

SPECTACLE OF SECRETS PRESENTS

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NIGHT



New York Times & USA Today Bestselling Author

PEPPER WINTERS

One
Dirty
Night

by

New York Times Bestseller

Pepper Winters

One Dirty Night

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Published by Pepper Winters

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OTHER WORK BY PEPPER WINTERS

Pepper currently has close to forty books released in nine languages. She's hit best-seller lists (USA Today, New York Times, and Wall Street Journal) almost forty times. She dabbles in multiple genres, ranging from Dark Romance, Coming of Age, Fantasy, and Romantic Suspense.

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DEDICATION

To those who just want to skip to the good stuff...

*Oh, and those who don't shy away from dirty talk, dirty deeds, and incredibly
dirty men...*

LETTER FROM THE AUTHOR

This (extremely) sexy book heralds from Pepper Winters' vault of unpublished stories. One of her very first written and she figures, after a decade of gathering dust, One Dirty Night might as well be read.

Flaws, filth, and all...

BLURB

“If you came here to get mauled, Ella...I’m very willing to bite.”

The night of my birthday looked as boring as the rest of my life. Sitting on my own, trying to avoid my insanely gorgeous but horribly mean flatmate, all while waiting for him to leave so I could have a party for one...if you know what I mean.

But that was before I almost crashed on the way home when a big top rolled into town. Before I locked eyes with the hottest guy I’d ever seen swinging a sledgehammer in the rain. Before I read the flyer promoting the newly erected circus. A circus that wasn’t the usual garish carnival...oh, no...this one was most definitely not for children.

Not unless you counted bondage, fantasies, and one dirty night full of heinously deviant fun.

Only problem was...my flatmate decided to get his freak on too. He saw me as I agreed to spend the night with the owner of said depraved circus...and he made me an offer I couldn’t refuse.

Both.

Together.

I get to be owned by two men, not just one.

I get to live out my wildest fantasies and teach Nicholas Davis a lesson for all those stony scowls and disdainful glances he’s given me.

He can have me for one night.

He can make me crawl, beg, and take me in any way he chooses.

But he has to share.

That is his penance.

And I mean to make him suffer...

Tropes: HIGH, HIGH spice. (We're talking volcano heat). Standalone. Dirty. Kinky. BDSM. HEA. MFM one scene. MF romance after. Longing. Kink. Master/Sub. Punishments. Praise. Toys. Fall Hard. Dirty Men. Dirty Talk. Dirty Deeds. Forced proximity. Enemies to Lovers. Explosive Chemistry. Quiet on the Outside absolutely Depraved on the Inside. And rated F for Filthy, Filthy...

PLAYLIST

Teardrop – Massive attack

I put a spell on you – Annie Lennox

Earned it – The Weeknd

Nothing left to say – Imagine Dragons

Dusk till dawn – Zayn & Sia

Treat you better – Shawn Mendes

Flowers – Miley Cyrus

It's you – Ali Gatie

Love me like you do – Ellie Goulding

Chains – Nick Jonas

Birthday Sex – Jeremih

Beg for it – Chris Brown

Tonight – John Legend

I bet my life – Imagine Dragons

Love me harder – Ariana Grande, The Weeknd

I want to fuck you like an animal – Nine Inch Nails

**[Shamanic Drumming Air Immersion \(Sky Dance Tribe\) \(the music
Hunter turns on in the Big Top\)](#)**

CHAPTER ONE



THE BIG TOP ROLLED INTO TOWN THE NIGHT of my twenty-fourth birthday.

Swaths of billowing material teased childhood memories as I drove home after a long day at work.

My hands gripped the steering wheel as I peered through a rain-splattered windscreen, suffering a pang of sadness that it might be my birthday, but I had no celebrations planned.

Those heading to the circus, even in a storm, would have a much better time tonight than me.

Stupid circus.

I glowered at the purple-and-silver dome.

Whatever show they're putting on in there better not have animals.

Movement dragged my attention to the flapping big top corner. Caught in a breeze, the heavy canvas fought against being secured.

Good lord...

My mouth fell open.

All my faculties vanished. Poof. Just like that.

A half-dressed man whacked a sledgehammer over and over. Rain ran down his bare chest, catching on hard muscles and soaking into his jeans.

What the hell is he doing?

The temperature outside was enough to pucker every body part, and my car's heater couldn't cope with how high I had the thermostat. He must have ice for blood. Either that or he'd worked up a sweat throwing that sledgehammer around.

My mouth watered as he stretched and swung, showing off every rippling ab, every bunch of biceps, every damn delicious part of him.

Surely, that ought to be illegal.

Children went to the circus. He needed to put on a t-shirt, for goodness' sake.

I rolled to a halt at a stoplight, inconveniently putting me in front of the show. Other men and women worked—erecting a fence, a ticket booth, a quaint carousel—but I couldn't tear my eyes off the man currently taming the wind-whipping big top.

Even in the rain, the dark silver and rich purple of the main arena screamed money, opulence, and something...*else*.

Something decadent, something sinful...

Something that sent shivers down my spine.

My heart skipped as I studied each sky-puncturing spire and the black ropes tethering it down from the angry breeze.

The half-naked guy continued to whack his sledgehammer against huge tent pegs, driving them deeper and deeper into the ground, ensuring my blood tingled and an annoying little fire kindled between my legs.

Fuckable.

He was deliciously fuckable, and *oh my God, what am I thinking?*

Just because I'd been through the longest dry spell of my life.

Just because I lived with a roommate who hated me.

Just because I hadn't seen a half-dressed man in years didn't mean I could drool over anyone.

Ella...keep your damn legs together—

A honk wrenched me from my thoughts.

I jumped a mile, guilt coating me like the thick clouds above. Flashing a look at the green light, I glanced at the stranger, drinking him in as if to imprint his beauty for all those long, lonely nights in my future.

Damp skin, wet jeans, black hair plastered to his handsome face. His powerful chest and wiry muscles made me picture him as an acrobat: sculpted, toned, and lithe.

Wonder what he looks like without the jeans—

The honk came again, louder and obnoxious.

I glared at the older woman in my rear-view mirror. She flipped me off, and my mouth dropped open. Jeez, how rude could some people be?

Grinding my teeth, I put my cantankerous Toyota into gear and took off. My tyres squealed a little, wrenching the guy's eyes to mine, snapping us together across the road and rain.

My heart stopped.

He froze as our gazes locked as I rolled past.

For a second, he frowned as if annoyed at something but then he grinned. A grin as decadent as the big top he erected, full of secrets and sin.

The fire between my legs turned into an uncontrollable blaze.

Look at the damn road!

He tracked me, and just before our eyes unlocked, he freaking winked.
Winked!

As if he could hear all my dirty thoughts about him and wouldn't mind obliging me by stripping off rain-logged jeans and showing me exactly what he packed beneath them.

My foot slipped on the gas pedal.

Something primitive shot through my body. Something hungry and filthy and not at all me. I'd never been one to let desire cloud my head, yet here I was, well and truly in a fog.

Giving me a seductive wave, he raised the sledgehammer again and returned to his task.

Ripping my eyes away took inhuman strength; my foot pressed a little too hard on the accelerator. My tyres squealed again, and my cheeks blazed as the man threw his head back and laughed.

Damn man and his stupid muscles.

Didn't he know I favoured petri dishes and microscopes over a human specimen? I hadn't studied all my life to be a microbiologist and not know about the chemical reaction my body was undergoing. It wasn't anything more than feminine instincts wanting to mate with a nice example of male flesh.

Nothing more.

Nothing worth getting flustered about.

Focus, Ella.

You're a scientist. You're above these biological impulses. You—

Something sodden slapped against my windscreen.

“Ah!” I jumped at the sudden lack of visibility. Fighting the urge to swerve, I flicked on my wipers, trying to dislodge the purple paper.

But then I stiffened, pulled over to the side of the road, and slammed on my brakes.

I didn't believe in fate. Never had. Never will. But...it seemed as if the world had given up on simple nudges and slapped me around the face with what I needed. My workaholic nature had slowly been crippling beneath the very real, very urgent need to be free. To indulge in the sexy, starving part of me that wanted to live and touch and do wickedly bad things.

There had to be more to life than working in a lab all day, every day. More to life than sleeping alone, eating alone, and ultimately doing absolutely everything...*alone*.

Gripping my steering wheel, I peered closer, reading the rain-bleeding text.

A scrawling cursive invitation.

An invitation that set my heart winging with a crazy, ridiculous fantasy.

The Spectacle of Secrets invites you to One Dirty Night.

One night where fantasies are indulged, and reality is ignored.

One night where you can be free, be you, be used, abused, worshipped, and adored...

Strictly R18.

Couples encouraged.

Singles implored.

Entry must include a recent medical health certificate and proof of age.

We look forward to you...

coming.

My cheeks ignited into flames at the last line. Whoever was in charge of advertising wasn't shy. Decorating the edges of the invite were suggestive sketches of couples in all sorts of sexual poses—some bound, some begging, some in the throes of ecstasy.

Seemed the *Spectacle of Secrets* wasn't afraid to give explicit information on exactly what went on in that big top.

Wow.

No wonder my skin flared with sinful thoughts when I first saw it. It wasn't a circus for children; there'd be no lion tamers or pretty woman wrapped in silk—actually, there probably *would* be pretty women wrapped in silk—but it wouldn't be the child-friendly variety. More like bondage... with velvet blindfolds, feathers, whips, and—

Ella...don't—

Images exploded in my head.

My mouth watered at the thought of me bound, spread, and at some stranger's mercy. Someone who looked like the shirtless guy; someone who did whatever they wanted to me and left me in a puddle of passion.

They'd mark me. Bite me. Make me scream.

Oh my God.

You're going straight to hell.

Those sorts of fantasies usually only dared haunt me when I had the house to myself and a date with my vibrator. I made a point of keeping that part of myself buried deep down, suffocated under lock and key.

I'd never told another soul who I truly was beneath my prim skirts and pretty blouses. I'd never been tied up during sex. Never been made to crawl or beg. Never indulged in the dark parts of me that—

Well, you definitely won't be starting now by paying for someone to do it. Jesus.

Whatever went on in that circus, I wanted nothing to do with it.

Are you so sure about that?

I strangled my steering wheel.

Very sure.

Absolutely, totally sure.

My car's heater coughed, almost as if it laughed at me.

But it's your birthday...

Gritting my teeth, I flicked my wipers on full speed to get rid of the incriminating flyer. So what? I was another year older. That meant I was another year *wiser*, not stupider.

I was going home to do what I did every night. Eat something bland, watch something boring, and go to bed. Alone.

I sighed in relief as the invitation tore into pieces under my wiper's attack and plopped into the gutter. No way did I want my flatmate to see that. If I was a deviant pretending to be a prude, he was a straight-up, no libido puritan. I'd never met someone so aghast at seeing the smallest flash of flesh before.

The first time he'd seen me dash down our shared corridor from the bathroom in just my towel, he'd glowered at me so hard my skin broke out in hives. He'd left a note on the fridge the following morning telling me it was

inappropriate to be in such stages of undress when we were colleagues and sharing a home as well as a workplace.

I hadn't been able to make eye contact with him for a week.

Which was difficult because we worked at the same lab. Luckily, ever since that day, he'd changed his hours. Our shifts sometimes overlapped, but we never spent longer than an hour or two in each other's company.

Which was *fine* by me.

I just wished we could figure out a roster like that for our weekends. I might not have much of a life, but at least I enjoyed going out to dinner with friends and doing my best not to waste the time I'd been given.

But Nicholas?

He made friends with meningococcal and the flu, losing himself in YouTube videos on the latest cure using ivermectin and fenbendazole. He might be a biochemist by trade, but I think he dreamed of ending the world's suffering with a magic pill he could give away for free.

That purpose drove him hard.

To bring down Big Pharma.

To give health to billions.

His one-track mind made him the worst sort of flatmate because compared to him, I felt like some silly girl playing with a microscope while he was some disciple sent straight from heaven to do godly work.

I had doubts he was even a hot-blooded man.

Compared to the guy who'd just winked at me, I'd have to say a big fat no. Even though Nicholas wasn't bad looking. In fact, he was bookishly handsome with a neatly trimmed beard and an envy-inducing mop of brown

hair bordering on bronze that flopped over his forehead. I found his habit of pushing it out of his eyes colossally annoying—including his toned, stupid muscles from working out in our lounge and running around the park. And don't get me started on the sculptured jaw, visible whenever he was clean shaven—a jawline that some roguishly good-looking ancestor had given him.

Fine, bookishly handsome was more like deliciously handsome, but it didn't make up for his lacking personality. He didn't make jokes, barely looked at me, and had no drive for anything but microbiology.

Living with him was like living with a sedative.

My stomach flip-flopped as I eased back into traffic and drove on autopilot all the way home. Why did the sex-maniac circus have to stop a block away from my house? Why did I have to drive past it? And why, oh why, was I pissed about it?

It meant nothing to me.

People could do whatever the hell they wanted.

It's a free country.

I didn't have to go.

I didn't need a good time in the form of a black-haired man with abs like an old-fashioned washing machine.

Definitely not.

Nope.

What man?

See?

I've already forgotten.

CHAPTER TWO



OKAY, SO I LIED.

That damn man paraded around my head like a flashing billboard. His jeans hung low on his hips. That naughty smile planted firmly on very kissable, very bad, bad lips.

Dinner was dismal: broccoli with scant ranch dressing and a steamed piece of parsley fish. Yes, it was healthy, but crap, it was boring. Netflix was just a bunch of nonsense. And my heart had forgotten how to beat like a normal person, making its personal mission to keep me twitchy and hot, jumping at the barest breeze.

A noise came from Nick's room just before his door opened and closed, and he appeared from the corridor.

My eyes flashed to him against my command; my stomach clenched.

Damn him for being so attractive.

Damn him for looking at me as if I were something he pulled off the bottom of his shoe.

He wore his usual black jeans and white t-shirt, both items far too enticing on his lanky, muscular frame. If that wasn't bad enough, he'd thrown on a casual chequered blazer, rolling up the cuffs to his elbows, showing off forearms that should be outlawed.

His hair looked sexy-messy—styled with a bit of wax to keep it in place. He somehow toed the line between handsome geek and naughty bad boy. Not

that he was a bad boy. I'd never heard him bring anyone home for the night...I would've heard him through the walls.

I'd often waited in the dark, holding my breath to see if I could catch the soft moans of him masturbating and not once. Not a single time in eight months we'd been rooming.

I couldn't even use my trusty rabbit vibrator because he'd definitely hear that telltale buzzing and would probably march into my room, snatch it right out of my greedy little hands, and then give me the worst tongue-lashing of my life.

Tongue lashing...between my legs. Yes, please.

Oh God, will you stop?

My skin prickled as he stalked into the living room, keeping his eyes on the beige carpet.

I would never admit it, but I'd fantasised about that one too many times. About him finding me self-pleasuring. Him stalking into my room to spank me. He'd see how badly I needed to be touched and...well, he'd touch me. He'd sink to his knees, yank my hips off the edge of the bed, and bury his face between my—

“Ella.” He froze when he noticed me sprawled on the couch. “I thought you'd gone to bed?”

What? At freaking nine p.m.?

I wasn't a party hopper, but I wasn't a nana, either. “Nope. Just studying.” I motioned to the heavy text in my lap. He didn't need to know the thought of going to bed turned me on. That reading a book turned me on. That *every damn thing* turned me on.

I'd never been so...itchy before. So desperate to scratch something I didn't dare to scratch.

For the first time, I noticed the shape of Nick's lips. Full, but not too full. His face so prim and proper, but beneath that properness an edge lurked, intimidating me in a purely feminine way.

I'd never noticed before.

Why not?

How had I been living with this guy for eight months and all we'd discussed was microbes and disease?

Sitting up from my slouch, I asked, "You heading to work?"

His eyes flashed to the clock hanging over the fairy-light decorated fireplace. (My doing, not his). "Umm, yes. Heading in early."

My ears pricked. Nick—sweet, bookish, insanely smart Nick—just lied to me. My heart skipped faster. "You do know your shift was pushed back? You made a note of it in the staff room." It was the truth. We'd been banned from the lab from nine till midnight for rigorous cleaning once a month. He knew that. He also knew that we were encouraged not to work late unless we were in the crux of a fragile experiment.

So where the hell was he going?

My heart sprinted as a thought barrelled into me. Not him too! Had he seen a flyer? The titillation big top for adult orgies?

He avoided my eyes as he rucked up his cuffs again, sending the tendons in his forearms popping. Something crinkled in his front pocket. What was that? A condom? It sounded more like paper. Oh shit, was that his health

certificate that the circus requested? Was he really going to a sexfest, or was my mind utterly defective?

“Oh yeah, right. Guess I’ll just go get something to eat then. Perhaps head to a bar and watch the highlights of the baseball game last night.” He cocked his head, looking at me with his usual disdain. “Why? What are you up to?”

I forgot how to swallow. The air in our small house shattered into temptation. If I wasn’t sitting on the couch, my knees would’ve wobbled. And my knees *never* wobbled under the stare of any man.

“Just going to sit here and read.”

No way. Lying again.

I was done.

Done feeling out of control.

Done trying to be *in* control.

“Sounds good,” he muttered.

I smiled sickly sweet. “Yep. Well, I guess...goodnight?”

Nicholas scratched the back of his neck. “Yeah, you too. Eh, enjoy your book.” His eyes darkened, going more green than hazel as they landed on my legs. I’d put on teal yoga leggings, and they clung to every inch.

My stomach tightened; I swore he frowned. Could he smell the pheromones cooking inside me? Could he see how close I was to just saying ‘fuck it, I give in’ and throwing myself into his strong arms?

I’d never wanted to jump a platonic flatmate before. Especially not *this* flatmate, but dammit, there was something about him. There always had been. For eight months, I’d convinced myself I harboured no such feelings for him, but lying to oneself was exhausting.

My attraction to him tonight seemed worse than usual, though.

And I blamed that damn circus.

My imagination raced out of control.

Where is he truly going?

My mind drowned in questions I would never, ever ask. Was he into the same things as me? Was he tempted by the unknown—by the thought of whips and ropes and pain? Did he harbour deviant desires that no one admitted to unless they were in a club with an alias and wearing a mask to hide all their secrets?

“You’re not going to a bar, are you?” I slapped a hand over my mouth the moment the words were free.

Oh.

My.

God.

It wasn’t my business. He could be going to a friend’s house. Or doing exactly what he would typically do and head into the lab despite the orders to stay away.

Jesus, Ella.

His eyebrows flew into his hairline; his jaw clenched with haughty arrogance. “Course I’m going to a bar. Where the hell else would I be going this late?”

My nether regions tingled at the thought of him going to get his freak on with a total random. I bit my lip as an image of *me* being that random filled my head. Problem was, I lived with the man—and if by some miracle he ever touched me, it would make our living situation unbearable afterward.

My eyes dropped to his lips. Was he a good kisser?

What's his secret fantasy?

I sucked in a breath and did my best to get myself under control. “Sorry. Don’t know why I doubted you. You’re Nicholas Davis. Of *course*, you’d never lie.”

“What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“Nothing.” Hoisting the book higher on my lap, I smiled. “Enjoy your night.”

His shoulders tensed. The air crackled between us. He shifted as if he wanted to say something or maybe even grab me and bruise me and—

Ella...enough.

Finally, he nodded stiffly. “Thanks.” His eyes lingered on me, but I kept mine firmly on the scientific text. “You have a good night too.” He headed toward the door, tucking his keys into his pocket from the bowl on the sideboard.

Awkwardness settled over us, which wasn’t anything new. We never fully relaxed around each other. Probably our own damn fault. We never talked, so how could we relax? We were practically strangers.

“I guess I’ll see you soon.” His gruff voice made my hair stand on end.

Before I could over analyse what he meant, he disappeared through the door and slammed it closed.

I sat there, heart bucking. What did he mean by that? ‘See me tomorrow’ soon or ‘see him at the big top’ soon?

Good lord, you need help.

There was no way in hell Nick Davis was going to a circus full of sex. No way. Hell would have to freeze over first. He'd actually have to get an erection, and I seriously doubted he even had a cock in his trousers, even if I had spied a sizeable bulge before he stalked out of the door.

Dammit!

Closing my book, I rubbed my face.

This was ridiculous.

Turning twenty-four had broken something inside me.

Maybe I *should* go to bed early. Would that cure my affliction? I could even use my vibrator while Nick wasn't in the house.

I could get rid of this hot and bothered nonsense and go to bed like a good little girl.

Leaping to my feet, I hugged my book.

Good plan.

Excellent plan.

So why the hell was that half-naked carnival guy parading around in my thoughts again? The sledgehammer flung over his shoulder and that naughty little wink drawing me in like a stupid prey to a dangerous predator.

Just the knowledge that the big top was only a ten-minute walk away made my blood burn with need. It wasn't even about sex at this point. It wasn't even the fact that I hated myself for getting so boring that I hadn't celebrated my birthday.

It was about freedom.

Being free, if only for one night.

Living an ultimate fantasy with no one to judge or condemn me.

Just one dirty night where I could be someone other than a lab rat with no life.

The heavy book thudded against the floor as I gave up.

Running down the corridor, I burst into my room, my mind full of images of me strolling into the big top in my white lab coat with high kitten heels and nothing else.

For one night, I would pretend.

For one night, I would indulge in things I never let myself consider. I would explore the parts of me that grew hot and bothered under my sheets at night. I would indulge in the curiosity of what it would be like to kiss another girl. To be dominated by a man...possibly two. To have my every power stripped so I was nothing more than a vessel to take whatever my lover wanted to give me.

What was so wrong with that?

What was so bad about a night of sensory overload; a physical, visceral, sexual overload.

I was old enough to choose.

Old enough to embrace my secret perversions.

And boy, did I want a ticket to that.

My hands shook as my heart thundered against my ribs. My white dresser wobbled as I wrenched open the top drawer where skimpy lingerie that I'd bought myself in a moment of self-pity waited. I used lingerie to make myself feel powerful. And this set...it promised magic.

Soft pewter silk embossed with black lightning bolts graced the lacy bra and tiny see-through thong. They weren't exactly underwear for support or a

hard day at the office. They were purely for driving a man wild or granting feminine strength beneath a good girl's clothes. A bit like Superman in his flying suit—I was Superwoman in my G-string.

