the hostess all worked up.”

“Hmm?” he asks, face still in my neck, mouth marking my skin.

“She was giving you the look, trying to flirt with you. You didn’t see her?”

His fingers brush up against my slit, finding it bare and wet. He purrs in my ear when he feels how soaked I am.

“I only have eyes for you.”

I clasp his face between my hands and pull him up to me, kissing him deeply. He groans and bends over me in the booth. One hand rests protectively on my thigh, keeping my dress from riding up to my hips. The other grabs at my ass, roughly squeezing and groping me.

He moans into my mouth when I run my nails down the back of his head and neck. I clutch the lapel of his suit jacket and pull him agai—

“Um, excuse me?” The voice snaps me out of the moment and I push Tristan off. He doesn’t go far. “Hi. Wow.” Tristan growls warningly at him. “Um, no I mean, sorry,” the waiter adds quickly, apologetic. He’s holding

two full champagne flutes. “I was told this was for a first date.” He pauses, frowning down at his notepad like he must have gotten the info wrong. “You guys seem *very* cozy for a first date.”

“We’re not on a date,” Tristan replies. He stares into my eyes seductively, arrogantly almost, and thumbs the traces of my lipgloss off the corner of his lip before slowly sucking it into his mouth. The move is so carnal and charged with sexual tension that I feel wetness drip down my thigh and onto the seat beneath me. He smirks cockily at me when he sees my eyes drop to his mouth. “Just having dinner.”

I roll my eyes at him and he laughs, a deep chuckle that sends a zap of pleasure skittering down my spine.

“That makes even less sense. But, alrighty!” the waiter says cheerfully, setting the flutes in front of us and walking off.

It’s as I watch him leave that I spot them across the bar.

Them.

Rogue, Rhys, and Phoenix.

Chapter 32

Nera

Of all the bars in Geneva, they had to choose to drink in this one. They belong to at least two gentlemen's clubs and yet here they are, sitting less than twenty meters away from me and my second biggest secret. Or is he my biggest?

I should stay away from them. Half a room separates us, they'll likely never look over here.

And yet, when I look over, I see a devastated Rhys. I can't just sit here without making sure he's okay. He and Thayer broke up a couple of weeks ago and I know he hasn't been handling it well. It's hard to see the joker of our little fucked up group so miserable. He doesn't look anything like himself.

"Tristan."

"Mmm?" He says, taking a sip of champagne. His gaze snaps to mine at my tone and immediately follows my line of sight.

He pauses momentarily when he sees who I'm looking at. I expect him to look terrified of being found out, but he's unmoved. He doesn't react at all, except for a small narrowing of his eyes.

His reaction surprises me.

"I'm going to go say hi and make sure he's okay."

I caught Tristan up to speed on Rhys and Thayer weeks ago so he knows the situation well.

His hand tightens on my thigh.

“He has his own friends.”

“I know but now that I've seen him, I have to report back to Thayer just how miserable he looks. It's girl code. She's going to want details so I need a closer look.”

He grumbles and releases me.

I slide out of the booth and stand. I've barely taken a step before he's reaching out and grabbing my hand. I look down at him over my shoulder, my arm extended behind my back where he holds me.

He gives me an icy look from beneath his dark eyebrows.

“Be *very* careful in that dress,” he warns.

I nod and smile and his hand drops to hook one finger around mine on the way down before it falls back against his side.

I wink at him and give him my own cocky smirk, and then I walk away, swaying my hips seductively from side to side with each step I take away from him. The metallic fabric jumps up and down, teasing the skin right below my ass.

Behind me, I hear him mutter a slew of creative curses.

I walk around the bar and up to where Rhys is half slumped over the counter, Rogue and Phoenix talking to him quietly.

I tap his back and when he turns, his eyes widen slightly.

“How are you, Rhys?”

“Fine, how is she doing?”

“She might kill me for saying this, but about as well as you seem to be doing.”

She's not drinking herself into a stupor, but her spark is gone. She goes to class and to practice and she comes home and she has dinner with us, but the banter is subdued.

She's just *sad* and, as a sad girl myself, it's hard to see.

“Tell me what I need to do to make her forgive me.”

“She's the only one who can answer that and I think she doesn't know the answer herself. For what it's worth, I think she will forgive you.”

“Yeah?”

“Yeah,” I put my hands up. “You're on your own though, I've already said too much.”

I don't want to get involved in their relationship, I just want to nudge it in the right direction.

When that thought flits through my brain, I take a moment to recognize how much has changed. A few months ago, I probably wouldn't have believed in any relationship enough to think it was worth a second chance, let alone now trying to help it myself.

"That's alright, thanks for telling me."

His phone dings and when he looks at the screen, his eyes widen. A smile erupts on his face and he jumps to his feet, forgetting his drunken state. He almost takes his friends and a couple others down, but Phoenix catches him.

"You alright, mate?" Phoenix asks.

"Yeah, yeah. I have to go, Thayer texted."

I smile as I watch him gather his things, the joy that suddenly radiates from him palpable in the room.

"Nera."

I turn towards the sound of my name and look at Rogue.

"Yeah?"

His eyes are pinned on something in the distance. My stomach clenches. He's not moving, just staring intensely.

"Is that who I think it is?"

With his words, I watch both Rhys and Phoenix's gazes slide slowly over to where he's looking. Rhys' eyes widen, whereas Phoenix's stay blank.

I look over my shoulder at where Tristan sits in our booth, his black gaze fixed heatedly on me. There's no use denying who he is or pretending that he's not with me. Not when the territorial look he levels my way makes it obvious to any man around us that he fucks me.

"Yeah."

"You're playing with fire," Phoenix says.

"You're one to talk," I snap back at him. Six just recently told us that they've been sleeping together, that they're engaged even.

You've got your own lane to worry about, I want to say. Then I remember that he could tell Thornton about Tristan and I and I swallow those words.

"I know what I'm doing." They're all entangled in some way with my best friends, that means I'm pretty sure they'll keep this secret. "You won't say anything, right?"

"No."

I nod, an understanding passing between us, and go to walk away. I'm

halfway back to my booth when I hear Rogue call after me. I turn, noticing that Rhys has left, and take a few steps back towards them.

“Yeah?”

He tips his chin in Tristan’s direction.

“He ever crosses a line, you let us know.”

A surprised grin stretches slowly across my lips.

“Yeah, what are you going to do if he does?”

Phoenix leans forward, propping his elbows on the counter. “Deal with the problem for you,” he says with a threatening smile.

“Ew, don’t get all emotional on me now lads, it’s totally ruining your bad boy mystiques,” I say, teasing. But I reach out with one hand and squeeze Rogue’s forearm. He’s mellowed out on the psychotic tendencies since he and Bellamy got back together and I’m touched by his protectiveness of me. “But thank you.”

I feel Tristan before he touches me, his warm body calling to mine even before he presses against my back and places a large hand on my hip. I guess he got tired of watching from afar.

I look up at him and see him give a chin tip to Rogue and Phoenix. They return it and I’m shocked to see something like amusement flash in Rogue’s eyes.

“Why aren’t you more worried?” I whisper hiss at Tristan as he guides me back to the table. “I thought you’d be freaking out about this. Why are you so calm?”

“They won’t tell anybody,” he answers, confidently.

I agree, but why does he know that? I ask him as much.

“Just a hunch,” he says with a mysterious shrug.

I’m saved from answering when our waiter comes back, this time accompanied by two servers carrying steaming plates of food.

“I ordered a few plates to share while you were gone,” he says, as the dishes are placed in front of us.

Warm garlic bread, prime rib, fried artichokes, mashed potatoes. Everything my mum and my brain tell me not to eat.

After what happened at practice yesterday, I can’t afford to cross Coach Krav again. I’ll be back training with him on Monday and I’m sure he’ll want to weigh me again.

Fear and alarm squeeze my lungs so tightly, I feel like I can’t breathe.

I have no idea how I’m going to get myself out of this.

My eyes bounce furtively around the restaurant, trying to find something. My gaze lands on the bar.

Distraction. Distracting him is good.

I place a hand on his thigh. His heated gaze immediately jumps to mine from where he was pouring himself some water.

“What if we roleplay?” I say. I sound breathless, because I am. Stress has my hands clammy and my heart racing. The food smells amazing and I’m hungry, but I can’t. I just can’t. “We could recreate how we met,” I say, suggestively. I glide my hand further up his thigh to cup his cock.

A guttural groan rips from his mouth. He leans closer until only a few inches separate our faces.

“I don’t think so.” His eyes trail leisurely down to my mouth, extinguishing any remaining oxygen in my lungs. “I’m not playing any game that requires you sitting alone and away from me in that dress.”

Tristan brushes his thumb gently over the tip of my nose before claiming my mouth with one hard, animalistic kiss. When he pulls away, he’s breathing roughly and eyeing me with dark, dangerous eyes.

“Eat your dinner, you’re going to need your strength.”

He grabs spoons and tongues and starts adding items on my plate. I try to pass on a couple of items but he explains to me the nutritional benefits of each or says “this one’s simply just fucking *delicious*” before giving me a helping anyway.

“For what?”

“Upstairs.”

Before long, my plate is heaping with food and placed back in front of me. It looks and smells glorious. My stomach grumbles in hunger even as the voice comes screaming through.

Don’t eat it. It’s bad for you. It’s gross, just like you if you eat it.

Push it around your plate.

Think about Monday. Think about if it’s worth it.

It’s not.

Only someone with no self-control would let themselves eat that.

The voice roars so loudly in my head, I’m having trouble concentrating. I’m devolving.

“You got us a room?”

His eyes twinkle with mischief as he looks back at me.

“Same as last time,” he says, picking up a piece of garlic bread and

bringing it to my lips. “Here, try this.”

I have no choice but to open my mouth and eat. My throat is dry and swallowing is hard.

“Awfully presumptuous of you,” I say.

“I figure if I promise to make you come at least as many times as last time, you’ll agree,” he replies, a smirk curling the corner of his lips.

He tries the steak and groans softly, a sound that has a lusty pang shooting through my lower stomach. The way he feels about food, his love and passion and acceptance of it, makes me so jealous. It’s what I want.

Desperately.

To be able to have a bite of bread without giving myself thirty lashings, or some of the fried artichoke without convincing myself I can feel the cellulite setting in.

To have some of the mashed potatoes without immediately running to the bathroom.

Food is something to be savored and enjoyed for him. For me, it’s torture.

“This is one of the best steaks I’ve had in a long time,” he says, adding a couple pieces on my plate.

I stare at it, frozen. Unable to pick up my fork but mesmerized by the way the chimichurri oozes on my plate. Hypnotized by the scents that waft into my nostrils.

Tristan speaks and I answer, but I have no idea what we talk about. I’m on autopilot. My knife cuts the meat, my fork raises it to my mouth, and I eat. I taste nothing except the emotional relief of giving in and the physical satisfaction of being full.

I eat and I eat and I eat, my control slipping through my fingers like a yanked rope. I don’t know what I eat or if I like it, it doesn’t matter – temporarily, it fills the gaping wound inside me and makes me feel whole.

But then comes the realization.

The crushing shame.

I excuse myself with a laugh. I think Tristan calls after me, but I don’t hear him. Unsteady legs take me down a dark hallway towards the bathroom as my head spins. My hands grab at the wall as I stumble in my heels.

Despair claws at my chest. Self-loathing wraps its tentacled, sticky fingers around my brain and squeezes.

I open a dark door and the bathroom awaits.

My enemy.

My release.

There's an open area with a mirror, a counter, and a chaise. On the other side, two sinks and stalls. The decor is chic and modern and airy and I'm about to sully it with all my brokenness.

I drop to my knees in front of the toilet, the stall door locked behind me. My hands shake. My vision blurs until I can barely see them. The relief from the temporary release of control that eating gave me morphs into a pit of self-hating darkness that consumes me from the inside.

Out, it needs to come *out*.

Fat, ugly, worthless, bitch.

I clutch my head in my hands, ripping at the hair at my temples. *Shut up*, I want to yell back at the voice, *leave me alone*.

It's so hard to explain the battle that rages on in my brain behind the perfect smile I put on for others. Two sides of me, only one I recognize as myself, go at it incessantly. The internal volume in my head gets progressively louder until the voice, the evil one, snuffs out everything else.

It wins, it always does. Even when I'm in the middle of a lovely dinner.

The hopelessness is crushing.

Staring down into that toilet bowl, brought to my literal knees by an invisible monster in my head.

Hand clutching the rim. Fingers in the back of my throat. Vomit dirtying the white porcelain.

An addictive rush. Emptiness is power.

A sense of relief. Weightlessness followed by the pulverizing weight of shame.

You'll never be good enough.

Why can't I stop?

I throw up again.

My back hits the side of the bathroom stall. I hug my knees to my chest. Dizziness blurs my vision and I fight the alluring call of unconsciousness.

Keep going, mum will be proud.

The palpitations of my heart scare me. Sweat dots my brow. My throat is sore. My teeth hurt. My body is weak in the aftermath.

I need to collect myself.

When did I let it get this bad?

Again. Do it again.

Failure isn't an option.

I want to scream. Scream so loudly that the voice cowers back into the dark recesses of my mind where it came from and never comes out again.

Lazy, disgraceful, waste of space.

Emotion clogs my throat. I'm so *tired*. I can't keep doing this to myself. I can't stop.

The room comes slowly back into focus. I'm on the floor, sweat beading at my temples.

I don't know how long I've been gone, but it's a while. Tristan will be wondering where I am.

I need to go back out there. I need to paint that smile back on and show him I'm okay.

There's a tube of toothpaste and a toothbrush in my bag, I never go anywhere without them. A quick brush and the veneer of perfection will be back firmly in place.

Wiping my hand across my mouth, I open the stall door and walk out. I'm digging in my purse for my things. I think I have breath spray as well.

I dump the contents of my purse haphazardly on the counter. Shaking hands pick up the breath freshener and spray it a couple of times in my mouth. I run my toothbrush under the tap and bring it up to my mouth, looking up into the mirror.

My heart comes to a devastating, screeching halt.

It feels like it completely caves in on itself and slowly collapses when my eyes meet Tristan's in the reflection.

I whip around, clutching the sink counter behind me for support.

His eyes are so dark and intense in the mirror that all traces of blue are gone. All I see is the blackest look that's ever been leveled at me.

The denial is instant on my lips.

"It's not what you think," I swear.

The look in his eye tells me I'm not getting away with it.

"Really? Because it sounds like you just made yourself throw up."

The words carry the weight of a slap and I flinch. They've never been said to me before and I'm not ready to receive them.

I turn back around and away from him. I run my trembling hands under the water, drawing out my response as I try to cling to my composure.

"I didn't feel well," I say tonelessly, avoiding his gaze in the mirror. "I preferred to just get it out and over with."

I brush my teeth, still averting my eyes. He says nothing. The silence compresses the air in the room until I feel like I can't breathe. I can feel him standing impossibly still behind me, staring me down.

Finally, he breaks it.

"You're lying."

My eyes fly up to meet and hold his. He gives nothing away. A crack appears on my fragile heart, one that slowly worsens, fissuring into dozens of little tentacles until it feels like if I so much as breathe, it'll fracture.

He takes a step towards me.

Then another.

"This isn't the first time you've made yourself throw up, it's just the first time I witnessed it. You've been doing it for a while. For how long, I'm not sure, but I'd guess this isn't a recent development."

"Stop."

"The benefit of being obsessed with you is that I watch you, Nera. All the time. I see you stumble sometimes, I see you brace yourself against surfaces. You're in pain. You're lightheaded. You're *hungry*."

His voice pounds against my temples. It's not unkind or critical, but I can't breathe, I can't see. He's pulling at everything I've been holding together, trying to yank it loose so he can look at the ugliness underneath. He has no right.

"Stop."

Panic seizes hold of me. I never wanted him to see me like this. Not him. I can't make him understand this. I can't take his judgment of me, his horror at how fucked up I am.

Worse, his *disgust* of me.

"Is this why you won't stay the night? Is this why you push me away every time I try to get close?"

Shame and terror fill me. This is my worst nightmare, everything I feared would happen since I realized that I have feelings for him.

Try as I might have to keep my emotional distance from him, he's managed to worm his way in. And the pain of knowing he's discovered my secret and that he's undoubtedly about to reject me because of it hurts more than any physical bruise or hit.

I feel so exposed and vulnerable that it's almost enough to make me sick again.

I dig deep, searching for that place in my mind and try to bury myself

there, wrapping cool aloofness around me like I'm not dying on the inside.

"I don't stay over and I push you away because I'm not interested in a relationship with you. I've told you that repeatedly, you just won't listen."

He stares at me with depthless intensity and I can't take it.

I look away.

"I don't believe you," he retorts.

"I think you should leave," I say, turning away.

"No."

Simple.

Why is he making this so hard?

"I said, *go*."

My shoulders shake, my entire frame trembling as the swirl of emotions thrashes violently through me, as destructive as an earthquake. I bend my head in defeat and look at my hands. How they clutch the sink for support, white knuckling me through the pain. How the red of my nail polish looks like blood against the white porcelain.

It's impossibly hard to remain upright. All I want to do is crumple to the floor. My hands keep me steady. He needs to leave before I completely fall apart.

I hear him close the remaining distance between us and then his hands are on my shoulders and he's flipping me around.

Something like a sob catches in my throat.

I swallow it down.

I shove at him, hard.

I don't need him. I don't need anyone.

His eyes fall to the place on his chest where I pushed him but he doesn't move backwards. Instead, he reaches for me, pulling me into him.

I shove again. When he still doesn't move, I do it again.

And again.

And again.

It's like all the dark energy explodes out of me at once. I'm fighting like a woman possessed, years of bottled-up pain and anger and fear being leveled indiscriminately and unfairly at the only person who's ever protected me.

The voice takes aim where it knows it'll hurt most and fires. Hateful thoughts crash against the walls of my skull like balls in a lottery machine.

Push him away before he rejects you.

You never deserved him anyway.

“Just go!” I scream.

But it’s like fighting with a brick wall. He takes it, takes all the ugliness I hurl at him, both physical and emotional, and doesn’t flinch. Doesn’t move an inch. His eyes are trained on my face and they see too much. There’s a matching world of chaos in them, as if my pain is somehow hurting him.

Finally, I shove him with enough sustained strength that he takes a step back.

He’s right back on me before I can blink.

“No,” he snarls. He locks me against him with his arm around my waist and his hand on the back of my neck. His heart is pounding against my ear but his body is warm and big and inviting.

Comforting.

I don’t understand why he won’t just *leave*.

The bubble of emotion travels upwards in my throat and releases from my mouth in the form of a keening cry.

“Stop, Tristan. I want you to leave, I don’t need this right now.”

“No,” he answers, mouth now pressed against my ear.

I’m fighting, but fighting a losing battle. He’s bigger, taller, stronger than me and he holds me firmly against him. The only way I’ll get out of this embrace is if he chooses to let me.

“Why won’t you just go?” I yell, completely split open. I feel like a raw, exposed nerve. “Let me go,” I beg. “Just let me go...”

My voice catches on a sob.

No.

No, no, *no*.

“Never,” he whispers. He wraps me tightly in his arms.

No matter how much I struggle, he doesn’t let me go. He holds me. And eventually, when I realize that I can’t win against him, that he won’t leave, I finally let go. My legs give out and my body gives in, falling against him, and his follows mine unhesitatingly down to the floor.

He doesn’t abandon me. He doesn’t hurt me, he doesn’t chastise me. He just...holds me.

I’m clutched against his chest when he slides his back down the bathroom wall. He lowers me so that I’m sitting in his lap, pressed against his heart.

He strokes my hair. He whispers heated reassurances in my ear. He rubs comforting circles on my back. He gently caresses my cheek with his large,

warm palm and it's when he leans down and licks a tear into his mouth that I realize they're there.

"You don't need to hide parts of yourself from me. I want it all, every single piece. And Nera," he whispers against my ear, "I'm not going anywhere without you."

The next tear falls, catching me off guard and surprising me. Another follows, then a third, until my face is drenched. For the first time in years, I allow myself to cry. The tears rain down my cheeks and bring with them near crippling emotional relief.

Tristan holds me through it all, never once wavering.

Chapter 33

Tristan

The doors of the elevator open and I walk into the penthouse with Nera still clutched in my arms.

She hasn't said a word since the bathroom. I don't know how long we sat there with her cradled against me as she cried softly. At least an hour, with every new tear down her face fueling fresh retaliatory fury inside me.

I'd wanted to take her pain and make it my own. The best I could do was lick her tears as they fell, tasting her misery just like I've tasted her joy in the past.

When I watched her rise from our booth and head almost blindly towards the bathroom, I knew. Knew that she needed me.

So, I followed her.

I snuck in behind her and listened as she hurt herself.

Rage unlike anything I'd ever known had warped my fists. Rage at her parents, rage at the world for inflicting such pain on her. Rage at myself for not seeing it earlier, for not taking care of her.

After what happened downstairs, what I finally confirmed, I don't know how I'll ever be able to be separated from her again. The protectiveness I feel pales in comparison to what it was before, when I'd already been concerned about my blind infatuation with her.

It's downright an obsession now, and as I set her down and release her, I have to physically restrain myself from reaching for her when she takes a step

away from me.

Nera turns towards me and her eyes are so fucking wide and sad that my heart squeezes painfully. She has me worshipping at her altar with just a look in my direction and she doesn't even know it.

Shame and resignation burn brightly in them, but she meets my gaze. Streaks of tears mark her face like a canvas and fall off the curve of her jaw. Even in her suffering, she's beautiful.

"You said I wasn't breakable," she says with a humorless laugh. "Now you get to see just how broken I really am."

"You're not broken."

"Look at me," she begs, her voice breaking on that desperate plea. She holds her hands up in defeat before dropping them limply back against her sides.

"I am," I say, my tone raw. "All I do is look at you."

I grab her hand and pull her behind me into the bedroom. There, I stand her in front of the floor-length mirror. I flick on the lights and rip open the clasp at her neck that holds her dress together.

A small cry leaves her lips as she catches the front of her dress and holds it clutched over her front.

"What are you doing?"

I tip my chin at her dress. "Take it off."

Nera looks so fragile, so young, standing there. Back hollowed, no longer confidently wearing the dress that'd brought an entire bar to its knees earlier. She shakes her head in refusal so I grab the fabric and pull it over her hips and off myself.

"Tristan!" She cries, covering her breasts and stomach.

I grab her arms and force them down against her sides so she's standing naked in front of the mirror.

"What do you see?" I demand, voice gruff.

She looks away and closes her eyes, refusing to look at herself.

"What do you see, Nera? Do you see someone beautiful?"

She shakes her head, eyes still closed.

"I do," I say, softly. I press my lips against the back of her neck. "I see lean shoulders that carry the weight of the world." I move my mouth over to her right shoulder, kissing the rounded edge of her back. "I see toned arms that'll raise a gold medal this summer." My hands caress the curves of her body, moving down in tandem with my lips as I continue my exploration of

her body. Her eyes open and find mine in the mirror as I drop to my knees behind her.

“I see a strong stomach that’s allowed you to endure more than anyone should. I see powerful thighs and legs that’ll carry you to whatever you want in life because from what I know of you, when you put your mind to something, you always achieve it.”

Liquid pools in her eyes as she looks at me, the vulnerability in her gaze hitting me in the softest part of my marrow.

My hands move up to cup her ass, my fingers digging in greedily as they do every time I get to touch it.

“Beyond that, I see an ass that I spend half of my waking moments thinking about, hips that I need to touch whenever you’re near me, and mouthwateringly distracting tits.” I stand, pulling her back against my front. “Your body is perfect, Nera. In every way,” I growl in her ear.

“I don’t think so,” she murmurs, jaggedly. “How do I fix myself when I’m so broken?”

“There’s nothing to fix because you’re not broken,” I answer, kissing her forehead.

“Yes, I am.”

“No, baby,” I say, cupping her face and tilting it up to look at me. “There’s only so many times you can only be told you’re not good enough before you start to believe it.”

I press a heated kiss on her lips, a relieved sigh leaving my throat at the contact.

She whispers so low that I barely make out her words. “Maybe that’s because it’s true.”

Her eyes are closed like she can’t even face looking at me when she says the words. My mouth comes down on her right eyelid, kissing it softly. I tilt her head upwards, moving over to the other eyelid. Then, her nose. Her cheeks. Her jaw.

Finally, her mouth.

“No, it’s not.” I know my kiss communicates the ferocity of my feelings when it comes down on her lips. “I wish you could see yourself the way I see you. Beautiful inside and out.”

“How can you say that when you’ve just seen what I’m like on the inside? Warped and ugly and intent on ruining any chance I have at being anything but miserable.” She hangs her head. “I ruined our night.”

“You didn’t ruin anything,” I say, angling her chin back towards me. “I walked into this wanting to get behind those walls, wanting to see the parts of you that you stubbornly keep in the dark.” I stroke her cheek, whispering, “I got exactly what I wanted tonight.”

“And?” She asks. I can tell she holds her breath. “Now that you’ve seen it, what do you think?”

I smile at her, brushing a strand of hair behind her ear. “I think that your mind is my favorite thing about you.”

“You don’t have to li—”

“I think that it’s beautiful and strong and resilient and competitive and smart. When I look at you, I see someone who’s kind and flawed and human and interesting and so goddamn compelling that it’s got me under your spell.” I push against her shoulders softly, guiding her towards the bed. The back of her thighs bump against the mattress and she sits, eyes still locked on mine. “I see *you*, Nera. I always have. Nothing about tonight changes that.”

I force her onto her back and crawl over her body until my face is back over hers.

“But no one hurts you, baby, including you,” I growl, my tone shifting from gentle to husky. “I made you that promise and I intend to keep it. So, we’re going to gameplan how to make sure you never hurt yourself again.”

She reaches up and buries both her hands in my hair, bringing my face down to hers and closing the gap to kiss me. I groan gutturally, intoxicated by her lips. She tastes different, the salt of her tears giving her a tangy savor that only spurs me to claim her mouth.

“Tomorrow. Tomorrow, we’ll talk,” I say breathlessly, pulling away from her mouth. “First, you need to learn to love your body as much as I do.”

It takes all of my willpower to rip myself from her, but I do. I straighten to standing and take a couple of unsteady steps back. I grab the chair in the corner of the room and pull it closer to the bed, dropping into it and sitting with my legs spread. My eyes shine with obsessed lust as I stare at her.

“What?” She says, confused as she sits up.

She crosses her legs to hide her nakedness.

“You need to get more confident in your body. Uncross your legs,” I order. She blushes, hesitating, then eventually giving in. Her thighs shake ever so slightly as she moves the right one back down next to the left. “Now touch yourself.”

Even in the dark room, I can see the violent red color that bursts on her

cheeks.

“I can’t,” she says, embarrassed.

My hands white knuckle grip the edge of the armrests to keep me from reaching for her. My cock is painfully hard in my trousers and demanding attention.

“I’ll tell you what to do,” I say, voice thick with lust. “Part your legs and show me my pussy. I want to see how wet you are.”

She hesitates once more. But when I bring my hand down to stroke my cock over my trousers, she swallows and scoots backwards deeper onto the bed. She leans back, her weight resting on one forearm as her eyes find mine over her closed legs. Slowly, she parts them, our gazes never leaving each other’s.

“Good,” I say, lust warping the one syllable until it’s unintelligible. “Good. Now bring your hand down between your legs. Run your fingers through your folds and show me.”

Slowly, she does as instructed. My eyes drop to the apex of her legs and I swallow thickly. Her hand moves unhurriedly down her stomach until she reaches the top of her pussy. She pauses for half a moment before her fingers move down to her folds. Her back arches and her breath hitches when she makes contact with her clit.

When she pulls her fingers away and holds them up between us, they’re glistening with her arousal. An animalistic sound echoes in the room and it takes me a second to realize it came from me.

“Soaked,” I growl. “Just like I knew you’d be. Now put two fingers inside you.”

I rip off my suit jacket and dress shirt and sit back down in the chair, shirtless. I unzip my trousers and pull out my throbbing cock as I watch her dip her fingers inside her tight pussy. Her eyes roll back into her head and close. She looks wanton and delirious with lust and I roughly fist my length in response.

“Fuck yourself with your fingers.”

Nera’s eyes open and darken when they notice how I work my dick, my hand moving up and down in almost vicious strokes as I pleasure myself to the sight of her fingering her pussy.

Her tongue peeks out and licks her top lip, the move so sultry that cum leaks from my tip. Her fingers move inside her, her hips arching to meet every thrust.

“Grind your palm down on your clit. Good, like that. Now lay down on your back and play with your tits. Imagine that it’s my tongue flicking the piercing, my mouth closing around your tight nipples. Imagine that it’s my cock fucking you and not your fingers. That you’re parting your legs for me, so I can take your body the way I like too. Hard. Fast. *Rough.*”

“Oh God, Tristan.”

“Get yourself off to thoughts of me, Nera. Think about what I’m going to do to you once you come on your fingers.”

“Oh, *fuck.*”

She’s spread out on the bed, hair fanned out around her shoulders, back arched off the mattress. Hand moving roughly between her legs.

Pain thumps in my head at the effort it takes to remain here, to let her bring herself to orgasm instead of burying my tongue in her folds and my fingers in her tight cunt and ass. I’m greedy for her body and letting her steal an orgasm that rightfully belongs to me isn’t an easy task.

I’m pumping up and down my cock so hard and fast that I feel like I’m chafing the skin. My eyes are pinned unblinkingly on her as I watch her approach the cliff of her climax. Her legs kick out, her stomach works, her free hand shoots into her hair, her face twists in pleasurable agony.

She looks so fucking beautiful.

“Come for me, baby,” I order.

My words release the dam of her climax with one violent pull. She stills completely, body hanging in the balance as the waves crash over her. She pants, loudly, her body shaking.

My own muscles lock, my stomach caving as I watch her succumb to her pleasure. The extent of her power over me hits me and I only have time to pump up and down a couple more times before I come with a loud groan. Ropes of cum shoot from my dick and land on my stomach.

I’m gasping for breath as she falls back to the bed, spent. Finally, she turns her face towards me, her eyes hooded with lust and post-orgasmic bliss. Her gaze catches on the streaks of cum on my stomach, her eyes heating further.

I release my still hard dick and it bobs before remaining upright. Placing my arms back on the armrests, I spread my legs further.

“You’ve made a mess, Nera,” I say, tilting my head down at my stomach. “Come and clean it up.”

Her eyes flash with arousal and something like mischief. My voice

drops an octave, my whispered command coming out sultry.

“On your knees.”

She sits up and gives me an erotic look as she slides off the side of the bed and down onto her knees as ordered. Her eyes stay on mine, never wavering from the contact.

She crawls to me.

My heart pounds, my dick hardening again watching her prowl towards me like a stalking panther.

I’m so fucking obsessed with this girl, there’s no saving me at this point.

My salvation is coming towards me anyway.

Nera comes to a halt between my legs, settling into her ankles with her knees crossed behind her. She reaches for my thighs, running her hands up the expanse of fabric-covered skin until they find my waist. Keeping her eyes on me, she leans over, parting her lips.

My breath catches in my throat as her tongue peeks out and she makes contact with the sensitive skin of my lower stomach. She licks upwards, collecting my cum into her mouth. She moans as she swallows, coming right back down for another swipe of her tongue over my hot flesh. She wraps a hand around my shaft, squeezing me tightly and fisting up and down my length in twisting motions. I hiss at the combination of her mouth on my stomach and her hand on my cock. My abs shift under her wet tongue and I cup her nape, keeping her head down as she licks me clean.

“Good girl,” I growl. “Perfect girl.”

She brings her thumb up to wipe her lower lip and I’m done for. I snap forward, using my hold on her neck to bring her against me as my mouth claims hers.

She rips away after a couple of seconds, inquisitive eyes finding mine.

“Why is it that every time I kiss you, you taste like bourbon?”

My shoulders stiffen in response. She seems to have sniffed out my secret the same way I did hers.

“It takes the edge off.”

She brushes the slope of my shoulders, soothing away the tightness. “Let me do that for you.”

A primal growl erupts from my lips and I lift her into my arms, settling her legs on either side of mine. I’m still kissing her as I maneuver my cock to her entrance and push in, so that her surprised groan falls into my mouth. I

swallow it greedily, driving into her with one sharp thrust.

Both of my hands wrap around her neck to keep her in place as I pound into her. Her head falls backwards and she hangs on to my forearms to keep herself upright.

“Look at me,” I order, and she does. “Remember what I said earlier. Do I look like a man who doesn’t like what he sees, Nera?” I ask, the potency of my desire for her crackling around us like hundreds of little bang snaps. I know my eyes are black and shining with manic lust. “Do I fuck you like I’m not obsessed with your body?”

I pull her forward so that her weight falls into her knees.

“Answer me,” I demand, roughly.

“N-no.”

Her answer is stuttered by my thrusts into her pussy.

“Good. Glad we cleared that up,” I snarl. Clutching her waist in my hands, I guide her up and down my length at a furious pace. “I fucking love it when you ride me, baby,” I praise breathlessly. “I love how much you love the way I fuck you. It’s so fucking hot seeing you bouncing on my cock and chasing my thrusts. You’re so needy, so hot for me. As much as I am for you.”

Her eyes are closed, her mouth parted on a silent scream as I bottom into her over and over again. I stuff two fingers into her mouth, pushing them deep into her throat until she gags on them. Pulling them out, I reach around her and part her cheeks with my palm, my fingers sliding down the valley of her ass until I feel her tight hole.

Her eyes snap open as I press in with a finger, shoving it completely inside her.

“Oh my...God. Fuck, *fuck*, that feels good,” she pants.

I add a second finger beside the first, pumping into her ass in tandem with my cock in her pussy. She grimaces at the tight fit so I lean forward and suck her hard nipple into my mouth.

“Yeah? Every part of you belongs to me, Nera. Your pussy, your ass, your tits, your mouth, your mind. I want it all and I’m taking it all.”

She shudders, goosebumps erupting all over her skin as the walls of her pussy flutter around my dick. Small, breathy pants fall from her lips as my words, my fingers, and my cock make her come. She falls apart and then falls forward, twitching as she comes down from her orgasm.

I shove one last time roughly into her ass, and her pussy clenches in

response, suffocating my cock in her tight folds. I come with a loud roar, spilling my hot seed inside her this time.

Her head turns and her lips find mine and we kiss for long minutes, my length still buried inside her. Eventually, I lift her into my arms and lay her back down on the bed, getting a wet towel and cleaning her gently.

When I get into bed beside her, she curls into me and throws her leg over mine. It's the first time she openly seeks the comfort of my body in bed and unfortunately for her, that means I'm never letting her go now. I tentacle her against me, my arm wrapping around her and my other leg coming down over hers until there's no way she can move.

The night took some sharp turns in the wrong direction but ended as it should, with her in my arms.

"Want to work at being happy with me?" I ask her, tapping her nose.

She tilts her head up on my shoulder to look at me.

"I don't think there's anyone else I could even do it with."

Chapter 34

Tristan

Two days later, I'm awoken by a shrill ringing. I lift my head and look around my bedroom. Nera is gone, headed to practice. I wonder what her reaction will be when she realizes she'll never have to deal with Kravtsov again.

When we went to bed last night, I noticed how tightly wound she was. She'd never admit it, but I knew it was fear and anticipation at seeing him again that was tensing her up. At potentially being put through another almost lethal workout.

I'd solved that problem.

And yesterday I'd spent a good portion of time doing what I could to help her with her eating. The reality is she needed to talk to someone, which I suggested, but I'd tackled the issue the way I knew how – by prepping her meals that she could take with her today, explaining that all the ingredients were good proteins or healthy fats, both sources of energy that she'd need to fuel her workout.

She'd taken it, albeit somewhat reticently, but had mellowed when I'd explained that gaining additional muscle weight would only strengthen her athletic abilities.

Clearly, she's been trained by old school coaches if nutrition hasn't been a part of her overall regimen. While on paper those coaches have yielded successful results, the methods themselves leave little to be desired.

I'm determined to help her win this medal the right way and I told her as much. She'd kissed me so passionately when I'd vowed it to her that I'd had to keep her up well into the night for a different kind of workout.

My phone rings again and I reach for it, answering groggily.

"Hello?"

"Is this Tristan Novak?" A voice I don't recognize asks.

I sit up, groaning as the blood rushes to my head. "Speaking."

I look over at the alarm clock on my bedside table. Seven am. A criminal time for a phone call.

"My name is Luca Marchesani, I'm a chef and owner at *Sambour*."

"I know who you are," I say, cautiously.

What I don't know is why he's calling me. I've followed his career from a distance, inspired by his skill and creativity, and to say I'm a fan is an understatement. How he got this number and why he's calling it is beyond me.

I resist the urge to slap myself to gauge whether I'm conscious or if this is just the best dream I've ever had.

"Great, that's all the awkwardness out of the way. So, you know why I'm calling then?"

"I'm afraid not. I'm still trying to work out if this conversation is really happening or not. How'd you get this number?"

He chuckles. "Fair enough. Listen, a friend of mine sent me a portfolio for you. Photos of meals you've conceptualized and cooked. I have to say, I was impressed. You've had no formal training, is that right?"

"That's right," I answer, still feeling a beat behind and off-footed in this conversation.

"Then I'm even more impressed. Can you come in this morning?"

I'm out of bed and pacing, unable to contain the nervous energy. "For what?"

"A try out. I want to see what you can do. It's my understanding that you have a full-time job you're committed to, but cooking is a passion. You can't just ignore it, especially if you have natural talent. Come in and show me what you've got. We can talk from there about what I can offer you if you're interested."

"Is this a prank?"

He laughs outright now. "No."

"Who sent you my portfolio?" I don't have an actual portfolio so

whoever sent him my info must have cobbled together a few random pictures and sent that. But why?

“That question is irrelevant if you’re staying home. You coming in or not?”

I don’t even take a moment to think about it.

“I’ll be there in an hour.”

Exactly an hour later, I walk into the darkened restaurant and back towards the kitchen. It won’t open for a few more hours so it’s completely absent of staff milling about and preparing for the night.

In the back I find who I assume is Luca in an all black chef’s outfit, doing food prep. It’s rare to see a head chef doing his own prep instead of handing it over to a prep cook and it seems to speak to his character. Across the island from him are another set of knives and a cutting board.

He lifts his head when he hears me come in and looks at me. “Novak?”

“Tristan,” I correct. The last thing I want is my fake identity associated with this.

He wipes his hands on the apron at his waist and walks up to me, dapping me up. “I’m Luca.” He turns, pointing at the cutting board. “Why don’t you get set up there and help me prep. I want to see your knife work.”

I pick up the utility knife amongst the set, running my thumb over the sharpened edge. These are top of the line and similar to the ones our chefs had access to back home.

Luca hands me an onion and two cucumbers and I get to work, quietly chopping under his watchful eye. When I’m done, I nudge the cutting board forward between us.

He nods and tips his chin at another station where bowls and a few ingredients are laid out.

“Do you know the French mother sauces?”

“Yeah. The velouté isn’t my specialty.”

He nods again. “Okay, go ahead and make me a béchamel and a hollandaise.”

Pure adrenaline and excitement electrify me as I move over to the other station. I’m trying to tamp it down, to mitigate my hopes since I don’t know what the outcome will be even if I nail these two sauces. But I’m galvanized more in this one morning than I have been in four months of teaching at RCA.

When I’m done, Luca leans over and dips the back of the spoon in the

béchamel. He tastes it, looking at me thoughtfully before going back for a second pass. Then, he moves on to the hollandaise.

Finally, he puts his spoon down and looks at me, giving me yet another nod, this time more decisively. That nod pulls a pleased smirk out of me.

“Not bad at all. You have raw skill, lots of it if this is what you can whip up without having trained under anyone. I have just one more thing I want you to try – you ever made fresh pasta?”

My smirk widens. “A couple times.”

“Make me some, whatever kind you want.” He tilts his head to the right and my eyes follow the motion. “Pantry’s that way.”

I head in and come back with all the ingredients I need for egg yolk ravioli. It’s what our chef was teaching me how to make that fateful day when my father caught me, so there’s poetic justice in making it now, in these circumstances.

Luca pins his eyes on me in honest appraisal. I chop ingredients for the filling as he speaks.

“Your confidence is another one of your assets. It comes through in your cooking. But everyone needs some form of training, Tristan, and so do you. Especially so you learn basic techniques – it’ll help you further shape your skill into an ownable style.”

I look up at him. “Are you offering that training?”

“Make me some good fucking pasta and we can talk.”

I snort, focusing back on the basil I’m chopping. We talk as I busy myself around the kitchen, constantly in motion, and I actually enjoy the company. Luca’s a jokester, I can tell, but also clearly a genius at his craft. He’s only a few years older than I am and the four walls we’re standing in are a testament to his brilliance.

“So,” he starts during a natural lull in our conversation, “is Nera single?”

My hand freezes abruptly at the top of my movement.

Seconds bleed by as his question seeps in.

A clock ticks. The water boils. My eyelid twitches. My blood pressure rises dangerously.

This ranks high on the list of moments where I’ve been most caught off guard in my life and my physical reaction reflects that. My grip tightens around the handle of my knife.

Why the fuck does he know her name?

I look up at him slowly, the hairs on the back of my neck rising in warning as if to alert me a predator is nearby.

Luca's eyes drop to my white-knuckled grip and he chuckles easily, inclining his head towards me in acknowledgement of my reaction.

"Message received loud and clear, mate," he says, putting his hands up as if backing off. "I get it."

I straighten, steeling my spine.

Did he bring me here just to try to hit on my girl?

He's about to find out just how good my knife skills are if he did.

"Do you?" I ask, somehow managing to grit out the words around my tightly clenched jaw.

"If she's yours, then yeah."

"She is."

"Understood," he answers, putting his hands up in a harmless gesture. "Don't worry, I was just testing a theory. Glad to see my hypothesis was correct."

My jaw is tensely corded, my teeth clenched. I was just starting to like the guy but this new connection is going to be short lived if he doesn't shut his fucking mouth.

"What the fuck are you talking about?"

"When she called, I was wondering why she was so insistent I meet you, her *professor*. The reason is pretty obvious now. Don't worry, your secret's safe with me."

Surprise clashes with anger, shoving it easily out of the way. My brows rise, nearing my hairline.

"Hold up. Tell me how you know Nera." I narrow my eyes at him. "She called you?"

"She's...a friend." He pauses before adding, "Well I only hesitate to call her a friend because in full transparency, I did ask her out. No, *relax*," he adds with a teasing smile when I slam my knife down on the metallic kitchen island. "I'm telling you because you're clearly head over heels and if we're going to be working together, we need to trust each other."

"You're off to a shit enough start on that front," I growl, roughly.

"This was months ago in September and based on how quickly she shut me down, you have nothing to worry about. She's not interested in me and that has to be because of you. I mean, look at me," he says with a grin. "Who wouldn't say yes to taking me to bed?"

“Think carefully about the next words that come out of your mouth, Luca.”

He laughs outright, a hand coming down onto his stomach. I pick the knife up and point it at him.

“I’ll remember this when it’s you who...”

“Yes? Finish your sentence,” he goads. “When it’s me who what?” His shit-eating grin grows even wider when I set my jaw and don’t answer. “Yeah, you’re in deep, even I can tell that much off a five minute conversation with you. Have you told her how you feel yet?”

“None of your business. Tell me why she called you.”

“Isn’t it obvious? She wanted me to hire you,” he says, crossing his arms and leaning back against the counter behind him. “I am, by the way, you’re excellent. She was right to send you my way.”

“She arranged this?” I ask, bewildered. I’d been so focused on his admitted interest in her that I hadn’t even processed the other thing he said.

“Yeah. She called and swore up and down that I’d be making a mistake if I didn’t hire you. Wouldn’t get off the phone until I agreed and then swore me to secrecy.” He pauses again. “To be clear, I wouldn’t have agreed to meet you, let alone spent the last few hours here watching you work, if I didn’t actually think you had talent. Your portfolio speaks for itself, that’s why you’re here. She just put it in front of me.”

Warmth fills my chest at the realization. Just as I helped her with her passion, she’s helping with mine.

Sneaky girl.

As much as she likes to pretend she has no feelings involved in this, this little clandestine maneuver proves the contrary.

Chapter 35

Nera

I get out of my car and circle around the back to the boot. I'm bent over it, gathering the items I bought into my arms when someone reaches in from behind me, startling me. I recognize the warm body before I've even turned around.

"What's all this?" Tristan asks, grabbing the items from my arms, the bag from my shoulder and closing the boot with his elbow.

I look around self-consciously as we head towards his apartment. I'm always afraid of being spotted by someone. His place is just off campus but close enough that it's not out of the realm of possibility that other students would be walking by.

He sets the bags down on his small kitchen table and I start taking things out.

"Are those flowers?" He asks. He places a hand on my waist and leans over, dropping a kiss on my lips. "Also, hi. Missed you today."

"It's only been eight hours," is my answer instead of admitting that I've thought about him almost incessantly since I last saw him.

"And I missed you from that first minute."

My skin heats happily in response. He's so good with his words.

I take a vase out and walk over to the kitchen sink, filling it with water and starting the flower arrangement.

"I bought a few decorative things. It's really not much, just a few small

pieces to make your place feel a bit more like home.” I turn and show him the finished bouquet. “I hope you don’t mind.”

He peers into the bag and my breath catches in my throat when he pulls out a couple rolled up posters. He unravels them and looks at them quietly.

“Where did you buy these?”

“I, um, I designed them and then got them printed.”

His head snaps to the side to look at me.

“What?”

“Yeah.” After practice, I’d curled up in my chair with my iPad and I’d drawn. Inspiration had flowed and after a few strokes I’d gotten caught up in what I was doing. Before I knew it, I’d created a couple abstract post-modern graphics that I thought would look good on his walls. “If you don’t like them, that’s okay. You don’t have to hang them up or anything, I just wanted to give them to you.”

He wraps his hand around my nape and pulls me into him, curling me up against his side.

“I fucking love them. Thank you, baby.”

He drops a quick but intense kiss on my lips.

I smile at him. “You’re welcome.”

“And thank you for what you did with Luca.”

I freeze, feigning ignorance. “What do you mean?”

“I spent the day at *Sambour* being put to the test by him. I know you set it up.”

“I told him not to tell you!”

The morning after our emotional night at the hotel, I’d snuck out of the room and called Luca. From the start, I’d been taking photos of the meals Tristan cooked for me so I texted them to Luca live as I was trying to convince him. Helping Tristan get a foot in the door was the least I could do when he’d been there for me in a way no one ever had before.

“He thought I should know.” His eyes narrow on me. “He also thought I should know he asked you out.”

I groan and wave him away. “That was months ago and I turned him down.”

“Because you don’t date,” he says, smirking down at me. “And yet, he seemed to think you turned him down because of me.”

I think about it for a second. I’m sure he’s expecting a denial but I find I can’t give him one. “You were playing hard to get back then. I guess I was

holding out hope.”

Tristan makes a satisfied noise that sounds awfully close to a purr and tightens his hold on me. “I’m glad I came to my senses in time to not lose you.” He places a lingering kiss on my lips. “Although, believe me, I wouldn’t have let you go that easily.”

Butterflies come alive in my stomach and I tilt my head up to look at him. “I thought you didn’t fight for things?” I teasingly remind him.

He brushes his thumb gently over my nose like he loves to do, then runs his fingers down my cheek until they settle under my chin. Fierce intensity burns in his gaze.

“For you, I would,” he whispers. “I’d fight for you every day of my life if needed.”

The butterflies erupt, taking up all the available space in my body until I feel full. Happiness seeps so powerfully through my skin that I’m surprised I don’t glow.

“How did it go with Luca?”

He beams when he answers and my heart swells.

“I fucking nailed it. He wants me to work with him and he’s going to be flexible around my schedule. So, during term I’ll only do a couple hours at night, but starting next week when we break for Christmas I’m going to be doing full days.”

I squeal and jump up, throwing myself into his arms.

“Holy shit, that’s amazing news! I’m so happy for you. You deserve it.”

He laughs happily and twirls me around before setting me down, grabbing my face and kissing me.

“This opportunity is truly the best present anyone’s given me, thank you.” His eyes drop down to my body and he bites his lip. “Now take off your clothes and let me show you just how thankful I am.”

I step back out of his arms, thumbing the zipper of my hoodie and bringing it down to reveal my sports bra. He takes a step towards me and I put my hand up to stop him.

“One last thing,” I say. “Coach Krav resigned apparently. One of the assistant coaches is taking over. Do you know anything about that?”

I’d been dreading going to practice today and the relief I’d felt hearing I wouldn’t have to see or deal with him again had been monumental.

His eyes flash in satisfaction.

“I’m not implicating you, remember?”

My heart rate speeds up impossibly.

I knew he had something to do with it. He said he'd slay my demons and he has, one by freaking one. I want to tell him he doesn't need to, that he shouldn't risk himself for me, but I know I'd simply be wasting my breath.

So instead, I grab my bra and pull it off over my head.

"Yes, chef," I say, throwing him a suggestive look.

His pupils dilate in response, his eyes darkening to the color of obsidian as he prowls towards me, closing the distance between us.

"I'm going to fuck you so hard. I hope you're ready."

My father mandates my presence back in Hong Kong over the holidays, so I leave three days later.

Tristan and I haven't been separated for more than a day for weeks now, so saying goodbye is hard. Harder than I thought it would be. I don't know why I didn't prepare myself for it or think about how the winter holidays would impact us. Maybe I was willfully ignoring it.

I try to keep our goodbye short and sweet but of course he refuses. He drives me to the airport in Geneva, takes my luggage out, and waits in line with me while I check in. His arm hangs loosely around my shoulder as he scrolls on his socials.

It feels like the most natural thing in the world to be like this.

I've dreaded going home the last few years, but I've always resigned myself to it. Now, home feels like it's the place I'm leaving behind, not the place I'm headed towards.

We haven't had *the conversation*, Tristan and I, so I wonder if he feels the same. He still jokes about how I won't date him, but now I stay silent when he does. He hasn't picked up on it or asked me to be more since, so maybe he's fine with the way things are.

I know he cares about me but I don't know if he sees a future with me. It feels impossible and complicated what with his career and the stigma around how we met. I don't know when we'll be able to be together in public, if ever.

I don't know if he'd even want that. I'm only slowly letting down my walls and opening myself up to that idea.

"What are you stressing yourself out about over there?" He asks, pulling me from my looping thoughts. He says it without looking up from his phone, like he can *feel* my mind spiraling. "I can see your thoughts working overtime."

"Nothing."

We get up to the counter and I hand over my documents.

"If you're worried about your father, don't be. You tell me if he so much as exhales in your direction. I'll fly over there and come get you myself."

I smile, taking my passport back as he places my suitcase on the conveyor belt.

"No, I'm sure it'll be fine. I doubt he'll be around much anyway, he's not a big family guy. I'll mostly hang out with Jude."

"Then what are you worried about?" He asks, placing his arm back around my shoulders as we walk towards security.

"Nothing important, I'm serious. Just what I'll do on the plane to distract myself," I lie.

We're standing in front of the security checkpoint where we're going to go our separate ways and I have a ball in my throat.

"Okay, baby," he says, kissing me.

I realized a while ago that he hasn't called me 'jailbait' in weeks. I'm "pretty girl" when he's speaking softly, "baby" when his eyes burn with lust.

He brushes his thumb over my nose in a gentle caress like he so often does. I swat at him playfully.

"Why do you always do that?" I grumble, but there's a smile on my face.

His arms wrap around me, his hands coming to rest on my lower back and pulling me more tightly against him. Heavy eyes look at me through lowered lids as he swipes his thumb back over my nose, his touch affectionate.

"I like to check in on my little beauty marks. The five tiny ones you have spread out on your nose here. And here," he says, tracing them individually. "And here. They're my favorite," he purrs, kissing the tip of my nose softly. "I'm going to miss them."

My lips part but no words come out as emotion swells in my chest and chokes me. He cups my face in his hands, tilting it up to look at him as

people mill about us. The airport is packed, canceled and delayed flights adding to the holiday mayhem, but it feels like we're alone. People pass us as if on warp speed while we stay standing, staring at each other.

"You're back in two weeks?" He asks.

"Two weeks and five days. Almost three weeks."

He groans unhappily, dropping his forehead against mine.

"Call me every day," he demands.

"We don't have to if you don't want—"

"Every day."

I nod, speechless.

"I will," I promise.

His mouth crashes down on mine in a searing kiss and then he's gone.

Chapter 36

Nera

Christmas break is excruciating. Each day drags by like it lasts a week until I feel like I'm going to lose it by the time my last night rolls around.

I managed to avoid overexposure to my father only because he told me he's been getting glowing reports from Coach Krav. I have to mask my reaction when he tells me. I assume Tristan is behind this maneuver as well. Even when we're separated by distance, his protection of me is still in full effect.

It makes my feelings for him ten times stronger, if that was even possible to begin with. I've given him the power to hurt me in a way that I've never to anyone else before, and that terrifies me.

When I finally get back to Switzerland, my brother is with me. He's going to spend two weeks in Aubonne at my place before going back to Hong Kong for the start of term. The night we land, I find myself anxiously counting down the seconds until I can ditch him and my friends and go meet Tristan instead.

I miss his big body, his deep laugh, his warm touch. I'm bouncing my leg erratically like it'll make the time go faster and I see Thayer give me a concerned look. I texted Tristan and told him I was back in Aubonne and currently busy with my friends but trying to get away.

I haven't heard from him yet.

I figure if I just drive over to his place he'll be there.

I'm so happy to catch up with the girls again. We didn't really get to talk in Paris when we were there for New Year's Eve and we have plenty to update each other on – Rhys and Thayer are back together and happier than ever, and Phoenix and Six are attached at the hip and sailing towards what everyone hopes is a happy ending.

Their relationship tea is piping hot, but I'm so relieved when everyone finally goes to bed and I can sneak out.

I hug the walls in my exit as I've become accustomed to doing and leave the apartment. I'm out of the building and into the night only seconds later. It's pitch black outside with only two lamp posts casting some low lights on the sidewalk pavement. A sheen of snow covers the ground and the smell of pine trees and spices burns in the frigid air.

I jog down the steps, my icy cold breaths billowing in front of my face. I turn to the right, heading towards my car, when a hand wraps around my elbow and pulls me backwards towards the darkness.

My heart jumps into my throat when another hand clamps down over my mouth, silencing my scream. I can't make a single sound. Adrenaline and fear spike as I'm pushed up against the cold, hard side of the building.

I'm blinded by the black of the night so I don't see the large body until it's pressing up against me.

When it does, my breath catches and swiftly releases, oxygen filtering greedily back into my lungs.

Hands come down on my hips and then a head bends towards me, its owner partially illuminated by a sliver of moonlight. My heart races giddily. When he speaks, his voice is rough as a gravel road and deep, like he's been smoking cigars. It's aroused and seductive and beckons me ever closer.

“Hi, baby.”

I've barely processed his purred greeting before Tristan's mouth slams down on mine. He parts my lips and thrusts his tongue into my mouth, seeking mine out and fighting with it. It's not a nice kiss, it's obsessive and violent and I know most psychiatrists would classify it as destructive.

As much as he protects me, he still fucks me like an animal. And I love it.

I shove my hands into his hair – it's gotten so *long* – and grip his head to take ownership of the kiss.

He groans, annoyed and turned on. He shoves my thick coat over my thighs, brings my leg up to his waist, and spans my ass. It's a sharp, warning

smack meant to remind me of who's in charge. It sends heat pooling between my thighs.

He pulls back, drawing in sharp, ragged breaths. His gaze is heavy with lust as he stares down at me, his cocky grin firmly in place. My heart pounds against my ribcage, a caged bird asking for release now that I'm back in his arms.

"I didn't have the patience to wait for you to get to me, sorry," he rasps.

"I fucking missed you too," I admit, grabbing his face and bringing it back down on mine.

His body melts into my embrace, his chest somehow enfolding me against him. One hand comes around the back of my head to cup my neck, the other grabs my jaw. He moves me at his leisure, attacking my lips and punishing me for the mortal sin of being away for three weeks.

"You can't leave again without me," he informs me.

"How is that going to work?" I grin, reassured to see him as affected as me.

"If you want to go somewhere, I'll take you," he answers, hoarsely.

Tristan yanks my sweatpants and underwear down until they're around my ankles. The freezing air whips at my body, at my vulnerable pussy, and makes me dizzy. His massive body is back against mine in an instant, the heat coming from him beyond burning, making me instantly forget about the cold around me.

He taps his thick cock against my entrance a couple of times. My head spins with lust, all rational thoughts of self-preservation gone missing from my head. I don't think about being caught or what my father would do, I don't think about his career being destroyed. I just, *feel*.

He rips his mouth from mine and rests his forehead against mine as he catches his breaths. He pushes in slowly, parting my walls.

"Let me hear those adorable little noises you make when I sink inside you. Give them to me, don't hold back. You've kept them from me for too long."

I hiss in a sharp breath.

I pant as he keeps pushing in, stretching me completely full. My brow creases and I mewl as he finally bottoms inside me.

Greedy, crazed eyes pinned to my face track every sound that falls from my lips.

He doesn't give me time to get adjusted. He pulls back and slams in

roughly. His pace is manic and out of control, his balls slapping against my ass with each upstroke. I'm trying to muffle my screams so as not to wake the whole neighborhood. They come out as garbled moans instead.

"Did you have a good holiday?" He rasps against my mouth, warm breaths hitting my face with every thrust of his hips.

We spoke every day, he knows the answer to that question. I shake my head repeatedly "no" back and forth, unable to form words right now.

Possessiveness bleeds into his eyes and they turn molten.

"Good," he grounds.

I wrap my arms around his neck, hoisting myself off the side of the building and fully into his arms. I shudder and he groans gutturally when I sink even deeper onto his cock.

"Did you?" I whisper against his ear. I'm so tightly clutched against him that my face bumps against the side of his cheek with every brutal thrust.

"Fuck no," he growls.

"Why?" I ask, breathily.

He pulls back to look into my eyes, one arm only holding me up now as his other hand fists my hair. He slowly wraps the strands around his fist and then he tugs sharply. My neck goes back, my throat opens up to him. I look at him from below half-lowered eyelids.

"Fishing for compliments, are we?" He purrs, darkly. His hips take on a slower, more sensual tempo. He arches back and pushes forward in exquisitely precise strokes that keep me on the knife's edge of sanity.

"Not at all," I pant.

"What do you want me to tell you? That it was terrible because I missed you?" He demands, putting an abrupt end to his thrusts. I can barely make out his handsome face in the pitch black, but I see his eyes shine.

"Not if you didn't."

"I didn't miss you."

I flinch and place my hands on his chest. He bites my neck until I feel his canines break the skin. I yelp and shudder, wetness gushing from my pussy in response.

"My family and my mates, I missed. You, I *yearned* for," he declares, the words avowed against the shell of my ear. "I woke up in the mornings craving your smell and needing your touch, I looked for you in every room I was in, I imagined you curled up on my couch in my shirt every time I walked past it. Fuck, I even sniffed your shampoo every time I took a shower.

I couldn't stop thinking about you, Nera, even when I was supposed to be at *Sambour*. I think the only person who's happier than me that you're back is Luca because it means I'll be able to focus again."

He thrusts inside me with every rough word, driving me wild.

"You and those five little beauty marks of yours — of *mine* — are the only things I've thought about for nineteen days."

My eyes roll back into my head, the pleasure too much. "I-I woke up in the middle of the night," I manage to exclaim as I bounce on his cock. "Multiple nights. Most nights. I woke up touching myself, dreaming that it was you on top of me." I pant, heavily. "I'd cry out in disappointment when I'd realize you weren't there."

His eyes flash with satisfaction before darkening. He stuffs his hand in his coat pocket as he brings his mouth down on mine. I hear something click, then a buzz sound in the air before Tristan presses something against my pussy. Vibrations pulse from the vibe and straight through my vulnerable clit.

My back arches as the first blast of pleasure tears through me and I scream. My feet fall to the floor and I stumble, almost unseating myself off him. He doesn't miss a step. He presses me into the side of the building, keeping himself shoved deep inside me and positioning his vibrator back against my pussy.

He slams his palm on my mouth when I shriek again.

"Shh, baby, you're going to get me arrested."

My screams are continuous but muffled by his hand. I come long and hard, my pussy spasming and clenching around his length. He continues fucking me through it, his gaze blown with lust as he watches me fall apart.

He pushes me from one orgasm into the other until I can barely stand anymore. If I wasn't impaled on his thick, hard length, I'd be in a puddle on the floor.

I come with one final garbled cry, my pussy convulsing to the point of pain. He finally drops a muttered "*fuck*", his muscles lock, and then I feel warm cum jerk inside me, coating my walls.

He's out of breath.

"So yeah, my holiday sucked without you and I'm glad you're back," he says, pulling out of me and pressing a deep kiss on my lips.

I smile up at him. He pulls up my sweatpants and panties and takes me home where he fucks me two more times.

I bask in the euphoria of being near him again. It turns out happiness comes pretty easily to me when I'm with him.

Our reunion is the stuff of literal romance novels – magical and perfect. Which is why just a little over a week later when I spot him with another woman, the shocking pain of it catches me completely off guard.

That afternoon, Rogue, Rhys, and Phoenix come by our apartment to take their girlfriends to dinner. They insist I come with and seventh wheel their dinner as I've been prone to doing lately.

The necessary secrecy of seeing Tristan means that I spend many nights being the extra at these sorts of dinners. I always have fun, but it is starting to weigh on me. I'd like to be able to talk about him with my friends, to be seen in public with him.

I don't know where he stands though. Would he want to be seen together if we were allowed or does this arrangement work perfectly for him?

After dinner, we head to a bar famous for its shots. The girls and I throw them back and dance to the early 2000s music pulsing through the bar, all under the watchful eyes of the boys. When we finally stumble outside, Phoenix is carrying a drunken Sixtine. A deep, happy laugh falls from his lips as she whispers dirty things in his ear. Bellamy and Thayer are up ahead, singing and giggling loudly.

Suddenly, Bellamy bends over and throws up in a nearby trash can. Rogue is across the street and holding her hair, a soothing hand rubbing circles on her back as he helps her.

I stop a few feet away to give her some privacy, and stare idly into a nearby restaurant's window.

That's when I see him.

He's being shown to a table by a hostess. My pulse picks up excitedly at the sight of him. He looks handsome as sin in a perfectly tailored black jacket with crisp lines, an equally dark scarf, and his tousled hair. A smile spreads across my face as I wait for him to look out of the window and see me.

I don't notice her until he turns and hugs her. His arms go around her neck, tucking her head under his chin in a familiar embrace. Her hands wrap around his back and she clutches him.

Bile rises sickeningly in my throat.