Tossing them onto my cream bedspread, I darted down the corridor to the bathroom. I didn't bother closing the door. I stripped, climbed into the shower, and had the quickest wash and shave of my life.

Nerves scattered down my spine as I wrapped a towel around myself and padded back to my room. Even though Nick wasn't here, his harsh telling-off still made my nape prickle at the thought of him finding me half-dressed again.

Rebellion filled me and my chin tilted up.

I refused to let him make me doubt my own self-worth anymore.

I had a good body. I worked hard for it every day that I ran. I wouldn't hide away just because he couldn't stand the sight of a little skin.

Dropping my towel, I paraded naked into my bedroom and headed to my very lacking wardrobe. I didn't really have anything sexy to wear. Working long hours meant I favoured leggings and jumpers. But I did have a little black dress in the back.

Slipping into my sexy underwear, I shivered as I stepped into the dress and contorted myself to secure the zipper. Every twist sent firebolts of awareness through my nipples, the satin of the bra amplifying every sense.

Dammit, I hadn't even left my house yet and I was more turned on than ever.

What if I read the flyer wrong?

What if it was a sick, practical joke for horny, desperate people?

What if I got there, and it was nothing more than a ruse?

Worry prickled; I shot a look at my bedside drawer. Maybe I should stay?
An orgasm was an orgasm—regardless if a vibrator or a man donated it.

A vibrator can't hurt me.

All my horny confidence bled down my legs and puddled onto the floor.
God, what made me think I could do this?

Stupid. So stupid.

Cursing all the tight tingles inside me, I reached for the zipper again. I'd slip into my cotton pyjamas and—

My reflection snagged my gaze as I twisted in my dress, struggling to undo it. I stuck my tongue out at myself, hating that my blue eyes seemed extra bright, my skin flushed a dewy pink, my chestnut waves were extra bouncy thanks to the steam of my quick shower.

Slowly, I dropped my hands and padded toward the dressing table.

I ran my fingers up my belly before cupping my breasts.

What if, years from now—when I was older and married with a kid or two—I never felt this wild again? What if this panicky desire to be free was every primal instinct driving me toward recklessness for a reason?

To sample, to try, to learn, once and for all, what made me happy before I settled for a life of mediocrity.

Dropping my hands, I caught my eyes and nodded.

I'd lived my life the way I was supposed to. I'd focused on study. I saved what I earned. I only dated nice boys. And I was so...freaking...*bored*.

Fuck it.

Without my permission, my hands wrenched open the drawer full of make-up, and before I could second guess myself again, I swiped smoky shadow on my eyelids, mascara on my long lashes, and peach gloss on my lips. I even applied a spritz of expensive perfume that my lab partner, Kate, had bought me and I'd never bothered to use.

What was the point?

Petri dishes didn't care if I smelled good.

Ebola didn't care if my legs were shaved or if I got laid the night before.

But I care.

Tonight, I wouldn't be that Ella.

I'm going to be free.

Dashing to my wardrobe, I shoved my feet in my black patent heels, grabbed a cute beaded bag with a rose on the front that I'd bought and promptly regretted, then sashayed through the house to my desk in the front sunroom.

Lucky for me, my work required a monthly checkup thanks to all our handling of contagious diseases. But what about the people who didn't have such risky jobs? How did they enter the circus with its rule of medical resumes?

Nick has one.

He would have the same letterhead on his, listing his bloodwork and every other biological secret.

He didn't go; you know this.

He was most likely sulking in a bar, waiting until midnight so he could come home and pretend he'd had a wild night out.

Well, good.

I didn't want him there.

I wanted nothing from this boring life to interfere with my newfound freedom.

Tonight, I might end up being flung around by an acrobat or tied up by a rope magician or whipped into an orgasm by a sadistic lion tamer.

Tonight, I could be anyone and do anything I wanted.

The tingles were back.

The shaky need and burning want hijacked my normal decorum, and I bolted from my house.

I didn't bother taking my car.

The rain had stopped, the pavements dry, the clouds parted for a river of brilliant stars.

I stood on my street, smiled at the moon, and ran in high heels as fast as I could, straight into the arms of sin.

CHAPTER THREE



THE BIG TOP SET THE NIGHT SKY ON FIRE.

Purple and silver spotlights swung in lazy arcs, and the pony carousel that looked so quaint and innocent played a melody reminding me of childhood days and summertime.

The silver fences ringing the circus glittered with warning, screaming the rules that to enter was to make a choice. To enter was to leave all inhibitions and preconceptions behind.

I still had no idea if what I thought went on in there was the truth.

But standing on the curb watching wasn't getting me any closer to learning.

Only problem was, my heart flopped around as if it might faint at any moment. My blood buzzed, and my skin was coated in the finest mist of nervous sweat. I hadn't bothered bringing a coat, and my arms pricked with goosebumps even while my insides burned.

A car drove past.

Two parents and two children, probably returning from a normal family dinner with normal acceptable activities. I watched their taillights turn the corner, offering me no encouragement or judgment.

My knees locked.

My breath came shallow.

Two lanes of bare road were the only thing barring me from doing the raunchiest thing in my life.

Perhaps I read the brochure wrong? Surely a deviant circus where singles were implored and couples encouraged didn't mean sex?

It couldn't exist, could it?

Wouldn't something like that be banned by all the uptight neighbours ringing the huge park where the circus had set up?

Maybe that's why it's a circus?

So it could seduce the residents for one night, corrupt souls, wring out pleasure from those lacking such joy, and then pack up and leave...never to be seen again.

Why did they want my medical report?

I flinched as images unfurled once again in my overactive imagination.

Unprotected sex, that's why.

If I did this, I'd be agreeing to have unprotected sex with strangers.

I ought to be repulsed.

I ought to march back home and bury myself under a blanket.

So why, oh why, did a trickle of moisture soak into my underwear and the click of my heels echo condemingly as I stepped off the curb?

My throat squeezed as a tall woman clad in a red sparkly leotard waved at me. I stepped into the road as she blew me a kiss, cocking her hip suggestively. "That's it. Don't be shy, gorgeous."

My cheeks threatened to spontaneously combust.

I stepped dazedly toward her and into oncoming traffic.

An angry horn had me prancing back to the safety of the footpath.

Jesus, Ella.

You're here to live, not die an untimely death.

The woman giggled as the hatchback tore past me, whipping my little black dress around my knees. I winced in her direction, shyness cloaking me, but then full embarrassment settled as the richest, deepest, most annoying masculine laughter rippled through the dark.

I froze.

Him.

The man who'd started my insane obsession with this place.

He morphed from the shadows with a lazy stroll, his teeth white, eyes dark, his hand possessive as he placed it on the woman's bare shoulder and whispered something to her.

His lips might speak to her, but his eyes never left mine.

Burning, ensnaring, eating me alive.

I gulped as she laughed.

With a chuckle, he checked for traffic (unlike me), and jogged across the road, coming to a stop within touching distance. His gaze looked me up and down, drinking me in as if he'd ordered me from some catalogue and come to claim what was his.

While he inspected me, I examined him, drinking in his open-necked black shirt and low-slung slacks with dusty boots. No circus attire, except for the small slash of black glitter in the shape of a lightning bolt on his cheek.

Oh my God, he matches my underwear.

“You. I remember you from the almost-accident a few hours ago.” His voice resonated deep in my stomach, rich and seducing as velvet. I struggled to stay teetering on my crazy high heels. They pinched my toes, helping ground me in reality and not float away in a fog of lust.

I tried to speak—to sound sexy and confident—but it came out like a squeak. “Hi.”

He chuckled and ran his tongue over his bottom lip. “Are you here for sex or to be entertained?”

My core clenched at the way he rolled ‘sex’ in his mouth. “You mean there are *two* options?”

Maybe I wouldn’t have to go through with this? Severe disappointment crashed over me. Here I was hoping I might kiss this man—a complete stranger—because I’d be forced to by circumstance.

I’d come here on my own volition, but I still needed to be pushed.

And if there wasn’t anyone to push me...

I sighed heavily, embarrassment settling once again.

He smiled, shaking his head. Shaggy black hair danced over his forehead, seeming at odds with his stern nose, jaw, and brows. His face was as chiselled as his stomach with no room for softness or any illusion that he didn’t live his life by strict expectations and most likely got everything he set his mind to.

“Yes and no.” He smirked, his eyes lingering on my lips. “There’s sex...plenty and plenty of sex. Wholesome sex, naughty sex, completely wicked and shameless sex...” He stepped closer, bringing the heat of hell with him. “But...if you’re not quite ready for that and are more of a spectator than a participant, well, you can watch.”

“Watch?” I breathed.

He stepped into me again, crushing me against the pavement, trapping me with his violently purple eyes. “You can watch any of the couples currently enjoying themselves. Everyone who enters these grounds gives permission for their fantasies to be shared...with others who want to play or those who just want to watch and live vicariously through them.” His hand came up; his fingers dusted over my cheekbone. “The choice is yours. Watch or be part of the entertainment. Whatever you want. However you want it. With whoever strikes your fancy.” His eyes glittered with sordid amethysts.

Contacts.

He had to be wearing contacts to match the big top colours. No way did anyone have eyes so naturally *unnatural*.

His voice lowered to the lewdest whisper. “I saw you watching me earlier today. I felt your eyes on me as I worked.” Closing the final step between us, he brushed his mouth against my ear. “Did you like what you saw? Did you imagine me naked? Did you think about my cock, little witch, while you almost drove off the road?” His teeth latched onto my ear, making every cell, every breath freeze. “Did you go home and pleasure yourself, thinking about what I would do to you? Or did you save yourself for me?”

I shivered, doing my best to catch my breath. I locked onto the only part of that sentence that didn't send me into a tailspin of erotic desperation.

“Witch?”

He grinned. “It suits you.” Lowering his head, bringing our eyes more in line from his taller height, he whispered, “And it's the truth. You have to be a witch. You intrigued me this afternoon, and now that you're here, I find myself...enjoyably aroused.” Taking my hand, he tugged me forward. “Want

to feel *how* aroused?” Looking around for any dog walkers or elderly couples out for a nighttime stroll, he oh so casually pressed my hand against the very hard, very big stick in his trousers.

I gasped and tried to pull away.

He bit his bottom lip, holding me against him for a moment before opening his fingers and letting me go. “You must be a witch to drag that sort of response out of me. This is my job. I meet gorgeous women all the time. I dally with all kinds of partners and like all kinds of kink, but you...you seem to have a talent at drawing out a side of me that I haven’t felt in a while.”

I tripped back a step, every part of me smouldering. “W-What side?”

Crowding me, he murmured, “The side that craves to protect you because you look all jittery and spooked, like a baby deer about to bolt. But there’s another part of me, the stronger, wolfish part that very much wants to chase after you and devour every single delicious, wet piece.”

I had a heart attack.

Right there.

I’m dead.

Steam feathered off my skin from the way he made my insides *burn*. “You’re...um, you’re very forward.”

“And you like it.” He fisted himself through his jeans. “That’s why you’re a witch. You give off these helpless vibes, these ‘*Oh shit, I don’t know what I’m doing here because I’m far too much of a good girl for this filth*’ vibes, all while the hidden parts of you are begging, fucking *begging*, to be thrown to the ground and fucked like the very dirty, very naughty girl you truly are.”

My mouth hung open as my brand-new knickers became drenched with need.

I couldn't speak.

He'd undone me. Unthreaded every part of life until I no longer knew who I was.

"Am I wrong?" he whispered. "Tell me I'm wrong, and I'll get on my knees in apology." He winked. "Unless you're into that? Perhaps I've read you incorrectly, and you're a secret Dominatrix instead of a submissive just dying to be controlled."

"I-I—"

He backed up, crossing his arms. "Let's just get a few things straight before I completely lose my mind, alright? You came here on your own accord, correct? No one forced you to come here. It isn't a dare gone bad or something you're regretting already? I know you read the flyer. I saw you in your car, so I know you're aware of what this place is." Waving his hand at the big top behind him, he smiled like a hungry shark. "You know what goes on in there, and you also know the chances of you getting fucked seven ways to Sunday is extremely high if you step inside."

I shuddered.

A full-body shiver that felt like a thousand tiny orgasms all at once. Licking my lips, doing my best to school my out-of-control heart, I said, "And if I stepped inside...would you...would you be the one doing the fucking?"

He laughed out loud, thick and dark, rough and gravelly. "Usually, I *oversee* the fucking. I'm on the clock, after all. I don't participate that much

these days. But..." Stepping back into me, he cupped my face with slightly scratchy palms.

Palms weathered from wielding sledgehammers in the rain.

Another flush of wetness.

Another lash of heat.

"But?" I breathed.

"I could be swayed to make an exception...for you."

I trembled as a slideshow of possibilities filled me. Images of sleeping with this stranger. Letting him inside me. Letting him dominate me. Letting others watch him do those dirty things.

But what if someone I knew was in the crowd? What if I went to work on Monday and my boss had intimate knowledge of my come face or how I sounded when someone spanked me?

Oh God.

The horror.

Fear and propriety doused me in ice water. My hands flew up to his wrists, my fingers curling tight around him. "I, eh...I think I might've made a mistake."

"Mistake?" He reared back, but his hands didn't stop cupping me. "How so? I can practically smell your lust from here."

"What if...what if people see? People I know?"

He smirked. "If they're watching you, they're here for the same reasons. We make everyone sign exclusive NDAs. We might be a circus, but we are a legitimate business with legalities and disclaimers. What goes on here, stays here."

“Oh.”

Good but not foolproof.

“We have a licence to do what we do and prefer to move around rather than stay in one city.”

“Why?”

“So we can break the chains of lonely housewives or add spice to stale marriages in every town we go.” Brushing his nose over mine, he murmured, “Are you a lonely housewife, little witch?”

Nicholas shot into my head.

I shoved him out of it.

“Nope. Just me.”

“And have you told anyone what you truly need in bed?”

I blushed. “Never.”

“Would you tell me?”

“I-I don’t know.”

“Even if I promised to make your dreams a reality?”

I squirmed on the spot, hyperaware of his thumbs stroking, always stroking, softly but also with a savage edge of possession. “I’ve never even been honest with myself, let alone a total stranger.”

He sucked in a breath, nuzzling into my neck. “A stranger is the best person to confess to.”

My head tipped to the side, giving him unfettered access. My nipples pebbled into diamonds beneath my dress. My heart did its best to crawl out of

my chest and kneel at his feet, sacrificing my power, my dignity, my *everything* to this man for the darkest promise of one night to remember.

One night to break my chains.

One night to find the real me.

“Any other reservations?” He ran his thumbs over my cheeks, right beneath my heavily mascaraed eyes. “Speak them now because the moment I have you inside that big top, you won’t get a second chance.”

He let me go. Sudden and swift.

I swayed a little, blinking away the lust-wool he’d conjured.

“Answer when my hands aren’t on you.” He smirked. “It will make it easier. And it’ll also give my cock time to remember that it’s not supposed to get this worked up for customers.”

“Customers?”

His smirk turned into a full crocodile grin. “Come now, you didn’t think I was free, did you?”

Shit.

I blinked.

I tripped backward. Why did that sound so seedy, but at the same time, so scandalous? I’d come to a sex circus, for goodness’ sake. I’d come to be pushed and used. Of *course* something like that didn’t come without strings.

“So...you’re a...you’re a whore?”

He snickered under his breath, followed by a tummy-clenching groan. “Fuck, how can your eyes scream at me to bind you up and do whatever I want to you, but your voice is strangled by shyness?” He raked a hand over his face. “And no, I’m not a whore. This is mine. *Spectacle of Secrets* is my

business. I make plenty of coin from other patrons such as yourself. I don't do this for the money, and I don't just fuck anyone, but you...if you want me to be your whore, I'll be your whore. If you want me to be your sadist, I'll be your sadist. If you want me on my knees licking your pussy, then I'll charge you a fortune. But...if you want me behind you, fisting your hair as I ride you so damn hard, then...I'll do that for fucking free."

"But you just said—"

"I said *I'm* not free. I want something in return. And I have a feeling the enjoyment I'll get from breaking you out of that prudish little shell you're wrapped up in will be a good enough reward."

"So...you—" I rubbed my temples, trying to get my brain in order instead of lust completely corrupting me. "You're saying you'll—"

"Fuck you for free?" He stalked into me again, planting his hands on my hips and dragging me right against his hardness. "Yes, I am saying that. But only if you do one thing for me. One teeny, tiny thing...right here, right now."

My eyes flew around the darkened street, grateful we weren't directly beneath a streetlight. "What?"

"Tell me why you're so timid. Tell me how a dirty little creature like you has managed to convince herself that she's a good girl and not a slut who wants to be used until she screams."

Every rule of society urged me to slap him and run away.

He shouldn't talk to me like that.

He didn't know me.

He couldn't possibly know how dark my desires went beneath my cardigans and lab coats, but...I couldn't work up the effort to be offended.

I couldn't pretend I wasn't the most turned on I'd ever been. Couldn't deny that I could wring out my knickers from the flood he'd teased out of me.

"I..." I searched for answers but could only shrug. "I don't know."

"How old are you?"

I blinked into his uncanny purple eyes. "Twenty-four." I smiled self-consciously. "It's actually my birthday tonight."

His entire face switched from coy to outright salacious. "Your birthday? Seriously?"

"Yep."

"And you're not out celebrating with your friends?"

"Nope."

"No cake? No presents? No boyfriend to give you a lacklustre orgasm in the dark?"

"Unfortunately not."

Grabbing my chin, he held me tight. "Tell me. If you could have anything you wanted, no matter how sexual or perverted, what would it be?"

My throat closed up.

Every instinct to hide—like I'd always done—threatened to crumple me into a meek little ball and crawl home.

But...I didn't want to be that girl anymore.

Not tonight.

Not ever.

Sucking in a breath, I used all my strength, all my courage, and stood tall in his hold. "I want to know what it feels like to be at the mercy of someone."

His gaze locked on my mouth. “Go on.”

“I...”

“Don’t be shy. You can’t shock me.” He pressed a kiss to my cheek.
“You’ll only turn me on even more.”

“I want...I want to belong to someone. And not just in a biblical marriage sense. I want every damn part of me to belong to them. To exist *because* of them. I don’t want to be able to breathe unless he gives me permission. I want him to control my laughter, my tears, my screams. I want someone who knows my body better than me. Someone to use me in ways that I’ve only read about. I want to come on someone else’s hand and not my own. I want to be hurt. I want to be worshipped. I want to be so sore the next day, so bruised and marked and used, that I know, with every part of me, that I was his meal, and I only exist for him to take another bite.”

Silence blanketed us.

I couldn’t tear my eyes from his as his breath came in short, heavy exhales. His pupils widened behind the purple contacts until all the colour leached out of them, turning inky with desire.

He didn’t speak. His scent of spice, sin, and sex assaulted me.

I could get off just on his smell.

Time stretched, scratching into my skin, injecting my heart with adrenaline.

But then, he finally growled, “You want to be eaten, little witch?”

Every part of me went still.

Last chance.

Last opportunity to run.

But I just nodded.

Once.

“And you want me to be the one to devour you?”

My heart lodged in my throat, but I nodded again.

“Prove it,” he snarled.

My teeth rattled I shook so hard. “H-How?”

“Give me a taste. Show me what I’ll be dining on.”

I tipped my chin up. “What did you want to taste?”

His eyes dropped to my mouth in a blaze of lavender. “This.”

Snatching me to him, I slammed against his hard body as his mouth crashed over mine.

No hesitation. No request. He stabbed his tongue through my lips and stole my breath right out of my lungs.

He sucked me dry.

He bruised me with every slash and hunt of his tongue.

And something snapped inside me.

A tether.

A string.

The cord between right and wrong.

Without it, I sank into darkness. I gave myself over to the devil. I opened my mouth and let him plunder.

I surrendered.

Every damn part of me.

Every shred of control, I put it firmly into his hands...if only for one night.

And he felt it.

He recognised my submission.

He fed on it.

He groaned and wrapped his arms viciously tight around me, accepting the gift I gave him and giving me one in return.

His violence made me soaked. His plunging tongue made me choke. His nose nudged mine as he tilted his head to consume me deeper. His teeth clacked against mine as I welcomed him to take. To take everything.

His heart thundered against my own storming one as his hand came up and grabbed my jaw, his fingers digging into my cheeks, forcing me to kiss him wilder, harder, filthier.

His hips thrust against mine, punishing me with his considerable hardness.

Every good girl piece incinerated. All that was left was a woman who wanted, no *needed*, craved, and begged to be fucked.

It made me wild.

He turned feral in response.

A feral kind of creature, swallowing down every morsel I gave him.

The kiss was demonic.

My legs turned to water.

He drove his thigh against my pussy, connecting with my throbbing clit.

I cried out, gasping for breath.

He didn't let me go, making me ride his thigh, snarling into my mouth as he felt my wetness soak into his jeans.

"Fuck," he growled.

Fuck yes, indeed.

What the hell is happening to me?

"Christ, you're a good little girl," he grunted, grinding himself against my hip all while his thigh did unspeakable things to me. "You told me the truth. You want this." He hissed as he thrust harder. "You want it so damn badly."

I squirmed on his leg.

Fireworks shot down my spine.

The first waves of pleasure spindled in my core, threatening to spill and shatter.

God...I could come.

My eyes flew open at the thought.

The girl who'd never had a release without battery-operated help was seconds away from coming on a street with a stranger.

A part of me tried to wrangle back control.

To stop this insanity.

To gather up the shreds of my decorum.

But he felt that too.

He bit my bottom lip, sinking his teeth into my delicate flesh. "You're not going anywhere. Not now. Not until I've eaten every part of you."

I froze.

My heart galloped.

Would he bite?

Would he draw blood?

How far will he go?

I winced as his canines answered my runaway questions. The quick bloom of hot blood filled my mouth, spilling into his.

He turned into an animal.

Marching me backward, he slammed me against some unfortunate person's fence. The palings dug into my back, the unsanded wood snagging on my dress.

I should be afraid of his intensity.

I should run from his violence.

But all my body wanted was to beg for more and more and *more*.

"Fuck, who are you?" he snarled before he attacked me again, drowning me, consuming my every thought as he drove a hand between my legs. I moaned as his tongue gagged me, drinking me as well as tasting me, giving me all the bruises I'd asked for.