It really is like watching a car crash. Everything happens as if time slows. There's no looking away from the destruction as it unfolds in front of me, no matter how painful it is to keep watching.

Tristan releases her and pulls out her chair. He takes her coat and hands it to the waitress and then he helps push in her chair once she's seated.

She's blond and beautiful. Tall, with fine, dainty features, gorgeous blue eyes and a stunning smile that she aims at him.

Happy, uncomplicated, definitely emotionally available.

Everything I'm not.

The waitress comes up to their table and pours him some wine. He swirls it around in his glass and smells it before taking a sip.

He's on a date. With someone else.

In public.

Taking her coat and helping her with her chair and *touching* her. I turn away as a violent urge to throw up seizes me at the throat. The nausea is overwhelming and almost enough to take me out at the knees, but Rhys is right there.

He grabs my elbow when I stumble, brows creased at the whiteness of my face. He looks over my shoulder at the car crash happening in the restaurant, his eyes scanning for what could possibly have upset me. When they land on Tristan and his date, his features smooth out in anger, his gaze turning flinty.

"Who is that he's with?"

"I don't know," I croak, voice absent.

Rhys stares at him silently for a couple of seconds.

"You want me to kill him?" he finally asks.

Somehow, that manages to pull a lone chuckle from my chest. It sounds more like a sob when it comes out.

"No, thanks for the offer though." I work to calm my dying heartbeat, to stifle the pain before it spreads through my whole body and takes me under.

It's my fault.

I'm the one who told him we weren't dating. I pushed him away. I have no one to blame for myself that he finally listened to me.

“We were never exclusive,” I hear myself say.

But we were. At least, I was.

I thought he was as well.

I would never have opened up the way I did to him if I thought he was seeing other people.

I pull out my phone and see that I have a couple missed texts from him.

Gary: I won't be free until later tonight.

Gary: Come over around midnight?

Frozen shock morphs into blazing fury. He was going to go out with this woman, probably kiss her and touch her, and then come home and fuck me. How long has he had this double life? How long has he been playing me for a fool?

Tears of anger cloud my vision as I stalk off. Dark, unspent energy surges through my arms and legs. I need to put distance between me and my friends before I lose my shit.

“Hey, where are you going?” Rhys calls, jogging after me.

“I don't know, but I need to be alone. Go take care of Thayer, I'll be fine.”

He looks over his shoulder at his girlfriend who's still helping Bellamy. He turns back towards me.

“Be careful,” he says. “She'll kill me if something happens to you.”

I nod and march off into the night, at first walking, then jogging, faster and faster until finally I'm running at full speed down the dark streets of Geneva, the tears streaming off the sides of my cheeks and into the wind.

I'm angry that he manages to pull such emotion out of me. The pain in my chest throbs, a pulsing ache that makes it hard for me to breathe without my throat catching on falling sobs.

I finally come to a stop, my palm pressed against a cold stone wall, my top half bent at the waist as I fight to draw air into my lungs.

I'm devastated by his betrayal. I despise him for making me think he was different when he so clearly is like everyone else who hurt me. I look up, still gasping for air, and more tears fall down my cheeks when I realize where I am.

Where I unknowingly ran to.

Our hotel.

My eyes close as more pain rips through me. I push it away, trying to keep it from reaching my heart. The effort is exhausting. Of course I came here. The irony of coming to a place where Tristan made me feel safer than I have in my life when I'm fresh from his betrayal is not lost on me.

I stumble into the lobby and walk up to the front desk with my head bowed. A mumbled request is made for the penthouse suite as I place my black AmEx on the counter. Moments later, I'm handed an equally black keycard and instructed to take the lift up to the top floor.

It's when I'm in the very same elevator where Tristan and I had our first kiss that I text him and break it off for good.

Me: No, I'm done. This thing between us is over.

Me: I don't want to speak to you again outside of class. I hope you can keep it professional.

I make sure the messages are marked as delivered before I power off my phone.

The doors open on the penthouse in the same breath and I walk in.

I head straight for the bedroom and let myself fall on the mattress. I don't take off my expensive dress. I pull the covers back and get underneath. I close them around me, bringing them up to right under my jaw, and fall into a fitful sleep marked by tears and bad dreams.

Chapter 37

Tristan

“**Y**ou’re a hard man to track down, Tristan,” someone calls from behind me as I put my key in my front door.

“Fuck me,” I jump, startled, then surprised by the voice.

I recognize it immediately. There’s no way its owner is standing behind me right now though.

I turn around and sure enough, Tess *is* standing there with a huge grin stamped on her face.

“Holy shit,” I exclaim, jumping down the stairs and embracing her in a hug. I nearly clothesline her in my excitement and have to catch her before she falls. Her happy laugh is muffled against my chest but bursts forth from her lips when I push her at arm’s length. “What the hell are you doing here? How did you know where to find me?”

I can’t believe she’s here. I haven’t seen or spoken to her in months, not since that night we spoke on the phone right before I met Nera. I’d broken most of the rules my father had laid out for me, but not the one that said I couldn’t speak to her or my mother. I was afraid that he’d find out since it’d be happening right under his nose, and that his ensuing punishment of them would be swift and brutal.

“I’m happy to see you too,” she says, still laughing.

“Seriously, what are you doing here? Why did you risk it? Where does the tyrant think you are? How’s mum?” I ask, firing off rapid fire questions at

her.

She puts her hand up as if to stop me.

“Let’s go to dinner and we can talk. I’ll answer your questions then, okay?”

Shit, I’m supposed to meet up with Nera tonight. I so badly want to introduce her to Tess – I know they’d get along so well – but I can’t. I haven’t let myself think about the future with Nera, not beyond what we’re doing each day, because that would mean acknowledging the fact that I’m lying to her. That I’ve lied to her every day that we’ve been together.

There is no path forward without her by my side, I just don’t know how to get myself out of my current predicament without risking losing her forever.

I text her and suggest meeting up later tonight, then put my phone back in my jacket pocket.

“Let me guess, you’re going to want Italian food?” I ask her.

“Obviously.”

“I know a great place then, I’ll call and make us a reservation.”

It’s in Geneva and far away from the prying eyes in Aubonne. Guilt eats at me that this is another thing I’m keeping from Nera, but I’m in too deep right now.

“I can’t believe you’re here, Tessticles,” I say, locking her head in my elbow and ruffling her hair.

“What did I tell you about that nickname?” She mutters, throwing an illegal elbow move straight at my ribs.

I groan and bend at the waist, the breath exhaling sharply from my lungs. But a smile stretches across my face.

It’s good to be reunited with my sister.

A couple of hours later, I’m pulling her chair out at *Tartucci’s*, my favorite Italian spot in Geneva. I sit opposite her and pour us both some wine as I tell her about my new job with Luca.

The three-week intensive I did over the holidays was critical in

developing my skills. In that time period alone, I've seen noticeable improvements in my knife skills, the creativity of my recipes, and my plating of final dishes.

Tess is thrilled to hear I've been able to pursue that in parallel with fulfilling our father's mandated prison term. She, more than anyone except Nera, understands just how important cooking is to me.

When I finish telling her, there's a lull in our conversation as we dig into our entrées.

"So, the million-dollar question," she says, spreading her hands. "How's celibacy going?"

I throw her a veiled look, picking up my glass and taking a sip instead of answering.

She shakes her head, looking down at her plate.

"Tristan..."

"It's not what you think."

She gives me a dubious look. "Isn't it?"

"No."

Something about the tone of my voice when I deny it catches her attention. She looks up into my eyes, picking me apart to see if I'm lying. Satisfied that I'm not, she sits back into her chair, hands falling on her lap as her brows raise in surprise.

"Really? This one's special?"

"Yeah."

Fuck, it feels good to finally admit a sliver of my feelings for Nera to someone.

Tess leans forward, eyes sparkling with excitement, and rests her chin on her palm. "Tell me about her."

So, I do. I tell her how we met, omitting the more salacious details, and how I found out her real identity. She blanches when I reveal she's my student but she turns downright gray when I confess Nera doesn't know about my real identity.

"Tristan, what are you doing? If you care about her, you have to tell her the truth! This is going to blow up in your face sooner or later and you're really going to hurt her. You're going to hurt *yourself* when she never speaks to you again after she finds out."

"I can't, Tess. Not yet. She's only barely started opening up to me and trusting me. She'll slam that door closed and never trust me again if I tell her

now.”

“Trust *me* when I tell you, she needs to learn about this from you. No matter how mad she’ll be, it’ll pale in comparison to how furious she’ll be if she finds out from someone else. Take it from someone who would light you on literal fire if you did this to me.”

I’m deep in thought as we wrap up dinner. She pays the bill and we’re heading outside when I realize I haven’t asked her a single question about her or mum.

“How have you been? And how’s Mum? Has dad been leaving her alone?”

We stand on the sidewalk, our icy breaths creating long clouds around us. She shuffles her feet and looks away, a clear sign of shifty behavior.

“I don’t actually know.”

“What do you mean?” I say, frowning. “Didn’t you see her this morning before you came here?”

Something like guilt flashes in her eyes before she answers.

“It’s a long story, but no. I haven’t. I haven’t seen her—”

A large shadow moves next to us, black and slick as the night. I have no premonition that danger is near until it’s upon us.

The most intimidating man I’ve ever laid eyes on, made only that much more menacing by the expensive black suit wrapped around his massive body, steps out from the cover of shadows and appears behind Tess.

She turns around and a shocked gasp rips from her throat. Her face falls, her eyes widening in alarm as fear etches itself across her features.

He grabs her before she can make a move to run.

One hand clasps her throat. He uses it to pull her against his chest as the other closes firmly around her upper arm, keeping her pinned against him.

Dark, volatile energy pours off of him in waves. He’s got bronze colored skin that hints at Latin origins, black hair and an equally black expression on his face. Dark, intricate tattoos snake out from the top of his collar, up his neck and the underside of his jaw.

Only his eyes are gold and they shine as they examine my sister with almost deranged possessiveness. He hasn’t blinked since he laid eyes on Tess. He looks at her like he’s going to consume her alive and leave nothing behind.

It’s that look on his face that jolts me into action and I take a step forward to intervene.

I'm immediately yanked back by my arms. Two men in fully black suits restrain me, keeping me from intervening. Guns shine in arm holsters but they make no move to use them.

They don't acknowledge me, their gazes trained on the larger man who holds Tess prisoner, their bodies taut as if ready to jump in at a moment's notice. They're attuned to him the way only men looking to their leader are.

Clearly, he's the boss and they take their orders from him. They protect *him*.

The man in question leans forward. He has to bend a long distance to get within reach of my sister's face.

"Found you," he rasps, dangerously. His tone is sinister, like the voice of Death personified, the threat in his words in no way subdued.

His eyes flash hungrily when Tess inhales sharply, his gaze lowering to her lips. She shakes in his hold but doesn't fight him.

"Who the fuck are you?" I say, throwing my weight forward to try to destabilize the bodyguards who hold me, to no avail. "Get your fucking hands off her," I sneer.

Unexpectedly, it's Tess who answers.

"Tristan, it's okay," her voice is tremulous, but not fearful. She flicks her eyes up to meet the man's. His gaze is already pinned unwaveringly on her face, but his eyes flare ominously when they finally connect with hers.

She tilts her chin up at him defiantly and demands, "Let my brother go."

Menace oozes from him and wraps around us all. Whoever he is, he's dangerous as fuck, that much is very clear. I can't tell what he wants with us, or with Tess specifically since that's very obviously where his interest lies. I'm not sure how she even knows someone like him to begin with. Whatever business he's involved in, I'd gamble that it lives well south of being legal.

When he says nothing, she tries, "Let him go and I'll come with you."

His upper lip twitches into a snarl. "I'm taking you regardless."

"I'll go *willingly*."

A rumble sounds in his chest. Without looking away from her, he tilts his head almost imperceptibly in my direction.

I'm immediately released.

The two goons take a step forward, placing themselves between us in case I move to lunge for the man.

A black Rolls Royce rolls silently up to our level, stopping next to the man. I know without a doubt that it's his ride, that he intends to take my

sister with him.

“I’m not leaving you with a stranger who’s trying to fucking kidnap you.”

“He’s not... he’s not a stranger,” she admits, sliding her gaze over to meet mine.

I slip my phone out of my pocket in case I need to discreetly call the police. It’s when I flip it face up that I see I have two texts from Nera. I unlock my screen and read them, my stomach immediately plummeting when I take in her words.

Meanwhile, the man moves his hand from the front of Tess’ throat to cup the back of her neck in a controlling hold. He forces her head back to look into his eyes.

“Tell him who I am,” he orders, sharp teeth on display as he grins. It’s cold and emotionless and sends a shiver shooting down my spine.

I’m barely paying attention anymore, my concern for my sister drowned out by the roaring in my ears at Nera’s attempt at finishing things with me. My head spins as rage sends blood rushing straight to my brain.

My body twitches with the need to find her and correct her of the mistaken assumption that she can end our relationship.

“He’s...” Tess starts, face still angled up towards the man. He watches her with a savage gleam in his eyes, his gaze locked on her mouth. Dark ownership rolls off of him as he waits for her to speak. He leans forward when her lips part, as if transfixed by her. “He’s...”

“Tell him,” he growls, the words more a seductive caress than a threatening command.

She swallows.

Blinks.

And finally, speaks.

“He’s my fiancé.”

I drive down the highway like I’m asking for a fatal car crash to take me into the next life, but I don’t care. My phone is in my hand and I try calling

Nera a fifth time.

Yet again, it goes straight to voicemail.

My teeth grind together so hard, I'm surprised they don't make an audible noise.

"Nera," I growl. "Pick up the phone. We're not over, you hear me? I'm coming to pick you up now and we're going to talk." My grip tightens around the phone as I think about her texts. They're seared into my memory; I see them every time I blink. "Then I'm going to punish the fuck out of you for trying to end this."

I hang up and throw my phone so hard on the passenger seat it bounces off, clips the door, and lands back on the seat. The feeling of helplessness in my chest is almost crippling. I can't drive any faster, I can't get any answers from her, I have no idea where she is.

I hit my palm repeatedly on the top of the wheel. It serves no purpose except to get the rage out and to make me feel an emotion other than pain.

I have no idea why she'd abruptly try to end things. I brush my hand across my jaw as I stare out the window. I can't let myself think about her potentially having found out my secret. There's no way she could anyway.

We've never been closer and things have been even better since she came back from the holidays. We spend every moment we can together and although it's not as much I'd like, it's what's possible in our situation. I cook her meals, we watch shows, sometimes we go out.

I wonder if this isn't one of the times where she pushes me away. Her fear of commitment has been dormant since before the break, but maybe it's back now.

If it is, I'll make quick work of dealing with it like I have every time before. She's not getting away from me, it's that simple.

I grab my phone, accidentally swerving into the next lane in the process.

Me: Where are you?

Me: Talk to me.

Me: Please.

I watch the screen, accidentally dropping below the speed limit and getting honked and cursed at by other drivers. The messages don't get marked as delivered. Her phone must be off.

When I turn into The Pen's parking lot, my head is bent to look out of my window and up at the third floor of Nera's building. The lights are completely off but it's late. She could be asleep.

I park and slip out of the car in the cover of darkness. I slink over to the back of her building until I see her window. No lights coming through either. I look at the ground around me. There's some gravel I can use. I pick up a handful and start pelting them at her window.

There's no answer.

If she's ignoring me, she's going to get the spanking of a lifetime.

I pick up a larger rock and toss it, hitting the window pane square. It makes a loud, cracking sound but the window mercifully doesn't shatter.

No light comes on either.

She's not home.

Concern grabs me around the windpipe and squeezes. I walk back to my car, checking my phone once more. Still no notifications. The antsy feeling in my belly makes me almost nauseous.

Back in the car, my eyes are pinned on the door, watching and waiting for Nera's return. I turn the heat on and sit back in my seat, getting comfortable. After a while, my eyes start to flutter but I fight the call of sleep. I'm not going to miss her.

I sit there well into the night, until I have to turn the engine off and the only heat I have to keep myself warm is the one from my own body.

She never comes home.

Chapter 38

Nera

I end up staying at the hotel the entire weekend.

I don't mean to. I fall into a light sleep where I'm tormented by happy memories of Tristan and I, each reminder a new stab wound to my heart. When I wake up late the next day, I don't have the strength to get up and face the world. I won't be able to hide my heartbreak from my roommates and I can't explain it to them.

So, I stay. Despondency takes me and leaves me as nothing more than a living, breathing shell. I spend the next night flitting between fitful sleep and bouts of silent crying.

It was stupid of me to think he could ever really care about me. My own parents can't love me unconditionally so how can I expect a random guy to, especially one who's seen as much of my internal ugliness as he has, one who I've routinely pushed away for months.

The worst part is I know I can't fault him for it. I'm the one who refused to let him in. I messed this up, I *failed* at this like I always seem to do.

And even if I had let him in, we're in a terrible situation with no recourse. There is no happy ending in the cards for us.

The anger and hurt I feel eclipse the guilt, but just barely. Knowing he touched her and probably spent the night with her after I ended things makes me sick to my stomach. I'd throw up if I'd eaten anything recently.

On Sunday afternoon, I finally peel myself out of bed. When I turn my

phone back on, I have dozens of missed calls and over a hundred texts. I don't check any of them. I'm not ready to go back to my new reality just yet.

I order an Uber and wait for it on the steps of the hotel. It's gloomy and gray outside, a perfect reflection of how I feel inside. I get in the passenger seat and stare silently out the window the entire way back to The Pen. There's a mass in my throat that makes it hard for me to keep the tears in, but I manage as best I can.

The driver parks and walks around to the boot to help me. He bends and grabs my backpack then extends it towards me.

"Nera."

Ice trickles down my spine and freezes me in place. When I don't take the bag from him, the driver looks up, confused.

The voice is smooth as liquid gold, the stony authoritative tone wrapping like a physical touch around my nape and bending me to his will. With one word, he has my knees flinching and ready to kneel for him.

Our connection is out of control; for a moment, it clouds my anger at him.

What is he doing here?

I'm not ready to deal with this.

I turn slowly, coming face to face with Tristan. He's walking towards me from where his car is parked a couple of lanes away.

He looks awful.

His eyes are sunken in, his skin is pale. His hair looks tousled and dull. His clothes are wrinkled. He looks like how I imagine I look, like he hasn't really slept in forty-eight hours.

And looking at him hurts. It's pushing the blade back into the exact same wound, making the cut deeper and more jagged. Harder to heal from.

I go to turn away.

"Don't," he snaps.

My eyes widen and flick back to meet his. He doesn't look angry like his tone made it seem, he looks... miserable. Chaos rages in his eyes, burning only slightly brighter than the hurt and confusion I see in them.

His gaze slides to the man behind me, his upper lip twitching with emotion. Tristan looks at me, pain flashing briefly in his irises and all the angst in the world wrapping around every syllable of his question.

"Who the fuck is he?"

I say nothing, staring back at him mutely. On the inside, I'm in

shambles. My body, my stupid, *stupid*, brain, they both call at me to run at him and jump into his arms, even as disgust roils in my stomach knowing he was with someone else last night. Anger lances through me that he has the gall to look as hurt as me when *he* caused all this.

“I’m just her Uber driver, man. That’s it,” he says, putting his hands up innocently and backing away. “I’ll leave you two to it.”

I stomp towards my building’s front door. We’re not going to have this conversation. If he can’t put two and two together on why I ended things, then that’s on him.

I don’t owe him an explanation for his actions.

I have the key in the lock and am pulling the door open when a hand comes down on the frame from above me and slams it shut. The momentum takes me and my key with it and I fall against the door. When I turn around, I find myself pinned against the glass between Tristan’s arms.

The temperature cools fifty degrees around us as I take in his icy glare. We’re out in the open, in the middle of the largest student housing on campus, and he has me trapped. There’s no way to spin this moment to look appropriate. He’s risking his whole career just being near me like this.

“Where have you been?” He demands. His voice vibrates under the weight of his anger. “I’ve been worried out of my mind.”

“I doubt that very much,” I say with a humorless laugh. “Move aside.”

“What the hell does that mean? Have you checked your phone at all since you tried to end things with me via text?”

I clench my teeth and look away, refusing to make eye contact.

“Move aside,” I repeat, keeping my tone even.

“Answer my questions and I will.”

“If you don’t, I’ll scream. See how well you can keep me trapped here when the entire school runs over.”

He glares at me but steps back. I rip the door open and stride in, heading for the stairs instead of the elevator. I hear his heavy steps slap against the ground behind me as he follows.

“Who have you been with?” He asks as I clear the first landing. I hear the hollow echo in his voice, the one he gets when he’s jealous.

I hope it chokes him like it did me.

I take the next batch of steps two at a time, hoping to put some distance between us.

“Whoever I want,” I bite back. “Stop following me.”

I find out just how easily he's keeping up with me when a hand closes around my elbow and he swings me around. He pulls me against him, jaw working violently as he shoots daggers at me.

"I don't find that joke funny."

"That's good, because it wasn't one."

I rip my arm out of his hold and run up the stairs. As I clear the second landing and turn towards the third, I catch a look at his face. He hasn't moved from where I left him, but his face is angled up to follow me. His mouth has flattened, his eyes are narrowed on me.

I don't stop, running for the third floor. Once I'm in my apartment, I'll be safe from him. The girls are home, he won't risk them seeing him. As it is, I'm surprised he's followed me this far.

I wonder if the blonde is somewhere waiting for him, wondering where he is. I hate her.

"Nera," I hear him call angrily after me, a clear warning in the way he says my name.

I spin around on the landing of the third floor, suddenly overcome with anger.

"I'm single, Tristan, you don't get to question what or *who* I'm doing."

He climbs the last few steps slowly, the look in his eyes downright murderous. The air is charged with our collective anger, but his brings thunderous, ominous energy.

"Come again?"

The question is asked clinically, with each word delivered on the edge of a knife. I swallow and go to turn, but he grabs me and yanks me back.

"I'll ask the question differently," he says, and his voice terrifies me. It sounds on the edge of insanity. "You think we haven't been exclusive?"

"That's right."

"You think you're *single*?"

"Yes."

Tristan's eyes close and a low growl emits from his throat. It grows until it erupts into a furious roar that shakes me to my core. He squeezes my forearm before releasing me like I burned him. He drops his head in his hands and runs them violently over his face.

Eyes cut to me when they come back into view and he takes a step towards me.

I stumble backwards down my hallway.

“Have you acted on that thinking?”

I swallow and his eyes drop to my throat before coming back to my face. When he speaks, his voice is softer in tone but the warning in his words rings with violence I can palpably feel.

“Save a life today, baby. Tell me you haven’t let anyone touch you since we’ve been together.”

Another knife to the heart, this time in the form of the endearment he has for me.

Baby.

He says it so possessively, his voice deep and claiming. I love when he calls me that. It feels like a loving caress coupled with a violent promise of ownership every time he says it.

I’m never going to hear him say it again. The realization pulls a sob from the depths of my chest.

I look away from him, blinking rapidly. Hoping to make them disappear as quickly as they appeared.

“Don’t call me that,” I snap, voice shaking. “I told you we were done. You showing up here changes nothing. I don’t even understand why you came.”

The tears pool in my eyes and crest past my lower lid and down my face. It’s crazy how I didn’t cry for years and now I can’t seem to stop. It’s all connected to him, the good, the bad, the unbearably painful.

His face falls when he sees my tears and he reaches for me but I step out of his reach.

“For once, please listen to me and leave when I tell you to.”

Wiping the teardrops from my cheek, I turn and jog the rest of the way to my apartment door, happy to finally be able to put distance between us.

I have no such luck.

“I’ll do that when you stop running from me,” he thunders. “Literally *and* figuratively.”

I watch him storm down the hallway after me, his body somehow dwarfing the space. I fiddle with my keychain until I find the right key and push it into the lock. I throw the door open and go in, immediately turning around and shoving it closed.

“Nera?” I hear Six ask from behind me. She sounds startled, probably by the way I just crashed into the room after being AWOL for the whole weekend.

I look over my shoulder and see her sitting with Thayer and Bellamy, all three of them looking at me with expressions ranging along the scale of surprise.

“Why are you crying?” Thayer asks, concern making her stand.

I’m still looking at them when I feel Tristan’s arm catch the door before it closes.

Then he’s thrusting it open and barging through.

My mouth drops in shock, the tears momentarily giving way to disbelief.

He’s unseeing of the apartment or people in it, his heated, furious glare locking on me and me only.

“Professor Novak?” I hear Bellamy call from behind me. Total confusion rings clearly in her voice.

I don’t know if he even hears her.

“I’m furious with you, Nera, and you’re making this worse for yourself by running from me.”

“Tristan, I—”

“*Tristan?*” Thayer and Bellamy say in unison, cutting me off.

My heart is beating so wildly, I can barely suck in a breath. I feel like I’m hyperventilating. The combination of being forced to see Tristan when I’m not ready, of fighting with him when I’m fresh on this betrayal, and of my worlds colliding and crashing together so unexpectedly and publicly makes me gasp for air.

“Why the hell are you calling him Tristan?” Six asks, in shock.

Without even looking at them, he grabs my elbow and pulls me with him to my bedroom. I hear Thayer’s voice before he slams the door closed behind us.

“Wait, is he the guy? Is *he* Gary?”

And then it’s just the two of us, with no escape for me.

“I don’t even know where to start,” he growls, taking a step towards me. “Asking you where you were, who you were with, why you think you’re single or why the fuck you tried to dump me. But given I spent the last forty-two hours in my car, sleeping in the freezing cold, waiting for you to come home, I’ll start there. Where the *fuck* were you?”

That’s why he looks so terrible. He’s been... waiting for me this whole time? I don’t understand but it does nothing to appease me.

“You want to know where I was?” I say, taunting him.

“Yeah, given that I’ve texted you maybe a hundred times, that’d be fucking swell,” he responds, sarcasm dripping heavily from his words.

“I was holed up in the penthouse of our hotel, *alone*, crying my eyes out over you for the past two days!”

He recoils, the look on his face pure confusion. I want to wipe it off, by force if need be, anything rather than having him continue the innocence act.

“What the fuck?” He exclaims. “*Why?*”

I scoff, rolling my eyes.

“If you’re going to pretend like you didn’t do anything, then I don’t know why you’re forcing me to talk. We have nothing to say to each other.”

He grabs my arms right above my elbow and pulls me against him.

“I have no idea what you’re talking about, Nera. Zero. Obviously, I did something to piss you off but I can’t apologize and make it right if I don’t know what it is I did.”

“No *apology* is going to fix what you did,” I spit.

He blanches and I jump in for the kill.

“I saw you. At *Tartucci’s*, with her. Whoever she is. A girl that’s not me. Tall, blonde, beautiful. Gorgeous smile. Probably uncomplicated and not messed up in the head and has no problem being open and expressing her feelings to you.” I curse myself when my voice catches on a sob. “Age appropriate and someone you can proudly display on your arm. In short, the perfect woman. I get it, that’s the worst part,” I say, the tears making a reappearance now. “She’s everything anyone could ever want, so of course you want her.”

He exhales roughly, shaking his head.

“Nera...”

He pulls me against him, his hand moving to cup my cheek. I turn my face to the side, not wanting his touch on me.

“This should be the easy part for you,” I cry out. “You should be with her, you shouldn’t be here, but you are. Why do you keep coming back? Why do you keep staying when I tell you to go?”

He grips my jaw and forces me to look into his heated eyes.

“Because I fucking love you, that’s why,” he exclaims. “I’m *in love* with you.” Softer, he adds, “How is that not painfully obvious to you by now?”

I’m mouth open ready to clap back at him, but the words die on my tongue at his words. Silence stretches for interminable seconds as I process his words.

“You can’t say that to me wh—”

“That woman you saw me with. The blonde? That’s Tess.”

“I don’t want to know her fucking name,” I hiss, furious. Shoving at him.

My mouth is operating independently from my brain, the muscle too occupied with the words he just so casually dropped like they’re not the most important words a person could ever say.

“Nera, it’s *Tess*. My sister. The one I’ve talked to you about.”

I pause like a record scratch mid-thought. It’s as if the haze of anger instantly evaporates, leaving rational thought in its place. He has told me a lot about her over the past few months, how she’s his best friend and most trusted adviser.

Tristan sees the cogs working behind my eyes and pulls out his phone. He scrolls through rows of photos before selecting one and turning the phone in my direction. It’s a picture of him as a teenager next to a blonde.

The same one from the restaurant.

He swipes and there’s another photo, this time of him when he was even younger, with her at the beach.

Relief lifts the impossible weight that the anger, hurt, and pain had been pressing suffocatingly down on all my major organs and provides an immediate release of serotonin and hope.

“She surprised me out of the blue last night. I would have introduced you yesterday but her...fiancé interrupted us Friday night and took her back to Engla— you know what, it’s a long story. It doesn’t matter. What does matter is the fact that she’s my sister and not some other woman I was seeing behind your back.”

My heart pounds with every word, but he keeps going.

“What we have is *real*. You weren’t — *aren’t* — just a fling to me. I’m putting it all on the line for you. To have you. All because I can’t get you out of my head or my heart. The worst part is I’m fully aware of all the consequences that come along with loving you, but I can’t get myself to have one ounce of self-preservation. I don’t care what happens to me because the alternative — a world in which you and I aren’t together — isn’t even worth considering, let alone living.”

He grabs my face, squeezing it almost painfully in his hands as he stares hot-bloodedly into my eyes.

“You know how it feels to see you coming out of a car with another

man? It hurts me,” he exclaims, inches from my face. He grabs my hand in his and clasps it over his heart. It beats wildly, frantically, and I’m certain I can feel the remnants of that pain. “Mentally *and* physically. It’s like having a dagger the size of the Burj Khalifa buried inside my heart. It’s all I can think about, it’s all I can feel because it hurts every time I fucking *breathe*. Do you understand me? I’m in physical pain seeing you with him, imagining you with anyone who isn’t me. Think about that the next time you assume I’m interested in anyone else,” he says, backing away and running an erratic hand through his hair. He turns back around and walks up to me. “I have a black and white world and you are responsible for the only parts of it in color, Nera. I’m unwilling to give my colors up.”

He cups my face again, brushing my hair manically out of my face.

“I’m not going to hurt you. You have to believe that. You have to trust me. I’m not your father, I’m not your mother. I’m Tristan. I’m here in this room for *you*. I just revealed our relationship to your friends and put my career in jeopardy for you. I wake up in the mornings thinking *of you*. I am yours in every conceivable way that exists and if they invent new ways, I’ll be yours in those ways too.”

Shock freezes me. I hate the parts of me that don’t know how to be loved and reject it at the first sign of trouble. The constant self-sabotage is exhausting and I suddenly feel world weary. I’m tired of fighting all the time.

“You’re so busy trying to push me away that you can’t even see that I’m right here. I’m *here*, Nera. I’m not going anywhere.” He drops his forehead against mine, taking a deep breath. He whispers, “Please stop pushing me away.”

I cry quietly as we stand there. The origin of my tears is a mystery to me. It’s a mix of whiplash, relief, and the heady feeling of happiness.

“You love me?”

He nods. “I’m in love with you. Everything about you. I have no idea how you could ever think that I’d look at anybody else when I spend every waking moment thinking of you and every sleeping moment dreaming of you. This is the last thing I thought would happen when I came to teach here, but meeting you, getting to know you, falling in love with you?” he pauses, inhaling a ragged, emotional breath. He steals a kiss from my lips. “It’s been the adventure of a lifetime. I could never have imagined or hoped to experience happiness like the kind I feel when I’m with you.”