My legs gave out as his hand cupped me with harsh ownership.

The orgasm that lived in my teeth, my eyes, my bones, my blood, all arrowed to his touch, pounding, throbbing, waiting for that final push to break.

I held my breath as his fingers shot beneath my dress and teased my underwear, shoving aside the scrap of silk to—

"Eh, Hunter. You might want to stop before the police are called."

The world came crashing back as he ripped his mouth from mine, breathing hard, eyes glazed, lips swollen.

I blinked, utterly lost and completely boneless.

“Giselle, what the hell?” He pushed away from me, ripping his fingers from beneath my dress and wiping his mouth with his knuckles. His hand trembled just like my entire body. Shooting me a look, he shook his head as if the same spell that’d ensnared me had done the same to him.

Oh my God.

We almost had sex against a fence.

In my local neighbourhood.

What the hell was I *thinking*?

“I figured I’d better break up this little show before you were arrested.” Giselle, the woman wearing a bright red leotard, smirked. Her cheek held a matching glittery lightning bolt like Hunter’s did. Her dark hair scraped back into a high, sleek ponytail.

“Jesus Christ.” He raked both hands through his hair, glowering at my arousal still glistening on his fingers. “What the hell was that?”

Giselle snickered. “It looked like you two touched and then exploded. I must admit, I was enjoying the spectacle, but figured I better step in before you ended up humping each other on someone’s front lawn.”

“Thanks.” Hunter pinched his nose, trying to get his breathing under control. When he finally dropped his hand, his purple eyes locked on mine. “Definitely a witch. How did you do that to me?”

“*Me*?” I blinked all innocently. “You were the one who shoved me against the fence.”

“It was you telling me how you crave a man to have such power over you that you can’t take a breath without his permission.”

“You said that?” Giselle asked, her smirk falling. “Oh dear.” Coming to my side, she whispered in my ear, “You really shouldn’t have said that to him.”

“What? Why?” I whispered back.

“Well, Hunter has a minor addiction when it comes to control.”

“Control?” I shivered.

“He’s a natural Dominus. A Dominant. But not just any Dom who gets off on overpowering someone in sex. He gets off on the whole ownership. The rush of protecting her and providing for her. The knowledge that he is everything to someone, just like they are everything to him. He wants to be the moon and stars to her, just as she is the sun and flowers to him.”

“That’s...very poetic.” I rubbed my stinging mouth.

“And a big fat lie,” Hunter barked. “Stop filling her head with fibs, Giselle. You’ll have her running away before I’ve had my fill.”

Giselle crossed her arms. “Perhaps that would be best for everyone.”

The way she said it sent prickles of foreboding darting down my spine.

I glanced down the shadowed road, wondering if that earth-shattering kiss was enough to survive on for the rest of my life. It might be prudent if I left now because I honestly didn’t think I’d survive if I slept with this man.

Grabbing my wrist, Hunter wrapped tight, unfightable fingers around me. “You’re not going anywhere. We had a deal, remember?”

“Deal?” Giselle looked back and forth between us. “What deal?”

“The deal where she gives me everything that she is, and I give her myself for free.”

Sighing heavily, Giselle shook her head. “You can’t keep her, you know. We’re leaving tomorrow. Just like we always—”

“I’m fully aware we’re leaving. And she is too. This is strictly a one-night thing.” Yanking me into him, he fisted my hair and pulled my head back. Staring into my eyes, he murmured, “But tonight, she’s mine. All fucking mine and I intend to dine on every piece.”

My unsatisfied orgasm threatened to ignite from his voice and words alone.

My pussy clenched on emptiness.

My body needed to be filled.

God, I’m in so much trouble.

Pulling me toward the road, he added, “Come. Best we get somewhere private before I lose control again.”

I tottered after him in my heels, my little bag swinging against my hip. “Wait...eh—”

“The time for worries has passed. You’re mine now.” He flashed me a grin. “And I’m yours. Happy birthday.”

“But—”

He sighed as he yanked me across the street. “But what? Any reservations or second-guessing is done. I told you what would happen if I got you inside that big top—”

“I’m not inside yet.”

“No, you’re not.” He pulled me to a stop in the middle of the lanes. “But my fingers were almost inside you. You opened your legs for me. I still have your arousal coating me. You weren’t just wet, you were fucking drenched,

so if you try to lie to me and say you weren't into me, we're gonna have a problem. You can't pretend that this...whatever this *is* between us...doesn't drive you as insane as it drives me. You do, and I'll just have to spank you until you confess."

I sucked in a breath.

My ass stung just imagining his palm creating heat and punishment.

His gleaming lilac eyes met mine, and with a guttural groan, he let me go. Holding up his hands, he muttered, "Fine. Last chance. You want to run? Run." He pointed up the street. "Go home. Go back to your over-used vibrator. Back to fantasies that can never fulfil you."

I looked to where he pointed.

I swayed in that direction.

An image of Nick popped into my head.

Surly, haughty, disdainful Nick.

Eight months he'd made me choke on my sexuality. Made me ashamed of my needs. If I went home, I'd only have to hide again.

I don't want to hide anymore.

Then be brave...

My shoulders swept back as I slowly met those unnaturally purple eyes. Holding out my hand, I whispered, "My name is Ella Fitzgerald." I smiled shyly. "And you're...you're Hunter?"

"Hunter Dixon." He flashed me a sinful smile before wrapping his fingers around mine. "At your service." Pressing a kiss to my knuckles, he breathed, "Now, tell me I have your permission to take you into my big top and fuck you as hard as possible."

My brain went quiet.

My heart went loud.

And a smile I'd never felt before stretched my not-so-innocent lips.

Sultry.

Seductive.

Wicked.

“You have my permission, Hunter Dixon. Fuck me as hard as you want.”

“Oh, I shall, little witch. I most certainly shall.”

CHAPTER FOUR



“DO YOU HAVE YOUR RECENT MEDICAL CERTIFICATE?” Giselle asked politely as she went into the booth at the entrance of the circus. A place for ticket sales and welcomes instead of inquiries into your sexual health.

“Ah, yes. Here.” Fumbling in my little beaded bag, I unfolded my work document and passed it to her.

Hunter didn’t say a word beside me, his eyes sharp and full of authority. He looked over my head, watching the other people within the confines of his circus. Other deviants who’d already passed this test and were free to mingle, proposition, and enjoy.

How many people were here tonight?

Unlike a noisy, crowded circus, this was understated and full of whispers. The occasional laugh drifted through the night, but overall the only sounds came from the prettily painted carousel and its prancing, spinning ponies.

“Do people actually ride the carousel?” I asked Hunter as Giselle turned to scan my document into whatever system they had to keep track of sexually starving people like me.

God, what if they sell that information?

What if it got leaked, and others found out that I—

I gritted my teeth and balled my hands.

Who cares?

If others were too afraid to live how they wanted to live, then that was their problem, not mine. I was an adult. Practically middle-aged at this point and I wanted to experiment.

Hunter stopped glaring at the other guests, pinning me in place with his strange purple eyes.

I could safely say I'd never look at lavender the same way again.

"Why would they ride a make-believe horse when they can ride each other?" He chuckled under his breath. "I figured I better have at least one carny attraction to fulfil the terms and conditions of a circus."

"Terms and conditions?"

He shrugged. "We might cater to a very different market than most, but we still have the games you can play, the shows you can watch, the food you can eat, and the talent that performs."

"You do?"

He snickered. "Of course. Doesn't matter that the games are all lewd and suggestive, the shows are mostly live porn, the food is smearable and lickable, and the talent...that includes me by the way...perform in ways definitely not suitable for innocent eyes."

"I'm innocent," I whispered.

"Little witch, you are anything but innocent." He twirled his finger through my hair. "You gave me your greatest vulnerability. You told me your ultimate wish. And I'm going to fulfil that wish." He ran his nose down my throat. "I'm going to take you, strip you, lick you, finger you, bind you, whip you, and then fuck you. Over and over again. By the time dawn breaks, you'll be so corrupted, you'll have to live the rest of your life with the very real

knowledge that you need a special kind of man to scratch that certain kind of itch.”

His words were eerily close to my own thoughts, making me flinch. “And if I want to wake up tomorrow and find that you fucked all this forbidden kink out of me?”

“Then that will be a very sad day indeed.” He kissed my cheek with lingering kindness that undid me a little more. “I like you this way. I love knowing you’re dripping for me. That if we stood in this spot any longer, a wet patch would grow beneath you, all because you’re desperate for something only I can give you.”

Everything inside me clenched as he spun me around and pressed me against the booth.

He drove his thigh between my legs again, pinning me, trapping me. “I want to leave this town knowing I was the one to break in the hottest, sexiest, most deviant little creature. That you’re finally open to the kind of relationship you really need...because of me.”

I winced.

I knew he meant it as a joke or even as a compliment, but I couldn’t help thinking that tomorrow—once this was all over and Hunter and his circus had gone, when sunlight replaced starlight and reality replaced dreams—I might wish I’d never done this. Wished I never stepped outside my safe little box because how on earth would I ever fit back into those tight, restricting walls again?

It was a cage I’d finally broken free from.

To climb back in would kill me.

I couldn't catch a proper breath as Giselle finished scanning what needed to be scanned and handed back my paperwork.

Hunter let me go, and I tucked the paper into my bag. Nerves bolted down my spine. Butterflies winged through my veins. "Is that...is that everything?"

Was there nothing else?

Nothing to delay or stall this from happening?

Oh God...I'm really doing this.

"Just one more form." Giselle flashed her boss a grin. "And then, you're all his."

Hunter groaned beside me. "Don't say such things. I'm hard enough as it is."

My cheeks pinked, unused to people being so blatant with their appetites.

Giselle just giggled as if she was well used to her boss and his dirty mouth.

"What is it?" I swallowed hard.

Giselle smiled gently and picked up a pen. "A few more questions and you're all set."

"Okay." I kept my eyes on hers, refusing to pay attention to Hunter as he captured a lock of my hair again, spinning it, tugging it, keeping my body highly aware of his.

"You're clear of all STDs, so you're permitted to have unprotected sex within our big top. However, please do not feel like you have to. Whatever partner you choose has the right to wear a condom or for you to ask him to wear one at your discretion."

“And if you were wondering...” Hunter bent closer, breathing hot, minty breath into my ear. “I’m not wearing one. I want you bare. I want my cum leaking out of you so you remember who you belong to as you walk home later.”

Good God, this man.

I was in way over my head.

I’d drowned the moment I saw him earlier today swinging that stupid sledgehammer.

I froze.

I’m about to get my wish.

I’d wanted to know what he looked like naked.

And...he’s about to show me.

He’s about to stick his cock inside me.

About to come with no protection and—

“If he just whispered that he’s not wearing a condom, don’t look so terrified. That’s your choice, not his,” Giselle muttered, pointing the pen in her boss’s face before placing it into my slack hand. Her eyes flickered to her laptop screen for a moment before saying, “Did you even ask if she’s on the pill, Hunter? Do you want to knock her up tonight as well as completely break her?”

He stiffened, but a sexy, dangerous smile crossed his face. “She did say she wanted to be reliant on a man in every way. Perhaps I *should* impregnate her.” He lashed an arm around my waist, pinning me to him. “Keep her for myself. Drag her from town to town, bound to my bed, spread and wet for my

pleasure, getting fat with our child, knowing that she belongs to me in every possible way.”

I very nearly fainted.

My vision went light on the edges.

My body swayed with dizziness.

He didn't mean that?

Does he?

And what the hell is happening to me?

I was a career woman.

I ran from the very idea of domestication, so why...why did it sound so hot?

Giselle giggled. “Judging by the horrified look on her face, I’m guessing she doesn’t want you knocking her up. Tonight or any night.”

“Pity.” He nuzzled my neck. “You’d look edible pregnant. I wouldn’t be able to keep my hands off you or my dick out of you.”

I half-moaned, half-whimpered.

He laughed under his breath. “Your shyness does something to me, Ella Fitzgerald. It makes me want to wrap you up and protect you from all the monsters in the world, all while I tie you to an altar and sacrifice you to every monster inside me.”

My core clenched.

I almost came.

He said I was a witch?

Then what the hell was he?

A warlock?

A magician?

Some sort of circus performer with true magic? Magic that seeped into a woman's blood and turned her into liquid fire?

"Okay, okay, restrain yourself for ten more minutes. Jesus." Giselle threw a pencil at Hunter before pushing a questionnaire toward me. "Just fill that in and—"

"You fill it in, Gis. Doubt we'd be able to read her writing with how badly she's trembling." Hunter's eyes narrowed. "Besides, she's held the pen. We know everything we need to know...right?"

"Yes." Giselle gave him a nod I couldn't decipher. "All good."

All good?

What did that mean? I glanced at the pen in my hand before Hunter snatched it from me and tossed it back to Giselle. "Next question."

I looked back and forth between them, pretty sure I'd fail this test, seeing as I'd forgotten my own name.

"Are you open to bondage?" Giselle asked.

"Yes, she is. Next." Hunter answered for me with a devilish grin. "It's a particular fetish of mine that I'll enjoy delivering."

"What's your pain threshold on a scale of one to ten?" She quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Um..." I risked a look at Hunter. He watched me with calculated stillness.

Would he use my answer as his guide tonight? If I said ten, would he make me bleed? What if I said it was a pathetic number one?

“Let me rephrase that question,” Hunter murmured. “Do you get turned on by the thought of me teasing you with a feather? Running it between your legs, toying with the prude you pretend to be, or are you wet at the thought of me spanking you with my hand, leaving five red fingerprints on your perfect ass? Do you shudder at the thought of my belt singing through the air, slapping against your virgin skin? Or...” He captured my ear again with naughty teeth. “Do you want to come beneath the savage kiss of a whip? A whip that runs up and down your body, marking your belly, your breasts, before landing on your clit?”

I swallowed hard. A droplet of sweat rolled down my spine.

“Y-You have to stop,” I choked. “You can’t keep talking to me like that.”

“Like how?” He arched an eyebrow, adorably confused.

“Like....like *that*.”

“What with truth?” He scowled. “I hate to tell you, Ella, but if you can’t handle me describing what I plan on doing to you, you’ll most likely die when I do it.” Tucking chestnut hair behind my ear, he lowered his voice to a seducing whisper. “I know you’re afraid. I know you’re eager but wary. I know you’re probably thinking that you’re not going to survive this, and...you’d be right.”

I moaned as he pressed the softest kiss to my mouth. “But isn’t that the point? You want to be destroyed. You want to be at my mercy. You want to know what it feels like to have all that power you’re clinging to so tightly stripped away from you. You want to know what I’ll do to you when you have no control. You want to know who you’ll become if you let me rule you, worship you, shatter you piece by piece until you’re nothing more than —”

“Ella?”

Oh no.

No.

No.

NO!

My racing heart stopped with wrenching agony.

My cheeks turned to pyres.

My wetness instantly dried into shameful dust.

Hunter stiffened as he raised his head, no doubt locking eyes on the one man I couldn't look at. The one man who'd starred in a few of my dirty fantasies, all while I couldn't stand him in the flesh. The one man who always managed to make me feel small, childish, and utterly unimportant.

Nicholas Davis.

“Who are you?” Hunter asked coldly, his arm binding me to him with possession.

“I'm...I'm—” Nick's voice hardened. “Doesn't matter who am I. Who the fuck are you?”

Hunter seemed to double in size. His hard body turned to granite. “I'm the owner of this establishment. Is there a problem? Are you not having a good time? If you're looking for condoms, there's a large bowl in the foyer of the big top. If you want refreshments, they're—”

“I don't want condoms or a damn drink.” Nick crossed his arms, his chequered blazer still rucked to his elbows, ensuring everyone saw the tendons flexing in his powerful forearms. Forearms that did not belong on a scientist.

Don't look.

Don't look.

I kept my eyes locked on Giselle in the booth as Nick shifted in my peripheral. She gave me a wince, sensing the tension as if it were a great clotted cloud of awful.

If I looked at him, it was all over.

Who was I kidding?

It was already over.

I might as well go home with my tail between my legs and move out because I could never face Nick ever again.

My little dabbles of wondering if he came here tonight were the worst kind of joke. Because he *was* here. And now, I wanted him to be anywhere else.

“Ella...care to tell me what you're doing here?” Nick asked, deceptively soft.

Hunter stiffened.

Giselle flicked him a look from the booth.

And I stayed silent, tripping over words I would never say.

Shame shot down my legs, moments away from bolting from everyone.

But then...the hottest, dirtiest groan tumbled from Nick's throat, wrenching my eyes to his.

The moment I looked at him, the world stopped spinning.

I jerked at the sudden stop.

I gasped at the sharpest punch of connection.

His nostrils flared as he drank me in. Glowering at me in another man's embrace. Hatred swirled with unfiltered, unhidden, undeniable lust.

Lust?

My dead heart struck up a thrum again, racing, racing, racing.

Lust for me?

But how?

When?

Surely, not.

I would've sensed it, wouldn't I?

After eight months of living together, I'd never caught him checking me out unless it was with that usual air of annoyance.

I could never do anything right. I couldn't load the dishwasher right, hang out the washing right, even Hoover our apartment right. Everything I did was wrong. Everything I said was a nuisance.

Yet here he was...staring at me as if he was fucking starving.

No, not starving...ravenous. A violently ravenous beast eyeing me up for his final meal.

"Ella...I asked you a question," he seethed, his fists tightening into rocks.

Hunter shifted me deeper into his side, squaring off with Nick. "She's here for the same thing you are. To get fucked. And if you'll excuse us, we're about to get started." Barging past Nick, Hunter dragged me with him. "Run along, man. Pick your own partner because you're not having mine."

"Wait." Nicholas's hand shot out, latching around my wrist.

He didn't hold me gently.

He bruised me.

Squeezed me.

Struggled to hold back whatever mania coursed through him.

I froze and looked at where he grabbed me. “Nick...let me go.”

His fingers only tightened until blood pumped there, blocked by his grip.

The tips of my fingers throbbed from the restriction.

He swallowed hard. “I-I thought you went to bed?”

Bed?

What?

“I was reading my book!”

“Yeah, but...you normally go to bed early.”

“To avoid you!”

He stiffened.

Nervous laughter spilled out of me. “And I thought you were going to a bar, so don’t you get all shitty with me, Nicholas Davis. Not tonight.”

His jaw clenched. “Well...obviously, we both lied.”

“Obviously.” I sneered, letting Hunter tug me toward the looming purple and grey big top. “Have a good night, Nick. Goodbye.”

He stayed rooted to the spot for a moment before giving chase. “Stop. Wait...just for a sec.”

Hunter sighed heavily but obeyed. Keeping a claiming arm wrapped around me, he barked, “What? What do you want with my Ella? If you know each other, then you know it’s against the rules to approach each other if the other party is unwilling.” He pressed a dotting kiss to my cheek. “So, I ask

you, little witch. Are you willing? Because it sure as hell doesn't seem like it."

"Witch?" Nick wrinkled his nose. "She's not a witch."

"Tonight, she is." Hunter grabbed himself and stroked the large bulge between his legs. "She cast a spell on me the moment I set eyes on her."

"Fuck, I know the feeling," Nick groaned, pinching the bridge of his nose.

Wait...what?

What the hell was he playing at?

This wasn't him.

Where was the coldness? The criticising? The cryptic asshole I barely tolerated?

"What are you doing, Nick?" I narrowed my eyes. "This isn't you. Go home, or better yet...go bother someone else."

"You heard her." Hunter chuckled. "Plenty of other partners here to play with."

Nick reared back as if I'd physically slapped him. "Y-You'd be okay if I went and slept with someone else? Now you've seen me here?"

I shrugged even as my heart pinched. "Makes no difference to me who you sleep with."

"Says the girl who fucks a vibrator every night."

I went still, so very, very still. Every part of me surged to deny it. To trip over myself with explanations that I tried to wait when he was out of the house, but some nights...when he'd been particularly chilly toward me or

been working late with his nerdy, sexy copper-rimmed glasses on, I just couldn't help myself.

I'd keep it short.

A few seconds was all I needed to penetrate myself, line up the little rabbit wand, and picture Nick throwing me over the very kitchen table where he worked, scattering his papers, and pouncing on me.

I'd come. I'd wash my toy. And then go to sleep with tears in my eyes.

Dammit, he was ruining my night.

I didn't want him here.

I thought I did when I'd run out the door—some masochistic part of me using the emotional pain he gave me as a trigger to want him, but now, with Hunter's heavy arm around me and his taste still in my mouth, I got angry.

Fuming angry.

So, so angry it completely shocked me with its severity. Eight months' worth of holding my tongue, not fighting back, not calling him out on his bullshit. I took his icy behaviour at work. I tolerated his stiffness at home.

But here?

Tonight...

I don't have to put up with anything.

Hunter felt me bristle next to him and threw me a questioning look. I didn't look back. I kept my eyes locked on Nicholas and said what I should've said so many nights ago.

“At least I know how to pleasure myself, unlike some people I know. At least I allow myself to release once in a while instead of letting all that unsatisfied need twist into something toxic.”

“Toxic?” His eyebrows shot into his hair. “Who said anything about being toxic?”

“I did.” I cocked my chin. “You are. You’re the worst kind.”

“What?” His jaw clenched as he stepped closer, squashing me into Hunter’s side. “You don’t know a damn thing about me.”

I didn’t back down, and Hunter didn’t intervene. He merely watched with a sly smile on his lips, his fingers digging into me with power. “Don’t I? I’ve lived with you for months. I’ve tried to be nice. I’ve offered to be friends. I go out of my way to include you. Yet each time I made dinner for us to chat, or I called you in the supermarket to see if you needed me to get you anything when I did my weekly shop, you always gave me attitude.”

Nick’s entire face twisted. “I was told when I accepted my work contract that I’d be given my own place. I wasn’t expecting to have to rent with someone who—”

“Oh, so this is *my* fault, is it?” I sneered. “You wanted to be alone, and instead, you got shackled up with me?”

He swallowed a growl, but it still covered his words with grumbly, tetchy darkness. “Yes! And believe me, I wasn’t ready for you.”

I crossed my arms. “What the hell is that supposed to mean?”

“It means I had a life plan, that’s what! Work hard. Focus. Make a breakthrough in cancer treatment. Get financially stable. And then...*then* I’d find a girl who...who—”

“Who what? You sound like an owl.” I tapped my foot. “What’s wrong? Finally realised you have no life and successfully pushed away the very people who could’ve given you a little joy while you’re so damn busy working all the time?”

“You don’t give me joy, Ella.” He laughed blackly. “You give me the opposite of fucking joy.”

My anger exploded as if he’d poured gasoline on it. “Screw you, Nick. I’m nice. I’m a good person. And you? You...you are nothing more than a...than a frigid bastard who—”

“Really, *really* wants to fuck you,” Hunter interrupted with a curt snap. “Shit, just look at him, little witch. He’s about to jump out of his skin with how much he wants you.”

My anger whipped back, slapping me around the cheek. All my fight evaporated as I blinked at Nick.

I studied the out-of-control gaze.

The heaving of his chest.

The livid, furious way he held every muscle and sinew.

Hunter was wrong.

Nick looked as if he wanted to murder me and bury me in an unmarked grave, not ravish me.

Hunter didn’t say a word as I licked my lips and forced a laugh. “I think you believe everyone is a repressed deviant.”

“I don’t think.” Hunter kissed my nose with a flourish. “I know. Every single person who comes to my circus starts off wrapped in lies. They lie on the form about what their fantasies are. They lie when they meet a potential partner to play with. But you know what happens?” His purple eyes landed on Nick, narrowed and cold. “By the end...once they realise that this is a safe place—that they won’t be judged and don’t have to hide—they’re honest for

the first time in their lives. They wake up and realise all that repression has twisted them into something cruel. Something full of temper and irritation.”

He sighed heavily as if he truly used this circus to snap people out of their straitjackets of unhappiness rather than indulging the salacious appetites of strangers. “If people only knew that by denying who they truly are—by working a job they hate and tolerating people they can’t stand—that all that annoyance and discontentment bubbles up until every part of them is triggered and offended, and then they unwittingly complete the cycle of douchebaggery by doing the same to others. They inflict those same pains and offences onto loved ones and colleagues, contributing to the never-ending problem. Instead of taking time out to remember that life is pointless if we aren’t happy, they just get worse. What’s the point in working if we’re miserable? What’s the point in living longer if we’re sick? All of it is bullshit. Life is simple. We’re here to have fun...that’s it.”

My mouth hung open.

My heart kicked with more than just physical attraction but with awe instead.

Who the hell was this self-confessed Dom who joked about keeping me barefoot and bound? What had he endured to become so weary of the world and quite frankly...scarily right about?

“Who *are* you?” I struggled to pick my jaw off the floor.

Hunter shrugged. “Guess you could say I’m an epicurean. A sensualist. A hedonist.”

“A what now?”

He smirked. “I believe that the pursuit of pleasure, in all forms, is the most important thing in life.”

Before I could unravel that simplistic wisdom, Hunter glowered at Nick. “Now I’ve said my piece...what about you? Care to be honest for the first time in *your* miserable life? Are you brave enough to be like Ella here and tell me your deepest, darkest fantasy? Because I know hers and it’s freed her enough to allow me to corrupt her.” He shrugged again. “Maybe if you tell me yours, I can do the same for you.”

Nick swallowed hard.

His thighs bunched beneath his jeans; I counted the seconds for him to stalk away, leaving a cloud of rage in his wake.

Only...

He didn’t leave.

He stayed.

He raised a trembling hand and squeezed his nape. He sucked in a breath and slouched as if he couldn’t keep fighting whatever it was that haunted him.

My stomach twisted for him.

For the sudden flash of vulnerability.

The cavernous ache in his eyes.

The loneliness that I’d never noticed before, but now bled off him in such torrents I couldn’t believe I’d never seen.

All those nights I put his attitude down to disdain.

All those curt replies...

Maybe he wasn’t being nasty but using his coldness as a shield? A way to protect whatever part of himself that was hurting.

It didn't excuse his behaviour, but it did make my anger unravel into the smallest strings of forgiveness.

"Nick...it's okay," I whispered, hating how lost he looked. "Let's just forget we saw each other tonight and—"

"You want to hear my ultimate fantasy?" Nick choked, his eyes locked on Hunter. "Fine." Dropping his arm, he balled his hand and pointed a finger at me. "I want her. I've wanted her since the very first moment I moved in. I want her when I jerk off in the shower. I want her when I work late at night. I want her every damn second of every damn day, and I can't get the damn images out of my head. I can't stop imagining what it would be like to gag that gorgeous mouth of hers and stop her from trying to be my friend. What it would be like to rip off those tight, teasing yoga leggings she wears at night and bury my cock inside her."

His eyes snapped to mine, his voice turning thick with gravel. "I want you, Ella. I want you so much I can scarcely breathe. I can't be around you because I'm always moments away from grabbing you and fucking you against the wall. I've never touched you because if I did, you'd be naked and spread and I'd be inside you before you could even give me permission. When you do housework for us, it drives me insane because not only do I want to fuck you but watching you do that sort of stuff makes me want to keep you too. It's far too easy to see a domestic little future with you, and that terrifies me because I'm not ready for that. I don't want that. I don't *want* to want you, and I don't...I can't...fuck. I-I wish I could get rid of this need because it's driving me fucking crazy."

Hunter chuckled. "There now, do you feel better?"

Nick gave a strangled laugh. "Hell no. I feel flayed alive."

“Yes but lighter too, no doubt. No longer choking on the truth.”

“But...” I hugged myself. “I thought you hated me.”

Nicholas’s turbulent gaze snapped to mine. “I do. Fuck, I do. But...only because you drag things out of me I don’t want to feel.”

“You know how you can make those feelings go away, right?” Hunter smirked. “Or make them worse...depends how the night goes, I guess.”

“What are you talking about?” Nick ran a hand over his face, looking exhausted.

“Well, you want to know what it would be like to fuck her, yes?” Hunter cupped my breast, making me squeak. His thumb caressed my nipple, and my squeak turned into a tattered moan.

Nick went dangerously still.

I didn’t know if it was from my moan or seeing Hunter fondle me, but the look in his eyes sent shivers right to my core.

“Yes,” Nick finally grunted. “Hell yes, I want to fuck her.”

“Well...?” Hunter dragged me in front of him, grinding his cock against my ass all while palming both my breasts with large, strong hands. “Perhaps she’ll let you. If you ask nicely.” He nuzzled my neck from behind. “What do you say, Ella? Should we let your roommate watch while I have my wicked way with you and then let him have a tiny taste? Or has he ruined any chance of you being remotely interested in him in that way?”

Nick locked himself in place.

His fists shook by his thighs.

Trapped by two men, one manhandling me and the other devouring me with his eyes ought to make me feel imprisoned, vulnerable, and completely

at their mercy, but somehow, the softest, sweetest, most addictive power coiled through me.

Both men wanted me.

Me.

A girl who lived and breathed in boredom suddenly had two very handsome, two very sexual men asking me to choose.

Other people milled around, but no one paid us attention. Some strolled hand in hand in various stages of undress. Others snuck off to the big top with knowing grins on their faces. The faint threads of the carousel melody lapped around our feet, all while the stars shone down and the night stretched outward full of dirty, dangerous possibilities.

Clearing his throat, Nick stumbled over a sentence almost too low to hear. “If it’s true that you came here to get fucked, Ella, then...” He shook his head, his thick bronze hair falling over one eye. “Let me be the one to fuck you.”

His words were arrows, landing with their sharp, lethal points directly in my chest.

Hunter chuckled behind me, running his tongue up my throat. “Not until I’ve had her first.”

“Isn’t that her decision?” Nick hissed.

“It is. But I’m pretty sure I know the answer.” Hunter nipped my ear. “Am I right, little witch?” His hips rocked into my ass, sending another flush of wanton, wicked need through me. “Say the word, and you’ll be in paradise the moment we step into the big top.”

I shuddered as his hand boldly crept around my stomach and dipped, lower and lower. I squirmed for him to stop, but he just kept going, cupping

my pussy beneath my dress, blatantly laying claim to me right in front of Nick.

The heat of his captivity.

The pressure of his fingers.

I waited to be horrified.

I waited for all the feelings society said I should feel, already regretting saying goodbye to the naughty power I thrummed with.

But just as Hunter's kiss had cut the cord between good girl and bad, I endured another unravelling. No shame. No blame. No embarrassment or confusion.

Just truth.

And courage.

And...I opened my legs a little wider, stepping fully into the creature that'd always stalked beneath my skin. Something with claws and teeth. Something that wanted to get bit because she wanted to bite back just as hard.

I moaned as Hunter pressed my soaking underwear into my pussy, the friction of fabric sending me sky high. Shaky and feeling slightly drunk, I rested my head on Hunter's shoulder.

He groaned as he gathered up every submission I gave. "That's all the permission I need. Let's go. I'm not wasting another moment talking when I could be inside you."

Unwrapping his arms from around me, he grabbed my hand and dragged me toward the big top.

Nick let out a tortured noise.

I hoarded it. I loved it.

His painful desire was payment for every rebuke, every curt reply, and every stony look he'd ever given me.

Now he knew what it felt like to want something but be so cruelly denied.

Now he knew what hope felt like, begging the one person you wanted above all others to stop being a dick and choose niceties instead.

My eyes never left his as I tripped after Hunter, my legs jelly and heart wild.

Nick's mouth twisted as if he suffocated on things he wanted to say.

The big top loomed.

The soft breeze of perfumed air surrounded me.

And then, Nick broke into a jog, chasing after us, cutting in front of us with a savage snarl. "Have us both." He wiped his mouth as if he couldn't believe he'd said such a thing, but his eyes glowed with hazel fire as he nodded with determination. "Fuck us both. I-I'll share you...with him...if that's what you want. If that gets me an inch of being inside you, then...I'll do it."

"Shit, man, you've got it bad." Hunter laughed as if this whole thing amused him. He showed no offence at being asked to share. No aversion at having a threesome with another male. His smooth acceptance of sex and all its facets made me want to be him when I grew up.

I didn't want to hide from *me* anymore, and...I'd had plenty of fantasies where I'd been used by two men at a time. Sometimes more. Fantasies of being a sacrifice where men lined up, all hard and waiting for their turn. I didn't know why that was one of my ultimate, never-to-be-confessed daydreams, but I used it a lot.

Was it the power I felt having a lineup of gorgeous men, all desperate to have me, all jerking off while they waited for me to give them permission to service me? Perhaps it was the submissive inside me wanting to be at the mercy of a horde of horny, frantic men?

Either way...my mind exploded with images of sharing sex with Nick *and* Hunter.

My core clenched, teasing me with an unsatisfied orgasm. An orgasm that set my teeth on edge and blood pounding.

“Please, Ella. If this is the only night you’re open to being with me. Just like it’s the only night I’m open to being with you, then...” Nicholas stepped toward me, and for the first time in eight months, he willingly touched me. I moaned as his fingers slipped into my hair, fisting into a slightly painful, downright erotic handful. “Let me fuck you.” He lowered his head from his tall height. His cinnamon breath caressed my lips as he held himself ever so close. “Let me show you just how hard you make me. How hard you’ve always made me. Let me inside your pretty little cunt so I can finally, finally breathe again.”

All my inhibitions flew away.

I ached for him to kiss me.

But he pulled away and shot a look at Hunter. “Do you agree to share?”

Hunter’s rich, deep voice rumbled in his chest. “It’s her choice. Her night. She knows what I intend to do to her. She knows she’s going to be at my mercy the moment I wrap that first rope around her. If she wants to surrender to you too, then fine.” He shrugged. “I’ll share. You can fuck her, watch me fuck her, we can do it together or take turns. I just don’t cross swords.”

Nick gritted his teeth. “Same for me. All the attention is on her. I’ll accept that you’re in the room, but that’s it.”

“But what if I want you to kiss each other?” I asked, my voice barely a whisper.

Hunter chuckled and locked his fingers tighter around my wrist. “I think you’re forgetting that you’re not in charge tonight. I am. He is. You wanted to be controlled, remember? You want to give me your very air. You want me to claim your every last piece so you don’t have to think or worry or overanalyse every little thing. Your only job is to lie there and take what we give you.”

“Goddammit.” Nick groaned. “She really signed up to be dominated?”

“Hell, yes, she did.” Hunter grinned.

“Jesus Christ. How am I supposed to live with her now?”

“Fuck her every night?” Hunter chuckled.

“I’d break her if I—”

“I’m right here, you know.” I glared at both of them.

Nick’s lips twitched as he locked gazes with me and, in a rare confession, said, “I don’t think you realise that every night since I moved in, when I go to my room and you to yours, how close I am to breaking down your door, pinning you down, planting a hand over your mouth so you can’t tell me no, then pile-driving you into your mattress.”

I swayed.

Holy hell, he’s a dirty talker too.

I wouldn’t be able to survive.

Tonight, I wasn’t just in over my head; I was done for.

Well and truly murdered by lust, resurrected by need, and set on fire by sin.

“You know what?” Hunter looked Nick up and down. “I think tonight just got a lot more interesting.”

I shivered as his gaze narrowed on mine. “What do you say, Ella Fitzgerald? A night of being used, not just by one male but two? A night that will ruin every other night. A night that will always remain our little secret. Our little trio of absolute debauchery.”

My throat closed up. My blood thickened.

I tried to reply but couldn't.

Hunter released me ever so slowly, making me sway again as both men watched me.

“I need you to say the words. There are legalities, you understand.” Pointing at himself and then at Nick, Hunter smiled with every depraved and dangerous invitation he could muster. “Repeat after me. Do you, Ella Fitzgerald, agree to let me, Hunter Dixon, and this Nick fellow bind you, whip you, dominate you, feast on you, and most likely fuck you until dawn?”

Jesus.

My knees became custard.

My entire body melted into gooey dessert. Dessert for them to devour.

“Please, Ella...” Nick murmured. “Just for tonight. Please be mine...ours.”

They didn't need an answer.

I'd given it the moment Nick found me here.

But it sent a delicious, sharp thrill through me to lick my lips, smile at both men, and murmur, “I, Ella Fitzgerald, agree to let you, Hunter Dixon,

and you, Nicholas Davis, to bind me, whip me, dominate me, feast on me, and fuck me until dawn.”

“Thank Christ for that.” Grabbing my wrist, Nick didn’t wait for Hunter to follow, he jerked me into the big top, swiped aside the heavy curtain, and the thick purple and grey walls swallowed us whole.

CHAPTER FIVE



“THIS WAY,” HUNTER SAID, CUTTING IN FRONT of us as I blinked at the rows upon rows of carnival games lining a long corridor. Grey carpet covered the grass beneath my feet and the chimes and bells of the arcade games flashed with garish appeal.

Unlike other arcade games where a small teddy or nonsense figurine could be won, these were full to the brim with R18 toys. Whips, paddles, chains, and dildos all glittered beneath the sultry steampunk fashioned lamps dotted down the long hallway.

The big top had no central arena for performers. No uncomfortable seats or ring master. Just an avenue of see-through doors. No upbeat music or annoying requests to clap. The only sounds were the muffled moans of pleasure and the haunting, erotic strains of sensual music bleeding from hidden speakers.

Taking my hand, Hunter flashed me a smile. “Have a look as we pass. Maybe you’ll get a few ideas of what you want from me and Nick.”

With my left hand in Nick’s, (his lanky, bookishly handsome body bristling with energy), and my right hand in Hunter’s, (his muscular height imposing and the black lightning bolt on his cheek looking like a dangerous scar), I felt very dominated indeed.

Trapped but in a good way.

Captured and abducted from everything mundane and dragged into a world of forbidden.

We hadn't even gotten to a private room yet, but my blood burned as if I'd turned into a volcano. A volcano that very much wanted to erupt.

Hunter guided me forward.

I let him, not at all sure how to use my limbs anymore. They were thick and heavy, just like my breasts and between my legs.

The first door we passed revealed a completely different world. One with oversized phalluses, trapezes, and a bed drowning in purple coverlets. On the bed, two men kissed as if they couldn't breathe without the other. Their tongues tangling, their naked bodies pressed tight, pulled into one another with pawing, desperate hands.

Nick sucked in a breath beside me.

Hunter merely chuckled. "You think that's graphic? Wait until you're farther in. We reserve the rooms at the front for tamer pursuits, but the deeper into the big top you go, the wilder the shows become."

"W-Where's our room?" I asked, my mind racing, wondering just how wild Hunter intended to get.

He grinned and ran his tongue over sharp canines. "Oh, we're at the very end, little witch. The things I plan on doing to you needed to come with a warning to those who want to watch. Don't want to make my customers faint, do we?"

I moaned.

I couldn't help it.

My entire body *burned*.

Nick swallowed hard, but he didn't stop as we moved together toward the shadowy end of the corridor. Silently, we skirted around a giant bowl on a marble pedestal, full to the brim with packets of all colours and flavours. Condoms for everyone. Including miniature bottles of glittery lube, body-smearable chocolate, and even a few nipple clamps.

Hunter shot a look at Nick. "You're in my circus, which means you're clean, but...you're welcome to grab a few packets to use."

Nicholas clenched his jaw. "What about you? You grabbing any rubbers?"

"Nope." Hunter winked like a wicked devil. "Ella knows I plan on going bareback tonight. And if you choose to do the same, you should be aware of what that means."

"What does it mean?" I asked, my cheeks blazing like the surface of the sun.

Nick's fingers twitched around my hand, but he kept his chin arched with arrogance. "It means at some point, if we both release inside you, that we're gonna be sharing another man's cum."

Oh God.

"Yep." Hunter chuckled. "Is that gonna be a problem for you?"

Nick's brows came down, but he shook his head. "Pretty sure if I've just agreed to a threesome where we fuck the same girl—the girl that I live with and have wanted for months—I can tolerate some other guy's jizz mingling with mine."

"Oh, it won't just be mingling." Hunter ran his tongue over his bottom lip. "I'm having her first. Her first orgasm is mine and mine is hers. You can

have her after me. And you'll feel just how wet she is from both our pleasures combined."

"Good lord, that filthy tongue of yours is going to give me a heart attack," I gasped. "I'm going to combust before you've even taken my clothes off."

"My filthy tongue is going to be between your legs the moment I get you naked, but..." Hunter grabbed my jaw and kissed me even as we continued to walk. "You're not allowed to come until I'm inside you."

My spine rippled with hot desire.

Nick didn't react while Hunter dipped his tongue into my mouth, then pulled back, focusing on luring me deeper into hell.

Dipping his head, Nick said quietly, "Are you okay with having two men come inside you, Ella? I know you're on the pill. You keep them in the medicine cabinet beside that perfume that drives me wild. But...you don't have to do this if you—"

"Let's get one thing straight." Hunter slammed to a stop, making all of us bump into one another. "The moment she agreed to this, she has no more decisions to make. It's you and me who make them for her." Hunter planted a hand on Nick's shoulder. "I'm pretty good at reading people. I've read her and her inner submissive, and I'm reading you now as the reluctant Dominant who has never let himself out to play. So...here are the rules for the rest of the night. You don't ask her if she's okay, and Ella has a safe word for anything past her limits, got it?"

Hunter pinned me with his lavender stare. "Your safe word is 'Purple'. You can use it whenever you feel too overwhelmed or if the pain pushes you past a threshold of tolerance. You have my vow we will stop. Immediately. But..." He grabbed a handful of my hair and tugged. "If you don't use it, then

I'm not going to restrain myself. I agreed to fuck you for free, and I intend on taking everything you give me. And your angry little roommate here, who is so twisted up in his feelings that he's likely to snap, is almost guaranteed to break the moment he whips you the first time. The moment he lets himself go, you're his in every way possible. His to mark. His to pleasure. His to command. I'll even teach him if he wants. Teach him how to make you crawl. How to make you suck his dick. How to make you bend to his every wish."

"Fucking hell," Nick groaned.

Pulling my hair even harder, Hunter whispered in my ear. "Two men, Ella. Two Dominants who will wring you dry with bliss. You'll be taking a lot more than just our cum, you'll be taking a part of our very souls because in your surrender to us, we won't be able to stop ourselves from falling in love with you, all because you trusted us with your heart."

How could he turn the thought of two men's ejaculate blending inside me into one of the hottest things I'd ever heard?

I'd never been into bodily fluids.

Never really paid much attention to how sex conjured a hot, sticky mess.

It was a byproduct that I washed away with the faintest cringe of shame, not something to trip into with an almost primordial need to explore.

Every part of me tingled at the thought of Hunter coming and then Nick pushing inside me a moment later. The slickness not just from me. The thick lubrication caused by another man claiming me, not the man currently rutting into me. Wetness caused by the man watching another fuck me all because he'd had me first and was done.

Freaking hell...

I no longer cared about how I would survive tonight.

I was worried how I would survive tomorrow and the day after tomorrow and all the other days combined.

How could I go back to being who I used to be?

Life was meant to be draped in decadence and undisputed passion.

I was ruined for my bland house, my work with diseases, and my frigid, uncommunicative flatmate. I wanted to dance and fuck. I wanted to live in the full potential of my body and die shivering with uncontrollable orgasms.

Letting my hair go, Hunter gave me a heart-winging wink. “I can see that the thought of both of us coming inside you makes you hot. Let’s oblige you, shall we?”

As Hunter dragged us back into a walk, my eyes flickered to the see-through doors.

Behind one, a man led two women around on their hands and knees, their throats collared and leashes binding them to him. In another, a woman deep-throated a man as he stood over her, his face twisted in delirium, his hands buried in her hair as he thrust into her mouth.

Nick muttered something under his breath as we passed yet another door. Another and another. The spectacles we witnessed sent fireworks through my blood and legs wobbling with need.

In the next room, cotton candy poured from a machine meant to satisfy sugar-mad children at the fair, not adults at a sex club. Only, instead of twirling the sugar onto a stick, a man coiled it around his cock. The moment his erection sported a pink, sweet treat, he turned to the woman and man on their knees, their hands cuffed behind them, their bodies adorned with necklaces of popcorn and candy.

He offered the woman first taste, then made her stand while the other man sucked him clean. While he was serviced, his mouth went to the woman's chocolate-painted breasts and licked lavishly over her nipple before bending down and sticking his tongue directly into her pussy. She flinched as he dragged his tongue up to her belly button and tore at the string of popcorn around her waist with his teeth.