Emotion swells in my throat as I hang on to him, my body giving out. It's as if when I let go of the final walls guarding my heart, a physical weight is lifted off me and I sag into him. He holds me against his large chest, my face resting upturned in the crook of his neck, his arms wrapped like bands around my back.

So many words, so many thoughts, flit through my head but nothing comes out. Articulating my feelings back to him isn't easy, and all I manage to give him right away is a long-owed acknowledgment.

"We're dating."

My delivery is somewhere between an announcement and a question, but it's said with intent. A confirmation of what now is finally evident to me.

He laughs deeply, his mood lifting. His chest heaves with each chuckle, the movement comforting beneath the side of my face.

"Yeah, baby, for a while now. Thanks for finally catching on."

My eyes flutter closed.

Baby.

He turns my face and brings his down towards mine. The first contact of our lips feels like stepping outside into the sun after being trapped inside all day. Energy zaps through me as he presses his mouth down on mine and I whimper happily.

It's only been two days but it's felt like a lifetime.

When I part my lips, he groans loudly. His tongue thrusts in, searching for mine. He pushes me against the wall, his hand coming down next to my head.

I reach for him to pull him closer, but he lifts his head. I'm lightheaded with lust by the time he rips his lips off mine and it takes me a minute to get myself together.

"You can't ever do that again," he grunts, hand closing around the front of my throat. "Disappear on me. I nearly lost my mind when I didn't hear from you. Next time you're pissed at me, you text me, tell me what a shit I am, tell me where you are, and you tell me you're okay. No more running away."

I nod and he squeezes my throat gently. Warningly.

"Okay," I say. "But you have to promise me something in return."

"Anything."

"Don't break my heart. I won't forgive you for it. I've been disappointed and betrayed by those who promised they loved me. They hurt me. You know

that better than anyone. Don't do that to me. If you make me fall for you, own it. If you make me give you my heart, you have to keep it."

His eyes darken, a smirk stretching the corner of his lips. His hand moves around the back of my neck to cup my nape.

"It's already mine, Nera, and I'm never giving it back."

He crushes my mouth against his in a devastating kiss. It's the opposite of chaste. His other hand digs into my waist and presses me against his hard cock, but the kiss itself is slow. Tantalizing and excruciatingly seductive. His tongue twists with mine and licks my lips before he closes his mouth around my plump lower lip.

When he touches me, a different kind of electricity zaps through my body. This moment is so heady, so potent and charged, that I can feel it around me, burning us up together like a lightning flash before a thunderclap. Every touch on my body, whether it's his lips now on my neck, his hand on my hip, or his fingers glancing over my pussy, every single touch of his sends me into overdrive.

In a moment of clarity, I'd had some comfortable clothes delivered to the hotel. He rips the sweatpants off, does away with my underwear, and then he's there, pressed up against my pussy and demanding entrance.

I expect him to shove in but instead he finds my mouth once more.

"I love you," he whispers against my lips before claiming them in a tender kiss. Slowly, he starts to push in.

He swallows the breathy moan I make and bottoms inside me. Fuck, it feels good to have him inside me and pressed up against me once more. There's nowhere I'd rather be.

I grab the collar of his shirt and start tugging it over his head and off. Pure arousal shines in my eyes when they fall on his bare chest. He's so thick and perfect, such a *man*. And somehow, he loves *me*.

My nails dig into his back, clawing at him to get him closer. He has me pinned up against the wall, my legs wrapped around his waist as he pounds into me.

"You're such a good girl," he breathes against my mouth, punctuating the sentence with a thrust. "Smart." *Thrust*. "Beautiful." *Thrust*. "Mouthy." *Thrust*. "Mine."

My eyes roll back into my head at his heated, possessive words.

I let my walls, my fear of vulnerability, and my own mistrust blind me to the fact that he loves me. With those finally destroyed and gone, all that's

left is love. I see it clearly now. He's been there for me for months, taking care of me, fighting my battles, *saving* me.

I clasp his face between my hands as he drives into me. He stares at me, first at my eyes, then my beauty marks, then my mouth, and back to my eyes. His mouth is parted, small pants of effort dropping from his lips with each thrust.

Staring deep into his clear ocean-colored eyes, I bring his face closer and lay my own claim.

“*Mine.*”

His bright irises darken in response, his pupils dilating.

“*Yours.*”

Wetness pools in my lower belly in response, my pussy clenching around his thick length.

I've been so stupid. I almost let him slip through my fingers. I hold on to him for dear life now, like someone finding a life raft in the middle of the stormy deep sea and clinging on to it to get to safety.

And I find that when the words slip out, they're far easier to admit to, to proudly declare even, than I thought they'd be.

“Tristan?”

“Yeah, baby?” he answers, eyes closed in concentration. His thumb finds my clit and brushes against it, driving me wild.

I caress the side of his face softly.

“I love you too.”

His eyes fly open. They find mine, wild and frenzied, even as his teeth grind together.

“Don't tell me that when I'm balls deep inside you.”

I laugh, holding on more tightly. “Why not?”

“Because you're going to make me come.”

He spins us around and walks over to the bed where he lays me down, crawling on top of me while still buried inside me.

“So, I shouldn't tell you that I love you?” I say, teasing him.

“No, I want you to say it, fuck, I *need* you to say it. Tell whoever will listen, in fact tell the whole fucking world so they know you're mine. Just wait five minutes,” he grunts, forehead creased as he lifts my leg over his shoulder, changing the angle of his thrusts.

Pleasure lights up every atom in my body and I arch into him in response.

“I can’t,” I pant, “I can’t wait a second longer to tell you how I feel. I love you.”

He curses and then his mouth slams down on mine. He kisses me as his thumb toys with my clit and his thrusts drive me closer and closer to the edge.

“Again.”

“I’m so unhealthily, dangerously, completely in love with you, baby.” His eyes burn my mouth like he’s taking in every word I’m saying and locking them away in his mind. They downright scorch when I use the same endearment he has for me. “I have been for a really long time, I just couldn’t admit it to myself. Couldn’t get over my past experiences to see that the best thing that’s ever happened to me has been standing right there all along. You’ve taught me to believe in myself, to be kind to myself. You’ve taught me how to really live and enjoy it. You make me iridescently happy. The truth is, I don’t know how to do life without you anymore. I hope I never have to find out. I don’t know what the future holds or how we navigate the reality of our circumstances but that doesn’t matter to me. All that matters is knowing that I’ll be with you and we’ll figure it out together.”

His eyes flash with pure obsession as he stares at me. He brushes his nose against mine before finding my mouth with his. He lets his weight rest completely on me, his body suffocating me with his warmth and affection.

I find his ear and whisper, “The best decision I ever made was walking up to you in that bar.”

“The best decision I ever made was going after you when you tried to walk away.”

I giggle and he thrusts punishingly inside me. My mouth parts on a whispered ‘o’ as he grunts against my ear, “Not funny. I almost missed out on the love of my life because of that little game.”

My cheeks blush pink and I pull his mouth down against mine. He picks up his rhythm and I arch into him, meeting him thrust for thrust. Our mouths remain fused as he pounds into me.

Then he pinches my clit, sending a full body shudder coursing through me. His muscles lock as my pussy spasms around him. The explosiveness of our combined orgasms surprises me and all I can do is hold on to him as it takes me under.

We lay there for minutes, catching our breaths and laughing softly as we gaze at each other, the laughter of young people newly and giddily in love.

There's a lightness in my chest and in my mind that I hope I get to keep forever.

Eventually, a knock at my bedroom door startles us.

"We heard some sounds of, uh, let's call it vigorous agreement, coming from your bedroom—" Bellamy starts, from the other side of the door.

"We heard it all the way from the living room!" Thayer jumps in, her excited voice ringing clearly through the hard wood. "Congrats purely for that, Nera. I'm giving you a thumbs up behind the door, I know you can't see it."

"Focus," we hear Bellamy whisper hiss at her.

"What Bellamy is trying to say is it seems like you guys have made up, so *s'il te 1plaît* can we come in?" Six says, taking over. "We're *dying* to know what the hell is going on."

"And, personally, I'd also like to discuss a potential extension on my Securities paper—"

"*Thayer!*"

Chapter 39

Tristan

I should have told Nera the truth yesterday.

I thought that's why she'd ended things. When she yelled that she knew what I'd done, I was sure I'd been found out. The relief when I realized she'd misunderstood my dinner with Tess instead was crushing.

That was my opening to bare it all and admit the lie at the foundation of our relationship and I couldn't do it. Not when I was fresh on experiencing forty-eight hours of hell, not when I knew if I did it'd mean many more days without her.

It was selfish but I was willing to do a lot more than lie to make sure she stayed mine.

I'll tell her soon, once we've settled into our official relationship. Once she realizes how much I truly love her. She won't be able to leave me then.

"So, are you a pervert?"

The voice and the question alike startle me and pull me out of my thoughts. I turn from my desk and find Sixtine, Thayer, and Bellamy in the doorway of my classroom.

Bellamy is the one who spoke. She and Six march into the room as Thayer closes the door behind them.

"I beg your pardon?" I ask, bewildered.

Six stands in front of my desk with her arms crossed and her eyes narrowed on me. Bellamy leans her hip against my desk, a suspicious

expression on her face.

“You arrived all moody and mysterious at RCA this year with your perfect cheekbones and obvious scorn for your profession, I mean what’s that about? Did you have to leave your previous school because of some sordid scandal or something?” Thayer asks, sitting nonchalantly on top of a desk in the front row, her feet swinging happily beneath her.

“What she’s asking is, is this like, your *thing*?” Bellamy demands. “Hitting on younger girls, sleeping with them, having relationships with them?”

This feels like being accosted and cornered by the Powerpuff Girls. Last night, I knew an extensive debrief between the girls was needed so I left pretty quickly after the three of them knocked on the door. When Nera came over later, she told me they’d grilled her Spanish Inquisition style for hours. She recounted every detail of our story except the declaration of our feelings from earlier that night.

I think part of her is still hesitant to believe that it’s true, that I do love her. She’s been disappointed by that very same reality in the past, so I get it.

It only makes me love her more.

And now it looks like it’s my turn to be interrogated.

“She’s not a girl,” I grit out.

“But is it your thing?” Six asks.

“No.”

Thayer tilts her head to the side and examines me, giving me a probing look before deciding, “He doesn’t look pervy.”

Bellamy turns only her head to look at her friend.

“Just because he’s hot doesn’t mean he’s not a giant red flag. In fact, that probably makes it worse.” She looks back at me thoughtfully. “He’s got to be a perv.”

“I’m not a pervert.”

“That’s *exactly* what a pervert would say,” Thayer exclaims, pointing at me.

I close my eyes, pinch the bridge of my nose and pull deep from my reserves of patience. I hear the door open once more and look up as Phoenix walks in. He frowns as he takes in the scene before him but walks up to his fiancée, his forehead smoothing out as his hands come around her waist.

“Wild girl,” he purrs, his mouth dropping to her hair. “What are you doing here?”

She giggles when he nuzzles her neck and cups his face, pressing quick kisses against his mouth.

Thayer rolls her eyes. “Not right now, Phoenix. Don’t distract her, we’ve got important friend business to attend to.”

He hums in acknowledgement and comes to sit on a desk next to her, pulling Sixtine with him and settling her between his legs and against his chest.

“Are you grilling him about his thing with Nera?” he asks, taking out his phone. “I’m telling the lads.”

Six looks at him, wide eyed. “You knew?”

Phoenix waves the phone in my direction. “He spends eighty percent of his time in class eye fucking her. I’m surprised you didn’t notice.” Fuck, do I? That’s news to me. I need to be more careful about revealing my obsession with her. “That’s all you need to see to know he’s fucking whipped. Nera has him wrapped around her little finger,” he adds, smirking at me like the same can’t be said about him with Six.

Bellamy raises a brow in my direction when I remain silent. “Nothing to say to that?”

“Nope.”

“Why not?” Thayer asks.

A slow, satisfied grin stretches my lips.

“I didn’t hear a single lie.”

Six looks up at Phoenix.

“Why didn’t you tell me about the two of them?”

He shrugs. “I don’t give a fuck what he does.” His hands tighten on her hips. “So long as it’s nowhere near you.”

She blushes prettily. “Now that I think about it, I wouldn’t have wanted to hear it from you. It was up to Nera to tell me when she was ready.” She glances back at him. “Are you keeping any other secrets?”

He stiffens, but I’ve had enough of watching this conversation play out aimlessly.

“Look,” I cut in, staring at the girls one after the other, “The last thing I want is to be caught up with a student, believe me. You think I don’t want to stay away? You think I don’t want to date literally anybody else? I fucking can’t,” I grit through clenched teeth. “If I’m eye fucking her in class it’s because I can’t get enough of her even though we spend every night together. I love her. I’ve tried not loving her, but I can’t. More importantly, I don’t

want to. All I can think about is the day I'll be able to hold her hand in public and shout from the rooftops that she belongs to me."

Six's eyes soften as Bellamy's mouth drops. A surprised but pleased smile pulls at Thayer's lips.

The door bursts open, pulling everyone's attention away from me as Rhys and Rogue barge in.

"Babe!" Thayer exclaims, jumping down from the desk and into Rhys' waiting arms.

Rogue's penetrating gaze moves from where I'm seated and over to Bellamy who's still leaning against my desk. Her own eyes shine happily when they meet his.

He walks up to her and places a possessive hand on her ass. "You're standing awfully close, sweetheart," he mutters.

She wraps her arms around his neck and looks up at him prettily from beneath her lashes.

"No need to be territorial, baby. He just told us he's in love with Nera."

Rhys, who'd been making out heavily with Thayer in the background like they haven't seen each other in two years instead of two periods, rips his mouth away and looks down at her.

"Fuck me, we missed the good bit. Debrief me later, love?"

She nods, reaching for his face and bringing his mouth back down on hers.

"Hey," I say, snapping my fingers to get their attention. "I have too much shit to do to watch this little lovers' reunion unfold much longer. If you're satisfied with my answers, feel free to leave."

"You're not messing her about?" Bellamy asks.

"No."

"Promise?" Thayer adds, a hint of warning in her tone.

"Yes."

Six nods and steps out from between Phoenix's legs, walking up to me and giving me a quick hug. I hear him make an annoyed sound so I keep my arms firmly by my side.

"Then welcome to the family, Tristan," she says before laughing. "It's so weird to say your first name."

"What the— what are you guys doing?"

We all turn around as one to see Nera standing in the doorway, a truly bewildered expression on her face watching us all together. She must be on

her way to practice because she's in a cute workout set with her equipment bag slung over her shoulder.

I point at them. "Your friends are grilling me about my intentions with you."

"Good news, Ner Bear, turns out he's not a pervert. We asked him," Thayer announces proudly.

Nera's face is so comical, I can't help but laugh.

"Um, okay," she says, unsure how to answer. She turns towards Six. "So, how'd he do?"

Sixtine smiles happily at her best friend.

"He passed with flying colors."

Bellamy turns in Rogue's arms so she's standing back to his front with his arm slung around the top of her chest.

"For now. We're crime buffs, her and I," she says, waving her thumb between herself and Thayer. "I've seen every single episode of *Law & Order: SVU*, okay? I'll Olivia Benson you into next year if I think you're a creep. Or if you hurt her."

"Understood," I say with a solemn nod. I turn to face Nera, speaking to her friends but looking at her. "Now please leave so I can tell my girlfriend how much I missed her today," I purr, extending my hand towards her.

She walks over to me, eyes pinned lustfully on my face, and intertwines her fingers with mine. I curl her against me as I hear the others start to move towards the door.

I look up at her from my sitting position, enjoying this different view for once. She places a warm hand on my cheek, caressing me softly.

"About that extension..." I hear Thayer start in the background, her tone teasing.

"Get out," I say dismissively, my eyes never leaving Nera's.

"Worth a try," Thayer says, laughing loudly.

Rhys slings an arm around her shoulder and pulls her close. All traces of playfulness leave his face as he cuts me an icy look. "Watch the way you speak to her, Novak."

I whisper so that only Nera can hear me.

"Tell them to leave so I can get started on the many depraved things I've been thinking about doing to you all day."

Her eyes darken and an excited smile pulls at her lips. She turns towards her friends, making a shooing motion with her hand.

“It’s my turn to be gross with my boyfriend now, so get out before we give you guys a show.”

Her friends giggle as they walk out and my eyes clash with Rogue’s. He gives me an assessing stare, his gaze penetrating mine in a way that has a chill running down my spine before he walks out.

Chapter 40

Nera

I thought Tristan and I already had a good thing going between the two of us before, but things change after those few days.

For the better.

To the outside world, we're still a secret. I go to class and keep my head down in my International Business course to avoid the gaze he always has trained on me. I walk out without speaking to him like I don't know him. I go to practice. I go home. And the cycle repeats itself the next day.

But with my friends, my inner circle, we're in a strong relationship. I no longer have to exclusively slink over to his place late at night in the cover of darkness. He comes over for game nights, he invites the girls over and cooks us dinner, he goes to the pub and drinks with the boys.

He cuddles with me on the couch. He showers with me in my bathroom and tickles me in front of the steamy mirror when we come out of it. He makes me breakfast in the mornings and serves me coffee in my favorite mug.

I don't think I realized how much anxiety and trepidation I had about how the girls would react to him, but they've adopted him into the fold like we have with each of the other boys.

Even now, as I watch him bicker with Thayer about the World Cup, I feel my heart swell with a kind of comfortable warmth that I've become accustomed to feeling thanks to him.

“How can you not be rooting for England?”

She shrugs, disinterestedly. “They’re not exciting to watch. No flair whatsoever.”

“I can’t talk to you when you’re being irrational,” he says with a huff. I laugh from the kitchen where I’m refilling my water bottle.

“Now Argentina, France, Croatia even, those guys have style.”

“I’m rooting for France for my girl, Six,” Bellamy adds, pointing at her.

“*Allez les Bleus!*” Six chants happily.

Tristan gives Bellamy an affronted look. “Your boyfriend is English, Bellamy, rooting for the French is basically a capital offense.”

She gives him a sly smile. “Don’t worry, I know just how to make him forgive me.”

“You’re all lost causes,” he says, shaking his head in disappointment.

They continue bantering and bickering good-naturedly as I watch from the kitchen. I can’t keep the smile off my face as I listen to them while pouring snacks into a bowl.

My bulimia is still something I struggle with every day, but the voice is quieter, less present and oppressing. Most days I’m able to tune it out and focus on mindful eating, on eating foods that will fuel my body. With each passing day, the mental burden gets a little lighter.

“You look happy.”

I look over my shoulder at Six who’s standing next to me, leaning against the kitchen island.

“Really?”

She nods, holding my gaze. “Yeah.”

I look back over at where Tristan’s half-sitting, half-lying on the couch, hands gesticulating wildly as he watches the England match. He feels the weight of my stare and looks over at me, giving me a cocky grin that has my heart fluttering. It’s the one he gives me when I’m not standing next to him, the one that tells me I belong to him. He brings his index up to his mouth and kisses it, then points at me before tapping his nose a couple of times. That’s how he mimes kissing my nose from a distance.

I’m so in love with him, it shocks me. I didn’t think I was capable of feeling a positive emotion so emphatically, so wholeheartedly, but he pulls it easily out of me.

I turn back and look at Six. “I think I finally might be.”

She comes over and gives me a quick hug, pulling back but keeping her

hands on my shoulders. "I'm so glad. I'm sorry I didn't notice you were struggling before."

"You have nothing to be sorry for. I didn't want to bother you."

She gives me a disappointed look. "Nera..."

"No, it was more than that. I was ashamed. A part of me still is. On paper I have everything going for me, I'm privileged and successful and lucky in so many ways, luckier than most. It felt so selfish to admit that even with everything I have in my life I was deeply unhappy, you know?"

Her eyes soften and she rubs my arm gently. "Just because your struggles are different than others doesn't mean they aren't valid. Nor does it mean that you have to keep them to yourself and struggle in silence. I'm glad you have Tristan now, but I'll always regret not being there for you when you needed me."

It's my turn to hug her. I hold her so tightly, wanting to communicate the depth of my affection for her, that I nearly crush her against me.

"Don't spend another second thinking about it. I'm the one who kept it a secret from you and I was good at hiding it."

"Not really," she answers. I pull back, raising a brow at her in surprise. She explains, "Now that I see you like this, truly happy and in love, I don't know how I didn't see it before. The difference is night and day. You're literally glowing now," she tells me, happily.

"I'm so in love with him, it scares me."

She nods, understanding.

She knows better than anyone how painful loving someone can be.

"I get it. For what it's worth, I don't think you have anything to worry about. He can't go more than a minute without looking back over here. You fell in love with a good one."

"Good job today, Nera. Really well done on those footwork drills," Coach Kelly tells me.

It's been a couple of months since Krav 'resigned' and Coach Kelly stepped into his role. My fencing training has completely changed because of

it. While Kelly is just as results oriented as Kravtsov, his methods are much less extreme.

He prioritizes active recovery and calisthenic type movements as much as pure weight lifting and cardio workouts. More importantly, he's a believer in positive reinforcement to better athletes and the results have been clear. I can see improvements every day.

"Thanks, Coach," I say, smiling happily.

"Rest up tomorrow, I'll see you on Sunday for practice."

"Sounds good, have a great weekend," I reply, picking up my bag and heading out.

I check my phone and see I have no texts from Tristan. My brow furrows slightly. That's weird. He usually texts me increasingly raunchy messages that have me blushing post-practice.

I try calling him but he doesn't answer.

When we left my apartment this morning – me for practice, him for a workout – he told me to meet him at his place after so he could cook me lunch.

He must just be hands deep in dough or something and not checking his phone.

On my way to his place, I pick up some fresh flowers at a local market. I know he secretly likes them around the house and likes to see what kinds I'll surprise him with. Today, I chose tulips in his favorite colors.

A couple weeks ago, I'd forgotten the keys to my apartment and accidentally been locked out because the girls were with their boyfriends. When I'd gotten to Tristan's, he'd been standing at the top of his stairs, waiting for me. In his hand, he had a copy of his front key.

He'd clasped my hand and had gently placed the key in my palm, closing my fingers around it without a word.

Another step forward in our relationship, a small one but one that'd had my heart fluttering excitedly nonetheless.

I use that key today, letting myself into his place while answering a text from Bellamy. My focus is elsewhere and it's only when I've closed the door behind me and turn back around that I notice the state of the apartment.

It looks like it's been partially ransacked.

I freeze in place at the sight. The contents of the dining table – one or two mugs, some mail, a couple books – are spread on the floor. A bottle of whiskey lays shattered next to them, it's content dripping slowly down the

white walls. Shock steals my breath.

Something tells me not to run away but to go further inside.

Uncertainly, I step into the living area. More books lay sprawled on the floor next to the couch. A small, worthless decorative statuette is broken at the base of the bookshelf. My eyes follow the path of destruction until it leads me into the bedroom. A leg peeks out just past the frame. I shift to the side, slowly revealing more and more of the body until I recognize Tristan.

My heart lurches at the sight of him. He's sitting against the side of his bed, head bowed forward between bent legs, his elbows resting on his knees. A half empty bottle of whiskey hangs from his right hand.

"Tristan," I whisper, a ball forming in my throat.

He lifts his head and my breath hitches, but no relief follows. The look he gives me is haunted. He looks straight through me like I'm not even there.

I drop my bag, shuck my coat off and hastily kick my shoes off, all the while never taking my eyes off him. His gaze doesn't leave me either as I approach. His eyes are glassy and lifeless.

"What's wrong?" I ask, cupping his face as I drop to my knees between his legs. I check his body but he seems okay, at least physically. He stares at me sightlessly as I run my hands all over him. "What happened?"

I've never seen him like this...so, so *hollow*. Even though he looks at me, there's none of the usual intensity or mirth that I've come to love in his eyes. He's just a shell of himself.

"What happened, baby?" I repeat, clasping both sides of his face in a fierce embrace.

He looks around, dead-eyed, at the ravaged apartment. Finally, after what feels like an eternity of silence, he mutters, "I made a fucking mess."

So, he's the one who destroyed his apartment. I press his face against my shoulder, hugging him tightly against me. My hand caresses the side of his face as I hold him.

"Don't worry about that, it's easily fixable. Are you okay?"

He pulls back, his head falling against the mattress behind him, his eyes peering down intoxicatedly at me through half-lowered lids.

"He wasn't supposed to...He wasn't."

He mumbles the words, his drunkenness making it hard to follow. "Who wasn't supposed to do what?" I push his gloriously disheveled hair off his forehead, running my fingers soothingly through the strands. "Talk to me."

"Tess texted me after you left. Apparently, our mother is in the hospital."

Our father put her there.”

A chill crawls down my spine, freezing my hands mid-caress on his body.

“You mean...he hurt her?”

He nods, distress clear in his gaze. “Broke her eye socket and her left wrist.”

I swallow the horrified gasp that makes to erupt from my lips. No wonder he’s so distraught. My heart aches for them both. I can only imagine the fear she must have felt. My ordeal pales in comparison to her, but already the fear was deadly. It stays with you long after the hits have stopped.

It pains me just thinking about her having to experience that, about her being in the hospital, especially with one of her children so far away from her.

“He wasn’t supposed to— I should have been there,” he says vehemently, abruptly cutting himself off and switching thoughts. “I could have stopped him if I was there,” he suddenly rages, jumping to his feet and making me lose my balance.

I fall back onto my ass with a soft whimper, wincing when my tailbone connects with the ground.

His eyes snap down to me at the pained sound I make.

“Fuck. Fuck, I’m sorry,” he says, crouching before me and grabbing my forearms. “I’m fucking everything up, I’m sorry.” His voice is slightly manic, his eyes wide and frantic as he inspects me for any injuries.

“Hey,” I say, cupping his nape with one hand and his back with the other, pulling him against me. “Hey,” I repeat, getting him to look me in the eye. “I’m totally fine, there’s nothing for you to worry about, okay?”

He nods and wraps his arms around me, crushing me against him.

“I love you.”

“I love you too.”

He slams his mouth down on mine and I can taste the whiskey on his lips, on his tongue. I can taste it like I have many times in the past, when he maybe shouldn’t have tasted like that. I don’t think he has an addiction, but he certainly has a proclivity, one that I think is unhealthy.

I pull back, keeping my eyes on his face as I wrap my hand around the neck of the bottle. He watches me silently and doesn’t move when I slowly extricate it from his hand and pull it away.

“What happened to your mum is not your fault. The only person at

blame is your father.” I close and roll the bottle away on its side. “You can’t put that burden of responsibility on yourself, it’s unfair. There’s nothing you could have done, all you can do now is be there for your mum.” Gently, I push him back so he’s the one sitting. I crawl onto his lap, one leg on either side of his and start pressing soft kisses along his jaw. He lets me, putting up no resistance to my lead and clasping my waist in his hands. “It’s so easy for you to take care of me, to look after me and make sure I’m okay. Sounds like you do the same for your mum and your sister.” I press my lips against his ear, rubbing soothing circles on his back and shoulders in tandem. “You have to find some of that same kindness and compassion for yourself, baby. You can’t give it all away.”

“I thought she’d be safe. She was supposed to be.”

He repeats it over and over again, mumbling the words against my skin while I hold him. Eventually, he stands, carrying me with him onto the bed. He lays me down next to him, his arm curling around my waist and pressing me against him.

Chapter 41

Tristan

Over the last couple of months, my alcohol intake has slowly gone down. Drinking wasn't something I thought about anymore because I didn't need to numb myself when I was around Nera.

I'd showed up to *Sambour* only once with liquor on my breath and Luca had offered a piece of advice that'd made me put the bottle away.

He'd told me, "*a lot of chefs drink and for a lot of different reasons. I'm not judging you, I'm just letting you know that your palate is much sharper when you're sober.*"

He'd been right, and coupled with Nera by my side, I hadn't had a drink alone since that day.

But when Tess reached out to me using a number that wasn't hers, and let me know what our father had done, I'd needed the comfort of the emotionless abyss that was being black out drunk.

Now when I open my eyes, Nera is the first thing I see. She's cuddled up against me, face pressed into my chest, and she's sound asleep. Both of us are still wearing our clothes from yesterday.

I have no idea what time it is. All I remember is her holding me as I fell into a drunken sleep.

Strands of her hair have fallen in front of her face. I brush them away, tucking them gently behind her ear. She stirs, making a soft little whimper that has my dick instantly hard. Her eyes flutter open, those dark depths

beckoning to me.

“What did I ever do to deserve you?” I wonder aloud.

She tilts her head up and kisses me, cupping my face with one hand.

“You saved me,” she whispers back. “That’s what you did.”

I shake my head, dropping my forehead against hers.

“You have that wrong,” I breathe, “You’re the one who saved *me*.”

“Maybe that’s why I chose you in that bar. Maybe that’s why you couldn’t just let me walk away. I think maybe we were destined to meet.”

She cups my jaw. “To save each other.”

“Fate,” I say, translating her words.

She nods, kissing me again. She pulls back, giving me a smile with sparkling eyes.

“Fate,” she agrees.

I make arrangements to go back to London two days later. Fuck my father and his rules. We had a deal and he didn’t stick to his end of the bargain. Not only that, but his abuse of my mum was also far more brutal than it ever has been in the past. Tess says that she’s home from the hospital now, back in that cesspool of evil that is the home she shares with my father.

The purpose of my trip home is twofold; first, to make sure she’s okay, and second, to confront my father and put an end to this once and for all. I have no strategy, no plan as of yet, but the one thing I know is that when I come back, I’m telling Nera the truth.

I should have told her months ago, I just couldn’t bear the thought of losing her.

“You should get going soon,” Nera says.

I lift my head from where it’s resting on her stomach and look up at her. “You trying to get rid of me?”

We’re lying on the couch in her darkened living room, the only light coming from a Diptyque candle she has lit. We’ve been here for a couple of hours, relaxing and talking quietly, doing nothing else except enjoying each other’s company.

She laughs, running her hand through my hair. “Never, but you’re going to miss your flight.”

“It leaves in four hours, I have time,” I answer, putting my head back down on her stomach and closing my eyes. “Now let me take one last nap in my favorite place before I don’t see you for ages.”

“You’re going to be gone three days, Tristan.”

“And I’m not happy about it.”

I know she smiles even though I can’t see it.

“I’ll be here when you get back.”

I tilt my head up and meet her gaze, brushing her nose with my index finger. “You better.”

Before she can answer, the door to her apartment bursts open and her friends pile through, followed closely by their boyfriends.

Immediately, I can tell something is wrong. The girls have an anguished look on their faces and the guys slant murderous looks at me.

Nera freezes with her hands in my hair.

“What’s wrong?” she asks.

She pushes me off and joins her friends by the door. There’s concern in her voice as she grabs Six’s hands and repeats, “What’s wrong? Tell me.”

Sixtine’s eyes slide over her shoulder to meet mine, anger flaming bright in her irises, and I know.

Oh, fuck.

“Nera,” I start, taking a step towards her.

“Stay right where you are, wanker,” Rhys bites out.

“Rhys!” Nera exclaims, shocked.

Rogue comes forward, putting his body between me and her. I see the confusion on her face in the background as he levels an icy look at me.

“I ran a background check on you,” he announces, his voice dripping with ire.

“What?”

Dread twists my insides, making it hard to breathe.

Not like this.

I never wanted her to find out like this. I can feel all the control I have over the situation being yanked through my fingers and I’m grasping, desperately grasping, to hang onto it.