Was his fantasy to turn his sexual partners into eating utensils? And why was I contemplating trying it?

Shit, I was so turned on.

This place was Viagra to the senses. Speed and cocaine and every aphrodisiac known to man ran in my blood thanks to infernal need.

Hunter gripped my hand as he half-dragged, half-guided me deeper and deeper, arrowing toward the final door at the end.

My heart galloped as I looked at Nick, his palm sweaty against mine.

Our eyes locked. His jaw clenched. His forehead furrowed as if he hated me all over again for dragging him into this dark, wickedly depraved night.

Was he having second thoughts?

Would he use this to hurt me tomorrow?

I couldn't read him; my gaze dropped to his mouth.

His lips pursed, and dammit, I wanted him to kiss me. Fuck me. *Ruin* me.

When I looked back up, his eyes burned brighter than any flame, completely green with no trace of hazel. A heavy kind of lust. The deepest kind of want.

Hunter finally came to a stop as he reached into his pocket.

All three of us stood panting, glaring at the final door.

See-through but black inside as if no one had turned on the lights.

Withdrawing a small key, Hunter inserted it, turned it, then opened the door, and without a word, dragged us mostly willing inside.

The sound of our shared breathing scratched over my oversensitive skin just before Hunter flicked on a light and revealed the place where I would lose every shred of what was left of my virginity.

Not my sexual virginity—I'd lost that in a fumbling mess in the back of my first boyfriend's Mazda when I was sixteen. Oh no, this was so much more than just a tiny hymen. This was the ruining of my soul, my essence, the very fabric of who I was.

If I did this, I would never be Ella the microbiologist again.

I'd be Ella the girl who'd been ravaged by two men and wanted to do it again and again and *again*.

Hunter flicked another set of dim lights on, dousing me with eroticism.

As far as the other rooms went, with their funhouse themes and larger-than-life phalluses, this room was understated. Black pleather panels lined the walls, secured into place with velvet buttons, ruching the material so the entire room looked like a decadent headboard.

In the centre, on a platform raised with three wide, waterfalling steps was the biggest bed I'd ever seen. A bed with four posters carved from black wood, black gauze draped down from the top rails, flowing down the steps to gather like shadows on the floor.

Only a simple satin sheet covered the bed, almost as if any other blankets would just get in the way. A table held a bottle of champagne and a few glasses. A dewy bowl of ice-cold fruit waited to be eaten, and classical music poured right into my bloodstream, seducing me.

Not that I needed any more seducing.

But then...my eyes fell on the wall to our left and everything else faded.

A rack from floor to ceiling.

A rack holding every sized flogger, dildo, whip, cuff, gag, ball gag, butt plug, rope, silks, and paddles imaginable.

I sucked in a breath just as Nick groaned. “Fuck, this is really happening.”

“This is really happening,” Hunter murmured.

The large mirror to the right caught my reflection as my breathing slipped into hyperventilation. Dabbling with the idea of being at a man’s mercy made me crazy with want, but coming face-to-face with a room full of sexual torture, and not just one man but two ready to use them on me, sent frissons of fear bolting right into my toes.

My little black dress burst into flames against my skin.

My chest flushed in the mirror. My cheeks red. My eyes feverish. My oh so tiny and fragile body sandwiched between two controlling Dominants.

Nicholas tugged his slippery hand from mine, his breathing harsh and irregular. His own nervousness fed mine instead of soothed it—feeding me his agitation, anticipation...stuffing a cage full of frantic butterflies into my belly.

I stole a look at him, biting my lip.

His eyes no longer held green fire but smouldering emeralds. No light. No disdain. Only the crippling, savaging surge of aching, breaking need.

I swayed into him as Hunter stalked toward the rack.

The black sconces barely lit up the room. The eclipse drapery hushed everything but this. Us. Now.

Nick sucked in another tattered breath.

He stepped into me.

His hand landed on my hip.

I convulsed.

A full-body convulsion, complete with a flood of moisture between my legs.

Damn, if he made me react like that from a single possessive claiming, how badly would I break the moment he entered me?

My heart tripped and stumbled, forgetting how to beat.

Pulling me into him, Nick didn't stop until my breasts pressed against his chest, and his other hand came up to cup my cheek.

Soft.

Sweet.

A lie.

Slinking his fingers into my hair, he fisted my chestnut strands, holding me firm.

I tried to tame my breathing, but it was utterly impossible as I stared into his dangerously hungry eyes, noticing the greed—the ravenous, violent hunger that I always mistook for scorn.

“We do this, and we never speak about it again,” he whispered. His voice resembling a beast with brimstone in his heart and sizzling coals in his throat. “It stays here. In this place. Agreed?”

My head nodded on its own accord.

My body in charge instead of my mind.

I couldn't speak.

Couldn't move.

I yielded to him in every way possible.

His fingers tugged my hair, sending a wash of pinpricks down my back.

“Answer me.”

He bent his head, his tongue flicking over his bottom lip.

I licked my own in synchronisation, all too ready to feel his mouth on mine.

“We do this, and then it's over,” he grunted.

But what if this is just the beginning?

The way my heart plummeted in his hold.

The way my entire body wanted to kneel for him.

The power he already had over me.

It was horrifying, consuming...addictive.

It was enough to shake me out of my stupor and nod. “Agreed.” Not because he demanded a reply but because I had the frantic need to cling to some form of sanity. If he wanted to treat this night as a dream where we woke up tomorrow and pretended it wasn't real, then...so be it.

It would be better than it becoming a nightmare we couldn't escape from.

With a groan, Nick pushed me hard, slamming me against the closed door behind me. My back crashed against it. My breath catching. My lips parting.

“Tonight, you belong to me,” he snarled, just as his mouth collided with mine.

I gasped as he kissed me with every bit of pent-up arousal he’d kept hidden for eight long months. He didn’t ease into it. No soft peck. No questioning lick. He kissed me as if he aimed to rip out all my air and replace it with him. His breath. His taste. His need.

He crushed me against the door. His hands sweeping up to my cheeks, holding me captive as his tongue tore past my lips and drank me.

My knees threatened to give out.

I’d never been kissed so possessively. Even Hunter hadn’t consumed me like this when he’d kissed me on the street. Nick let go of the leashes trapping him and embraced every urge he’d been hiding from.

He groaned as I opened for him.

He snarled as I submitted.

His tongue licked mine. His teeth punctured my bottom lip. His cinnamon taste shot up my nose, making my eyes water as he kissed me deeper, deeper, *deeper*.

His fingers dug into my cheeks as he pressed his entire body against mine, urgency pouring off him to take me hard and fast and *now*.

I cried out as his head canted to the side, somehow finding a way to deepen our already abyss-deep kiss. His lips bruised me with warm, slippery, animalistic control.

I moaned as one of his hands dropped from my cheek and landed directly over my breast. He kneaded me instead of caressed me. A massage of heated

lust full of ruthless, firm strokes that sent my mind into hibernation and my body into hyper awareness.

My nipple peaked. My flesh ached. A fever ripped through my entire body as he claimed me.

I was owned by him in that moment.

Completely, wholly, terribly *owned*.

Nicholas groaned as my arms wrapped around his waist, clinging to him. His mouth suffocated me. His touch incinerated me. He was too close but not close enough. He was too aggressive yet somehow far too gentle.

How had we lived together for so long and never had an inkling of what the other was like? How did we sit in awkward silence watching some documentary on psychedelic medicine or anti-inflammatory mould and not attack each other on the couch? How would I go back to that existence after tonight? After I'd tasted him? Sampled him? Known how passionate he was under his stony, disdainful façade?

The ache between my legs intensified.

I arched my hips against Nick's upper thigh, needing friction. Desperate for his hand to drop from my breast and give such deliciously cruel attention to my—

“Fucking hell, down boy. You're going to devour the poor girl.” Hunter's amusement filtered through the roaring in my ears as Nick's lips suddenly wrenched from mine. The cold draft after his dominating flavour poured icy water on my lust.

Hunter squeezed Nick's shoulder, still holding him tight after jerking him off me. “Easy. We have all night to eat her, not just five minutes. Haven't you ever heard the expression ‘savour the meal’? Besides.” He fisted Nick's

shoulder, making him flinch. “It’s not just about you and her. It’s about *us*. And I fully intend to participate. But first...” He pushed Nick into the centre of the dark den of a bedroom. “Stand over there.”

Nick’s lips glowed red from our violent kiss as he balled his hands and tripped to the spot where Hunter had pushed him. “Why do I have to stand here?” His brows came down as Hunter captured my hand and pulled me into him.

“You’ll see.” Hunter smirked.

I sucked in a breath as Hunter pressed his finger beneath my jaw, raising my head just enough for his mouth to capture mine.

Out of the corner of my eye, Nick stiffened with jealousy. His nostrils flared. A rumbling growl echoed in his chest. But he didn’t try to intervene, and I didn’t stop Hunter from kissing me. My brain tried to keep up with the tabooess of this moment.

Two heartbeats ago, Nicholas had his tongue down my throat, and now the tongue teasing my stinging lips belonged to Hunter.

He licked me in the exact opposite way Nick had. He didn’t steal from me; he worshipped me. He lapped up Nick’s taste and replaced cinnamon with spicy mint, making my eyes flutter closed and dreamy arousal pulse through my blood, mingling with the gushing dangerous rapids Nick had conjured.

By the time Hunter stopped kissing me, my eyes refused to focus and the tension in the room from Nick bristling with envy prickled my skin like snow.

“Enough,” Nick snarled. “My turn.”

The feral sound of his timbre erupted through me; everything went hot and liquid. He shifted toward us, but Hunter shook his head.

“Patience, my horny friend.” He gently tucked hair behind my ear, his chest rising and falling. Despite the softness of his kiss, it’d affected him the same way it affected me. It webbed a feeling between us. A feeling of trust and safety and belonging.

I blinked and tried to shake off the sudden heaviness. The absolute cloaking obedience that soaked through my veins, making me pliant, eager, and far, far too keen for whatever came next.

“What’s the safe word, little witch?” Hunter whispered.

Nick sucked in a breath but stayed silent as I murmured, “Purple.”

“And if you don’t use it, you understand you belong entirely to us? Nod your head like a good girl if you agree.”

Biting my lower lip, I nodded.

“You understand that whatever I tell you to do, you do it without hesitation. If you speak back to me, you will be punished. If you displease me, you will be sorry. If you disobey us at any point, you might be whipped, chastised, and left begging for our mercy.” Pressing a whisper-soft kiss on my cheek, he whispered, “Nod your head.”

I nodded.

“Good girl.” Rocking back on his heels, he stopped touching me and a shadow fell over his face. A sharp mask full of irrefutable power. No, not a mask. Whatever persona Hunter hid behind outside of this room—whoever he was in everyday society was the mask. In here, he transformed into his true self. A man who seemed taller, wider, crueller, badder, and completely aware of his unquestionable authority.

Ever so slowly, he removed my handbag before tossing it into the corner of the room, then fanned my hair over my shoulders.

Stepping back, he bared his teeth.

“Get on your knees.” He pointed at the black carpet below. “*Now.*”

The command sent two emotions whipping through me. The urge to disobey because no one had the right to tell me what to do and the compulsion to surrender.

“Don’t make me ask again, Ella. You know what will happen if you do.”

I dropped as gracefully and as carefully as I could. My knees folded. My left ankle popped from a bad break when I was fourteen when I’d taken up trail running. And I sucked in a breath as I rested my palms on my thighs and waited.

Just waited.

How could waiting be such an aphrodisiac?

How could looking up at a stranger I’d agreed to obey set my blood into such decimating fire?

Nick shifted but didn’t intervene. He stayed rooted to the spot, his chest heaving and jeans tented with need.

Bending over me, Hunter pressed the sweetest kiss on my forehead. “You wish to please me, don’t you, Ella?”

Good God, my bones were aflame. My muscles. My cells. My every last piece burned and burned and *burned*.

I nodded.

“Then please me by crawling over to Nick. Kneel before him and wait for my next command.”

My eyes flashed to Nicholas as he stiffened.

It took a moment for me to figure out how to move my aching, smarting body. Tipping forward, I landed on my hands and shivered as the hem of my dress kissed the back of my thighs.

“That’s it. Crawl to him,” Hunter murmured.

I obeyed.

One hand, one knee, over and over, crawling like a cat in heat with my spine arched and skin blazing.

The closer I got to Nick, the stiffer he became.

His face went taut, body strung tight as I stopped at his feet and resumed my demure waiting. I’d never been more aware of my body. Little pieces I’d never felt before. Like the plumpness of my lips as they throbbed for another kiss. Or the way my skin prickled with a million tiny sensitivities. Or the fabric of my G-string directly between my legs, drenched with need, shaming me with how wet I was and making me drunk for more.

Nick reached for me. His fingertips grazed my cheek as he bent to—

“Don’t touch her,” Hunter snapped, appearing at my left with his arms crossed. “Stand up straight.”

Nick shot him a glower. “You’re not the ringleader of this little show, you know. If I want to touch her, then I’ll—”

“Ella. Unbuckle and unzip your Master. Pull out his hard cock with your perfect little hands. Stroke him if you wish, but then insert him into your mouth.” Hunter moved closer and nudged my knee with his dusty boot. “I want to see your lips spread around his dick. I want to see tears in your eyes as you swallow him down as deep as you can. I want to hear him groan as

you give him your mouth. A mouth he's probably fantasised about for months." A sly smile crossed his face as his gaze shot to Nick's. "Does that work for you, oh impatient one?"

Nick choked and struggled to speak. His handsome face twisted as if trying to figure out what to say, but I didn't hesitate this time.

I'd been given a command.

I had every intention of obeying—not because I bought into the fantasy of being at their mercy, but because I found such freedom in following their orders.

Such delicious, delectable freedom in turning off my thoughts. Of silencing my mind and giving in to desire in a way I never had before. I sank into the billowy electrifying beauty of it. I didn't just surrender; I let go of everything.

Rising up on my knees, I reached for Nick's belt.

He hissed between his teeth as I unbuckled the tan leather and left the ends dangling to the sides. With slightly shaking hands, I unbuttoned and unzipped him.

His black jeans fell to his ankles.

I froze.

I expected boxers or briefs.

I reached for underwear but found him bare.

His hard, heavy cock bounced directly in my face. His balls tight and drawn up with the same desperate pleasure haunting all of us. His impressive size seemed all the longer for lack of pubic hair. Not one strand. Just smooth, darker skin and thick veins roping the velvet wrapped steel of his sex.

“A man who grooms.” Hunter clucked his tongue. “I’m starting to like you all the more.” Unzipping his own slacks, Hunter pulled out his cock.

I froze as he pumped himself just once.

Hair framed his equally large length, trimmed into neatness with a razor’s precision. “I’m guessing we’re a similar size.” He eyed Nick’s cock with a critical stare. “Least one of us won’t stretch our little witch too much so the other doesn’t feel how tight she is.”

Nick gagged on a groan. “Fucking hell.”

“Ella...why aren’t you sucking your Master?” Hunter snapped, making me jump. “I gave you an order.”

My mouth watered. I swayed forward.

Nick froze as I reached for him, hesitating at the final distance. An arc of electricity crackled between us just before my fingers latched around his heated erection.

He groaned. Loudly. Explosively.

Hunter laughed. “If you’re that sensitive, I fear you’re not going to last the night.” With his hand still on his dick, he kicked off his boots and moved to the bed behind Nick. “If you want my advice, Nick, let her suck you off for a few seconds and then find something else for her to do. Otherwise, you’re going to blow, and you’ll end up watching instead of participating for the rest of the evening.”

“Believe me,” Nick snarled as his hands dove into my hair, tugging my face toward his groin. “I could come a thousand times and still want more when it comes to Ella.”

My eyes flashed to his. The truth in his tone. The blistering confession.

Our gazes locked as he slinked one hand over my cheek and pressed his thumb on my bottom lip. “Open.”

I stopped breathing as he dipped his thumb into my mouth. Instinct gushed through me. Instinct full of beguile slyness and wicked, wicked wantonness.

I licked him.

He shuddered. “Christ, Ella.” Hooking his thumb over my bottom teeth, he curled the rest of his fingers beneath my chin, holding me firm. An entirely different imprisonment. One that felt so intimate, so controlling, and at the same time, demeaning and almost spiteful.

“He’s right, you know.” He bent a little, holding my stare. “I’ve fantasised about your dirty little mouth every night since I moved in with you.”

I swallowed, staying silent. His thumb meant I couldn’t reply.

His eyes heated as he cupped my jaw even harder. “I’ve wanted you ever since that second night when you dropped spaghetti sauce all over the kitchen. You thought I was in my room unpacking. You didn’t see me as you whipped off your sauce covered t-shirt and cleaned up in your bra.”

I blinked.

He’d seen that?

I didn’t think he even knew I was a woman with the way he’d snapped at me for privacy. I’d been excited to get a new roommate, courtesy of our company. I didn’t like living alone, but by the second night of his coldness, I’d come to fear being alone might be better than living with someone who despised me.

I'd decided to make spaghetti to break the ice forming between us, but everything that could go wrong did. The noodles went soggy. The onion made me cry. And I'd stupidly burned my hand when I went to move the sauce off the stove, causing me to drop it.

"How many times did you watch her?" Hunter asked from his spot on the bed. "Spill all your secrets. Let her know how hard she's going to get fucked, all because you never let yourself have her until now."

Nick tensed but obeyed. "I've watched you every day, Ella. Each time you read on the couch, I wondered how you'd sound if I yanked you onto the floor and fucked you on the living room rug. Each time you streaked from the bathroom in just your towel, I pictured how your damp ass would look with my handprint marking it."

His thumb hooked deeper, forcing my jaw down. "You have no idea how close you've been to getting fucked all these months. How hard I've fought myself not to sneak into your room and take you in the dark." He shivered. "I've had dreams of slapping my hand over your mouth as I woke you, ripping off your panties, and sinking so viciously fast inside you, you had no choice but to submit. You'd fight me. Fuck, you'd fight me. You'd kick and scream. You'd bite my palm and thrash as I thrust inside you, but you'd be no match for me. No match for my desire. No match for my strength."

Bending his knees, ignoring the fact that his cock still speared upright in my fingers, he whispered into my ear. "Want to know why I avoided you at all costs? It's because I could sense how much you wanted to be ruled in that way. I never caught you looking at me like I looked at you, but I sensed your need. It called to mine. And some disgusting part of me believed you'd enjoy fighting me off. That you'd enjoy being forced against your will." His nose nuzzled the shell of my ear. "Just one wall separates me from fucking you

every night. It's not enough to protect you. Not enough to stop me from taking what I so desperately want. So...it was better to make you hate me. Better to keep my distance. Better that I never touched you because if I did...you'd no longer hate me; you'd fear me. You'd report me for all the bad, bad things I'd do to you, and...I have no intention of going to jail just because I can't control myself."

My fingers clenched around his cock, making him hiss.

I trembled on my knees.

Everything he said turned my already burning body into an uncontrollable furnace.

With gritted teeth, he slowly removed his thumb from my mouth. "And now that you know how depraved I am...suck my cock like a good little girl."

Standing straight, he didn't take his smouldering eyes off me as I licked my lips and shuffled closer. Blowing a stream of air on his dick, I murmured, "I wouldn't have been afraid of you. I would've begged you."

And then, I swallowed him whole.

CHAPTER SIX



NICK ROARED.

It was the only word that fit the tumbling, rumbling sound that raged from his lips.

The salty essence of him exploded on my tastebuds. The heat and silkiness of his crown sat heavily on my tongue as I dropped my head and did my best to take him as deep as I could.

Nick stumbled, his hands landing in my hair again, clinging to me for balance. His hips jerked forward, feeding his length down my throat and making me gag.

“Easy,” Hunter warned from the bed. “We both know our little witch is up for fun and games but let’s not choke her in the first few seconds, shall we?”

Nick muttered a curse as his fingers flexed over my scalp, claiming me in so many ways. His stomach rippled against my forehead, turning into marble as he clenched every muscle in his body. “Fuck, Ella. *God*, yes.”

I dragged my tongue up the sensitive vein along his shaft.

He didn’t just shiver this time, he snapped over me, his body folding in half, trying to protect itself from the onslaught of my mouth.

“Goddammit,” he half-grunted, half-cried. “*Fuck*.”

I stuck my tongue in his slit, earning another stream of filthy slurs.

Hunter chuckled on the bed.

Nick clung to my hair as I gave him the deepest, dirtiest blowjob of my life. I wanted to crack his mind. To fracture his psyche. To shred his soul.

Unsheathing my teeth, I dragged them down his length, dabbling with that line of seduction and savagery.

“Fuuuuck,” Nick gasped. “Your mouth. Shit. Feels. So good. Better. Than I. Could’ve imagined.”

“Hear that, little witch?” Hunter laughed. “He can’t speak in complete sentences. A few seconds of you sucking him and you’ve broken him.”

“Shut the fuck up,” Nick snarled. “I’m fine. I’m—Jesus Christ.”

I swallowed him deep, using the muscles of my throat to feather around his crown. Tears streamed from my eyes as I fought every urge to gag. Sweat rolled down my back. My knees ached, and every feminine instinct commanded I get up and stop being subservient, but...those instincts were wrong. They came from existing in a patriarchy. From a society that was so uptight and prudish, it made everything natural and sexual taboo. A society so full of rules and scorn that it’d blurred the lines of who we were and what we could become.

I had no control over my transformation as I kneeled at the feet of a man who’d treated me like dirt for eight months.

I despised his actions.

But...I understood him too.

I *felt* it.

Felt the yearning between us.

The tether, the string, the undeniable connection that warned this wasn't a simple blowjob on a simple night of fun.

This was more.

And more could get us hurt.

Saliva dribbled down his length as I gathered up the wetness and corkscrewed my hand around his cock.

“Fuck. Fuck. I can't—*stop*.” Nick tried to pull away.

I didn't let him.

Having him in my mouth unlocked the floodgates of my power. Power I'd always hid behind. Power borne from my sexuality. A sexuality I'd always denied because society told me it was wrong to want, wrong to experiment, wrong to be brave and bold and brutally honest with what I craved.

A telltale ripple up his shaft and the headier flavour of salt exploded on my tongue just as Nick wrenched my mouth away. “I said...*enough*.”