“Nera,” I try again. “Nera, look at me.”

She does and the look tells me that she’s outraged on my behalf. Now

that she trusts me, she won't be so easily swayed away from my side. Her loyalty lies in stark contrast to my betrayal, making me feel like the worst of traitors.

"Why would you do that, Rogue? You had no business violating his privacy like that."

"Nera—"

"No, it's not okay. He needs to know that."

"We don't know him, Nera," Rhys says. "He's not one of us. Of course we looked into him when it became serious between you two."

She stalks up to Rhys and pokes him in the chest as she grits out furiously, "I already have a brother, Rhys, I don't need three more."

My heart is in my throat as I watch her defend me when I know what she's about to learn is going to hurt her. I wish I could turn back time to five minutes ago, to before they walked in here. I wish I could have found the courage then to be honest with her instead of letting her learn like this, with an audience.

"Listen to what he has to say, Ner," Bellamy suggests gently, giving her a soft look.

"Nera, please, let me talk to you," I say, taking another step forward.

Rogue puts a hand out, stopping me. "He told you to stay right where the fuck you are," he grinds out from between clenched teeth.

Nera looks at every person in the room, one after the other, slowly taking in their facial expressions. When her gaze finally lands on me, her face is awash with confusion. Her friends' obvious concern has doubt etching itself on her features.

Her voice shakes slightly. "What's going on, Tristan?"

The silence stretches in my desperate attempt to keep things as they are for one last moment before they change forever.

She stares unwaveringly at me and I find that I can't say it.

In the end, I really am a coward.

Rogue answers for me, mercilessly delivering the killing blow.

"Ask him what his real name is."

The words explode in the silence.

You can hear the sound of a pin drop in the unearthly stillness that follows his announcement. Everyone stares at me with varying expressions of anger.

Everyone, except Nera.

She still chooses to trust me, to believe that maybe she misheard or that Rogue misspoke.

She laughs, but it does nothing to dispel the tension. When none of her friends laugh with her, when I don't immediately express outrage or say anything, it dies a quick death on her lips.

Her voice turns small. It sounds frail enough to break when she finally speaks.

"What is he talking about, Tristan?"

Everything stills inside me, down to my very blood cells. I can't look away from her, I can't blink, I can't speak. I have so many things to say, all of which I should have told her before but didn't, and I don't know where to start now.

"Say something," she begs, taking a step towards me. "Deny it. Tell him he has the wrong information, the wrong person — better yet, tell *me* he does."

I need to touch her. I need to hold on to a part of her when I finally tell her the truth, otherwise I'll lose her forever. I maneuver around Rogue and stride to Nera, cupping the back of her neck.

She falls against me, relieved.

She thinks I'm going to tell her he's wrong, I can tell. Her face is open and trusting as she looks up at me and I'm the one who has to hurt her now.

"I'm so sorry."

She flinches.

She flinches like I hit her. In many ways, it is a blow.

Her face turns to the side, her eyes fluttering shut. Pain etches itself slowly across her face, rippling over every single one of her features. I feel her wobble under the impact of my confession even as she struggles not to fall apart. I have a front row seat to the agony my betrayal causes.

Behind her, I can see Six crying. That's how overwhelming the pain coming off of Nera is. It seeps around the room and penetrates every person's chest, none as powerfully as it does mine. It strikes me so forcefully that it nearly takes me out at the knees.

"Your name isn't Tristan?" her voice is disbelieving and raw with betrayal.

"No, no, it is," I tell her, holding on to her nape and forcing her to look at me. "But my last name isn't Novak."

"Everything about him is a lie, Nera," Thayer says.

“That’s not true,” I growl.

She pulls away and when I make a move to grab her, Phoenix grabs my arm and twists it easily behind my back.

“Fuck!” I scream.

“Who is he?” Nera asks of nobody and anybody at once.

Rogue reads from his phone. “Ironically, his name is Tristan *Noble*. He’s the son of Alexander and Bettina Noble; Alexander is Chairman and CEO of The Noble Group which Tristan is set to inherit one day. I’m sure you’ve heard of it?”

Nera nods, despondently. “The media conglomerate. So, his parents aren’t teachers,” she adds, her voice shaking.

“No,” Rogue answers. “They’re billionaires.”

Chapter 42

Nera

I feel like I'm going to pass out. My head pounds under the assault of the information Rogue is dropping on me. My heart feels like it's rending itself to pieces.

Tristan lied to me. About his name, his family, his career.

About *everything*.

If he was willing to lie about that, what else did he lie about?

"Does he have a sister?" I hear myself ask.

Tristan tries to rush for me, but Phoenix's hold on him keeps him from being able to move. He makes a pained groan, wincing as his shoulder twists unnaturally.

His eyes are haunted when they meet mine and so heavy with emotion that I can barely stand to look at them. He fights against Phoenix, roaring, his free arm reaching for me and coming up empty. Desperation twists his features and his jaw looks ready to snap. "I've never cheated on you, Nera."

I look at Rogue. When he nods, a frayed breath rattles up my throat and falls from my lips. "Yes, one sister. Tess."

I hate that I'm relieved. It doesn't fucking matter.

I turn back towards Tristan.

"Explain yourself."

It takes everything in me not to overreact. Not to run at the first sign of trouble, but to choose to stay instead.

He swallows thickly, his expression broken by anguish. His eyes are beseeching, begging me to understand.

“I fucked up. I’ve been fucking up for a long time and I’m so sorry that I caught you up in my mess, it was never my intention. I always meant to tell you the truth,” he swears.

“*Explain,*” I repeat, harder this time.

“I told you that everything between us was real and I meant it. I lied to you about some things but I never lied to you about the things that mattered.”

“You think your name doesn’t matter?”

“No—”

“You think telling me you were stuck teaching because it was your parents’ profession doesn’t matter?”

“I mean that when I was with you, I never pretended to be anyone other than exactly who I am!” He interjects, hotly. “I had to tell some small lies so I could be truthful about who I really am on the inside, about what I really want— that’s what I need you to understand.”

“You should never have lied at all.”

“I didn’t have a choice,” he entreats. “My father forced me here. He’s the scum of the earth, an evil bastard with endless amounts of power. I’ve spent half my life rebelling against him at every turn and that’s what started this whole thing,” he explains. “I humiliated him and in retaliation he sent me here to punish me, to teach me respect and humility and, more importantly, how to bend the knee to him.” He shakes Phoenix off who releases him. “I didn’t have a choice. He threatened my mum. For a year, I was supposed to teach here and not speak to her or my sister. I was supposed to be celibate,” he adds, giving me a look. “In exchange, he promised that he’d stop hitting her. That’s why I agreed to it.” He takes my hands and presses them against his chest. “That’s why I was so angry when Tess texted me the other day. He broke our agreement.” His tone is imploring when he continues, “You see, I didn’t lie about everything. I told you the truth when it mattered.”

“You were supposed to be celibate?”

He releases me and runs a frantic hand through his hair. “I thought I was just throwing a year of my life away. I was unprepared for you. I didn’t expect to meet you, to be obsessed with you, to fall in love with you. I tried getting you out of my head when we were casually sleeping together, I tried to forget you, but I couldn’t. I never meant to lie or get into this situation. I’m not excusing it. I made the decisions I made and I’m at fault. I’m so sorry for

that. But I didn't expect to fall in love. I should have let you go but I couldn't and I'm certainly not about to now. Everything I did, every lie I told, was because I couldn't give you up. I know that sounds like bullshit, but it's the truth."

I'm overwhelmed taking in not only the betrayal, but all the truths revealed behind the lie. My body riots against it. My hands are clammy, my heart is tripping over itself, and a headache pounds against my temples.

I fight against the war raging inside me and nod, asking him the only question that really matters now.

"What was the plan?"

His reaction tells me that I catch him off guard. His brow furrows in confusion.

"What?"

"You asked me to stop running from you, Tristan, so I am. This is me staying and giving you a chance at forgiveness. I can understand the terrible position you were put in and I can forgive it — forgive *you* — *if* you answer my question," I tell him. "You say you love me, so tell me what your plan was for us."

He remains silent and the gaping wound he inflicted only ten minutes prior grows wider. Silence from the man who's always had comforting and reassuring words for me. I never thought the absence of words could hurt me more than the ones hurled cruelly at me.

"Why are you silent? *What was the plan?*" I yell now, pushing at his chest. "Were you ever going to tell me your real name? Were you going to tell me about your real life? What was going to happen when you went back to London at the end of the year?" My voice shakes under the force of my growing anger.

"I... I hadn't thought that far," he says. "But I was going to figure it out, I promise."

"When? It's almost March, we've been sleeping together since August. Were you going to wait until we'd dated for a year before you realized you had to dump me?" Hurt gives way to absolute rage. "Was I just a fling to keep you entertained before you went back to your real life?"

"No!" He blurts out, incensed.

"Then prove to me that you thought about us, about our future, when you lied to me. Prove to me that I mean everything to you like you claim and *show me* what your plan was for our relationship," I beg.

I can't see anything through the wall of tears welling in my eyes. The depth of his perfidy astounds me and breaks my heart. A single tear drops from an eyelash and onto my cheek.

"Please, don't cry. I don't have a solution yet, but I will. I'll figure it out—"

My eyes flutter brokenly shut, as if to keep the painful reality from getting to me.

"Got it," I say, hollowly. I feel like I just swallowed glass. Like if I take a breath, the glass will tear through my lungs and rip me apart from the inside out. The damage is invisible to outside eyes, but irreversibly made nonetheless.

"We're going to be together, Nera," he vows.

"No, we're not," I tell him, categorically. I turn away and hear scuffling behind me. I know the boys stop him from reaching for me.

"Nera—"

"This is *exactly* what I thought you were going to do to me," I say, brokenly. A humorless laugh erupts from me. "Well no, I can't say I quite predicted a fake name and a fake career, but I knew you weren't in this as seriously as me."

I drop my face into my hands and cry. Violent, painful sobs rack through my body as small hands close around me. I recognize Six as she pulls me against her.

"*Get the fuck out of my way, Phoenix,*" Tristan snarls, his eyes pinned desperately on me as he tries to get past my friends.

"I told you to leave," I cry, "I yelled at you to go, *over and over* again. I gave you so many chances to walk away from me without any consequences, without hurting me so badly," I say between ragged sobs, my face covered in tears. I'm never going to get over this, he's unequivocally shattered every part of me. "And you chose to stay. You *chose* to give me a pretty speech about being here when you really had no plan to be after the year was over. You chose to get me to trust you, to get me to fall in love with you. You built me up just to tear it all away."

"I'm so sorry. It's killing me to see you like this, to know that I'm the one who hurt you."

"Why did you take the time to care for my heart, to heal the parts of me that were broken, if you were just going to turn around and hurt me more than anyone else?" I choke on a sob, my voice ragged like it's been run over

hot coals. “You had to know you’d destroy me with this.”

“Because I never meant to hurt you! All I’ve ever wanted to do is protect you. I love you so fucking much. Tell me what I have to do to make you forgive me.”

“You told me that sometimes the people who love you the most are the ones who hurt you the most. You were wrong. Now I know that if you love someone, you don’t hurt them.” I shake my head, dejectedly. “You don’t love me enough if you could lie for *months* and keep stringing me along with no plan for our future.”

“I’m sick to my stomach at the thought of losing you, don’t tell me I don’t love you enough. I’d give up *everything* for you.”

“But you didn’t, and that says it all,” she whispers, shaking her head sadly. “This is over, Tristan. Thank you for what you did, you really did save me. Now I need to save myself.”

“I’m not letting you go,” he vows.

“I’m already gone, there’s nothing for you to hold onto. I told you to take care of my heart, that I wouldn’t forgive you if you hurt me like this and I meant it,” I head for my room with the girls in tow, but stop before crossing the threshold. I turn around and drink him in one last time. I’ll be forced to see him in class, but this is the last time I’ll look at him while he’s still mine. He’s disheveled and ruffled, his face twisted in an agonized scowl, his eyes desperately searching mine like he can convince me to stay with the force of his gaze alone. He’s painful to look at and shards of glass bury themselves deeper in my heart the longer I do so. “Our story starts and ends with you lying to me about your name. How fucking poetic.”

He yells my name after me, but I don’t turn around. My bedroom door shuts behind us and still I hear his frantic calls for me.

My knees finally give in and I fall to the ground, but Bellamy catches me before I hit the floor. The three of them hold me silently as I cry, lending their unyielding pillars of strength to me when I need it most.

Chapter 43

Tristan

I spend the length of the flight trying to hold it together. The airplane isn't strong enough to survive the explosion of anger and fear if I let it erupt out of me.

Nera is right, I should have had a plan. I was so worried about how she'd react to my lies themselves that I never stopped to wonder if my lack of answers about what came next wouldn't be what would upset her the most.

To be honest, I'd barely thought about it myself.

She was right, on paper there was no future for us. My father was going to make me marry someone from a family he chose. He was going to make me take over the company. On paper, we were going to be nothing more than a short-lived and doomed relationship.

On paper.

In reality, the moment she walked out of her apartment building wearing that microscopic metallic dress for our first date, that paper became obsolete. I took a metaphorical flame thrower to it, incinerating it and whatever plan my father had for me along with it.

That's when I knew I loved her.

As early as that innocuous day, I knew in my bones that I'd never let her go, that she'd never be anybody else's but mine.

I didn't think about a plan because the truth was self-evident to me:

there was no me without her anymore, end of.

But I now realize that isn't enough. That I can't expect her just to trust my word when it's been proven to mean nothing. I need to prove to her that I choose her.

That's the only reason I got on this fucking flight to begin with. I hate being away from her, especially now, but this is how I'm going to get her back.

I burst through the front door of my parents' home without pausing to acknowledge Clive.

"Sir! We weren't expecting you today," I hear him call out to me, but I'm already halfway up the stairs.

When I stride into my father's office, he's sitting at his desk opposite what I assume is a business partner of his. His eyes bulge when the door slams against the wall, rattling dangerously on its hinges.

"Tristan, what are you—"

"Get the fuck out," I snarl at his associate. He takes one look at me, grabs his briefcase with shaking hands, and runs out.

I watch him go before slowly turning back around to face my father. He's standing, fists clenched and resting on the desk as he glares at me. Fury cords the veins in his neck and makes them stick out violently against his mottled red skin. His lips are flat lined into a savage slash across his face. His eyes are bloodshot, the red suffocating the white.

"What are you doing here?" he barks, spittle flying from his mouth.

I step up to his desk and get in his face.

"I came to end this."

He scoffs, laughing at me. "End what? You have nowhere to go, nothing to do with yourself but stay and do as you're told."

I round the desk and grab him by his lapels. His eyes widen comically, fear flashing through his irises. I've never laid hands on him before and this sudden clash reveals the new power dynamic between us. I feel it shift in real time as he realizes just how much physically stronger I am than him.

A weight lifts off my shoulders realizing just how frail he is in my hands. He's only human, not this monster I built up in my head. It's freeing, like shackles falling off my wrists, and I shake him.

"Tess showed me what you did to mum, you piece of shit. The only reason I agreed to this punishment of yours was because you promised not to hurt her." I snarl, inches from his face. "I should have known you couldn't

keep your word, should have known you couldn't resist those psychotic urges for a year." He fights against me, trying to wriggle himself out of my hold like the vermin he is, but I stay firm. "How could you do that to her? What about hitting someone weaker than you helps you get your rocks off, huh?" I snarl, inches from his face.

He says nothing the coward.

"I'm done, *father*," I say, releasing him with a shove. He stumbles backwards, catching himself on his desk. "I'm giving it all up. The money, the houses, the company, the fucking name even. I don't want any of it. I came here to look you in the face and let you know this plan of yours backfired. You can't threaten or force me any longer."

I turn on my heels to walk out, but he's on me. I should have known not to turn my back on him.

He jumps on me, violent hands reaching for my neck.

"You'll do no such thing," he hisses. "I can do much worse to your mother if you test me, Tristan." Ice crawls down my spine at his violent tone. "I can make her disappear overnight, believe me."

Fear claws at my chest and morphs into violence. I whip around and nail him in the jaw with a right hook. He tumbles to the floor in a lump of pitiful bones and I stand over him, breathing heavily, restraining myself from killing him on the spot.

Part of me is scared by my own need for violence, but I recognize it for what it is – a desire to protect and not a desire to harm, like him.

"What's going on here?" a small voice asks from behind me. I turn to find my mum standing in the doorway.

She looks petite and frail, smaller than when I last saw her six months ago. Time and my father haven't treated her well. The sling on her arm and the massive purple bruise on her eye don't help. She shakes like a scared animal as she looks at the shocking scene before her.

"Mum," I say, striding over to her and wrapping her in a large hug, being careful to avoid hurting her wrist. When I pull back, I run my thumb gently along her eye socket, tracing the terrifying bruise there. "I'm sorry I wasn't here to protect you."

"It's nothing."

"It's not, Mum." I grab her other hand tenderly in mine and give her an imploring look. "He's going to kill you one day, you know that right?" I turn and point at him where he's trying to get up from the floor, wiping the blood

off his chin with the sleeve of his shirt. “You heard about his best friend, Robert Royal? He killed his wife. *Alexander* is going to do the same to you if you don’t leave him.”

“Tristan, I... I wish I could,” she stutters, adding on a whisper, “I wish I was brave enough.”

“You *are*, Mum. Look at how brave Tess is, how fearlessly she conquers the world, how kind she is, she certainly didn’t get that from him,” I say, tossing a glare at my father. “She got that from you. You can do it, Mum, you *need* to. Please... I don’t want to have to bury you because you stayed,” I beg, my voice imploring.

“Bettina, don’t listen to the boy—”

“I’m not a boy,” I snarl, taking a step towards him. He cowers reflexively. I look at my mum, searching for how to get through to her. “I’m not a boy, Mum. I’m a man who’s in love.”

Where before there was despondency in her gaze, they now shine at my words. It’s like her entire body perks up at my declaration.

“In love?”

“Yeah,” I say, taking her hands once more. “Her name is Nera and she’s... she’s everything, Mum. I can’t live without her and I won’t. Choosing her is the easiest decision in the world, except when it comes to you. I can give this all up easily, I don’t need any of it, but I can’t leave you here in danger. You need to leave him. If you won’t do it for yourself, then do it for me. Do it so I can be with the love of my life.”

There’s a fierce look in her eye that I haven’t seen before.

“Will you tell me about her?” She asks, squeezing my hands back for the first time.

Chapter 44

Nera

I hear the front door open and then Bellamy walks into my bedroom. She's holding a Starbucks cup and hands it to me.

"Chai latte, your favorite," she says, dropping into my desk chair and looking at me where I'm sitting on my bed. "How are you doing?"

"I'm fine."

I'm not fine. I feel like a walking, breathing exposed nerve. Everything abrades against me and causes indescribable pain. I yearn for the despondency and detachedness I felt a few months ago. I yearn for a time before I knew happiness, before I knew it could be snatched from me in an instant.

"Have you heard from him?" she asks.

"No."

Ever since the boys threw Tristan out two days ago, I haven't heard from him. It's better this way. A clean break to match the swiftness with which he shattered my heart. I can move on now. I don't want to hear his pitiful excuses anyway.

"I know it hurts now, but it'll get easier with time."

"If you say so."

It can hardly get any worse. I miss him with every fiber of my being, even as I preach to never want to see him again.

I never expected this kind of betrayal from him and I can't make sense

of it, no matter how hard I try.

And I've tried.

I've spent the last two nights lying awake, punishing myself by reliving every moment spent together over the past few months, desperately trying to find a clue I must have missed that showed he was playing me.

There's nothing.

Nothing that reveals the truth of his lies.

Now I'm left alone and feeling this way, thinking about how unfair it is that someone can come along one day and leave a permanent mark of their passage on a part of you that no one's ever reached before and do so without you ever being able to remove it.

Sixtine bursts into my room next, her eyes finding mine.

"Did you hear? Tristan's gone."

"Yeah, he went back to London to see his mum. Family emergency."

I hate that I know that. I hate that I've spent so much time wondering if it went well, if his mum is okay.

Six sits next to me on the bed and takes my hand.

"No," she says. "He's *gone* gone. He resigned yesterday. I heard one of the admins saying that Thornton is furious and desperately searching for a replacement to finish out the year." Softer, she adds, "He's not coming back, Nera."

I look away, towards the window, blinking back the tears that threaten to make a reappearance. That news should come as a relief, not another blow, but it hits me like a tornado smashing into a fragile reed.

I'm disappointed in myself that I continue to let him hurt me. Clearly, I didn't learn anything from his betrayal.

"It's better this way," I say, this time out loud. I'm happy when I manage to squeeze it out without my voice shaking too much.

I look down at the parking lot and a part of me searches for his car where it usually waits for me. The spot is empty and covered in deadly looking ice.

It feels like a metaphor for the end of our relationship.

"It's better this way," I hear myself repeat once more, like a mantra. I figure if I make myself say it enough times, eventually I'll come to believe it.

I still can't believe how quickly everything went from picture perfect to complete and utter devastation. I feel like I still haven't caught my breath from that night.

Arms close around me from behind and hug me tight.
“I’m so sorry, Nera.”

“Hey Nera, come here for a sec?” Coach Kelly calls me.

I look up at him. I’m flat on my back on the mat after yet another fall.

I’ve been terrible at practice today, completely unfocused and sloppy. I’ve dropped weights, missed hits, and tripped over my own feet more times than I can count. I’m a danger to myself and others in this headspace but I can’t seem to shake it.

“Yes, Coach?” I say, jogging up to him.

“Go home.”

“What?” I ask, startled. Immediately, fear swells in my stomach.

Failure is not an option.

I’m conditioned to lose my shit in this moment and I recognize the familiar encroaching negative feelings. Coach Kelly must sense something is off because he puts a comforting hand on my shoulder, forcing me out of my thoughts. I look up at him and find kind eyes staring back at me.

“No one’s perfect every day or every practice. You’re having an off day, it happens. Go home and rest.”

I shake my head in refusal. “No, Coach. I can’t afford not to train. I can’t let myself fall behi—“

He pats my shoulder encouragingly a couple times, silencing me. “I’m serious. Relax for the afternoon, it’s the best thing for you right now. Come back tomorrow ready to hit the ground running, okay?”

I give him an uncertain look. “Are you sure?”

“Positive.”

I nod wordlessly and head for the locker room. It’s a new regime under Coach Kelly and I’m still getting used to the more lax approach, albeit doing so warily. I didn’t trust people easily before, and I trust them even less so now.

But the truth is, I could use a day to clear my head.

Maybe I’ll go for a walk around the grounds or read a book in a coffee

shop somewhere. The idea forms as the memory of Tristan telling me to do something that'll make me feel alive assaults me. Shaking my head to clear my thoughts, I gather my things and head outside.

It feels so impossible to move forward without being constantly reminded of his presence in my life. I have to tell myself that it's still fresh and raw, that as time goes on without seeing him, he'll eventually fade to nothing more than a bad memory.

And so what if a part of me is hurt that he left without a word? We're broken up, he doesn't owe me anything. In fact, him leaving is exactly what I need. Patience and distance will make me forget him.

"Nera."

For a second, I think I've imagined his voice. I've spent enough time thinking about it over the past few days that it doesn't seem far-fetched to assume I'm conjuring it up in my head once again.

But then I look up and there he is, standing before me staring at me like a soldier seeing his love for the first time after coming home from the battlefield.

I stop in my tracks. My throat dries.

It's snowing.

Thick, fluffy, almost soft looking flakes float around us, ambling slowly towards the ground. The air grows shallower with every second I spend staring at him until there doesn't seem to be enough of it left for me to breathe.

His cheeks are reddened by the wind, like he's been standing out in the snow for a while. As cold as it is, his eyes blaze a path of warmth wherever they touch me.

My body roars treacherously to life in response.

"I thought you weren't coming back," I say, the words tumbling out of me.

It's not what I should say. His comings and goings don't matter to me anymore. They shouldn't.

A frown creases his brow, as if the very thought of not coming back is incomprehensible to him. He steps forward, the snow parting gracefully around his body like it answers to him.

"Who told you that?" he demands, huskily.

I shrug and look away. He takes another step forward and I feel his gaze heat the side of my face.

“I quit,” he announces.

“I don’t care,” I lie. Quietly, I revel in the fact that I managed to sound as dispassionate and detached as I’d hoped I would.

He doesn’t let my tone deter him.

“Teaching was nothing more than a farce. It wasn’t me. The only reason I lasted this long was because I got to see you every day.” I scoff but he forges on, taking another step towards me. “I stayed in London longer than I was supposed to because I was getting my mum settled into her new place.” Against my will, my eyes widen in surprise and snap back up to meet his. “She left my father. She finally did it. Turns out, all it took was me telling her I’d lose the girl I love forever if she didn’t. She was out of the house before nightfall after that,” he says with an easy grin, like it’s that simple.

My heart aches in my chest, brittle and hollow.

“I’m happy she’s safe, I’m glad she’s never going to be in harm’s way again. I really am. But you already lost me, Tristan.”

He takes another step, continuing like I didn’t speak.

“I told my father I didn’t want it. Any of it. Not the money and certainly not the company. So I’ve been cut off, I’m unemployed and I’m homeless now too. I had to give up the accommodation when I resigned.”

I look off to the side, dreaming of his little apartment. Our very own sanctuary where nothing could touch or break us.

Just him and I in a world of our making.

Gone now.

My posters likely in the trash along with all the trinkets I bought that he never wanted. He did tell me it wasn’t his home and I, foolishly, didn’t listen.

I whip back to face him, anger lashing through me now.

“Why are you telling me this?” I snap.

He’s above me suddenly and clasping my face in his large hands, his thumb rubbing soft circles on my skin. He inches closer until his warm breaths hit my frozen cheeks.

“Because I have a plan,” he breathes, vehemently. “For us.”

The words I’ve been waiting for, the ones he should have said to me a week ago.

They feel empty now, worthless.

I laugh, humorlessly. “Too little, too late for that.”

“Don’t say that,” he begs, turning me towards him, towards his mouth.

I rip my face out of his hold and step back, the heat of my anger keeping me warm even as my hair becomes slick with snow.

“Did you think you’d come here, lay out whatever this plan is you just cobbled together, and that I’d just forgive you? Is that it?”

His jaw twitches. “I thought you’d at least hear me out.”

I grin bitterly and shake my head. “I don’t owe you that, Tristan. I don’t owe you anything at all. You lost the right to anything from me when you lied to me for six months.” I glare at him, crossing my arms over my chest. “Are you done? Have you said everything you need to say?”

“Not even fucking close,” he grits.

“Find the words then, and make them count. This is the last time we’re speaking — consider it closure for the both of us. I need to move on from you and that means never seeing you again.”

The words hurt as I say them. I don’t know if I’m speaking for him or myself, but either way I know I have to find the strength to move on.

His eyes bore into mine, dark and enticing. “I love you.”

“Stop,” I say, closing my eyes and turning my face away.

“I love you,” he repeats, louder.

“Tristan!”

“I fucking *love you*. This isn’t an ending, this isn’t closure. This is just the beginning and I’ll make you see that.”

My pulse flutters every time he utters those words, as if he can control my life and the very breath in my body.

“I’ve been in agony the past week, Nera. I won’t survive living without you. I’m *begging* you to forgive me. I’ll spend the rest of my life making up for how I hurt you, I promise.”

My face whips around, fresh anger surging in my veins.

“You didn’t learn a single thing about me if you think I’d ever forgive you for hurting me this way. You want to talk about begging? *I’m* the one who begged you not to break my heart. You had all the warnings you needed, but you chose not to heed them. Now you have to live with the consequences of your actions. My parents I have to put up with, but you I can just cut out of my life.”

The words alone are painful to say. They rip at my chest, tearing my vital organs until it feels like I’ve been sliced to ribbons on the inside. The thought of actually going through with my threat kills me, but I know it’s what I have to do.

Tristan closes the distance between us and I expect him to grab me again. I'm ready to shake him off if he does. Instead, he stands in front of me and stares for long seconds. Up close, I can see how awful he looks. His skin is grey and ashen, like he hasn't gotten any sleep in days. His eyes are raw with pain and deep grooves have etched themselves beneath his lower lids. Unhappy lines mark his face on either side of his mouth.

Slowly, he bends his legs, lowering himself to the ground until he's on his knees at my feet. His eyes never leave mine as he settles into an imploring position. His dress pants are ten centimeters deep in snow and I know his knees are wet and frozen.

A thunderstorm of chaos rages in his gaze as he looks up at me. He looks so tormented that he doesn't seem to notice the physical pain he must undoubtedly feel.

"Please."

The word echoes like a gunshot.

It's a simple plea.

I don't let it thaw my heart even a little.

Even still, I don't have the strength to look him in the eye when I answer. My voice trembles, but I affect confidence.

"Ask as many times as you want, beg, plead, get on your knees, I don't care. The answer will always be the same," I say. "No."

I walk around him and to my car, leaving him there on his knees. Behind me, I hear him stand and march after me, his steps crunching loudly in the snow.

"Just leave, Tristan," I call out, annoyed.

"I am."

"Good."

"No, I mean, I'm leaving Switzerland."

My heart stops like it runs abruptly out of battery.

He comes around to stand in front of me, our eyes clashing when he comes back into my field of vision. That's exactly what I want, what I thought he'd already done, what I *just* told him to do, so why is everything inside me screaming *how dare he?*

His face softens, relief washing over it when he takes in my reaction. I harden my features to stone so that he can't see what I really feel behind the impenetrable mask.

And what do I feel, I'm not sure. Rage, relief, bitterness, anger,

desperation, heartbreak. Everything and nothing, all at once.

“I’m doing a three-month intensive culinary internship in Lyon. It’s half-restaurant experience, half-schooling at the most prestigious institute in France. I start this Monday, on March 1st.”

Behind all the anger and resentment, there’s real happiness for him. He’s making his dreams come true, like we always talked about.

“Congratulations,” I say, sincerely.

Inside, the rip in my chest tears impossibly deep, a fatal blow. In the end, he was yet again full of pretty words and of even prettier lies. Minutes ago he was down on his knees, begging me to forgive him and all along he knew that he was leaving the country. He wasn’t going to stay even if I had been foolish enough to forgive him. How many times can I let one person hurt me?

I find my last remaining shred of decency and add, “Goodbye, Tristan. I hope you get to live the life you always dreamed of.”

I walk past him once more and reach for my car door but he turns and grabs my forearm.

Electricity zaps up my body like it always does but this time it’s met with grief. Grief at what we lost and over what could have been.

“Lose that word from your vocabulary when it comes to me, Nera.” His thumb strokes the exposed skin of my wrist. “Goodbyes don’t exist between us. I’ve told you before and I’ll say it again. I’ll say it every day for the rest of my life if that’s what it’ll take for you to believe me – I love you and I’m never leaving you.”

Chapter 45

Tristan

March.

Nera walks out of her apartment building with Thayer, Bellamy and Sixtine following closely behind her. The foursome is chatting excitedly about something I can't quite make out.

I'm too busy staring at Nera.

It's a soothing balm to my soul laying eyes on her again after a few days away. There's an innate sadness to her, not unlike the one she carried when I first met her. It seems deeper now and knowing I'm the sole culprit for it makes me want to take a knife to my own chest.

I miss her like the desert misses the rain. There's a drought inside me and I feel like I'm shriveling up and desiccating from the inside. Every breath is painful, every step forward agonizing.

We haven't spoken since I cornered her coming out of practice and I've barely slept since. Her words play on a loop in my brain, taunting me and terrifying me with the possibility that she'll never forgive me.

She seemed resolute and unmoving, but I can't let that stand.

I'll get her to forgive me no matter what it takes.

No matter what I have to do.

I exit my car and walk towards her. She's the first to look up when I'm still a ways away, almost like she can sense me when I'm in her vicinity. Her

eyes sharpen and her features tighten like she's steeling herself for battle.

Her friends' gazes follow hers over to me, the words dying out abruptly on their lips when they spot me.

"Aren't you supposed to be in France?" Nera asks tonelessly, like she has no interest in the matter.

If I didn't know her so well, if I didn't spot the way the corners of her eyes crinkle like they do when she's putting on a front, then I'd fall for her unaffected act.

"I was, I just made it back."

"Back for what?"

"To bring you dinner," I say, extending the bag I'm carrying towards her. "Sorry it's so late, traffic was terrible near the border."

Silence meets my declaration as four pairs of eyes stare at me. No one makes a move to reach for the bag, all of them shocked by my words.

Nera is the only one I see, the only one whose breaths I'm counting. I know her body better than I know my own, I've studied it and worshipped every centimeter of it over the past six months.

She missed an exhale after I spoke.

Maybe there is hope for me after all.

Thayer's brows rise and she throws a wide-eyed look at Nera before looking at me. "Are you saying you drove to Switzerland from France just to bring her dinner?"

"There's also breakfast and lunch in there for tomorrow," I reply, looking only at Nera. "I made that veggie hash you love." She used to ask me to make it for her at least two to three times a week.

I'm hoping she'll accept it. If the only part of me she'll allow near her is my cooking, then I'll take it. I'll survive on thoughts of her eating my food alone until I have her back in my arms.

"That's a two and a half hour drive each way," Six points out.

"I'm aware," I say, walking right up to where Nera stands on the steps. She looks down at me, her expression blank, revealing nothing. "Have dinner with me," I whisper.

She turns her head away. "No. Go back to France, Tristan, you're wasting your time here."

I clasp her wrist before she can walk away and place the bag's handle in her palm, closing her fingers around it.

"Take the food, Nera. I made it for you."

She sets the bag down on the steps without looking at me.

“I don’t want anything from you,” she says, her voice sad, before walking back into the building like she hadn’t been on her way out somewhere before I showed up.

I watch her go, the wound in my chest ripping. I so badly want to run after her like I have in the past, to make her forgive me, but I know this is different. She can’t be forced. She has to make the decision to come back to me herself.

As unnatural as it is for me, as much as it’s difficult to restrain myself, I know what I have to do. I have to suffocate and snuff out the primal need calling at me to take her and keep her. It burns a hole in my chest but I clench my fists and resist, turning towards her friends instead.

They stand on either side of me, watching me silently. They look unsure what to do with me, their faces still angry and suspicious.

“Tell her I’m not leaving until morning. I’ll be in my car if she changes her mind. It doesn’t matter what time of night; I’ll be waiting for her.”

“She won’t come,” Bellamy tells me.

“That’s alright. I’m not so easily dissuaded.”

I pick up the bag and hand it to Six who’s standing closest to me. “Watch over her for me?” I ask. “Make sure she’s taking care of herself.”

She nods, taking it from me, and follows Nera back inside with Thayer.

Bellamy stays, giving me a hard look.

“Why did you help me the night of the grand opening?” she asks. “You didn’t know me and I wasn’t actually in any danger.”

We’ve never spoken about it. When she didn’t bring it up after my relationship with Nera was revealed, I thought she must have been blacked out and couldn’t remember that night.

“I knew you were Nera’s friend.”

“You did it for her?”

“Yes.”

She tilts her head to the side, digging for something. “Why?”

I jam my hands in my pocket and look up at the sky. The beauty of being in Aubonne is an almost complete lack of pollution. The stars shine bright and beautiful at night.

“Even back then, she was all I could think about. I knew it would hurt her if anything happened to you or if I even took the risk of letting potential harm come to you. I had to make sure you were safe.”

“You did all that because you didn’t want her experiencing any kind of hurt and the whole time you were lying to her about who you were?”

Not strictly true, but still I grit my teeth and say, “Yes.”

“You’re an idiot.”

“Yes.”

That pulls a grin from her. She looks at me thoughtfully, as if deciding something.

“I hope you prove us all wrong,” she says finally, before turning on her heels and walking back inside.

I get in my car and wait like I promised I would, but Nera doesn’t come down and I don’t hear from her.

At around midnight, I’m peering out of my backseat window towards her apartment when I see a shadow move in her room. I’d know the outline of her body anywhere, even when no part of her is recognizable.

It’s her.

She’s standing at her own window, looking down at the parking lot.

I forget to uncross my legs in my hurry to exit the car and end up tripping over my feet on my way out. Thankfully, I right myself before I fall flat on my face.

I’m in the cold in nothing more than my sweater, but I barely feel it. My face is upturned towards her, desperately seeking out any sort of connection between us. I raise my hand in a greeting.

She moves and her face comes into the light, haloed by a small lamp on her bookshelf.

Something tugs violently at my stomach and I stagger almost drunkenly towards her. My breath hitches and my heart wrenches as time stops. We stare at each other.

My lips part to confess just how much I love her. She couldn’t hear me from here, but I know she’d understand.

Before I can say anything, her hands come up and she closes the drapes with two swift flicks of her wrist. She disappears from my sight as quickly as she appeared, leaving me standing in the physical and metaphorical cold with unsaid words of worship on my lips.

Early April.

The sound of knuckles rapping on glass wake me up with brutal effectiveness. Groaning, I peel open a groggy eyelid only to make eye contact with Rhys. He's bent halfway at the waist and peering through my backseat window, his critical gaze roaming over the entirety of the interior of my car before coming back to me.

"Rise and shine, sleeping beauty," he exclaims, much too loudly for this hour in the morning. He punctuates his words with a slap of his hand against my window, really waking me up now.

"The fuck do you want?" I mutter, sitting up and unzipping my sleeping bag.

"Sassy," a familiar voice drawls from the other side of the car. "I'd say you must have gotten up on the wrong side of the bed this morning, but clearly that's not a problem you're currently burdened with. Was the sleeping bag perhaps too snug last night?" Rogue inquires.

I stare at him and then look over my shoulder, seeing Phoenix through my back windshield. A pained groan rips from my throat alongside a sudden urge to mummify myself completely in my sleeping bag and ignore them altogether.

I flip my middle finger at Rogue and slam it against the window pane for emphasis. He chuckles darkly and lifts one of the two coffee cups in his hands up to his mouth, imperturbable.

This is the closest I assume I'll ever be to feeling like an animal in a zoo and I hate it. I throw on my shoes and sweater and climb down towards the backseat door before throwing it open.

"To what do I owe the displeasure of your company?" I ask. "Come to meddle in things that don't concern you again?"

I haven't seen any of them since they outed me to Nera without giving me a chance to explain myself.

"Don't blame us, Nera fell in love with you. We didn't have a choice but to make sure you were clean," Phoenix tells me, crossing his arms and leaning nonchalantly against the car.

Rhys walks over to join us on this side of the car and explains, “We look after our own. They’re the only family we have.”

I can’t blame them for what they did. Both because it was my lies, my inaction, that got me in this mess, but also because I understand the primal need to protect the ones you love and those they love in return.

Rogue speaks, his face impassive but his words somehow impassioned, “I get why you did what you did,” he says, nodding once. “For your mum.”

An understanding passes between us but neither of us acknowledges it.

“So, what do you want?” I demand, looking at the three of them.

“The girls told us what you’ve been doing and we wanted to see it for ourselves.” Phoenix eyes my car and the set up I have within it assessingly. “Do you even have a place to live?”

“You’re looking at it.”

He turns his gaze on me and if I didn’t know any better, I’d say he looks almost impressed.

“Every night?” he asks, grabbing the second cup of coffee from Rogue and handing it to me.

I feel like I’ve just passed a test. Given I know the things he did to get Sixtine back, I’m hoping his approval means I’m making progress with Nera.

I take it, nodding. “Every night.”

It’s been four weeks since my first day at the culinary institute in Lyon. Four weeks since I drove back to Aubonne that same evening and tried unsuccessfully to get Nera to speak to me.

I’ve been back every night since.

Thirty-two nights.

Thirty-two mornings waking up without having spoken to me.

Every day, my afternoon classes end around seven o’clock. I clean and pack up my station, get in my car and drive the two and a half hours to Aubonne. I always bring with me meals I’ve made for her. Usually, they’re a mix of new recipes I’ve learned and her standby favorites, in the hopes that it’ll make her forgive me.

Every day, my journey back to Aubonne is always the same. I park in The Pen’s parking lot, in the same spot I usually do right under Nera’s window. I ring her doorbell and wait anxiously for her to come down and grab the food.

Every day, I find myself holding my breath when I see socked feet

coming down the steps of the building staircase. Instead of relief it's dismay that hits me when I realize it's one of her friends.

They come to the door for her.

She never does.

Not a single one of those nights.

It's emotional torture not seeing her. It's even worse knowing that she's not similarly affected. I feel like I'm losing her, like she's slipping through my fingers no matter how tightly I try to hold on.

"Is she taking care of herself?" I ask the girls.

At first, they simply nod curtly, grab the food, and go back upstairs without a word. Over time, they mollify. They start to give me small smiles, to answer my question, to ask me how my day was or how my program is going.

Yesterday, Sixtine even gave me a quick hug.

They feel sorry for me, I think.

I'm withering away without Nera and it's showing, physically. I knew time was never going to do anything to dull the throbbing pain, but I hadn't expected it to make it worse either. Every day that passes without her feels like I'm falling deeper and deeper into eternal oblivion.

I live in wait for her to be the one who comes down those stairs.

In the meantime, I resist the temptation of barging past her friends, taking those stairs three at a time up to her apartment and dragging her out of her room and back into my life for good.

Every day, once her friends have taken the food back to their apartment, I head back to my car. I always throw a glance up at Nera's window to see if she's there, but she never is.

Every day, I sleep in my car. I keep the backseat perpetually down, that section of the vehicle now designated as my bedroom. I've done what I can to make it as livable as possible by buying a cushioned mat, a sleeping bag, and a space heater for the very chilly nights.

I even have the framed posters she gave me leaning against the back windows providing some decoration.

"Aren't you fucking cold at night, even with that thing on?" Rhys asks, nodding at the space heater.

If only he knew. At six foot four, no space heater is large enough to heat my entire body against a subzero March winter night.

"There were a few times I thought I might lose a toe."

More than a couple times, my extremities have frozen to the point of pain during the night. By the time morning came around, I'd have to sneak into the locker rooms and soak my toes in warm water to regain blood flow and feeling in them.

Rogue quirks a brow at me. "And that didn't dissuade you?"

"I only have one of her. Toes I can afford to lose, her I can't."

The corner of his lips lifts in humor but I'm not joking.

Mercifully, temperatures are starting to rise now so very soon I won't be risking frostbite every night I'm out here.

Every day, when my alarm rings at dawn, I get in the driver's seat and head back for Lyon, always throwing one final glance up at Nera's window and finding it as equally empty as the night before.

Every day, I make it back just in time to get a quick shower in the school facilities and head to the restaurant for my morning shift. Then classes in the afternoon and the drive back to Aubonne.

Every day, I do it all over again without fail.

"How long are you going to keep this up for?" Rhys asks.

Thanks to my shifts at the restaurant, I'm making enough money to afford rent on a small place if I wanted. But I can't bear the thought of not being close to her at night when I'm spending my days in another country.

I don't know what having a mattress would change anyway. I haven't slept in weeks and it's not because I'm sleeping in my car.

It's because I can't sleep if she's not nestled against me with her face burrowed in my neck and her soft breaths falling rhythmically against my skin.

I shrug, the answer so obvious that I don't know why he's even asking. "As long as it takes."

Chapter 46

Nera

Late April.

“Ooh, looks like it’s tacos for dinner tonight, girls,” Bellamy says, opening the bag she just brought up from downstairs. “And then Nera your breakfast tomorrow looks like it’s...” she says, inspecting the contents of the clear containers, “some kind of overnight oats, maybe blueberry. Lunch is a yummy looking pasta salad.”

“How many tacos did he put in there?” Thayer asks, getting up from the couch.

Bellamy counts softly under her breath.

“There’s eight tortillas in the bag.”

“Fuck yes,” Thayer answers, excitedly. “I love this man. If you don’t forgive him, Nera, I might just have to take Tristan home for myself.”

Every single day for almost two months now, Tristan has been coming back to Aubonne every night and delivering handmade food.

After that first night, I thought he’d give up pretty quickly. I thought he’d last max a week, maybe ten days. I never expected him to still be doing this, especially since I’ve categorically refused to see him.

I assume that’s part of the reason why in the last couple of weeks he’s switched from dinner just for one, me, to making enough food for the girls as well. It’s not lost on me that he’s trying to woo my friends and get them to

forgive him as well, but they don't seem to care.

Clearly, it's working.

"You might want to never repeat that around your boyfriend," Six replies, joining them around the kitchen island.

"Don't worry about me," she says, waggling her brows with a cheeky grin, "Rhys loves staking his claim," she purrs, her tone so happily in love it makes my stomach clench.

I close my book and get up from the couch, ambling towards them.

"What did he say to you today, Bellamy?" I ask. I wish I was strong enough to pretend I was immune to his efforts to get me back, but I'm not. I try to couch my question in a detached tone, but I'm desperate for any crumb of information about him.

"He asked me if you were taking care of yourself, like he always does. I told him you were. And then he told me to tell you that he loves you and to give you this," she says, handing me a small white envelope.

My heart lurches into my throat. Although I aim for nonchalance, I reach for it with greedy fingers and tear it open.

Inside, there's a polaroid photo of us.

Pain slithers down my chest as I run my thumb over the picture. I remember exactly when it was taken.

In his apartment, one night after we'd just had sex. I'm wearing his sweater and am sitting between his legs in front of the couch, sticking my tongue playfully out at the camera. His arms are wrapped around me, holding me tightly, his hand cupping my jaw and his lips pressed against the side of my face. Even with his mouth half-obsured, you can make out his happy smile.

I turn it over and find a note written on the back.

I've had this photo pinned to the backseat of my car since the last time I saw you. I stare at it every night before I go to sleep, dreaming of a time when you'll let me hold you like this again. I need you to have it so that even with time and distance you never forget how fucking obsessed with you I am.

How in love with you I am.

I miss you so fucking much.

A lump forms in my throat, choking me.

I know it wasn't just any other night. This was taken the night we confessed that we were in love with each other.

I wish I could forget, but I can't. Time is doing nothing to dull the suffering. If anything, it's morphing into a throbbing ache more bothersome than just pain.

With the photo clutched in my hand, I turn on my heels and head towards my bedroom.

"Do you want a taco?" Six calls after me.

"Later," I answer, closing the door behind me.

The lights are off and I don't turn them on. The window beckons to me like it does every night. In the many weeks since that first night, he's never caught me looking at him. I always wait until it's late into the night to approach and look down at him.

I do it every night.

Usually, I don't see anything except a corner of his sleeping bag. But on the nights where I'm lucky, I'll look down and find that he's rolled over in his sleep. His face will be turned to the side and visible through the window.

He looks tormented in his sleep, unlike what he looks like when he's sleeping next to me. His features are the opposite of relaxed, his brow pressed down, his eyes wrinkled, his mouth in a flat line like he's being haunted by nightmares.

Still, I look at him. Sometimes for up to an hour. Sitting on the reading bench in front of my window, my face resting in my palm, just looking at him.

Those nights where I get to see his face are the only ones I sleep well. Like a junkie waiting for a fix, I'm listless and on edge when I go days without seeing him.

Sometimes it feels like I'm punishing myself more than I'm punishing him. I'm hoping that this is just the part where things get worse before they get better. That I have to suffer through this part of the breakup in order to get to the next phase where in a few more weeks, maybe a month tops, he'll be nothing more than a bad memory.

But tonight, I can't make myself wait until he's asleep. The need to look now is clawing at my skin and begging me to give in. My self-control has been ironclad for eight weeks; it's fine if I wobble and look a little earlier tonight.

Taking a deep breath, I walk up to my window and look down.

The air expulses violently from my lungs when my eyes clash with his.

My heart skids to a ragged stop from the unexpected blow of seeing him. He's standing outside right below my window, waiting and looking up at me like he knew I'd come.

My phone rings in my hand, startling me. Tristan's name flashes across my screen.

He's texted me hundreds of times over the past two months but I've never answered. This is the first time he tries to force his way past my resistance and calls.

I look back down at him to see him bring his own phone up to his ear. Adrenaline rushes through my veins as uncertainty freezes me. I let the phone ring until the call goes to voicemail.

Tristan brings the phone down only long enough to tap his screen once and then my phone rings again.

His eyes are determined, his jaw set as he stares at me. I could block him, I should, but in the story of him and I, I never have been able to do the things I should.

"What?" I snap, picking up.

His answering smirk is wolfish, making my stomach clench in response.

"Hi, baby. It's been a while."

My eyes flutter closed, my heart squeezing. I underestimated the destructive power of his voice. Whatever defenses I've managed to devise, he blows them to pieces with six words.

"Say something," he entices. "I need to hear that beautiful voice of yours."

How is he still doing this? If he's so desperate to get me back, why didn't he do what was necessary to keep me in the first place?

"Why won't you give up? I've refused to see you for two months, that should tell you that I want nothing to do with you."

He steps forward as if it'll bring him closer to me.

"I won't give up because I refuse to live without you, it's that simple."

I turn away from the window but his voice comes through the line, frenzied and agitated.

"Don't," he pleads, grimacing. "Please. Just give me five minutes. Five minutes of your time and I'll go."

"You'll go back to France?"

I don't know why that thought turns my stomach almost to the point of being sick.

"No," his jaw sets. "But I'll leave you alone for the night," he clarifies. "Five minutes. Please."

I consider him for a moment longer, my face turned towards him but my body angled away. I'm still so angry when I look at him. Betrayal rattles in my chest as fresh as the day I found out. And yet, I can't make myself walk away from the window.

"Two minutes."

Relief flashes across his features, an easy smile stretching his lips and making my pussy clench.

"Good girl," he purrs through the line, making arousal pool in my lower stomach. "How are you? Have you been taking care of yourself?"

His eyes scan eagerly down the parts of my body he can see from three floors below as if to assess the answer for himself.

"Yeah, I have."

I actually have. As much as I miss him, as much as the hurt he inflicted caused real devastation, I haven't let it break me.

The food therapist I'd started seeing when we were still together helped me understand the root causes of my eating disorders. She taught me coping mechanisms to use when I feel the voice rearing its ugly head.

The road to a healthy relationship with food is a long one with an as of yet uncertain ending but... I'm doing better.

I've put on a bit of much needed weight. While the numbers on the scale terrify me and make me want to run to the bathroom to remedy the problem immediately, I can't deny that the changes I'm seeing in my body are for the better. Gone are the mental fog, the lightheadedness, and the bone deep weakness. Now my skin is rosy with good health, my hair shinier than I've ever seen it, and my fencing the best it's ever been.

The therapist also helped me understand that I needed to set boundaries with my parents. For my father, that meant cutting him off entirely. He was never going to change his ways or stop his various abuses of me. That relationship was irretrievable and I found that I didn't even want to try.

The same day I cut him off, I had an emotional call with my mother. She was flustered when she picked up the phone, her voice shrill and worried.

"I heard what you said to your father. Are you out of your mind? You need to call him right now and apologize. If you beg for forgiveness, he

might choose to forget this ever happened.”

I’d had unwitting tears in my eyes before she even finished her sentence, suddenly choked by years of suppressed emotions being set free.

“Why couldn’t you protect me, Mum?” I’d asked, hiding the tremble in my voice. “From him and everything else.”

“I did! I made sure no one could criticize you.”

“No, you became the bully. You enabled another bully and let him drive me into the ground until it almost broke me. Maybe your intentions were good to begin with, but you let your own trauma blind you and you punished me for it.” My voice breaks over the next words. “Why aren’t you proud of me?”

I wasn’t sure what I was searching for – acknowledgment maybe, or closure. Answers, definitely.

“Of course, I am!”

“Then why can’t you tell me?”

Silence met me on the other line.

“I shouldn’t have to beg you for a kind word. You have no problem listing all of my flaws – do you really find it so difficult to find one redeeming quality in me?”

“Oh, darling,” she says. “No.”

“I make myself throw up, Mum. After almost every meal since I was fifteen.”

The therapist helped me prepare for this conversation, but it’s Tristan who gave me the strength to do it. Prior to our relationship falling apart, he’s the one who was steadfastly by my side, my greatest champion and slayer of every self-doubt I ever had. I doubt I’d have found the strength to take these steps to heal myself without him.

I certainly wouldn’t have known that I deserved a million times better.

“I’m so sorry,” she chokes out, silently crying now. “I never wanted that for you, I just didn’t want you to get hurt.”

“You were so busy worrying about how the world might hurt me that you never realized *you* were the one hurting me,” I say. “Things have changed, Mum, and I will no longer accept the way you speak to me, the ways in which you belittle me. So, you have a choice. Either you understand what I’m saying and change or you don’t and, like dad, we go our separate ways. Think about it and let me know your decision.”

“I don’t need to think about it honey, of course I’ll change. I– I don’t

know if it'll be perfect overnight, but I'll try."

The relief of her words had been crushing. A big part of me had truly believed I'd lose both parents that day.

I'm not naive enough to think things will magically get better, but I can settle and be happy with intentions changing.

And so far, progress has been slow but evident.

I know Tristan would be thrilled to hear it, to know I *am* taking care of myself and even more than he could hope for, but I don't tell him. There's no use pulling him closer when I'm trying to push him away.

"That's great," he says. "It's pretty dark out so I can't see much, but you look really good."

My heart squeezes again, happy to have him compliment me.

"Maybe that's because we haven't spoken in a while," I jab, wanting my own petty revenge for how he's hurt me.

He winces, but doesn't let it deter him.

"Nope, that can't be it. You've always been stunning," he says, easily. "On the other hand, our separation is definitely why I look like shit these days."

It's hard to make out his facial expressions from so far away, but even I can see how tired he looks. It can't be easy to work long hours, drive to another country, and sleep in his car for weeks on end.

Then again, no one asked him to do that.

Even though I have about a million things I want to tell him, I stay silent. He's the one who wanted to speak to me, *he* can do the talking.

He looks up at me like I'm the only good thing in his life, his eyes lined with sadness but shining on me.

"How much longer am I going to be in the doghouse, baby?"

"Forever."

He chuckles in response, his confidence steadfast.

"You think that's funny?"

"Not particularly, no."

"Then why are you laughing?"

"Because I'm not going anywhere."

I tsk, equal parts annoyed and turned on by his words.

"You taught me self-love, Tristan. It's one of the many things I love—*loved*," I say, correcting my slip up, "about being with you. That you saw something in me that I couldn't in myself until you opened my eyes to

it.” I can feel the intensity with which he listens to me through the phone, his eyes never leaving mine except to flick to the building quickly. For a second there, I’m pretty sure he thinks about scaling the facade to get to me. “But that’s also why I can’t take you back. Because now I know I deserve better than what you did to me.”

“You do,” he agrees, vehemently. “You fucking do. And I’ll prove to you that I’m still the person who can do that.”

I shake my head sadly. “You need to stop wasting your time.”

“It’s my time to use, Nera, I choose what I do with it. And I need to make something clear – for me, the choices are being with you or death. Because frankly a life without you in it isn’t a life worth living at all.”

He echoes my own thoughts so clearly, it’s as if he had a direct line into my mind. It’s been a fight to grasp at happiness in his absence. In comparison, it comes so easily when I’m with him.

This call was a mistake. All it did was remind me how much I love him, how much my heart yearns to forgive him even as my brain knows not to.

“Your two minutes are up, Tristan,” I say.

“One last thing before I leave you for the night. You know why I laughed when you said I’d be in the doghouse forever?” His eyes pierce mine from down below and my throat dries. “Because I’ll happily spend forever waiting for even two more minutes with you.”

Chapter 47

Nera

May.

As the year rolls into May and final exams approach, I focus on studying and committing myself to training. It helps keep my mind occupied so my thoughts don't trail to Tristan.

This is the final push before the Olympics next month, so it feels like it's do or die time. My continued focus is paying off and I'm playing better than ever. I haven't lost a sanctioned bout in almost four months and am one of the favorites heading into the games. The French also have a couple of established international champions on their teams so I have quite a road ahead of me, but I'm feeling confident.

Because I spend my days in class or at the training facility, I barely have time to see my friends. I know they miss me and I miss them, but my schedule doesn't have much leeway.

That's why earlier tonight they ambushed me in the library and refused to leave until I agreed to go clubbing with them.

I'd hesitated for a good thirty minutes before finally giving in. The prospect of a fun, responsibility-free night sounded very enticing after months of heartbreak and heartache.

So, I let Bellamy dress me in a hot outfit, I sat still while Sixtine did my makeup, and I happily took the drinks Thayer poured for me. We ended up

going to a new club in Geneva called Vega and overindulging in every alcohol that was served to us.

We danced and we laughed and we evaded grabby hands. As much fun as it was, as I was out there on the dancefloor, swaying my hips and giggling happily, my hair slick at my temples from the effort, I was overwhelmed by thoughts of Tristan.

My mind always finds a way to slither back to him, no matter how much fun I'm having in the moment. It's like I can't help but compare every experience to what it would be like if he was there.

And all I could think about was how tonight, when he was going to ring our doorbell, no one was going to answer.

How we'd never not answered before.

How he'd probably wonder where we were.

Well, good.

He needed to know what it'd be like when I started dating someone else. He'd have to stop sleeping outside my window then.

The thought of moving on turned my stomach a little, but I knew it was an inevitability.

I just needed to make it a reality now.

I'd smiled at a couple boys tonight but my bravery died the second they took a step towards me. The thought of having to flirt with someone new, not to mention to kiss and touch someone new, terrified me.

I guess I wasn't ready yet, but I knew I needed to be soon to really, truly move on.

Those thoughts, which had been playing pinball in my brain all night long, trouble me the entire ride home. I don't notice the time pass until we're pulling back into The Pen's parking lot.

"I can't wait to be snuggled up in my bed!" Thayer singsongs drunkenly as we get out of the black car.

"Shh!" Six whispers urgently, wincing and looking around. "You're going to wake up the whole complex."

Bellamy, equally as drunk as her best friend, slings an arm around my shoulders, points towards an SUV we've all come to know very well, and says, loudly, "Should we say goodnight to Tristan? I feel kinda bad we didn't see him last night."

My friends seem blind to the fact that Tristan's charm offensive over has worked on them. They haven't told me to forgive him – they would never –

but he's no longer iced out like he was right after we broke up.

Tonight is the first night I feel my own resistance wobble a little bit. Because by now, I should be firmly distanced from him. After all, it's been months.

Instead, I feel him as dangerously close as ever.

"More like good morning," Thayer chirps back. "What time is it? At least three am, right?" she slurs. "We had such a good night," she slurs, happily.

Before any of us can answer her, the door to Tristan's SUV opens. It feels like time stops as we all wait for him to appear. And not ten seconds later, he does.

His feet hit the asphalt, followed by long legs, and finally he's unfolding himself out of the car.

He's wearing sweatpants and nothing else.

Lust grabs me at the throat and squeezes.

They hang low on his hips, revealing a deep V of muscles that disappear beneath his waistline and a brawny chest rippling underneath intricate tattoos.

He smiles sleepily at me, simply happy to see me. His hair is adorably mussed and he looks warm and inviting. I want to run up to him and bury my face against his chest as his arms come around me and his head comes down to rest on mine. I want to feel the total protection of being his once more.

"Oh my..." Bellamy says from next to me, mouth agape as she looks at him. Thayer rubs her eyes disbelievingly in the background.

"Hey," I grit through clenched teeth, suddenly irritated. "Look away."

His smirk tells me that even though I muttered the comment under my breath to B, he still heard it.

I'm annoyed that he caught that momentary lapse in judgment. It's misplaced possessiveness on my part. He's no longer mine.

My stomach churns at the thought.

"Sorry," she says, throwing me an apologetic look. "But Jesus, Nera. How the hell have you been able to hold out for this long?"

I'm asking myself the same question. Because standing there, staring at him, arousal is doing absolute numbers inside my body. Clearly it hasn't gotten the memo that we're done. My throat is dry and I find myself licking my lips to rehydrate them. Butterflies and nerves fight in my stomach for dominance and my pussy clenches, begging me to throw myself at the attractive man who wants to do all the bad things to me.

I really am no better than a man, lusting after him like I am.

His expression drops into a frown when he notices my tight, sequined outfit. He rakes his gaze lustfully down my entire body before letting it roam lazily back up my curves.

“Were you at a club?”

I nod, my tongue still glued to the roof of my mouth, making it impossible for me to speak. He takes a couple of steps forward.

As he gets closer, I can see the thunderstorm brewing in his eyes.

The frustrated set of his jaw.

The tightness of his shoulders.

When less than ten meters separate us, he stops. His tongue works the inside of his cheek angrily as his eyes scan down the entirety of my body. When he lifts his gaze slowly back up to meet mine, they’re so dark with desire that I almost throw in the towel right then and there and give in.

“You look fucking hot,” he growls, roughly.

His voice is thick with a combination of barely contained lust and months of sexual frustration. I think if I gave him a sign, he’d fuck me right here in public.

He walks up until he’s right in front of me. My eyes ping back and forth between his, my lungs working overtime to try to pull in enough oxygen.

Breaths expel haltingly from my lips as he takes a finger and drags it ever so slowly up my arm. It’s both lazy and seductive, frenzying and teasing. Our eyes track the movement wordlessly. His finger dances across my collarbone and up my throat until it’s joined by another under my chin. He tilts my jaw up towards him, forcing me to meet his territorial gaze.

“Did you let anyone touch you tonight?”

His question is like a bucket of ice water dropped over my head, pulling me from my momentary trance.

I shake my face out of his hold and step away.

“You don’t get to question me about my personal life. It no longer belongs to you. So, whoever I’m touching, kissing, or fucking is really none of your business.”

I grab Bellamy’s hand and pull her behind me as I head towards the front door. I expect Tristan to say something or follow me, but surprisingly he doesn’t. I can’t resist the lure of looking over my shoulder and getting one last peek at him.

He’s standing frozen where I left him. The tension that exudes from him

is palpable and aggressive. His eyes narrow on me when he catches me watching him and an anticipatory shiver rolls down my spine.

I've seen that primal look in his eye before. I know I've pissed him off now and he won't stop until he gets what he wants.

Later, I receive several texts from him.

Gary: Remember what happened the last time I chased you.

Gary: Remember how it ended.

Gary: Think about it because when I finally get you to forgive me, I'll fuck you so hard in every one of your tight holes, it'll make that night in the forest look like a beginner's class.

Gary: Don't push me.

Gary: Sleep tight, baby. Love you.

He's certifiable.

And apparently so am I, given how wet my pussy gets reading his messages.

Given his very obvious obsessive tendencies, when the girls and I decide to go out again the following Saturday, I'm only partially surprised to see Tristan stroll into the VIP area less than thirty minutes after we arrive.

Chapter 48

Tristan

May.

“What the hell is he doing here?” Nera demands, pointing angrily at me and turning to look at Phoenix, Rhys, and Rogue seated right next to me. “Which one of you traitors snitched?”

Technically, it was Rhys. He’s the one who gave me the heads up that they were all going to Baroque tonight. But I would have found my way here without him.