Panting hard, I rocked back on my heels and licked my lips.

His nostrils flared as he glowered at me. Glowered with familiar disgust and disdain only now...I saw those two emotions for what they truly were: desperation and self-denial.

With a grunt, he dropped to his knees, grabbed my cheeks, and dragged me into the most consuming kiss of my life.

Our lips smashed together.

Our noses bumped.

It took a second to fit into one seamless dance but when we did, we ignited.

Wet and hot.

Fierce and vicious.

He kissed me as if he was dying.

He shoved me out of the persona of bookish scientist and turned me into a wanton, weak-kneed slut.

I devoured him back. I opened wide and let him take. I duelled his tongue with mine as if they were two daggers intent on drawing blood.

We were more honest without talking than we'd ever been. Honest in how blatantly hungry we were for each other. How addicted to this new freedom—where we could touch and taste and taunt.

Another frisson of fear filled me that tonight would forever change me.

I could no longer hide behind falseness.

I loved this wildness.

This barbarity.

I liked the thrill...the chase...the catch...the temptation.

My eyes shot wide as the realisation slammed into me.

Damn, I...I like Nick.

More than just physically. More than just sexually.

I liked his fiercely controlled violence. I liked his recklessness, his ruthlessness.

I liked how he made me feel when he finally gave in to the heat between us.

Nicholas was wrong. We would talk about this again. And again. And again.

We would do this. Over and over.

We would fall into this sick addiction and—

“Get up.” Hunter grabbed me under my arm and wrenched me to my feet. Nick fell backward, his lips swollen and eyes feral.

“Go and choose a weapon,” Hunter said to Nick while dragging me toward the bed. Climbing the three large steps, he sat down and planted me, facing him and wobble-standing, between his spread thighs.

“A weapon? What weapon?” Nick asked, pulling up his jeans to hide his glistening erection.

“Buckle up your pants, take off your blazer and shirt so you don’t sweat through them, then go and choose a whip or two.”

I tensed as I shot a look at Nick over my shoulder.

He stood with his hands balled in a sea of black carpet, looking as if hell lapped around his ankles. “A whip?” he asked ever so softly.

“Or a flogger. A paddle. Anything that takes your fancy.” Hunter grinned. “You wanted to embrace your sadistic side, and I know for a fact Ella longs to know just how much of a masochist she is. So...snap, snap.”

Sucking in a breath, Nick tore his gaze from mine and marched to the rack holding all manner of toys. He stared at the selection of leather strips, strings, knots, and tassels for far too long before reaching for his blazer and shrugging it off. Dropping it onto the floor, he grabbed the hem of his white t-shirt and ripped it over his head, revealing the ridges and valleys of his washboard stomach.

Toeing off his shoes and wrenching off his socks, he successfully stole all my sanity as he stood before a rack of depravity, barefoot, bare-chested, and

tenting his black jeans.

Freaking hell...how was I supposed to function? How was I supposed to speak when he was every fantasy I'd ever had come to life?

You don't have to speak...only obey, remember?

I sucked in a breath as Hunter ran his fingers over my collarbone. My gaze snapped to his as he smiled. The glittery lightning bolt on his cheek caught the sconces, looking like a magical brand instead of a painful scar.

“Like what you see, little witch?” His fingers grazed lower, following the curve of my breast and finding my pebbled nipple beneath my bra. “You’ve seen everything that Nick has to offer. You’ve tasted him. And he’s kissed you twice. It’s now my turn.”

I swallowed hard as he followed the line of my waist, then hip, slowly dropping his fingers beneath my dress and sliding up and up, heading toward the pounding ache between my legs.

I couldn't catch a breath as footsteps sounded behind me, and Nick's fiery heat scorched my back.

He didn't stop Hunter from touching me. He didn't speak. He merely tossed a flogger with multiple leather strands and a thick corded handle onto the bed and bristled.

Hunter threw him a smile as his hand kept climbing. “Your grouchy flatmate got to have your mouth first...but me? I get to be the first to touch you...”

Every bone and ligament snapped into stone as his hand cupped my core.

“...here.”

My eyes slammed closed as every awareness arrowed to the quaking, pulsing need directly in my centre.

Tripping forward, I almost fell, but strong arms wrapped around me from behind, holding me upright and trapped. Nick pressed a kiss against my throat as he grunted, “Spread your legs, Ella. Let him finger you.”

Such a crude command.

Such a dirty, despicable demand.

I inched my knees farther apart, my high heels whispering over the carpet. The moment Hunter had space for whatever he planned to do, he didn't hold back.

“Goddammit, you're drenched.” With dextrous fingers, he shoved aside my sodden G-string, and with a hiss, inserted one long, strong finger inside me.

I moaned like the whore they'd made me.

After needing to be filled for so long, a single finger was both a gift and a tease.

He kept sinking deeper, forcing me to feel every stroke. Hooking his touch, he groaned. Loudly. “And without sounding entirely cliché, you're fucking tight too.”

I cried out as he stretched me, filled me—turning me from needy to positively suicidal with lust. “Oh God.”

His finger eased in and out, thrusting slowly, flaming me to a fever.

“Better prepare you to take both of us,” Hunter murmured, inserting another finger, deep and true. “We aim to hurt you tonight but not split you in two.”

My eyes struggled to open. “Y-You’re going to take me...together? But I thought—”

“We’re not crossing swords,” Nick snapped. “We take turns, remember?”

“Oh, I remember.” Hunter pressed his thumb against my clit, making my legs buckle.

Nick gathered me tighter against his chest, holding me upright. “I’ve got you. I’ll hold you. Just...give in. Take what he gives you. You offered yourself to him to make me suffer. So...make me suffer.”

Catching his eyes over my shoulder, I breathed, “Seeing him touch me hurts you?” I flinched at the smoky, husky tones of my voice. I sounded nothing like me—more like a sex-kitten, urging two men to pounce.

Nick’s body pressed against mine from behind. “You seriously have to ask?” His forehead furrowed. “Knowing his fingers are inside you right now? That you’re enjoying it? Goddammit, Ella.” He bit the side of my neck, sending shockwaves down my spine. “It’s turning me the fuck on, all while I want to rip his damn head off for touching what’s mine.”

Hunter chuckled. “She’s not yours. She’s ours.” Hooking his fingers inside me again, he tugged me toward him, forcing me to trip into the cage of his spread thighs, dragging Nick with me. “Wait until you feel how hot she is. How wet and eager for a cock.” Thrusting his fingers deeper, he dragged another moan up my throat.

“Are you sure you don’t want to see if she could take both of us at the same time?” Hunter asked Nick, deceptively soft. “I’m sure by the end of the night, she could. A few orgasms would make sure of it.”

My body went into pleasure overload.

Sandwiched between two delicious males.

Dirty touches and salacious words.

Testosterone and possession.

Aggression and lust.

These men were both so different, yet they watched me with the same predator-ferocity gleaming in their eyes. My stomach clenched to their unanswered call. I wanted to be claimed and ravaged. Taken. *Used*.

An image of them both inside me at the same time made a gush of wetness cover Hunter's hand.

He sucked in a breath. "Would you like that? Two cocks in one hole? Could you take us both?"

"Enough," Nick snarled, yanking me away. Hunter's touch slipped out of me. With a sinful grin, he held up his wet fingers and placed them into his mouth.

Never looking away, he sucked my arousal off his skin, then blew me a kiss. "Delicious. Just like I knew you would be."

Nick made a noise of furious anguish behind me.

Hot, heavy anticipation unfurled.

Chemistry ran rampant. If someone struck a match, the flame would ignite every pheromone into the largest explosion this small town had ever seen. And I'd be the epicentre of it.

"Bend over," Nick suddenly barked, pushing my shoulder blades and folding me in half. "Hold on to him."

Hunter caught me as I fell, cradling me close all while my feet remained planted on the carpet. The soft thud of Nick falling to his knees echoed

behind me. It was the only warning I had as he flipped up my dress, yanked down my underwear, then buried his face between my legs.

I yelped as his nose pressed in places it should never press, and his tongue

—

Good *God*, his tongue.

I lost all function, all purpose, as he speared his tongue deep, *deep* inside me, drinking me down, licking where Hunter had just touched.

“How does it feel?” Hunter whispered as he kept me trapped in his arms, holding me tight for Nick to ravage me from behind. “Usually you don’t earn a reward like this until you’ve done something to deserve it, but...I suppose we can make an exception.”

Nick’s hands spread my ass cheeks, his nose going deeper, his tongue moving like a powerful snake over my entrance and clit. Forward and back, in and out. His rhythm pulled me into a whirlpool, making me drunk on pleasure.

An orgasm sprang from nowhere—coiling, gathering, spooling.

I couldn’t answer him.

My blood was too thick, too hot, too rich. This entire night had been one terribly tangled evening of foreplay, and I couldn’t hold back.

I’m going...God, I’m going to—

“That’s it. Surrender. You’re his to eat,” Hunter murmured. “His to devour. Feel what he’s doing to you, Ella. Every lick, he owns you. Every bite, he controls you.” Kissing my cheek, he kept me still as Nick’s tongue shoved me higher and higher, coiled me tighter and tighter.

“You wanted this, didn’t you, you dirty girl? You wanted to be trapped between two men who can’t help themselves. Two men who are quickly losing their self-control.” He sucked in a breath as I cried out and lurched forward into his arms, bracing against Nick’s tongue and the fireworks in my clit.

“He’s obsessed with you, Ella. I fear just how far he’ll go after months of fighting how much he wants you.” His voice darkened. “You’ll walk out of here bleeding, that’s a guarantee, but you’ll also fly on wings made of pure pleasure.”

“Fuck,” I moaned as Nick bit me.

Little mewls and whimpers fell from my lips. Noises I’d never made before. But I wasn’t embarrassed. I was caught up in this magic; utterly bewitched by this night.

I spread my legs until my ankles threatened to snap in my heels. My entire body quaked, and sweat misted my skin as Hunter held me prone, and Nick fucked me with his tongue.

His teeth caught my clit again.

This time, I screamed.

Falling all the way into Hunter’s arms, I surrendered to the vicious licking and blatant claiming of another man.

My orgasm reached the pinnacle of pain.

The first band of my release cut into me like the hottest, sharpest blade. I held my breath. I saw nothing but stars. I teetered on that blistering edge of falling.

But then...

Nick stopped.

And slid my underwear back into place.

“No,” I whimpered. “Don’t stop. Finish. Please...”

“Speaking out of turn will earn you a whipping,” Hunter scolded, wiping away the sweaty mist on my temples. “Say thank you instead of complaining.”

I shook my head, trembling, quaking, broken beyond repair as my frustrated release seethed in my core. “Nicholas.” I looked over my shoulder. “*Please.*”

“Thank him,” Hunter commanded.

“I’ll thank him when he puts me out of my misery,” I snapped. “Nick. Make me come. I beg you.”

With a grunt, Nick stood and wiped his mouth before his hands landed on my dress zipper.

“Do what Hunter told you, Ella. I want to hear you say the words ‘Thank you, Nick, for your wickedly talented tongue. Thank you for eating me out better than anyone else has before. I’m so grateful to be the one you decided to taste.’”

I tried to twist to face him, but Hunter kept me bound. I was mad and angry and twitchy and *arghhh*. “I’ll say thank you when you deserve it.”

Our eyes locked over my shoulder.

For a second, he didn’t move but then his face slipped into a sardonic smile full of Satan himself. “You’ll pay for that. You’ll soon be begging me to stop instead of commanding I keep going.”

“Why? What are you going to—”

“I’m going to do what I’ve wanted to do since you first teased me in your towel even when I told you not to tempt me that way.”

Hunter chuckled and rearranged me in his hold. His hands clamped on my hips. His thighs wedged against mine, pinning me firmly in place. “You could use a rope to bind her to the bed, but...I’ve got her trapped.”

Nick nodded. “Good. Don’t let her go.” Ripping the zipper down on my dress, he shoved it over my arms and waited for Hunter to remove one hand off my hip at a time so the fabric could tumble to the floor.

I shivered as the cooler air licked against my feverish skin. I stood in just my underwear and heels, all while my mind crowded with curses. I wanted to argue and demand, but the swirling tingles of my denied release made words hard to wrangle.

Pressing my legs together, I tried to ride through the unsatisfactory clenches wracking my body. I didn’t know how much more I could take before I self-combusted.

Hunter’s amethyst eyes scorched me as he stretched up to kiss me on the lips. One hand went to my breast, dragging his thumb over my hardened nipple beneath my silky lingerie. “Well, look at that.” He glanced at the lightning bolts covering my bra. Lightning bolts that matched the glittery one on his cheekbone. “That’s a pretty cool coincidence. It’s as if you were always meant to belong to me for the night.”

Nick sniffed and shifted closer, glancing at my breasts.

With a smile, Hunter pressed a finger to his bolt-painted cheekbone. “Kiss it, Ella.”

Shooting a look at Nick, I swayed forward and obeyed.

I prepared to kiss him chastely, but the way Hunter sucked in a stuttered breath sent another wash of fiery power through me. My lips wrapped around his finger still pressed to his cheek. In a reckless move, I sucked it into my mouth and bit him softly.

He froze as I circled my tongue around his first knuckle, not sure if I was taunting or seducing.

His purple eyes darkened to aubergine. “You’re very brave for a prudish little witch.”

I hollowed my cheeks and sucked as hard as I could.

He jerked on the bed, and Nick tensed beside me. Both men watched my mouth, their eyes clotting with shadows. Shadows full of sex and daydreams of what else I could be sucking.

Glancing at Nick, Hunter grunted, “I think our girl needs a reminder of who calls the shots around here.”

“Agreed.” Nicholas growled. “By the time I’m done with her, she’ll know her place.”

A full-body clench had my knees turning to water and moisture trickling down my inner thigh.

I wanted sex.

Badly.

I wanted to be fucked.

Desperately.

I was done with foreplay and needed filling.

Gathering up all my courage, I asked in a timid but determined voice. “I already know my place. It’s beneath one of you. So...who’s going to take me

first?”

Chuckling blackly, Hunter lowered his hand. “You ask which one of us is going to fuck you first when you already know that man is me.” He shot a look at Nick. “I called dibs the moment this became a threesome. He’s not happy about it. He’ll most likely take out his rage on you for letting me fuck you before him. He might even hurt you in ways you might not survive. But here’s a little secret, Ella. While he’s granting you pain, it’s nothing compared to the pain he’s in. The pain he’s drowning under all because he’d rather make you bleed than let you think, even for a second, that he has feelings—”

“Enough,” Nick snarled. “You’re wrong.”

“I’m never wrong about these things. Why do you think I started this business? It’s not to fuck my way around the world...although that is a perk.” Hunter’s purple eyes shot back and forth between me and Nick. “It’s to strip back all the bullshit and let the truth flow freely. Not until we’re stripped back to the most primal of our natures do we find such brutal honesty. And you?” Hunter pointed at Nick. “You’re about to face a reckoning.”

“I’ll whip you too if you keep talking.”

“Be my guest.” Hunter laughed. “I like pain with my pleasure. But only if you let me whip you back.”

Nick bared his teeth. “Just hold her.”

Hunter grabbed my waist again, keeping me facing him, grazing his thumbs over my hipbones. “You might be able to lie to yourself that you don’t want more from this girl than just sex, Nick, but the moment you see my cock sink inside her, the moment you see me come inside her...you’ll know.”

Turning his attention to me, Hunter whispered, “But what about you, little witch? How does it feel to know you’re in the middle of a very dangerous awakening? Not just your own sexual embracing but the fact that you’re about to be fucked by two men? One man who is madly in lust with you—that’s me, by the way. And one man who is so knotted in his feelings he doesn’t know, even now, if he would prefer to kill you or marry you.”

I choked and shot a look at Nick over my shoulder.

“No one is marrying anyone.” His jaw clenched and brows furrowed. Fury carved its way down his arms, and his knuckles whitened as he snatched up the flogger and tugged the leather strips with a vicious yank. “But someone is about to get fucked. Repeatedly.” Pointing at my underwear with the flogger, he snapped, “Strip her. I want to see everything. I want every part of her exposed so I can paint her skin a pretty red.”

Dear God in heaven.

Hunter pressed a kiss right between my breasts. “As you wish.”

I breathed hard as his fingers trailed around my back and up my spine to my bra clasp. Nick breathed hard, fisting the flogger. A soft moan escaped me as the fastener popped free. I reached up to catch the cups, but Hunter merely pushed my arms away and watched the straps slide off my shoulders.

“Let it fall,” he ordered.

With every nerve ending on fire, I obeyed.

I squeaked as masculine hands landed on the delicate fabric of my G-string from behind, shoving down the final shred of protection. Unlike Hunter who let my bra fall by its own weight, Nick guided my knickers down and down, his nose trailing along my skin, his teeth sinking into my ass cheek with a quick bite of ownership.

“Kick off your heels,” Nick growled as he slowly stood back up. “I want you completely bare.”

Struggling to breathe, I did as he asked. My G-string clung to my left ankle, then fluttered down the steps as I kicked my shoes aside. They thudded against the carpet.

Air turned far too thin as I stood naked between two very hungry men.

Their eyes seared into me.

Their lust choked me.

Their want made mine erupt with a million flickering candles.

Hunter cupped my breasts with both hands, rolling my nipples in his fingers. The heat he conjured arched right into my core. “You have incredible tits. Doesn’t she, Nick? Wet-dream tits.”

I couldn’t breathe as Nick shifted to study me. His eyes locked onto my flesh as his lips twisted into something tortured. “Stunning. Just like I knew she would be.”

My eyes locked onto Nick as Hunter suddenly stood and kissed me.

A hot kiss.

A dirty kiss.

Plunging his tongue into my mouth, Hunter turned my body to boiling water. Bubbles formed, then steam billowed, killing me from the inside out.

Nick strangled the flogger but didn’t try to stop Hunter from stealing what little breath I had left.

My eyes grew heavy.

I shivered as Hunter’s tongue sought mine, licking me with a need so deep, so true, I couldn’t help but answer.

I licked him.

I kissed him back.

The way he held me made me want to struggle and surrender at the same time.

His arms banded tighter, crushing me against him. His mouth opened farther, and I gasped as the kiss turned violent. I writhed in his arms. Every part of me snapped out of the sexual fog Nick had drugged me with, and I stepped into another wicked spell.

My denied orgasm woke. My blood flowed.

I threw myself into the kiss. Matching his pace, massaging his tongue with mine. His minty, dark taste sent my heart racing. My hips rocked, searching, needing.

His tongue lapped my bottom lip as a growl rumbled in his chest.

Fresh warmth spread through my stomach, down my inner thighs, and scorched between my legs.

I was nothing but heat—delicious, branding, mind-melting *heat*.

“My turn,” Nicholas snarled a second before I was torn out of Hunter’s grip and spun to face Nick. I gasped as I tripped into fresh arms. I moaned as my bare skin kissed Nick’s naked chest. His heat mingled with mine, sticking us together, burning us alive.

His hot, hard flesh scorched my nipples as he pressed me against him. It felt as if we were on a pyre. Two souls turning to ash on a flaming stake.

“Fucking hell, you feel good,” Nick groaned just before his mouth descended on mine, and his tongue shot between my swollen lips. Once again, he erased Hunter’s claiming and stamped one of his own. His

fierceness was exactly what I wanted. Craved. I wasn't here for sweet and tender. I was here for rough and primal. And he gave it to me with nothing bared.

His chest was smooth beneath my fingertips as I clawed him closer.

His guttural growl was pure kryptonite.

His cock wedged against my lower belly, trapped in his jeans but summoning me to touch, to stroke, to ride.

I reached for it.

Nick convulsed in my arms as I rubbed him through the denim.

With a snarl, he stopped kissing me. We froze in each other's arms, breathing hard.

Our eyes locked, and the room fell away. Hunter didn't exist as Nick's façade fractured, and he blinked with absolute wonder. "You're beautiful," he murmured. "So, so fucking beautiful."

His sudden sweetness overwhelmed me.

The moment stretched on as we stared deep into each other. The way he watched me felt as if he could read my every dark wish, every sordid secret. And I *wanted* him to read them. I wanted him to give them to me. I wanted him to promise that this wouldn't just be one night.

But then...the shutters came down, his brows furrowed, and awed wonder bled into black despair.

Spinning me around, he shoved me back into Hunter's arms. "Hold her."

I flinched as I collided with bare flesh.

While I'd been so wrapped up in Nick, Hunter had stripped to nothing.

Blinking, I drank in the owner of this dreamscape, following the ridges of his belly, the jutting hardness of his cock, and the marble-firmness of his thighs as he sat on the bed.

Raising one hand, he pointed a remote at a corner of the room.

Instantly, music rained from speakers all around us. Coaxing, whispering, making love to me with strands of sultry notes.

“What is that?” I asked, trying to pinpoint the smoky, heady music.

Hunter’s lips tugged into a half smile. “This soundtrack will get you off better than you ever have before.” Tossing the remote on the bed behind him, he clamped his hands on my hips. His fingers tightened until he bruised me, holding me perfectly still.

“I know you’ve pretended to be a prude most of your life, so this is probably a silly question. But have you ever been spanked?”

I flinched, glancing at where he held me. “No.”

“Whipped?”

“Never.”

“In that case...allow me to give you some advice.” His gaze fell behind me. “Nick is about to teach you how the body can beg for mercy, all while the soul howls for more. To begin with, you’ll resist the pain. You’ll brace against it. You’ll endure it. You’ll flinch and grimace and promise yourself it will all be over soon.”

The swat of the flogger as Nick snapped it into his hand made me jump.

“Your instinct will be to fight against the pain,” Hunter murmured. “But my advice is to go against those instincts. Don’t resist, relax. Don’t struggle,

surrender. Don't wait for it to be over but throw yourself into the endlessness of it. Give in to the pain and float in the subspace it grants you."

"I-I'm not sure I can."

"Try." Hunter looked behind me and nodded once. "Hold on to me. If you truly can't handle what Nick is about to give you, then use the safe word. But if you really want to be owned by us tonight. If you want to be stripped back to who you truly are and ride the high of uninhabited fucking, then...trust me."

"Do it," he said to Nick.

My shoulders tensed as a draft kissed my spine just before the first *crack* of agony.

I stumbled forward, crashing against Hunter's chest. I cried out as the thin web of agony quickly bled into a blanket of punishment.

I moaned, completely shocked, totally consumed.

"Fucking hell, this is a bad idea," Nick groaned behind me. "I shouldn't do this. I should *not* be doing this."

"Why?" Hunter asked with a curled upper lip.

"Because I won't be able to stop."

"Stop. You have my permission to stop," I gasp-panted, doing my best to ignore the pain, bracing against it exactly like Hunter said I would.

"Tonight isn't just about you anymore, Ella," Hunter murmured. "Nick came here to be free too. And he really, really wants to punish you."

"I don't need punishing. I've learned my lesson. I—"

"Again," Hunter commanded. "Strike her again. If you're going to do it, pick a rhythm. Dance with the music. Make her dripping, screaming, and so

fucking free, she'll sprout wings and fly."

I shied away from Nick behind me, doing my best to climb onto Hunter's lap. "I've changed my mind. I'm not. I don't. I don't want—"

Strike.

I screamed as another ribbon of fire laced my back.

"Jesus fucking Christ," Nick grunted.

"Again," Hunter snarled. "Perfect your technique. Not too hard. Not too soft. Find a balance and give it to her. Otherwise, I'll do it."

"You're not fucking hitting her with anything," Nick snapped just before another crack lashed me.

Pain.

"Oh God. Stop. *Please* stop." Tears sprang from my eyes, pouring down my cheeks.

"Keep going. Unless she says the safe word, don't stop," Hunter barked. "Again."

Strike.

"Fuck, her skin is already pink." Nick's voice didn't sound like him anymore. Dark and tortured. Thick and haunted.

"Again. She won't learn a damn thing if you don't push her to her limits," Hunter barked. "You both wanted this. So do it."

Strike.

"God, I'm sorry, Ella," Nick moaned.

"So."

Strike.

“Fucking.”

Strike.

“Sorry.”

Strike.

My tears turned to sobs as I did my best to run. I struggled and squirmed. I tried to throw myself to the side and get as far away from these sadists as possible.

But Hunter held me firm. Too firm. His fingers bruised me. His immense power kept me bound better than any rope or chain. “Don’t apologise to her,” Hunter snapped. “Set her free. She’s not there yet. If you stop now, she’ll hate you forever.” His mouth turned into a cruel smile. “Is that what you want? Her to hate you? If so, stop now, and you’ll get your wish. But if you want her to feel the same way you do about her, then—”

Strike.

The hardest one. The hottest one.

I couldn’t tell which lash hurt the most anymore. My back was no longer criss-crossed with lines of agony but ablaze in every spot.

“Nick...please,” I begged. “Don’t listen to him. I won’t hate you. I’d never—”

Strike.

I arched my back, screaming as the fire on my skin slowly sank into my blood.

Strike.

“Christ, I’ve never been so turned on,” Nick groaned. “I’ll never forget this.”

Strike.

“Never.”

Strike.

“Goddammit, you’re beautiful, Ella.”

Strike.

“I need to be inside you so. Fucking. Bad.”

Strike.

Pain.

Everywhere.

In my bones, my blood, my breath.

Fire ripped through me with vicious teeth, scorching my veins and sinking deep between my legs.

I tensed against it.

I didn’t want it.

I fought and squirmed and cried, and...something happened.

The fire switched from agony to something else. Something tangled and twisted and dangerously powerful. It soaked into my core. It smouldered in my clit. It set up its blazing home in my nipples and tummy and centre.

“That’s it,” Hunter whispered, pressing the sweetest kiss on my cheek. “Let go. Let it consume you.” Glancing at Nick, he ordered, “Again.”

The savage kiss of the flogger didn’t just strike me this time; it shoved me headfirst into a cauldron of coals and embers and incandescent smoke.

I couldn’t fight it.

Didn’t want to fight it.

The tension in my limbs melted beneath the onslaught.

The stiffness in my bones liquified into bliss as I submitted to wave after wave of cradling fire, carrying me deeper and deeper into a place I'd never been before.

A place of intensity and numbness.

Of severity and softness.

A place full of contradictions with its euphoria and misery, pain and pleasure, need and fear.

I squirmed for an entirely different reason.

The fire switched from punishment to salvation, and...I lost myself.

“Fuck, Ella,” Nick groaned as my hips circled of their own accord. My legs gave out, and I sat on Hunter’s bare thigh.

The moment my clit touched his leg, I whimpered. I rocked on him, using him, chasing the desperation inside me.

The pain drenching my back now throbbed directly in my core, driving me into insanity, freedom, and rapture.

“Good girl,” Hunter murmured, his hands on my hips, moving with me as I undulated on him. “You’re close. So close. Do you want to come, little witch?”

I nodded and mewed.

I gripped his shoulders with hands made of glass as I closed my eyes and rode his thigh.

I didn’t think about how I looked.

I didn’t remember I was human or a woman with accolades and degrees to her name.

I was merely frenzy and ecstasy and madness.

“Come here then.” Hunter wrapped an arm around me. His skin stuck to the stinging flaying of my back.

I screamed.

Nick cursed something I didn't hear.

Pain devoured me.

Pain annihilated me.

Pain absolved me as Hunter pulled me higher and shifted me so my knees landed on the bed on either side of his hips.

The first nudge of his hard cock against my pulsing clit had my eyes flying wide.

My gaze locked with his unnaturally purple ones, and just like I'd shared a moment with Nick, I shared a second with him.

A second full of sharpness and anticipation.

Of submission and permission.

He raised an eyebrow, a last-minute subtle question. I heard the unspoken words as clearly as if he'd said them aloud.

You sure you want to do this?

I nodded.

I raised up on my knees, shaking with pain and a twisted kind of pleasure.

Fisting himself, Hunter held his cock at the perfect angle. With one arm around me, glued to my agony and trapping me in my fire, he guided my hips down.

“Ella—” Nick choked. His footfalls thudded behind me as Hunter breached my entrance.

I cried out.

I’d never been so sensitive. So ready. So close.

I could come.

Now.

Please.

“Wait,” Hunter whispered. “Soon. Let me inside you first. I want to feel you shatter.”

“You fucking son of a bitch,” Nicholas cursed as Hunter slowly pushed me down and down. Inch by inch, my sopping wetness gave him the perfect lubrication to penetrate easily, deeply, completely.

I couldn’t breathe as he filled me.

Couldn’t think or speak or care about anything but throwing myself into the fire blazing in my blood.

I needed.

Needed.

Needed.

Hunter’s eyes tightened as he speared inside me, burying himself to the hilt. No space between us. No condom, no barrier. Just us at our basest levels.

He didn’t kiss me. He didn’t fuck me. He merely looked over my shoulder and commanded, “Again.”

Nick swore before the hottest, hardest lash licked my back.

And that was it.

As pain spread like a comet along my spine, Hunter clamped his hands on my hips and thrust up. He fucked me shallow and sharp, my weight keeping me firmly locked around him all while he drove himself into me, again and again and again.

Strike.

I screamed as another lash landed right over my shoulder blades. I scratched at Hunter's neck. I forgot who I was as I surrendered to every feeling and sensation.

“Fucking hell, I'll never forgive you for this,” Nick snarled as he struck me again and again.

Strike.

Strike.

Strike.

I no longer felt the individual lashing, only the accumulation of sweet, sweet agony.

It filled me with smoke. It carried me away on the wind. It drowned me in the sea. And blinded me like the sun.

“Goddammit, why did you have to feel so good?” Hunter choked, his savage pumps getting deeper, quicker as I clawed at him. “I wanted to last longer than this.”

A flash of crimson filled my hazy vision as I drew first blood on his throat.

“Fucking hell, you truly are a witch.” He bit my collarbone hard. A punishment. A reprimand for making him bleed.

In another world, I might've felt shame and stopped.

In this world, I merely gave myself over to the colour, the rust, the essence, and when his hand came up and wrapped around my throat, I gave in.

The orgasm that'd been haunting me ever since I saw that damn flyer this afternoon chose that moment to twist into something monstrous. Something I wouldn't survive. Something that would shred me limb from limb and leave me dying on the floor.

Up and up.

Tighter and tighter.

“That’s it. Fuck, I feel you tensing. You’re so tight. So impossibly, deliciously tight.” Hunter pounded into me, black hair falling into his eyes, all while his hand tightened around my neck. I breathed only because he let me. I existed because he permitted it.

And I hovered on that final blistering edge, not able to fall off it because he hadn't said I could.

“Please,” I whimpered. *“Please.”*

“Wait.” Hunter spun me around and shoved me onto the bed.

My back blazed.

My eyes flew wide as he stood over me, his feet connecting with the floor, all while my legs locked around his thrusting hips. Nick stood behind him, watching every pump of another man's cock disappear inside me, driving me into madness. Throwing the flogger to the side, Nick unzipped his jeans, kicked them off, then grabbed his own cock, coming to the edge of the bed as Hunter spread my knees, holding them down and wide as he hurt me in an entirely different way.

Barbaric.

Cruel.

But wanted.

Oh, so wanted.

My eyes locked with Nick's as Hunter fucked me harder than anyone had before and the pain in his gaze echoed the pain on my back. Pain of wanting. Pain of denying. Pain of lusting.

Just pain.

"Come, Ella," Nick whispered torturedly. "Come so your bargain with him is complete, and he can get the fuck out of you."

Folding over me, Hunter pressed his mouth to mine, distracting me. He licked me deep, his kiss not nearly as violent as his thrusts. And when he murmured, "Come." Right into my soul, I erupted.

My head flew back.

My mouth parted wide.

And my entire body detonated.

Wave after wave.

Clench after clench.

I died and was reborn, killed and reincarnated, over and over.

So fierce. Too fierce.

On and on, I rode that sea of sensual sin before the painful bands slowly waked into delicious, addictive pulses.

Sated pleasure whispered how easy it would be to float away and crash into clouds full of satisfaction, but the pounding of Hunter's cock kept me

firmly tethered. The aftershocks of bliss quickly switched to sharper spasms of new need, and when Hunter buried his teeth into my neck and roared into my skin, I almost came a second time.

His back turned to stone. His cock rippled with his release. And the first splash of his pleasure coated me in spurt after spurt of sordid claiming.

“Goddammit, take it. *Fuck*,” Hunter groaned.

Nick swallowed a moan, dragging my eyes to his.

As Hunter emptied himself inside me, I fell into Nick’s haunted stare as he towered over us, stroking himself, his knuckles white, his gorgeously handsome face contorted. He looked at me as if I was his. As if I’d been stolen from him by another and he couldn’t survive.

My heart didn’t beat a normal rhythm anymore. It was erratic and thick. I was terrified and enthralled. Caught in the web of sexual energy—unsure how Nick would react but a slave to the consequences regardless.

Hunter jerked a final time, giving a low chuckle of male appreciation. Pressing a sweet kiss to the corner of my mouth, he murmured, “I’ve never been so undone by a woman before. You, my little witch, truly are magic.”

I gave him a wobbly smile, doing my best to remember how to speak, but Nick tripped over his threshold. Every restraint. Every rage. All his fury ignited in a snap of breaking. “Get the *fuck* out of her.” Grabbing Hunter by the waist, he jerked him away, disengaging us with a feral yank.

“Nicholas, don’t.” Sitting upright, I scissored my legs together. My back blazed from the flogger, and the slickness between my thighs wasn’t just my desire anymore.

The knowledge that another man had come inside me, all while the one I wanted waited his turn, sent another quake of sickening, seductive power.

The urge to hide my breasts and apologise came and went as I sank back into the cloudy space of bliss. Nick had agreed to this. He'd agreed to share me. I'd wanted him to be jealous. I needed to see if there was something between us.

And now, I had my answer.

It was written in neon and lit up with bright spotlights.

Nick wanted me more than he would ever admit.

He wanted to fuck me, but he also wanted me in other ways.

I just have to figure out what ways before this night is over.

Hunter seemed to follow my train of thought as he gave me a quick, secretive smile. "If you were aiming to make him confess his true feelings, Ella, your evil plan is working."

"Fuck off," Nick snapped. "I'm not possessive of her. I just don't want her getting hurt."

"Says the man who whipped her like the true Dom he is."

"You told me to do it."

"And you almost came each time the lashes landed."

"And you're the bastard who claimed her orgasm. An orgasm that was mine. Earned fair and square."

"You can have the next one." Hunter lowered his chin. "See if you can make her shatter so spectacularly."

"She shattered because of me, you son of a bitch."

"It was my cock she was riding."

"She wasn't riding it. You drove yourself inside her like a fucking beast."

“And she fucking *loved* it.” Hunter winked.

My eyes volleyed between the two men as they verbally fought over me. My back prickled beneath the heat of Nick’s strikes.

Nick stepped toward Hunter, both of them naked, both with fists clenched and a war brewing between them.

“Stop it. Both of you,” I commanded. “We’re in this together. Remember?”

Holding up his hands, Hunter nodded. “Listen to her, Nick. This is her night. You didn’t have to join in her fantasy, but you did. What she says goes in here.” Lowering his arms, he added, “Besides, she’s all yours now.” He chuckled. “Until I’m ready for a second round, of course.”

“There won’t be a second round, you bastard,” Nick spat.

Hunter glanced at me on the bed. “When the girl I’ve just fucked looks as good as she does, I can assure you there will *definitely* be a second round.” He grabbed his wet cock, pumping it in his fist. “It’s been a long time since I’ve been this turned on. I’m not even going soft. I want her again, so I suggest you hurry up and take her because if you don’t...I’ll be thrusting right back where I belong.”

Nick’s fist twitched.

Hunter narrowed his eyes. “You hit me, and we’re gonna have a serious problem.”

“Nick...” I murmured. “You knew what you were signing up for by agreeing to this.”

He shot me a look, floundering for control. I’d never seen him so vulnerable, so heartbroken. It tugged on my heart. It made me second-guess

that perhaps I should stop this before he decided he didn't want to try for anything else, after all.

“I let him stick his dick inside you, Ella. I shared you as you requested. I even let him come bareback inside you, against every instinct I have as a man. That was the deal. I did everything you asked. But I refuse to let him have you again. He can't.”

My temper crackled to meet his. “You *let* him?” My chin snapped up before he could reply. “Don't you think *I* was the one who let him? That everything about tonight has been *my* decision?”

His nostrils flared. “And your decision is to let him fuck you again?”

Hunter crossed his arms over his flat, carved stomach. Naked and cut from rock, he was one of the most gorgeous men I'd ever seen, let alone slept with.

If Nick stayed true to his promise that tonight was a one-time thing, then...if I let him dictate what I could or could not do, I'd resent him.

But...if he'd truly woken up to how he felt about me. If he was prepared to admit that he wanted a chance, then...I wouldn't risk it.

I'd been lying just as much as him.

Each time we saw each other in the lab, I fell more and more into his intelligence and seriousness. Each time he skirted around me at home, I longed for a whispered word or gentle caress to soften the scorn he gave me.

I'd tried to stop my crush for months.

I hated the way he treated me but was grateful for it too because it kept my heart from fully tumbling, but...if he was prepared to *see me*. To see what

we could have together. Then...that was the ultimate fantasy. Not this. Not a threesome from heaven. This was a dream. Out there was a reality.

And I very much wanted Nicholas to be my reality.

Shifting onto my knees, hissing at the tightness of my back, I pinned him with a stare. “Okay, Nick...if you don’t want me to sleep with Hunter again, all you have to do is tell me one thing.”

He froze.

Hunter smirked.

Sucking in a breath, Nick asked, “What thing?”

“Are you set on this being over after tonight? Are you going to insist that there’s nothing between us and refuse to see where this could go? All because I’m an inconvenience to your timeline of how you figured your life should go?”

He wrinkled his nose and raked a hand through his hair. “You’re asking me if I’ll *date* you?”

“I’m asking you to give us a chance. We already live together. You admitted you’ve had fantasies of sneaking into my room and fucking me. What if you didn’t have to sneak?”

He crossed his arms, mirroring Hunter. “No.”

“No?”

“I don’t want a relationship.”

“What? Like ever?” My eyebrows shot up.

“Ever.” He bared his teeth. “I don’t have time for a wife.”

“Everyone needs someone.”

“Not when they’re dying, they don’t.”

My heart plummeted. “*What?*”

Dying?

He’s...he’s dying?

Nick’s voice turned cold as he said, “I’m determined to find a cure for cancer. Not for the rewards or accolades but because I want to make a difference in this diseased world. With every generation, people get sicker. Corporations get away with murder by feeding chemicals and poisons to unsuspecting populations. They pay off scientists to stay silent and bribe the FDA to slap stickers on foods that are chock-full of pesticides and herbicides and God knows what else, claiming they’re safe and effective, all while knowing they’re killing us.”

“Y-You’re dying?” I whispered.

Pinching the bridge of his nose, he shook his head. “I don’t have time for what I want when I vowed to do whatever it takes to stop the millions who are sick and diseased from suffering and dying. Their death is on my hands, just like my father and his father. Like my older brother—” He cut himself off, sighing heavily.

Hunter exhaled with a wince and went to his side. Placing a hand on Nick’s shoulder, he squeezed. “Their deaths are not on your hands. I lost my older sister to breast cancer. I get it, man. Truly.”

Nicholas looked up, and the tightness in his face eased a little. “According to genetics, I’m statistically likely to get the same pancreatic cancer that the other men in my family did. I might only be thirty-one, but I’m running out of time.” Flashing me a look, he shrugged. “I have to find a

cure before I get sick because if I don't...then I can't complete my promise to do something about this never-ending pandemic."

"So...you're not dying?" I asked quietly.

"Not yet. But it's an almost guarantee."

Climbing off the bed, I went to him.

I didn't think about the blended wetness oozing down my inner thigh.

I didn't think about the stinging of my back or the throbbing of my core.

All I thought about was him.

Nick.

The man I'd lusted after from afar and appreciated his career-obsessed nature, all while never truly knowing what drove him. I'd nursed an unwanted crush for months, but I didn't really know him and that made me ache with guilt.

Without a word, I wrapped my arms around him.

He stiffened and tried to pull away, but I just moved with him.

I jumped as Hunter wrapped his arms around me from behind, sandwiching me between both men.

"We're all dying, Nick," Hunter whispered. "Doesn't mean you have to die alone."

"I'm not putting someone through that," Nick muttered into my hair as his arms tightened around me against his control. "I won't. I've seen what watching a loved one dying does to those left behind, I will never inflict that curse on someone. Ever."

"You don't get a choice of who loves you," Hunter said softly, embracing me tight. "All you can do is be grateful for the time you have."

“Fuck off,” Nick breathed, burrowing his face into my neck. “This isn’t a therapy session.”

Hunter chuckled. “Sex is sometimes the best therapy.”

“Says the owner of a porn circus.”

“Says the guy who believes in love in all facets. Sexual or friendship. Physical or spiritual. I can fall in love with someone for a single night.” His arms squished me. “And be brave enough to open my heart to strangers, all because I’ve learned that every person I meet might end up becoming someone infinitely precious to me.”

Hunter kissed my cheek as he shifted his arms to incorporate Nick, plastering me even tighter between the two naked men. “I’m glad I get to share her with you. Truly. I like you, Nicholas. I like your morals. I like your passion. I like that you have the instincts of a Dominant yet choose to nurture instead. I like that you finally let yourself out to play because no one should go through life repressing who they truly are.”

“You don’t know me,” Nick snarled.

“I know enough to understand you use control as a method of protection.”

Nick’s head snapped up. “You’re saying I whipped Ella because I’m a scared little boy who would rather hurt someone he cares about than actually admit how he feels?”

I sucked in a breath as Nick’s cock twitched against my lower belly all while Hunter’s pressed against my spine. Such an erotic hold yet somehow ever so sensual at the same time.

“You said it, not me,” Hunter whispered. “Isn’t that what you’ve been doing ever since you moved in with her? Hurting her through avoidance, quips, and coldness?”

I froze.

Nick muttered a curse. I waited for him to retreat, but...he didn't.

He permitted the embrace, turning us into an unlikely throuple.

For a long moment, no one spoke but then Nick sighed into my neck. "I didn't mean to be so cold, Ella, but...you affect me. You always have. And...and I can't let that happen. I have to stay on my own."

"Loneliness is said to be the worst disease on earth," Hunter whispered before I could reply. "Loneliness kills, man. It drains us of life. It infects our happiness. Loneliness is the true sickness, but it can be cured so easily."

"No, it can't," Nick snapped.

"Sure, it can. All it takes is a choice. A choice to put yourself out there. Join a club. Message in a Facebook group. Take up a new hobby. People are pack animals, Nick. Your lonewolf attempt is only gonna get you killed."

"I already told you, I'm dying anyway."

"And I told you, we all are." Hunter squeezed us both, gifting such kindness and wisdom, all while we stood in the eye of a sexual storm we'd conjured.

Tears rolled down my cheeks. Not because my back smarted or because I'd had mind-blowing sex with a man who just proved himself to be as beautiful inside as he was out but because it seemed tonight was always meant to happen.

Fate had made me notice Hunter, drawn in by his good looks only to find such a wonderful soul. And fate had nudged Nick to come and blow off some steam, even as he wallowed in misery that I'd never noticed.

I shivered at the poignancy. At the depth this evening had taken.

I'd come here hoping for a few orgasms and a night of dirty freedom.

Instead, I'd found a connection I would never forget. A sense of belonging that filled me fit to bursting.

"Nick..." I licked my lips. "I understand why you want to stay single and completely get your drive to find that elusive cure. And...I need you to know, I won't push you into something you don't want. If you'd prefer to move out and forget all about me after tonight, then...I won't make it difficult. I won't hold you to anything that happens between us in this room. But I do want you to know...I like you. Very much. I *already* like you, despite you trying to push me away. I care for you regardless that we aren't in a relationship, so if you think being together will only end up hurting me, you're wrong. You can't stop how I feel about you—"

"Ella." Nick tipped up his chin, catching my stare. "Don't."

I opened my mouth to argue. To ask him if he wanted to go back to our apartment and forget all about this, but Hunter cut in.