Ever since Nera alluded to the fact that she would be moving on soon, I haven’t thought about much else. Nothing else, in fact, except figuring out how to make sure I don’t give her the opportunity to move on.

So, I’ve turned into something of a stalker. I had Tess’ coworker hack her phone so I could track her locations at all times. I’m not even ashamed of it. She should never have goaded me like she did last week. Yes, I want her to come back to me when she’s ready, but I’m not going to stand by and let anyone else take her from me in the meantime.

When the other boys don’t answer, she turns her flinty gaze on me.

“What are you doing here, Tristan?” she hisses.

“The same thing they are,” I reply, pointing a thumb in their direction.

“And what’s that?”

“Enforcing a hands-off policy,” Phoenix clarifies helpfully, his eyes

sharp on the area where Six is dancing.

Nera scoffs.

“Tell him to leave,” she orders him, haughtily.

“I’m afraid I can’t interfere.”

She crosses her arms and glares at Rogue, trying a different tactic. “You were all set to burn him at the stake when you background checked him. What’s changed?”

“He’s been groveling for three months, I’m starting to pity the guy,” Rogue says with a shrug.

“Yes, well you would, wouldn’t you, Mr. I-Barely-Groveled,” she jabs, indignantly. “I don’t know why I bother asking any of you. You’re all as guilty as each other. It’s like asking ex-cons if they think a convicted felon should be paroled.”

Rogue’s eyes narrow on her and his mouth parts.

I shove his chair with my foot before he can say anything, bringing his attention over to me.

“Watch it,” I warn.

“You,” Nera says, turning on me with her hands on her hips. She’s wearing a tight bodycon dress, her miles of long legs on display for me and every other fucker here. “I don’t want to see you.”

“No problem, I’ll stay right here,” I say, easily. She turns on her heels and starts to stalk off. The silky sound of my voice stops her in her tracks. “So long as you don’t let anyone touch you.”

She throws me a sharp look that promises retribution.

“You’ve signed yourself up for quite a show tonight then, Tristan,” she says, walking backwards away from me until she’s swallowed into the crowd.

Her words punch me in the chest. I don’t have time to gauge the retaliatory intent behind them because she reappears moments later, except this time her arms are wrapped around a random guy’s neck and his hands...

His hands are on her fucking waist.

I’m out of my chair and tossing my drink on the floor in the same breath. I shoulder through the crowd, shoving people out of my way like pins being flung aside by a bowling ball.

The music changes and the lights switch, the dancers now jumping to a different beat.

I momentarily lose her in the crowd.

Panic and protectiveness claw at my chest, urging me to get her in my sights once more. Everywhere I turn, I think I see her.

I spin, frantically searching the crowd, almost lightheaded from the need to find her.

Finally, the sea of people moves and parts and she appears before me. Her gaze is pinned on me, a brow arched provokingly as if to ask *what are you going to do?*

Her hands are still on him and that makes me want to fucking die.

My jaw twitches to keep from roaring in fury. I charge through the crowd towards her. When my hands close around her arms, an explosion of relief bursts from my lips. She yelps and wriggles in my arms. She continues to struggle like a fucking banshee as I drag her off the dancefloor.

“Tristan, let me g– what the, stop! No, put me down!” she shrieks when, tired of her hampering my progress, I grab her around the thighs and toss her over my shoulder.

I turn down a hallway of the VIP section until we’ve rounded a corner where the music isn’t so loud, and I set her down, not so gently.

“What the fuck do you think you’re doing?” I demand, voice frayed beyond recognition by anger. My hands slam down on either side of her head as I trap her against the wall.

“What are *you* doing?” she echoes, furiously. “You can’t jus–”

“Do you think this is a game?” I cut her off, rage boiling my blood. “You think I’m going to stand by and watch while someone else touches you?”

“Yes, that’s exactly what I expect you to do! You have no right to interf–”

“I have every right. You’re mine, you belong to m–”

“I’m not yours any longer!”

“Yes, *you fucking are,*” I roar, the words ripping from my throat. “You can be mad at me and we can be separated for as long as it takes for you to forgive me, but you are still *mine*. I’m fucking serious, Nera, nothing changes that.”

She gets on her toes, speaking inches from my face.

“Our breakup changes that.”

I bend, bringing my face even closer to hers. This close she can see the fury in my eyes and the snarl on my lips. I’m so enraged that I rip in oxygen with difficulty, the breaths settling dully in my chest like a mass.

My tone is glacial and colder than she's ever heard it when I make her a promise.

"Touch another man and I will *kill* him, Nera," I vow.

She swallows but tips her chin up defiantly, eyes flashing.

"You had a chance to make sure I never went to anyone else ever again — all you had to do was not break my heart. You didn't take that chance; you threw it all away."

My fists clench and unclench with unspent, manic energy.

"I want to take it now," I growl.

"It's no longer on the tabl—"

I grab her throat and crush my mouth against hers in an angry, jealous, and animalistic kiss, silencing her. Surprise catches her off guard and parts her lips on a gasp. I thrust my tongue greedily into her mouth and slam her back against the wall. Impatient hands grab at her curves, relishing the feel of them between my fingers after so long.

She freezes under the assault, her hands falling limply at her sides. I cup her nape and angle her face up towards me, moaning deeply into her mouth.

That's all it takes for her to give in with a breathy little sigh that almost makes me come on the spot. Her lips turn pliant and she gets on her toes to seek out my mouth, her hands desperately fisting my shirt. Our tongues clash in a fury of lust and resentment. The temperature scorches between us, sparked back to life after months of dormancy.

Disbelief makes me dizzy. This sudden overdose of her may very well stop my heart for good. I hold her so violently against me that I know there'll be traces of my passage on her tomorrow.

She arches into me, rubbing up against my hard cock, her hands pulling viciously at my hair.

A shuddering moan falls from my lips.

It has the unwanted effect of making her first tense, then rip her mouth from mine. When we break apart, I fall forward, crushing her between my chest and the wall. My head rests against my forearm just above her head as we both try to catch our breaths.

I had her. I fucking *had her* and now she's pulled away again.

The pain of having her literally extricate herself from my arms almost makes me double over.

"That was a mistake," she says, hollowly.

My chest tightens painfully.

I try to seek out her eyes, but she keeps her head turned to the side. She won't look at me.

Her hands push gently at my chest, as if asking me to release her.

"You're going to have to shove me off," I say, hoarsely. "I don't have the strength to let you go myself."

She does as asked, pushing at my chest with gentle forcefulness. I stumble backwards against the hallway wall behind me. Meanwhile, she closes her eyes and tilts her head up, resting it against the opposite wall.

Silence stretches as we wait for the sexual chemistry between us to fizzle out. The air is still thick from our kiss, the tension palpable around us.

Relief, which had been so quick to appear when I'd gotten her back in my arms, dies a quick death, replaced in its stead by a gaping wound that seeps poison into my bloodstream.

What if she never forgives me?

"Do you hate me?" I whisper, afraid of the answer. Afraid of the fact that I feel like I already know what the answer is.

Her eyes open and where I expected to find anger, I find pain and sadness instead. There's a fracture in them that reflects the wound in my chest and it devastates me.

"I wish I hated you, Tristan," she says, a single tear falling down her cheek. Her face doesn't move and she doesn't acknowledge it. I wonder if she even realizes she's crying. "Hating you would be such a welcome distraction. Maybe then my anger would burn out and I could move on and forget you. But instead, I love you. And no matter how hard I try to kill that love, it *refuses* to dim in any way. I can't forget you, I can't move on, but I can't forgive you either. I'm stuck in purgatory and yearning for hell. So, what am I supposed to do? Am I just doomed to love someone who lied to me and betrayed me for the rest of my life?"

"You can choose to trust me again," I urge, moving from my side of the hallway to hers. "That's what you can do."

"Last time I chose to let you in, you made me pay for that naivety in a pretty spectacular fashion," she says, laughing humorlessly. "Why would I ever do that again?"

"I made one mistake, Nera. One. A terrible one and I deserve all your anger, resentment, and reprisals because of it, but it does not negate the fact that I am in love with you and I never intentionally set out to hurt you. I lie awake every night, unable to sleep without you by my side. I ask myself how

you're doing, if you're taking care of yourself. If you think about me, if any guys are trying it on with you. There's a fist of dread and rage that hammers my chest every time I think about someone else touching you. You haunt my dreams and reality alike. I feel like I can't *breathe* without you. There is no Tristan that exists without Nera anymore. *That's* what I'm trying to make you understand. This wasn't a fling or a distraction or a game for me. This, *you*, are the most important thing in my life." Slowly, I reach for her. I cup her face with my hand, my thumb finding those cute little marks on her nose and brushing softly over them. Her dark, sultry eyes spear mine unwaveringly. "If you smile, I smile. If you hurt, I hurt. If you die, *I die*. Get it? I will be your shadow for the remainder of your days whether you like it or not."

She closes her eyes and leans into my touch, unknowingly seeking the comfort of my embrace.

"I'm not ready to forgive you yet," she whispers.

I hang on to that last word like a drowning man in the middle of an open ocean who's been flung one tiny buoy.

I stroke her hair gently, secretly inhaling her scent like an addict. Notes of vetiver and vanilla hit my senses and loosen my muscles. She's intoxicating in every way.

"Then make me suffer. I can take it," I whisper back, "as long as I know you'll come back to me one day."

Chapter 49

Nera

June.

“**A**hem,” Rhys says loudly. “Looks like we’re going to have lovely weather today.”

“Yes, quite,” Adélaïde, Sixtine’s mum, answers blushing heavily.

The three of us are standing in the hallway along with Rogue, Bellamy, and Thayer doing our best to ignore the noises coming from the bridal suite.

Minutes earlier, Phoenix burst in and demanded time with his fiancée before she walked down the aisle to him. We all knew exactly what he meant when he asked for ‘time’ but we’d hoped the walls would be thick enough to do away with any awkwardness.

We were wrong.

Passionate moans leak into the hallway once more.

“You really never know with English weather. Even in June it could be pouring rain!” Thayer adds even louder, coming to her boyfriend’s help.

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Rogue says, exasperated. “Let’s just move further away so we don’t have to be subjected to this.”

He grabs Bellamy’s hand and tugs her along with him. The rest of us follow him to the end of the hall where a small round window looks out over the gardens.

Bellamy glances down absentmindedly at the guests and freezes.

“Nera,” she says.

“Yeah?” I ask, distracted. Six needs to be ready in less than thirty minutes and based on the sounds coming from her dressing room, I’m guessing a lot of makeup touchups are going to be needed.

She turns towards me, wide-eyed, and points down at something through the window.

“Tristan’s here.”

My head snaps up. “What?”

I run up to the window at the same time as Thayer does and the three of us cram ourselves together to be able to look through the small pane of glass.

“Of course, he’s here,” Thayer says, a smile stretching across her face. “You’re here, Nera, so where else would he be?”

The three of us stare at him. He stands confidently amongst the crowd of people, a glass in hand. He’s wearing a classic tuxedo and even from here I can tell it’s tailored to within an inch of his life. The cut emphasizes the broadness of his shoulders and the tapered length of his waist.

Heat rises in my cheeks, both in flushed arousal and in embarrassment that he can get me so hot with just one look.

“I... I can’t deal with this right now,” I say, flustered. “I have a best friend to marry off.”

The truth is, I’m self-conscious about seeing him. I’ve been traveling for the last couple of weeks doing competitions in the lead up to the Olympics, so we haven’t seen each other.

The time away has lent some much-needed perspective. Coming home to empty hotel rooms after long days of training made me realize just how much I missed him. I’d found myself looking out of my window out of habit and being crippled by disappointment, as if I expected that he’d somehow be there.

He wasn’t, but he made sure I couldn’t forget about him. Every day, there was a new package waiting for me in my room. I wasn’t sure how he knew where I was, but they never failed to appear, no matter what city or country I was in.

At first, just small trinkets and notes, but then yesterday, I’d found a large box waiting for me. I opened it gingerly, doubtful of its contents, but when I finally worked my way past all the bubble wrap and styrofoam peanuts, it took my breath away.

Inside lay an épée fencing mask, the kind I use in competition.

Traditionally, the mask is black except for the padded protective gear that covers the neck and throat. This one had been customized with white flames climbing from the bottom of the mesh section and up, covering about half of the mask in the design. It looked intimidating as hell just sitting in the box, so I could only imagine what it would look like on.

I didn't wait to find out and immediately pulled it on over my head, looking at myself in the mirror.

I looked fucking cool.

I knew no one would have one like it and I loved that it was going to make me instantly recognizable. The flames felt powerful and gave me the last remaining bits of confidence I needed.

For the first time since our breakup, I'd been the one to initiate contact and I'd texted him a photo.

Me: [sends photo]

Me: I love it, thank you

His response had been immediate.

Gary: You're welcome, baby. You're going to look hot as fuck winning in it.

He has such blind belief in me, it just makes me love him more. After months of dedicating himself to me in every way, it's getting harder and harder to doubt his intentions. As difficult as I'm finding it to trust him again, my defenses are thinning away beneath the incontrovertible truth that he really does love me.

I didn't respond to his text yesterday, unsure what to say, and now here he is.

Crashing my best friend's wedding.

I'm going to have to see him – even more complicated, I'm going to have to figure out what I want from him – and that's why I'm feeling uneasy about it.

“This wedding is going to get delayed if we don't do something,” Thayer says, pulling me from my anxiety spiral.

I check the time on my phone and head down the hall when I see how close we are to showtime. I knock politely at the door, the noises thankfully over now, and lean closer so they can both hear me.

“You’re going to have all the time in the world to get up to whatever it is you’re doing in there after,” I say. “But we’ve got a wedding to go to in twenty minutes and you guys are the bride and groom. Phoenix, I need you to let Six go and let us get her to that aisle.”

The ceremony is beautiful and emotional. Both Phoenix and Sixtine cry and so does a healthy portion of their friends and family, including myself. They look so happy and in love it’s impossible to look away from them.

Phoenix stares at Six the same way he always has and I wonder how it took us all so long to realize he was head over heels in love with her. Maybe because his stare is so intense it could admittedly be confused for obsession or mania, but there’s no debating it now.

As the wedding party heads towards the grassy area where the reception is being held, I sneak up behind Tristan and grab his arm.

I pull him back, stopping him from leaving.

Although I managed to avoid him until now, I felt the heavy possessiveness of his gaze on me the entire time I stood next to Six during the ceremony. The intensity of his stare had almost permanently singed my skin, but I’d resisted looking over at him.

He smirks predatorily down at me when I slam him against the wall of the chapel with a glare.

“If you wanted alone time, all you had to do was ask,” he teases. “I’ve only been begging for it for four months.”

“You are not doing this at my best friend’s wedding,” I hiss. “It’s one thing to show up where I am, but you can’t ruin her day.”

“You don’t have to worry about that,” he says, reaching to cup my cheek.

I lean away from his touch. “Why’s that?”

“Because I’m the one who invited him.”

Startled, I turn around and look at Six. She must have walked back in when she didn’t see me come out.

“You invited him?” I ask, incredulity coloring my words.

“You were the one who was convinced Phoenix was in love with me

from the beginning. I thought I should return the favor,” she says, with a smile. “Tristan loves you, Nera, the very same kind of love everyone just bore witness to in this chapel.” She walks up to me and hugs me tightly, keeping me in her arms. She whispers against my ear so only I can hear, “And you love him too. Only you can decide whether he’s worthy of forgiveness or not, but don’t let your fear of getting hurt again stand in the way of your happiness. I know it’s a gamble to decide to forgive him, but if the promise of total happiness awaits on the other side, then why not bet on it? Take it from someone who took that risk.” She steps back and takes a moment to look around at the beautiful chapel we’re standing in before her eyes find mine once more. “It worked out alright for me in the end, don’t you think?”

She winks at me, tips her chin at Tristan, and walks out before I can find the words to say to her.

I’m deeply touched by her thoughtfulness on her own wedding day, and I want to take her advice. It feels like I’m standing on the precipice of a terrifying ledge and I need to take a leap of faith and trust him or walk away from it forever.

My feet are firmly planted, but I can’t get myself to jump.

A warm hand clasps my waist, demanding my attention. I turn back towards Tristan, still at a loss, and he brushes a loose strand of hair off my face and behind my ear.

“I couldn’t look away from you when you were standing up there. Every breath you took, every smile that pulled at your lips, I was hypnotized by it all,” he whispers, cupping my face. “I’m going to marry you one day, you know that right? It’ll be a beautiful, prison-themed wedding just like we always talked about.”

I can’t stop the laughter that rolls up my throat at the ridiculous thought, nor the nostalgia that hits me reminiscing about that night when everything was more complicated and yet, somehow, much simpler.

“Are you ever going to stop?” I ask.

He doesn’t need to clarify what I’m asking. He knows.

“No.” He smiles. “I’ll crash every event you go to. Every wedding, graduation, birthday party, bridal shower, gender reveal. Hell, every funeral. Every single one of them for as long as it takes for you to forgive me.”

“That’ll keep you busy,” I say, softly.

“I have nothing else worth doing with my life if I don’t have you.”

Chapter 50

Tristan

June.

My eyelid twitches violently as I watch Nera twirl about the dancefloor in the arms of some teenage boy. His hand is on her hip and she's laughing at something he says as he twirls her around the room.

My lip curls in disgust and my fists clench.

She's been dutifully ignoring me ever since she pushed me away in the chapel and announced that I hadn't suffered enough yet for what I'd done. It shouldn't have been hot as fuck seeing her vindictive side, especially since now I have to stand here and take it, but it was.

A woman in a blue cocktail dress sidles up to me, giving me a coy, flirtatious smile. I watch her approach out of the corner of my eye, my gaze still pinned on Nera.

"Hi," the woman purrs, throatily. "I'm Cecily."

"I have a girlfriend," I bark disinterestedly and dismissively, moving to another high top closer to the dancefloor.

The tightness in my jaw morphs from a dull ache to actual pain watching Nera. Something comes dangerously loose in my chest staring at her being twirled in arms that aren't mine.

I told her that she could make me suffer, that I could take it, and I'm starting to get concerned that I accidentally told her another lie. If this is how

she intends to make me pay, I won't last much fucking longer.

"Relax," a bored voice calls from beside me. "If you make a scene at my wedding and upset my wife, I'm going to have to kill you," Phoenix adds drolly. "I really don't want to have to do that, I've come to quite enjoy you and your dramatic little stunts."

"You're one to talk about dramatic stunts," I throw at him. "Aren't we standing on the grounds of the house you bought when you were trying to get Sixtine back?"

He stares at Six with an infatuated and deeply possessive look on his face. "If you fuck up, you do what it takes to get your girl back," he says, blinking and looking back at me. "And then you never fuck up again."

"Believe me, I never will."

He gives me an assessing look. "Four months without her," he says, giving me a pitying look. "I wouldn't have made it that long. After a month, I'd have locked her up somewhere and forced her to forgive me."

"Believe me, I think about doing just that multiple times a day," I say, gritting and adding, "especially when I have to watch this shit and say nothing." I point to where Nera is still dancing.

"Then why haven't you done it?"

"Because she's spent her entire life being bullied and belittled into doing what other people wanted her to do. I won't be another person who imposes themselves over her wishes, no matter how much I want to. I'm fighting against my better instincts here, but she has to decide to come back to me herself."

He tips his chin in her direction. "And what are you going to do about that?"

"Look at her," I say, sighing.

"What am I looking at?" he asks, cocking his head to the side, puzzled.

"You shouldn't be looking in her direction at all," I growl territorially, slanting a glare at him. "But for the next five or so more hours, *I'm* going to be looking at her. I'm going to take advantage of the fact that, for the first time in four months, I'm in the same room as her for an extended period of time and I'm going to look at her. I'm going to stare at her face. I'm going to watch her smile and laugh. I'm going to bask in how fucking beautiful she is. I'm going to resist punching that bloke in the face and kissing the fuck out of her and I'm *just. going. to. stare.*"

She looks like a fucking dream today, too. Her hair is parted down the

middle and styled in a sleek wet look. She's wearing a black, floor length gown with a sweetheart neckline and gold detailing on the corset. She looks happy and healthy and I can feel my heart palpitating just looking at her, the organ overwhelmed by an urgent need for her.

The pit in my stomach is momentarily soothed by looking at her, even in the arms of someone else. It's more than I've really had in months.

"Excuse me," Phoenix calls out, flagging down a passing waiter. "I need you to refill his drink anytime you see it's hovering near empty. I don't want him to ever see the bottom of his glass, understood?" he says, pointing at me. "He's going to need it."

"It's just seltzer and lime," I say, and Phoenix raises a curious brow at me. "I haven't had a drink in months," I explain.

He nods once, understanding.

"Good for you."

"Will do, sir," the waiter replies, nodding and walking away.

Once he's gone, Phoenix claps me on the shoulder.

"Good luck with your staring plan," he says, eyes sliding possessively back to Sixtine. "I'm going to go find and defile my new bride."

I don't move from that table for the next three hours. I watch Nera flit about the room, talking with friends, introducing herself to strangers, being the magnetic force that first drew me to her and has kept me hooked since. More than ever, I wish I could show the world that she's mine.

Our eyes meet more than once, an electrical spark roaring to life between us every time they do. Hope flares in my chest when I don't see the usual hurt and betrayed look in her gaze. She's softened over time and I almost recognize the way she used to look at me.

My phone rings. When I see the number, I step away and go to a quiet part of the venue.

"This is Tristan," I say, answering.

"Hello, Mr. Noble. This is Samantha calling from Meridian Bank. I wanted to call and let you know the good news myself – you've officially been approved! So, in terms of the details, here's what we're looking at..."

Chapter 51

Tristan

June.

I park at The Pen and get out of the car with a loud groan. My body is feeling the effects of not having slept on a mattress in months and sharp pain shoots up my side.

Grabbing the bag of food from the back seat, I head towards Nera's apartment building, wincing as I make my way up the steps. Now that I'm back in the other girls' good graces, I've been tapping them for information on what meals Nera has preferred. On their recommendation, today's bag features some of her favorites; a shakshuka for breakfast, thyme and honey chicken for lunch, and a poké bowl for tonight's dinner.

I had an early meeting with the bank this morning to finalize the paperwork so I slipped out of the wedding after my phone call last night. I wanted to say goodbye to Nera before I left, but when I looked over at her she was laughing with her friends and I hadn't wanted to intrude.

Now, I wish I had. With the Olympics next week, I'm not sure when I'll see her again.

It starts raining just as I ring the doorbell, big, fat drops that hit my cheek and body and have me almost drenched in seconds.

Fantastic.

Between the back pain and the wet clothes, I'm in for a great night.

Legs round the corner at the top of the stairs, my view of the rest of the body cut off by the sloping ceiling of the hallway. Feet appear as they start descending and I pause.

I think every atom in my body does too, hypnotized as I am by those legs coming down the stairs.

Because I recognize that body.

I'd know it anywhere.

And yet, still I wait, unmoving, just in case I somehow got it wrong.

But then black hair appears, and a pretty face, and it really is her. Makeup free and in that same H&M loungewear set she loves.

Heart-stoppingly, world-endingly, beautiful.

Mine.

Nera.

She's at the door before I've recovered from the shock of seeing her. It's the first time she's come down in four months.

I inhale a shuddering breath as the door opens and then there she is. Close enough for me to touch, not because she's angry at me, not because I cornered her, because she *chose* to be.

"Tristan," she says, worry ringing in her voice. "You're completely drenched."

"Oh, fuck," I reply, startled. I'd forgotten about the rain, hadn't felt it soak my shirt through, distracted as I'd been by seeing her.

She steps outside, joining me in the rain. I can't stand watching her in this downpour when she's in sweater and shorts. What if she gets sick?

"We should probably get out of this rain," I say. "Do you want to sit in my car for a bit?"

I find myself holding my breath, waiting for her reply. She may tell me to fuck right off, at which point this night would actually be in the running for worst night of my life.

"Sure."

A strangled sound of triumph falls from my lips. She catches it and raises a brow at me.

"Are you alright?"

"Yeah, I almost yelled 'fuck yes' out loud just then but I managed to swallow it down before I could."

A smile tugs at the corner of her lips. I grab her hand and pull her with me, running for the car. I clasp it tightly, enjoying the snug fit of her hand in

mine.

I open her door, watch her get inside, and close it behind her, running around the front of the car to get to the driver's side. Momentarily forgetting my back pain, I jump into the seat, cursing loudly as a result.

She laughs as I turn the car on and blast some heat on us. It's a relatively cool June night and the rain is unseasonably cold so we need it.

"Be nice to me," I say, massaging my neck and groaning once more. "I've been sleeping in your parking lot for four months; my back is in absolute bits." I tilt my neck to each side, stretching it. "This morning, I bent over to grab a pan and I swear one of my vertebrae shot straight out of my spine like it was a PEZ dispenser."

Nera's brow drops in concern and her hand reaches out to massage the tops of my shoulders. "I'm sorry you're in pain."

My eyes flutter shut the second her hand comes down on me. With one touch she calms something that's been chaotically unchained and wreaking havoc inside me since the day we broke up.

This is what I've wanted, what I've been waiting for, for months.

I open my eyes slowly to find her own wide and pinned on me, clearly surprised by my reaction.

Silence stretches uninterrupted except for the sound of rain coming down loudly and forcefully on the windows. She pulls back her arm slowly, dropping it into her lap.

"Don't be. I deserve it," I say.

Nera looks out of the window for a long, quiet moment before turning her gaze back on me. "What if I told you to stop?"

I shake my head. "I already told you I wouldn't."

"Even though you're in pain?"

"Emotional pain trumps physical pain."

"Meaning?" she asks, eyes soft on my face.

"Meaning," I say, leaning just a little closer and brushing the hair away from her face. "You're sitting in my car with me right now. That result is well worth a little back pain."

Her lips twitch in response. "Smooth talker."

"Only for you."

She looks away and down into her lap.

"Has it?" she asks, playing nervously with the frayed edges of her sweatshirt. "Been only for me, I mean."

There's a tension in her body as she fiddles with the fabric. Her eyes slide away, looking back out of the window. Understanding dawns on me when I realize what I think she's really wondering.

"Is this your way of asking me if I've been with anyone else?"

She flinches, her stare pinned firmly in the distance. Her reflection shows me the hollowness of her eyes, the unhappy slash of her lips.

So that's really what she was asking.

How she can think it's even a possibility is beyond me.

"You know exactly where I've been sleeping every night," I point out.

She shrugs, moving on to pick at her nail now.

"French women are beautiful."

"Are they?" I ask. "I wouldn't know, I don't look at them." When she still doesn't face me, I reach for her hands where they're joined in her lap and envelop them easily in mine. A buzzing sensation is palpable beneath my skin where I touch her, like when two powerful magnets come together. Both of us stare quietly as my thumb rubs soft circles along the back of her hand. Eventually, I whisper, "I'd never cheat on you, I told you that. So no, I haven't been with anyone else."

Finally, she looks up and meets my eyes. Relief explodes across her features, quickly replaced by uncertainty.

It's like she's bracing herself for heartache.

"I...it wouldn't be cheating. We're broken up."

I reach over to grab her chin, my thumb dragging heavily across her bottom lip. My heated eyes follow the way her plump lips move under my touch, fantasizing about the next time I'll have them wrapped around my cock.

I flick my gaze back up to meet hers.

"Not to me we're not," I rasp.

Her tongue peeks out to wet her lips, brushing teasingly over my thumb. She swallows thickly when an answering rumble sounds deep in my chest.

"What brought this on?" I question, roughly.

She shifts in her seat, uneasy. "You didn't freak out when I was dancing with Nolan, you didn't intervene or react at all, which is *not* like you." She pauses, turning her head out of my grasp. "I also overheard this woman talking to her friends about how hot you were and how she was going to get you in her bed, and then I turned around and she was gone and so were you. Without saying goodbye." She pauses. Adds, "You always say goodbye."

Her voice is so guileless, so young, that it pierces right through my chest and leaves a painful ache. She swallows thickly, like she has a mass in her throat. “I—I thought, I really thought...”

“You thought I went home with her.”

It’s not a question but she answers anyway.

“Yes.”

“You were jealous.”

Nera shakes her head, no.

“I was devastated.”

Dark satisfaction blooms in my chest. Fresh arousal springs to life knowing she’s just as possessive of me as I am of her.

I cup the back of her neck in my large palm and force her to look back at me.

“Do you believe me when I say I didn’t touch her? That I didn’t even look at her, that no one else means anything to me except you?” I demand. “Do you trust me?”

Her eyes go between mine, searching for truth, but she’s almost immediately nodding assentingly. “Yes.”

“Good girl,” I purr, enjoying the pink hue that stains her cheeks in response. “You noticed I was gone, huh? Did you miss me?”

“Maybe a little,” she answers, giving me a small smile.

I drop my head back against my headrest, looking down at her through lidded eyes and smirking. Her gaze is heated as it drops first to my lips and then to my open throat.

She swallows with difficulty.

The tension is so thick that cum leaks from my cock. It’s hard and throbbing in my trousers and desperate for attention.

I don’t want her to leave – in fact, it feels very necessary for her to stay – but the longer she stays, the harder it’s getting to restrain myself from fucking her right in the front seat.

“I let you have your fun at the wedding because he isn’t me,” I growl, roughly.

“What do you mean?”

“It hurt like hell to watch and I won’t stand by and do nothing ever again,” I grumble, “But I put up with it because I know I’m the only one you want and you needed to realize that. It doesn’t matter how many of these wankers you smile at or dance with to jab at me, it’s me that you love.”

“I do love you,” she admits, saying it for the first time in months. A powerful shiver rolls through my body in response. “But I don’t even know who you are.”

I frown. “How so?”

“Why don’t you tell me who Tristan Noble is? Who is the man behind the lie?” she asks. “Is he anything like the man I fell in love with?”

“I’m the exact same person, Nera. The only difference is a last name I don’t even want.” I thread my fingers with hers and squeeze her palm. “I really was born on August 8th, it’s a week to the day before we met. That makes me a Leo.”

“To be honest, I’m not sure I’m someone who believes in all that zodiac stuff but then I look at the defining characteristics of Leos and I think they’re pretty fucking spot on.” I continue, “I’m a son and a brother and a boyfriend and, one day, a husband. I’m a chef in training, a hater of oysters who will never be convinced they’re anything other than disgusting, and a habitual over-drinker who’s been sober for four months.”

“I’m an appreciator of beautiful things and, unfortunately, usually very expensive things. I’m reckless and I can be selfish and I have less than zero impulse control. I’m hot-headed and passionate, and I take care of the people I feel the need to protect. In summation, I’m an incredibly average guy because I like beer, sports, and a good night out at the pub, and, really, the only extraordinary thing about me is you. That, somehow, some way, with all the people in the world to choose from, you found me, you picked me, you *love* me. That you’re mine. That’s it. Everything that’s worth knowing about me beyond what I just listed is that I love you. Very, very much.” I bring her hand up to my mouth and place a warm kiss on her skin. “Did I say anything that you didn’t already know about me?”

“I didn’t know you were sober,” she breathes, softly.

I squeeze her hand again and her eyes come up to meet mine. We’re both leaning incrementally closer, like something is pulling us together. I’m only inches from her mouth; I can hear the rasped breaths that fall from her lips.

“You’re good for me, baby.” I hook her finger with mine. “You make me want to be better.”

“Tell me your plan,” she asks, an urgent undertone to her voice now. “The one you wanted to tell me about months ago. I think I’d like to hear it now.”

“Oh, yeah?” I ask, a slow grin pulling at my lips.

“Yeah.”

“You know why I left the reception before it was over?” She shakes her head. “I had an appointment at the bank this morning. They approved my loan application.” Nera’s eyes widen in surprise. “When I finished my program last month, I grabbed dinner with Luca. Well, not “grabbed”, he put me to the test again, the wanker,” I say, chuckling at the memory. “Turns out it was well worth it, because after that when I suggested that we go into business together and open up a restaurant, it didn’t take very much convincing before he agreed. Yeah, I’m opening up my own place,” I say, nodding at the expression on her face.

I look down at my phone, searching for the photos of the renders we approved a couple of weeks ago. Once I’ve found them, I take a breath and look at her. I’ve waited months to tell her about this, ever since I made the decision on the flight to go confront my father. I did the culinary program to help legitimize my loan application, so I could show the bank both that I have actual training and a real commitment to being a chef. The anticipation wraps around my lungs and squeezes, restricting the airflow.

I turn the phone towards her, showing her mockups of the interior and exterior we had commissioned.

“It’s going to be called *Nera*. I thought you’d want to see the design we’re going with.”

She brings a hand up to her mouth, a sheen of water filling her eyes as she reaches for the phone with trembling fingers. Her whole body shakes as she wordlessly swipes through the different pictures, taking in the proposed decor. It’s created entirely from the graphics she drew in those posters she gave me. It’s her name and her soul.

It’s her.

“You’ve been my biggest champion, my constant source of confidence, and my muse from the beginning. I couldn’t have done it without you.”

“Oh, my God, Tristan...” she manages to choke out, full on crying now. “Is this real?”

My thumb gently wipes one of the tears from her cheek.

“Yes. I’m broke, in debt, and currently living in my car. I have nothing to offer you except the promise of a happy life, a determination to succeed, and a guarantee that I’ll always take care of you. The plan is so clear in my mind, baby. First, you’re going to win that gold medal. You are, there’s no

doubt in my mind. Then we're going to find an actual home for that medal, somewhere we can hang it and all your past and future achievements – all *our* achievements, together – framed on a wall in a house where we both live.”

“After that, I'm taking you back to London so you can meet my mum and sister. I think you'll like Tess, she's just as strong and feisty as you are. More importantly, they'll meet you and see why I fell in love with you. They'll love you as much as I do. From there, well,” I say, nudging her chin and wiping more tears from her cheeks. “I'd marry you the very next day if I thought you'd let me. I know you won't so I plan on asking you every single day until you say yes. I see us traveling the world, eating Italian pasta and Thai street food. Jumping off a boat into Halong Bay and climbing the Acatenango volcano.”

“I see us being *happy*. Happy and together for the rest of our lives. It's a simple plan.” I drop my forehead against hers and whisper, “What do you say?”

Nera reaches across the console, cups the back of my neck and pulls my mouth down to meet hers. Our lips crash together in a savage, frenzied kiss. Our hands claw at each other, reaching for clothes, hair, skin, anything and everything.

I pull back an inch to drag in a desperate gulp of air.

“Is that a yes?” I question between frantic, ragged breaths.

“Yes,” she replies feverishly.

“So, I'm forgiven? I need you to say the words, baby. Put me out of my misery, I'm begging you.”

She brings her face down so ours are level and brushes her lips against mine. “I forgive you.”

I slam my mouth back down on hers with a loud aroused moan. I grip her around the waist and lift her out of her seat. She cries out in surprise but doesn't lift her mouth from mine as I settle her on my lap, stuck between my chest and the wheel.

I cup her face and lay frenetic, feverish kisses on her nose. “Hello, my little beauty marks, I've missed you.” I smother her cheeks, the bridge and the tip of her nose in more kisses, whispering fervently, “We're never getting separated again.”

Nera giggles and a lightness blows through my chest like a summer breeze through an open window.

“God,” I rasp. Lust and relief make my voice unrecognizable to my own

ears. "I fucking love you."

"I love you too," she replies, whimpering as my hand slides underneath the hem of her sweater and up her bare back.

"These curves, baby," I grunt, pressing her down onto my hard cock and rubbing myself against her center. "I've dreamed of them every day."

My hand wraps around her front, cupping her breast and tweaking that piercing. A violent shiver rocks through her body, making her arch into my touch.

"Give me that mouth," I order.

Nera tilts her head forward and does as asked, cupping my face and crushing her lips to mine. My other hand snakes under the hem of her shorts and underwear and swipes at her center.

She squeals, sensitive, and I swallow the sound into my mouth. She's soaked like I've been touching and playing with her for hours.

"My wet pussy," I purr. "How have you been managing without me, Nera? Have you been fucking your greedy little fingers?"

"I-I bought a toy."

Irrational jealousy fills me.

"And?" I growl.

"I hated it," she pants as my fingers slide up and down her center.

"Why?"

"I...I..."

"Come on, you can say it."

"I wanted your cock."

A strangled moan erupts from her lips when I shove two fingers inside her. I curl them until they're rubbing against that sensitive spot inside her that drives her wild.

She thrashes in my lap as I start circling that spot flesh.

"Good girl. Now come for me."

"Not...now," she says, fighting the blinding pleasure.

"Yes, now. I've waited long enough, I won't any longer." I press down on her clit with my thumb as I continue thrusting and rubbing inside her. "Come, Nera."

My words are the trigger to her release. She freezes, stunned, her muscles releasing in a dramatic shudder. She yells her pleasure, her walls fluttering tightly around my fingers. Her juices pool wantonly onto my hand.

"I know you told me I can't rip this set of yours, but I really fucking

want to,” I say, catching my breath.

“Do it, I don’t care,” she answers, throatily.

My eyes gleam obsessively. “Really?”

“Yes, do it!” she urges, adorably impatient.

I bunch the fabric in my hand and tear it off in one swift move. Her underwear follows as she rips the sweatshirt off over her head.

“Fuck,” I growl, voice hoarse. My gaze rakes down her naked body, taking in every bare inch of her that I haven’t laid eyes on in months. “Stunning.”

“We’ll have time for all that later,” she mewls, wrapping a hand around the back of my neck and making me look at her. “Show me how much you missed me.”

I fumble for the zipper of my trousers like an inexperienced teenager, spellbound as I am by her. Her hands come down to help me and when her palm wraps around the thick length of my cock, my head falls back against the headrest and my mouth parts on a long groan.

“Easy now,” I pant, aggressive sounding breaths erupting from my lips.

She strokes up and down my cock, squeezing it tightly in her grip. My eyes roll into the back of my head and I stop her with a hand on hers.

“Now’s not the time to play with me, baby. Put me inside you.”

“Yes, chef,” she says with a sly grin, positioning me at her entrance.

I force a thumb into her mouth. Her lips close around it, sucking the digit greedily.

“I’m fucking your mouth next,” I warn. “Now, do as I— oh, fuck.”

I clasp her waist with both hands as she starts pressing down, welcoming my cock back into her warm pussy. Impatience takes over and I lean forward, wrap an arm around her lower back and hold her against me. I thrust all the way inside in one sharp move.

Nera squeals, her mouth parting in shock. I don’t give her any time to adjust and start pumping into her. At first slow, languorous thrusts that draw out the exquisite sensation of being on the precipice between pleasure and pain, then faster, rougher thrusts until I’m pounding into her.

She bounces on my cock, her tits bobbing appetizingly in front of my face. I can’t resist a taste. I lean forward, sucking a hard nipple into my mouth and raking my teeth over the sensitive bud.

“Oh, yes. Oh god, that feels...yes. Yes,” she moans, over and over, head thrown back in agonizing pleasure.

“Don’t come,” I order through gritted teeth. It’s taking everything in me not to do just that.

“Ahh, why...why not?” She demands, one hand coming to clasp my shoulder for purchase.

“Hold it.”

It’s the opposite of what I wanted earlier. Now I want to draw it out, to stretch the exquisite moment until pain is indistinguishable from pleasure, until she feels like she’s going to lose her sanity if she doesn’t just let go.

I rub circles around the hood of her pussy, avoiding touching her clit. She mewls unhappily and arches her hips, looking for the slightest brush of my fingers against that sensitive nub.

“Answer one question and you can come.”

“Yes,” she breathes, nodding emphatically without even knowing what it is. “Anything.”

My thighs clench and my balls draw up when she inadvertently squeezes her pussy. Her already tight hole strangles my cock almost to the point of milking it of my cum.

I grit my teeth and think of wars and famine to keep myself from coming.

“What’s your boyfriend’s name?”

Her mouth comes down on mine in a possessive kiss. When she pulls back, her eyes shine almost dangerously on me.

“Tristan. My boyfriend’s name is Tristan.”

I thrust once more and pinch her clit. My core tightens and I roar my release, spurt after spurt of my cum pulsing inside her and coating her walls.

Her muscles lock, her walls clench.

She comes with my name on her lips and my absolution in her hands before slumping on my shoulder, spent.

Chapter 52

Nera

June.

I'm pacing the locker room, nervous and restless. My heart feels like it's in my throat and I can't get my pulse to settle. I feel jittery and high strung, the last things you want to be heading into the final round of the Olympics.

I've made it this far. The gold medal is within reach, I just need to reach out and take it.

But for some reason in this moment the years of training fail me and I panic. My breaths turn shallow and no matter how hard I try, I can't seem to make myself relax.

I fumble for my phone, buried at the bottom of my kit bag. I need to talk to Tristan. He's in the stands, waiting to watch my bout but I need him.

"Hi," I say when he picks up, the word tumbling gratefully from my lips.

"Hi, baby," he answers. Just the calm, deep sound of his voice is enough to soothe.

"I..." I try.

I can't seem to get the words out. I don't know what I'm hoping he'll say. He always seems to know just what I need though, and this time is no different.

"Do you need me?"

“Yes.”

“I’m right outside your locker room door, can I come in?”

My throat dries as relief brings a wave of emotion. I nod, making only a small sound, and somehow, he knows that means yes. I turn to see the door open and there he is, striding in with his phone still held against his ear and the same happy smile on his face he gets every time he sees me.

“How?” I ask as he folds me into a warm hug. His body dwarfs mine and lends the reassurance and security I’d been yearning for. I can feel my heartrate slowing as I wrap my arms around his back.

When we parted after I advanced to the final round, he’d told me he was headed for the stands. So, I’m surprised to find him here.

He presses his lips against my forehead, my eyes closing at the contact. When he pulls back, he gives me a knowing smile.

“Just in case,” he says with something of a shrug. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing, I...I’m just not sure if I can do it. I’m doubting myself.”

He brushes a loose strand of hair affectionately behind my ear and cups my cheek. “I’m so proud of you, you know that?”

It’s not what I thought he’d say, but my skin heats.

“Because I made it this far?”

“Because you never gave up. It would have been so much easier to throw in the towel and let the terrible experiences you’ve had win. To decide this sport and the dedication it requires have taken more than enough from you and that you were done. That you just didn’t want to do it anymore.” He bends so his face is closer to mine, whispering encouragingly, “But you didn’t do that. You chose to fight. You chose to go through with it and take back the power. That’s why I’m proud of you, because you didn’t choose the easy way out. That’s what makes you a winner, *that’s* why I know you’re going to win.”

My throat constricts. Nobody’s ever told me they were proud of me before and the words are a much-needed balm on my soul. They mean even more to me than I love you.

“Go out there and *win*, Nera. Not because failure isn’t an option, but because you want it. Because you’ve put in all the work to get here. Get that win, baby, and do it for yourself, nobody else. No one’s ever wanted it more than you anyway.” He kisses my forehead once more than looks back into my eyes. “Okay?”

“Okay,” I say, smiling.

“Louder.”

“Okay!”

“Good girl,” he purrs, kissing me passionately. I hang on to his wrists as he brings my face up to meet his.

When he rips himself back, his eyes are dazed with lust and heavy lidded. “Alright, bad idea to start something I can’t finish. Are you feeling better?”

“I am, thank you.”

“I’ll be in the front row, cheering you on at the top of my lungs. If you need support, just look at me, okay?”

“I will. Love you, Tristan.”

“I love you too, baby. Now bring home the metal.”

He smacks my ass, making me giggle, and walks out.

Twenty minutes later, I’m on the piste facing the French national champion and up by one point with fifteen seconds remaining on the clock.

She lunges once, then a second time, and catches me on the glove right on my wrist.

Shit.

I’m holding my breath, hoping it didn’t actually land and register when I hear the buzzer go off. The red dot lights up indicating that she scored a touch.

Fuck.

The timer stops and I throw a look at Tristan. He’s standing in the front row next to my mum. After years of refusing to support my fencing, she showed up when it mattered the most.

He’s rocking from foot to foot, arms crossed and one hand on his chin as he watches the match intently. I draw strength from seeing him, just like he said I could, and turn back towards my opponent.

I won’t let this go into extra time.

Ten seconds left to make a difference.

Ten seconds to win.

I find a burst of energy and move towards her, using my agile footwork to confuse her. I advance and retreat, I lunge angled to the right and then to the left, feigning an attack.

Our épées clash. She lunges for me, but with a flick of my wrist, I wrap around her blade and move it away from me before it can make contact.

That destabilizes her and she takes a step back.

It's my opening.

I lunge again and again, continually advancing on her and pushing her towards her end of the piste. She's dangerously close to stepping out of bounds and she makes a fatal mistake.

She looks down to see how close she is to the line.

It's only a second, but it's enough.

I dive forward into the lowest lunge possible, until my back leg is nearly flat to the ground, and angle my épée beneath hers and up, hitting her square in the chest.

I rip my mask off and scream in victorious joy in the second before the buzzer sounds or the green light flashes, because I know.

I just won.

And then the buzzer confirms it and I get my first official taste of victory. Turns out I don't think of my father or my mother like I thought.

I think of myself.

Of how much I love feeling that explodes in my chest. Confidence and a hint of cockiness that I won and pride that I did it *my way*. By cutting out the cancer and removing the stain it put on the sport for me.

I jump up and down, yelling excitedly, sword still in hand as the crowd erupts. They're a blur, just a mass of people cheering and clapping, except for Tristan. I see him clear as day, his hands cupped around his mouth as he screams for me.

I rip the body cord off me and drop the mask he gave me to the floor along with my épée and then I'm running for the stands.

He's in the front row but it's elevated off the ground with no access from the floor as a security measure. Tears sting my eyes as I run up to him and put my hands out, wishing I could grab and hug him.

"I did it," I say, breathlessly, giddily even. "I won."

Tristan bends over the railing and reaches for me. His hands close around my upper arms and with almost superhuman strength, he pulls me up and into the stands.

When I clear the railing and he sets me back down on my feet, he crushes me against him, whispering frantically into my hair, “I knew you were going to do it, I knew it. I *knew* it.”

I get on my toes and bring my mouth up to meet his.

Later when my flag is raised, when my flowers are handed to me, and when the medal is placed over my neck, Tristan is on the floor taking pictures like a proud boyfriend. He’s by my side like he has been since he decided I was his all those months ago.

His arm comes around my shoulders when I’m finally free of the press and attention.

“My girlfriend’s the best fencer in the world,” he says. “Phase one of the plan is complete. Thought I’d get a head start on the next bit and see if you’re feeling inclined to becoming my wife?”

“Tristan!” I say, smacking his chest playfully.

“Come on, what do you say? You’ll wear orange and I’ll wear stripes.” He leans closer to whisper in my ear, “I’ll bring handcuffs for after our guests have left.”

I flush pink but shake my head at him.

“Fine, I’ll try again tomorrow.”

“You can’t just ask like that,” I say with another giggle. “What if I had said yes? You wouldn’t have been ready.”

He cups my jaw with his hand and angles it up to face him. A dark, heated stare falls to my lips before dragging slowly back up to my eyes.

“What makes you think I’m not ready, hmm?” he asks, stroking my cheek with his thumb. “You know I went to see my mum in February. Well, we went through the family heirlooms when I settled into her new home. There’s a reason I told you I had a plan the day I came back.” He smirks at me with that same mix of playfulness and arrogance. “Believe me, baby, I have everything I need on me at all times. The moment you tell me you’re ready, I’m getting down on one knee and officially locking you to me for the rest of your life.”

“You’re serious?” I ask, my throat suddenly dry. “Show me.”

“Nope,” he answers. “You don’t get to see it until you’re ready to say yes.”

“Well then,” I say. “*Show me.*”

His eyes widen comically before narrowing. “You need to make sure you’re ready, Nera, because there’s no walking out of this once I ask. There’s

no more running away.”

“I’m sure,” I say, nodding, and then he’s pulling something out of his inner jacket pocket and dropping down to one knee.

My breath catches in my throat, my heart beats wildly, and I already have tears in my eyes. I’m already nodding.

“You can’t say yes before I’ve asked, baby,” he says, with a fond smile.

“Then get to it so I can give you my answer.”

He grins, a sheen appearing in his own eyes, and emotion wells more explosively in my throat.

“I think I’ve said it all to you already, Nera, and I plan on telling you every day anyway, so I’ll keep it short and sweet. I am completely, hopelessly, irretrievably in love with you. I want to be there for your every high and your every low, to be the person you turn to for celebrations, to be the shoulder you cry on when you’ve had a bad day, to be the person you laugh with every day until we both leave this earth. I’d be hard pressed to find only one reason I love you – the reality is that I love everything about you. Your passion and dedication, your stubbornness, your sense of humor, your inability to make even a simple grilled cheese, the way you care about others almost more than you care about yourself. I never want to spend another day separated from you. We’ve got time to make up for, baby, and I want to do that with you as my wife. As the mother of my children. Make me the happiest man in the world and marry me?”

I don’t find out what the ring looks like until later. I don’t take the time to look at it when he holds it up between us, instead flinging myself into his open arms.

He laughs loudly as he catches and holds me. I’m sobbing openly now, nodding and pressing wild kisses against his mouth.

“I need you to say the words, baby,” he says, gently.

“Yes! Yes, a thousand times, yes. I’ll marry you.”

We sit like that for a while, with him on his knees and my limbs wrapped around him like tentacles. Kissing, and laughing, and sliding on the ring. Celebrating it more than the gold medal, even.

“Fuck yes,” he breathes. “Getting you pregnant is next on the list,” he adds, eyes gleaming with obsession.

“Not yet,” I whisper, shaking my head slightly. “I’m too young.”

“I don’t know if I can wait,” he purrs, one hand gripping my ass and the other rubbing my stomach possessively. “I want to cum inside you and make

a baby. I want to watch as this belly grows with my child. I want it all.”

I cup his face in my hands and kiss him, delirious as I am with love.
“Okay, baby, but one thing at a time.”

I kiss him to distract him. There won’t be any babies for now, I have other goals I want to achieve first.

Eventually, he pushes my hair back and cups my face, eyes searching mine.

“Are you truly happy?” he asks, echoing the question I asked him almost a year ago in that hotel room.

And unlike then, the answer is so obvious.

So different.

So much easier.

“Yes.”

He places a soft kiss on my lips and pulls back.

“Good, because I am too. Finally.”

The End

Epilogue

Nera

Six Years Later.

“Hey, babe,” I call out to Tristan as I hear him climb up the stairs of our London townhouse to the third floor. “I left something for you on the bed.”

“A surprise?” he answers, from a distance.

“Something you’ve been wanting,” I add, smiling and looking back down at my book as I wait for him to discover it.

“You really are the best wife there is,” he praises, his voice thick with desire. “I think I’m going to have to marry you again.”

After Tristan proposed to me at the Olympics, I managed to convince him to wait a year to get married so we could plan a proper wedding. He’d grudgingly agreed, although he’d tried to change my mind almost every day after that.

We traveled the world for a few months like we’d discussed and we made it to the US, he included a layover in Vegas and a pitstop in front of a twenty-four-hour chapel specifically. It’d been hard to resist the lure of getting married right then and there, especially when Tristan was eagerly pulling my hand towards the entrance, but I had.

I’d made it up to him by letting him chase me again, this time through a natural park, and then fucking me brutally.

We’d gotten married in the south of France with all of our friends and

some of our family there. My mum and I had made significant progress by then so she was in the first row, crying into her handkerchief as she watched me marry the love of my life.

Jude gave me away, whispering jokes the entire walk down the aisle.

“Fucking your teacher and then marrying him. I didn’t know you had it in you, sis,” he said, and I’d had to keep it together so I didn’t burst out laughing.

Tristan had looked at me in a way I’d never seen before. Like I was the most beautiful, precious thing he’d ever seen. When the time came, he’d kissed me for so long that our officiant had to tap him on the shoulder. We broke apart to the sounds of cheering and whooping from our friends.

After we got married, Tristan surprised me by taking my last name. He brought home the paperwork one day and dropped it on my desk. He’d been serious when he said he didn’t want his last name anymore and he’d proved it.

I’d been so surprised and incredibly moved by it.

My friends couldn’t believe it.

“Wow,” Sixtine had said, a hand clasped over her heart. “That’s such an amazing thing for him to do.”

Thayer, meanwhile, had slanted a look over at Rhys.

“Why didn’t you take my last name?”

Rhys had groaned, glaring at Tristan who hid his laughter behind his drink. “Thanks for making the rest of us look like shit, wanker.”

“Let’s call it even,” he’d answered.

We’ve been married for five years. Five amazing, busy years where we haven’t been separated for even a day, as he’d promised.

After my first Olympics, I signed a significant Nike sponsorship that funded our lives for the next few years. Even though we were both still in contact with our wealthy mothers, we’d decided to branch off on our own and be truly independent.

Tristan’s hard work paid off almost immediately. When *Nera* opened, the crowds flocked and so did the critics. The reviews were raving, the press converging on this new fusion restaurant and the love story behind it. He and Luca became the darlings of the culinary scene and by the time the first year rolled around, they were awarded a Michelin star.

In the years since, *Nera* has continued to thrive. Luca is a permanent fixture in our lives and now one of our closest friends. Tristan went on to

open five more restaurants in different countries, one with Luca and four as solo ventures. What started out as one small restaurant quickly turned into a massive international entertainment group that made us enormously wealthy.

He's outsourced the management and chef duties of those places to trusted parties. His only focus is and has always been *Nera*. This year it got its third Michelin star making it part of a very small and exclusive list of restaurants with that honor in London.

Tristan rarely goes to oversee his other restaurants, usually once or twice a year max and never longer than a three day trip.

He doesn't want it to take him away from his wife and kids.

After winning my first Olympics, I continued training with the hopes of medaling again in the next games. I wanted to prove to myself that it wasn't just a fluke, that I deserved it. And when we settled down after our months of traveling, part of me missed the adrenaline and the pain of pushing myself that hard.

Those games were even more special than the first. I didn't think they could be but I woke up the morning of the final with a violent need to throw up. I ran to the bathroom, making it just in time, and emptied my guts in a pretty spectacular fashion.

My bulimia had been under control for years at that point. Not completely cured because the voice still makes an appearance sometimes, but I usually know how to manage it.

So, starting the morning that way was shocking.

I had a pregnancy test on me because we'd recently found out Thayer was expecting so I used it, not thinking anything of it.

Finding out I was pregnant had been a shock at first, but quickly morphed into the exact motivation I needed to make it through the final.

I won a second gold, this time by four points, and announced my retirement the following day.

Tristan had been over the moon at the news. He'd fallen to his knees and buried his face in my stomach, smothering it in kisses. He'd been vocal about wanting kids since our wedding night and I'd held him off for a while. But then one day I'd stopped taking my birth control. It wasn't a conscious decision so I never told him about it.

The shock of the pregnancy was nothing compared to the surprise the first ultrasound reserved for us.

Twins.

When I got home that night, Tristan was waiting with a bouquet of roses, my favorite meal, and a five-carat diamond.

Cato came into the world first, screaming and kicking his way into existence. Kiza followed her brother more quietly, eyes open and curiously looking at the world.

They've been the greatest joy in the entire world. They're a year old now and have progressed from walking to running. They're impossible little minions wreaking havoc in our household and we love them.

"Are you— is this real?" I hear Tristan call excitedly from my spot in our downstairs living room.

I can't help the wide, happy grin that splits my face as I hear him run and stumble down the stairs.

"Nera! Tell me you're not messing with me," he demands, making his way down the second flight of stairs.

He bursts into the room, wide-eyed and looking for me. He's still wearing the dress pants and shirt from his meetings earlier, the sleeves now rolled up to his elbows. My husband only gets more attractive with age. At thirty years old, he's in the prime of his life. He's constantly on the move which keeps him lean and trim. Even just looking at him now, I feel lust kick to life in my stomach and wetness pool in my pussy.

That's what got us here in the first place.

He's brandishing the pregnancy test I left on our bed, his eyes harried and wild.

"This better be real. If you bought this at a prank store, I'm punishing the fuck out of you."

Lately, Tristan's been whispering in my ear at night that he wants another baby. When he fucks me, he keeps his cock inside me long after he's cum so it doesn't leak out of me. When he pulls out and some of it inevitably stays on my thighs and lips, he'll fuck it back inside me with his fingers.

I stand and put a hand on my stomach. His gaze drops to it, immediately softening.

"It's real, baby. I'm pregnant."

He drops the test and crosses the room in two steps, crushing his mouth down on mine. He kisses me roughly, tenderly, affectionately, happily for long minutes before pulling away and dropping his forehead on mine.

"Another baby," he murmurs, happily.

"Due in seven months according to the test."

“I didn’t think I could love you any more than I already do but every day you surprise me.”

I laugh, clasping the back of his neck. Satisfaction buzzes underneath my skin like the purrs of a contented cat.

“I take it that means you’re happy.”

“I’m ecstatic. I hope it’s a girl so I get another mini me of you.” His mouth comes hungrily down on mine. “I want five more after this one.”

“Okay, slow down,” I say on a laugh.

“I want you pregnant all the time so the world knows how much I fuck you. So everyone knows when they look at you that you belong to me.”

“Let’s discuss it after this one is born.”

“I’ll shower you with gifts – clothes, bags, jewelry, anything you want. You name it, you’ll have it,” he says, finger snaking below my dress and to my slit. “Just keep having my babies.” I grind my pussy into his hand when he brushes against my clit.

“Oh, god,” I moan.

He tears my panties off and rips his zipper down and then he’s burying himself inside me. I cry out as my pussy gets flush with his hips, his entire massive length bottoming into my tight heat. He grabs me behind the thighs and hoists me into his arms.

“I wish it was possible for me to put another baby inside you right now. I’d stuff you so full and give the twins a few more siblings in one go.”

He drives manically into my pussy, his thrusts rough and devastating. Every time he bottoms inside me, his pelvis rubs against my clit and drives me wild.

“You’re unhinged,” I breathe into the crook of his neck.

His teeth sink into the soft tissue of my throat, pulling a rough cry from my lips. “Yes, I am. Come on, baby, squeeze that tight pussy around my cock.”

My body bends to the command in his heated words and my muscles flutter around his dick as I shatter around him. I come loudly, gripping him tightly, reveling in the feel of his crazed breaths on my skin as he pounds half a dozen more times inside me before his own release takes him.

When he pulls out, he fingers his cum back inside me as he usually does. There’s no use pointing out the obvious to him, this is all tied to his possessiveness of me. A part of him was changed by the four months we were separated all those years ago. It made him even more territorial than

before. Ensuring every drop of his cum stays inside me is just part of his ritual.

When our clothes are back in order, we stand in the living room of our perfect home, holding each other. For the vast majority of my life, I didn't think happiness, let alone happiness of this intensity, was possible.

The past seven years have been the greatest adventure of my life and I'm thrilled to bring another little baby into our world of love.

The only thing that makes this better is that Sixtine and Thayer are both five months pregnant and Bellamy is due to give birth any day now.

The four of us, pregnant. Together.

The next generation is assured.

About The Author

Khai Hara

Khai Hara is an American author currently based out of New York City. An avid fan of the romance genre, 'Pay For Your Lies' is her second novel and the second novel in the Royal Crown Academy series. In her spare time, she enjoys traveling, hiking, reading and spending time with her boyfriend and their dog Thunder.

To stay up to date on upcoming releases, you can:

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Royal Crown Academy

Long Live The King

“Go ahead, scream for help.” He taunts darkly as his hot breath tickles my ear. “No one here will save you from me.”

When I get a scholarship to finish high school in Switzerland, I don't expect to meet a villain.

Rogue Royal.

He's the kind of gorgeous your mom tells you to stay away from, filthy rich and his family founded the school I just got accepted to.

Did I mention he makes my heart race?

Only because he hates me, of course. The first day we met, I accidentally spilled a milkshake on him and he's made my life hell ever since.

But this is my best chance for a better future for my mom and I-I won't let him break me.

This is a full length standalone semi dark romance novel, with an alphahole, possessive hero and containing scenes that are not suitable for all readers.

Pay For Your Lies

Rhys

The moment I see her, I want her.

And what I want, I always get.

It's the competitive side of me.

Learning that she has a boyfriend already enrages me, but does nothing to

deter me.

I know that eventually she'll submit to me and be mine.

I'm so sure of it that I bet my friends I can crack her in a month.

I just hope I don't come to regret it.

Thayer

From the moment I meet him, he's determined to have me.

He doesn't know that I'm just as competitive as he is and he's met his match.

I'm attending Royal Crown Academy on an athletic scholarship for my senior year; the only things I care about are good performances on the field and lots of fun off of it.

I'm not interested in any of the resident heartbreaker's games but find myself sucked in when the soccer star becomes my personal Coach.

As we spend more time together, I see a different side of him and find myself falling for him a bit more every day.

But can I really trust him?

Pay For Your Lies is book two of the Royal Crown Academy series. It can be read as a standalone novel, but for better understanding of the universe, it's recommended that you start with the first book in the series, Long Live The King. This is a mature, mild slow burn, new adult romance with a jealous/possessive hero and lots of angst. It contains situations that some readers might find offensive.

[I Was Always Yours](#)

We all know how the legend goes.

Girl meets boy.

They fall in love.

They get married.

And they live happily ever after.

The fairytale. The ending that every girl wants, that every girl dreams of.

For a brief moment there, I foolishly, naively, allowed myself to dream that's what our destiny was. That our friendship would evolve into something more and we'd be together forever.

The reality is that our story ended before it even began, with blood at my feet, tears on my cheeks and my broken heart held forever captive in the hands of

someone who'd never wanted it.

I Was Always Yours is book three of the Royal Crown Academy series. It can be read as a standalone novel, but for better understanding of the universe, it's recommended that you start with the first two books in the series, Long Live The King and Pay For Your Lies.

This is a mature, new adult romance with a jealous and possessive hero, lots of angst and even more trigger warnings. It contains situations that some readers might find offensive.

Love In The Dark

I've been banished to Switzerland with a fake name, forced by my father to spend a year teaching spoiled rich kids as punishment for humiliating him.

I'm supposed to stay out of trouble, to avoid scandals, to learn responsibility.

I'm not supposed to meet her.

I fucked up before I even set foot within the hallowed halls of RCA.

And there she is.

In my class.

In the halls.

In my veins.

Every fucking where.

She's going to be my downfall.

Or maybe, my salvation.

Love In The Dark is book four of the Royal Crown Academy series. It can be read as a standalone novel, but for better understanding of the universe, it's recommended that you start with the first three books in the series, Long Live The King, Pay For Your Lies, and I Was Always Yours.

This is a mature, new adult romance with a jealous and possessive hero, lots of angst and even more trigger warnings. It contains situations that some readers might find offensive.

Afterword

Stay tuned for more information about Callum and Adélaïde's story which will kick off the next series, *Fragile Empires*, and for announcements about Thiago and Tess's book.