"What do you want, Nick?" His voice was dark and tight. "Do you want to forget about this? Do you want to go home nursing blue balls and wrap yourself back up in chains or..." He kissed my cheek and growled, "Do you want to fuck this delicious little sub? Do you want her begging for you? Do you want her at your every beck and call? Because if you do...I'll be nice. You can have her anyway you want. I'll even teach her how to please you so you can spend the rest of your life alone, jerking off to memories of what happened here tonight."

Before Nick could reply, Hunter lowered his voice to a seductive, spine-tingling murmur, "What do you say, Ella? Do you want to help me cheer Nick up? Tonight took a heavy turn, but that lust still burns. We have a fuck

ton of chemistry together; it would be a shame to waste it.” Rocking his hard-
on into my back, activating the lashes Nick gave me, he groaned, “Are you
ready to step back into lust, little witch? Because I desperately want you
again. And Nick? Well...he really, *really* needs to fuck you.”

My stomach clenched.

My core melted.

Every nerve ending sprang back into the fire that’d cindered me to the
ground, but...I hesitated.

I bit my bottom lip and looked up into Nick’s strained face.

I searched his eyes for a sign that we should stop. That this was too much
for him. That if we continued, it would shut him down and make it
impossible for me to sneak past all his defences and prove to him that it was
already too late not to catch feelings.

I had them.

I liked him.

I liked his selflessness when it came to putting the world before his own
needs. I liked that he would rather cure a stranger than cure himself through
happiness.

I had him all wrong.

His coldness wasn’t cruelty but survival.

His scorn wasn’t nasty but a mechanism in which to exist in a world he
believed he needed to fix all before he inevitably died like his loved ones.

Before I could figure out what to say, Nick stepped out of our shared
embrace. His eyes shadowed beneath drawn brows, lips thin and jaw
clenched, cock hard and angry.

Looking me up and down in Hunter's arms, he balled his hands and growled, "Climb on the bed and get on all fours."

Hunter smirked and let me go. "Good choice." Tapping my butt, he added, "You heard your Master. Tell him thank you and do what he says."

I met Nick's blazing green-hazel stare and every desire, every heated, swollen arousal swarmed through my bloodstream. I prickled with chemistry and threw myself headfirst into the role play.

If Nick wanted a night he'd never forget...I'd give him one.

Stepping toward him, I said as obediently and beguiling as possible, "Thank you, Nick."

"Sir," Nick snapped. "Call me Sir."

I shivered. "Thank you, Sir." Dropping my eyes like a good little submissive, I shifted toward the bed. I only took two steps before Nick's raspy, gravelly voice lashed around me. "Crawl. I want to see every part of you as you obey me."

"Yes, Sir." I fell to my knees.

I plummeted into bliss.

And I crawled.

CHAPTER SEVEN



BOTH MEN FOLLOWED MY SLOW JOURNEY ACROSS the thick black carpet. We made a depraved procession as I arched my back and unashamedly revealed the drenched need between my legs. The glistening of my desire and Hunter's. The swollenness from being fucked. The parts of me no other man had stared at.

I crawled as if I wore a thousand diamonds.

I dug my fingers into the carpet as if I was worth a million stars.

My hips swayed with sordid invitation.

My knees splayed wide in case one of them decided to drop behind me and mount me like the monsters they were.

"Fuck, you look good," Nick groaned, his bare feet thudding quietly behind me. "I can see every inch of you. Every wet and enticingly pink inch."

"She feels as good as she looks," Hunter murmured. "I envy you. Envy that first thrust into that tight, slick heat. Envy how she's going to react finally having you inside her."

Nick grunted.

I flicked a look over my shoulder.

My heart pounded as I noticed both men masturbated. Two cocks, two fists, two pairs of eyes locked between my bare legs.

“Did I say you could look at us?” Nick barked, stroking himself with a shudder.

“No, Sir.” I faced the bed again, slowly climbing up the three wide steps. I could barely breathe as I traversed the top one. I reached for the bed; I went to stand. But a delicious, dark command made me freeze.

“Wait,” Nick ordered.

“Yes, Sir.” I bowed my head, shifting to rest on my heels.

“Stay on all fours.”

I immediately resumed my sex kitten pose.

“Hunter,” Nick drawled with a dangerous edge. “Do you see what I see?”

Hunter’s lazy, heated voice echoed behind me. “I see a cunt begging for a cock. It can be yours or mine...I’m sure she won’t mind.”

“I see remnants of your cum on her,” Nick snarled. “And seeing as she’s now mine to sully and mark...clean up your goddamn mess.”

“My mess?”

“Lick it out of her,” Nick seethed. “Now.”

Hunter groaned. Loudly. “It would be my fucking pleasure.” Shifting toward me, the ground shook a little as he dropped to his knees behind me. His hands landed on my hips, pushing me forward, angling me so he could reach better. With him on the floor and me on the third step, his breath heated my pussy with every word he spoke. “And if she comes on my tongue?”

Nicholas made a noise that tangled my stomach. “If she does, she’ll be punished.” Marching up the steps, Nick stopped beside me and looked down. “If you come on Hunter’s tongue, Ella, I will string you up and edge you toward a hundred orgasms. I’ll use every toy in this room until you’re so

drenched in sweat, so beside yourself with need, you'll forget you're even human. You'll only exist for me to put you out of your misery, but I won't."

He bent down and sifted his fingers through my hair. "I'll leave you on that knife's edge. I'll take you home to our apartment and confiscate all your vibrators that I hear buzzing through the thin walls. I'll tie your wrists to your headboard so you can't masturbate. I'll tease you relentlessly. I'll keep you on the pinnacle until you lose your ever-loving mind and then, and only then, when a week's gone by and you're half dead from want, I'll fuck you until you scream."

Jesus freaking Christ.

A powerful, sharp orgasm spindled between my legs.

A release that sparked from words alone and threatened to erupt just from his warning. If Hunter touched me, I wouldn't have a choice. I would combust. Totally. Eternally.

But Hunter just breathed on my clit, whispering, "I see you clenching, Ella. I would do as he says. Orgasm denial is one of the worst punishments a Dom can give his sub. I know you're more focused on the idea of him taking you home and having his wicked way with you, but...it would be a living hell not being able to come." Running his hands over my ass cheeks, he soothed, "Don't come. Let me clean you, worship you, and prepare you for your Master. Once you're his, then you can come. That orgasm you're dancing with is Nick's, and you don't have his permission to enjoy it. Not until his dick is so far inside you, you can taste him."

Good.

God.

I can't.

I won't be able to—

“Lick her,” Nick barked.

“As you wish,” Hunter groaned.

He pushed me until my face pressed against the black sheets tumbling off the bed. I went to inhale...

And screamed instead.

Hunter's tongue laved from my clit to my asshole.

One long, deep, dangerous lick.

A lick meant to lap up every droplet of my desire and every ounce of his release.

My elbows gave out, pressing my face even harder against the mattress as Hunter licked me again and again. Swirling around my asshole, dragging back to my entrance, spearing deep inside me, cleansing me as well as breaking me.

Noises that could only be called bestial tumbled from my lips.

I lost all control.

My hips shot backward, grinding on Hunter's face.

My teeth bit into the sheet, and my eyes saw comets and stars.

Over and over, Hunter washed me clean. He lapped up our shared arousal, leaving me sodden with so much more.

My forbidden release teetered on such a painful blade.

It would be so easy to let go.

To explode as Hunter scraped his teeth against my clit before dipping his tongue inside me again and again and *again*.

“Don’t do it, Ella,” Nick warned, his hand tightening in my hair, tugging painfully. “You do and I won’t fuck you, after all. I’ll just walk out that door, and you’ll never see me again.”

That was the bucket of ice I needed.

The thought of going back home and finding his room empty? The thought of never sharing this wildness—this wonderful wickedness with him again turned me hollow.

Sucking in a breath, I looked up and caught his eyes.

A world churned in his green-hazel depths. A world of love, of longing, of loneliness.

I tripped into him; Hunter’s tongue became nothing more than a soft ministrations while a simple stare became the most erotic thing I’d ever shared.

“Ella...” Nick breathed, bending his knees and crouching beside me. His cock speared upright, and the image of all three of us, naked and entangled, made me blush: Hunter licking me from behind, me writhing like a creature in heat, and Nick...handsome, heartbroken Nicholas letting another man eat me out all because he wanted no remnants of him to smear the connection we’d share.

“Fuck, I want you,” he snarled just before his fist tugged my head upright by my hair and his mouth slammed on mine. The contortion of my spine made me cry out.

Hunter licked me deeper, losing himself to the pleasure quickly igniting out of control between the three of us.

Nick kissed me viciously. Violently.

His tongue fucked me while Hunter's worshipped me.

Two men. Two tongues. Two moments I would never *ever* forget.

Ripping his lips from mine, Nick grabbed me beneath the arms and threw me onto the bed. He didn't even look at Hunter as he gasped on the floor, his mouth smeared with wetness, his cock dripping from the tip.

I caught Hunter's purple eyes and couldn't speak. Couldn't thank him. Couldn't do a damn thing as Nicholas stalked to the rack holding all manner of depraved things and came back with a coil of black rope.

"Stand up." He toed Hunter.

With a grunt, Hunter obeyed, his hand going to his straining cock, his thumb smearing the precum beaded there. "Fuck, you're really getting into this domination thing."

"Get on the bed," Nick snapped.

"What?" Hunter's eyebrows shot up. "Look, man. I like you, but I'm not about to let you fuck me."

"Just get on the goddamn bed." Nick whipped Hunter with the rope.

With a glower, Hunter did as he was told, crawling onto the mattress and giving me a fleeting smile. "Turns out our mutual desire is now my favourite flavour."

"Don't talk to her," Nick said as he tossed the rope at Hunter. "Bind her wrists."

I threw a worried glance at Nick. "I-I don't need to be bound."

"Speak out of turn again, and I'll spank you." Nicholas kneeled on the bed, towering over both of us, his cock looking like a sword determined to kill me. "Say you understand, Ella."

I flinched as Hunter gently took my hands and tugged me to face him. Keeping my eyes locked on Nick, I bowed my chin. “Yes, Sir.”

“Good girl.”

I struggled to catch a breath as Hunter slowly wrapped the black rope around my wrists in an intricate, fascinating knot.

He caught me looking at it. “I was taught shibari by a woman who claimed she used to be a concubine. It’s come in handy over the years.” Tucking the end of the rope into the pretty design he’d trapped me with, he raised my wrists and kissed the back of my hand. “I’m never going to forget how you look right now, Ella. Flushed with sex. Sweaty with want. And tethered for our pleasure.”

“For *my* pleasure,” Nick hissed. “Not yours.”

Planting a hand on Hunter’s bare shoulder, Nick pushed. “Scoot higher up the bed and lie down.”

Scowling, Hunter obeyed reluctantly. “I meant what I said. I’m up for sharing her in any fashion you want. I’ll tolerate our dicks rubbing if they’re in her pussy together. I don’t care about shared jizz, but...I’m not for sale. Not for you anyway.”

“Your ass is safe.” Nick smirked. “I merely want you to feel what I did when I was forced to watch you rut into the one girl I want more than anyone.”

Be still my manic heart.

Hunter shot me a sympathetic look. “You’re really gonna get it.” Cupping my jaw, he ran his thumb over my cheekbone. “Remember the safe word. Use it if he gets too much.”

“She knows the safe word. Lie the hell down.” Nick pointed in Hunter’s face. “I’m barely holding on as it is.” Wedging a fist in his lower belly, he groaned, “I’ve never needed to come so badly. It’s like I have a dagger in my gut and—”

“It’s butchering you from the inside out?” Hunter interrupted. “I know that feeling all too well.” Laughing under his breath, he shifted until he had enough room to lie down, then reclined onto his back. “Ella definitely has the power to make a man come undone. Filthy little minx that she is.”

I shouldn’t preen under such praise, but I did.

I loved knowing I’d consumed these two.

Loved the fact that by day I was a geeky scientist, but by night...I had the power to destroy men with need.

“Now I’m lying down...what do you intend to do with me?” Hunter winked.

“Ella, go kneel over Hunter.” Nick nudged my knee with his. “Don’t sit on him. Don’t put your pussy anywhere near his cock. I don’t trust him not to slip.”

“Spoilsport.” Hunter chuckled, opening his arms for me to go to him. “Come here, little witch.”

I looked back and forth between both men.

Electricity crackled between us.

Physical bolts of power.

Hearts booming with thunder.

“Obey, Ella.” Nick ran his hand down his erection. “Don’t make me ask again.”

“Yes, Sir,” I said meekly, struggling to waddle on my knees to where Hunter lay sprawled. I tipped forward and shuffled with my bound hands, awkwardly crawling over Hunter until he took pity on me and hoisted me up his long, perfectly muscular length.

“Hi.” Hunter licked his lips.

“Hi.” I did my best to smile.

His gaze locked on my breasts hanging over his chest. “I have to say, the urge to fuck you again is almost unbearable.”

“You do, and I’ll kill you,” Nick snapped, the bed shifting as he came closer to where Hunter held me above him.

“I do have security, you know,” Hunter warned. “Other deviants aren’t the only ones watching us tonight. Hurt me and they’ll hurt you far worse.”

“People are watching?” I squeaked, my eyes shooting to the door.

Two things happened.

One, I froze as the gleam of wide, hungry eyes watched from behind the glass.

And two, I melted.

I burned up, burned alive, burned, burned, *burned* to put on a show. To have what they could not. To be used and abused and—

“You like them watching, don’t you?” Hunter murmured as Nick slowly reared up behind me, nudging Hunter’s legs apart so he could kneel between them.

I groaned as Nick’s hand cupped my pussy possessively. He didn’t finger me; he merely massaged my entire core. I moaned as he pressed four fingers

against my clit, feeling how hot I was. How every inch of me throbbed and begged and pleaded to be filled.

“I can feel every twitch, every flutter,” Nick breathed. “You’re a greedy little thing. Already been fucked yet desperate for another cock.”

My cheeks burned. I spread my knees wider.

“Christ, you look insane,” Hunter grunted, his eyes locked where Nick touched me. He grabbed my bound hands and planted them on his blisteringly hard cock. I had to use every ounce of effort to stay stable and not fall.

I sucked in a breath as his hardened steel slipped between my fingers, slightly powdery from my own arousal drying around him. His size and shape were made for raunchy, naughty sex.

I choked on a scream as Nick inserted two thick fingers inside me.

I clamped down on them.

My unallowed orgasm pounded, pounded, *pounded*.

“Goddammit, you’re wet,” Nick grunted. “So ready for me.”

“How ready are you?” Hunter asked. “Tell your Master how much you want him.”

They wanted me to speak?

I could barely stay alive, swept away by lust so thick, so consuming, I forgot how to exist without these two men touching me, licking me, owning me.

“Tell me, Ella,” Nicholas commanded. “Are you dripping for my cock?”

My head hung heavily. “Yes, Sir.”

“Are you as desperate for me as I am for you?”

“God, yes.”

“Yes, what?”

“Yes, Sir. A thousand times, yes, Sir.”

“Better.” He added a third finger, stretching me, adding a mind-numbing burn.

“Damn that’s a good view.” Hunter rocked against my roped hands. “Do you feel what you do to me?” He pushed his hips up. “Feel how close I am just watching Nick finger-fuck you?”

“Fist him, Ella,” Nick commanded. “Your hand is the only thing he’ll be getting for the rest of the night.”

My fingers locked around Hunter’s erection, squeezing him harder than I’d ever squeezed a man.

With a savage hiss, Hunter threw his head back, his hips bucking upward. “*Shit*, that feels good.”

Nick glanced at the strangers watching us through the door. “Should we give them a show, Ella?” Plunging his fingers inside me, he bit my hip as my back arched, and I choked on a guttural cry. “Do you want them to see how badly I need to fuck you? How badly I’m going to lose control the moment I thrust inside you?”

I nodded.

Over and over and over again.

My fear over people recognising me was non-existent.

My shyness nothing more than a pile of ash.

“Answer me,” Nick ordered.

Licking my lips, doing my best to find my voice, I said, “Please, Sir...please, please fuck me.”

“Fucking hell.” Nick groaned. “Hunter, you might not want her hands on your dick while I do this. She’ll snap it off.”

“With how horny I am, I don’t think I’d care.” Hunter chuckle-grunted but unwrapped my fingers and held them over his heart. “Watch me. I want to see what you look like when he enters you.”

Our eyes locked.

His purple contacts glistened in the sconces.

And for a single moment, nothing happened.

Nick didn’t move.

Hunter didn’t blink.

I didn’t breathe.

And then...

The most erotic, epic, ecstatic experience of my life slammed into me.

Nick grabbed my hips, reared up like a beast, then mounted me in one slick, sharp, *savage* impale.

I tumbled forward, held up thanks to Hunter’s strength and his eyes burning into mine.

I couldn’t move.

Couldn’t do a damn thing apart from feel *everything*.

Every thick ridge of Nicholas as he sank balls deep and claimed me in the most prehistoric way. A primal taking. A primordial claiming.

He twitched deep, deep inside me.

Every inch.

Every surge.

He gave me all of himself, and I choked on the sweetest, sharpest sensation of being completely owned by him.

“Christ,” Nick choked. “Motherfucking *Christ*, you feel so good.”

And that was the last thing I heard as Nicholas snapped.

He withdrew to the tip, then plunged back inside me.

Again and again.

Swift and unrestrained.

No sign of the cultured scientist.

No scorn from my broken flatmate.

Just a barbarian intent on getting his fill.

A rough, gruff caveman losing himself to the most ancient act on Earth.

My back arched as a feral moan wrenched from my lungs.

He drilled into me with muttered oaths and muffled grunts.

Bruising me with his thrusts, punishing me with his passion.

There was nothing sweet about the way he bucked into me.

He was obsessive, possessive, brutal, and borderline cruel.

And literally the best thing I’d ever felt.

“Yes!” I screamed, shoving my hips back, sending shockwaves of energy through our writhing bodies. “God, yes. More. *More.*”

“You’re going to kill me,” Nick panted, his voice tangled with nightmares. “I can’t. I can’t—”

“Don’t stop. Don’t you *dare* stop,” I seethed, anger pouring out of me. Frustrated fury hijacked my sanity; I craved a deeper, darker pain.

I threw myself backward.

I ground myself on him, forcing him to crawl inside me.

“Don’t stop.” I cried out as he thrust particularly deep, making me wince and sob and beg.

“Stop?” He speared right to the top of me. “You think I can stop after this? You think I could ever stop now that I know how fucking good you feel?”

“I told you she’s a witch.” Hunter laughed. “She’s bewitched us both.”

“She’s a fucking menace,” Nick groaned. “She deserves to be punished.”

“So punish her,” Hunter taunted. “Your dick’s inside her. Mark her. Brand her. Make her so sore she’ll remember you for the rest of her life.” Looking past me to Nick, he threw fuel on the already manic wildfire. “She’s yours, man. You know it. I know it. She knows it.”

“Tonight only.”

“If you still think that, you’re a fucking idiot.” Hunter bared his teeth. “But if that’s what you have to tell yourself not to admit you’re in love with her, then by all means. Fuck her like you hate her.”

Oh God.

Another thread of Nick’s leash snapped.

His hips pistoned into mine. Shallow and nasty—a daggering pace full of pain and passion.

Each time he surged into me, his desperation fed my churning, spindling release.

The way he rode me.

The way he needed me.

The things he felt poured through his body and into mine, bypassing words and lies and hopes, revealing the truth.

He didn't hate me.

He didn't even like me.

I stiffened as he bucked into me with a snarl.

He...he loves me.

My mind exploded into sparks.

Could Hunter be right?

All this time...

All those awful moments where he tried to push me away.

“You belong to me,” Nick grunted, fucking me relentlessly. “Until dawn you're mine.”

For a thousand dawns.

“Do you deserve to come, Ella?” Nicholas asked, dark and full of rage. “Or should I punish you some more?”

“Oh *God.*”

“Take it,” Nick hissed. “Take me. Take every inch.”

He shoved me forward, doing his best to feed me his soul and not just his body.

I almost face-planted into Hunter.

He caught me with gentle, firm hands, holding me upright for another man to pummel. “Goddamn, you look beautiful with a cock deep inside you.”

Tucking sweaty hair behind my ear, Hunter gripped my roped wrists resting on his chest with one hand while the other roamed over my prone and ravaged body.

He cupped my breasts.

Pinched my nipples.

“I need your mouth.” Grabbing my neck, Hunter jerked me down so our lips smashed together. I squirmed in his hold, my elbows giving up as my hips shot upward, giving Nick even more leverage to pile-drive into me.

I couldn't get air as Hunter stuck his tongue in my mouth, kissing me as savagely as Nick fucked me.

On and on.

Sandwiched between two males.

Their meal in every way.

My every gasp.

My every cry.

Over and over, they dragged me higher and higher into bliss I wouldn't survive.

Bliss that would butcher me.

Bliss that would define me, ruin me, complete me.

I'd never felt like this before.

Never been so free, all while bound by ropes and men.

Never been so me, all while I had no idea who that was.

There was sex, and then there was *this*.

This riding, this rutting, this ritual of sadistic, masochistic pleasure where pain became the only thing I needed to fly.

Biting my bottom lip, Hunter yanked my mouth from his and sucked in a greedy breath. Holding my cheeks, he kept me aloft, his gaze scorching mine as Nick continued to fuck me so incredibly hard.

No rest.

No pause.

Just a never-ending thrust, thrust, *thrust*.

“Come for him,” Hunter commanded. “Let go and soar on all that need.”

His words knotted in my clit. His permission clotted in my stomach.

But...I couldn't.

He wasn't my owner in that moment.

Nicholas was.

He'd clawed out my heart and devoured it with his every rut. He'd slashed at my soul and left me in absolute tatters. My mind untethered from my body. I spiralled into darkness and carnality. Teeth bit me, pleasure tortured me, and every brutalised nerve-ending transformed into searing, slicing nightmares.

I fell into the whirlpool of it.

A never-ending chasm, falling into the deep, dark pleasure-pain. A brain-burning, synapsis-scalding euphoric submission that crippled me, consumed me, made it hard to breathe, and impossible to escape.

I was tight.

Thick.

Heavy.

Frantic.

Woefully enslaved to this deliciously dangerous paradise.

Oh God.

Oh God!

“Give her permission, Nick,” Hunter commanded. “She’s burning up.”

Nick’s fingers flexed on my hips. “Not yet.”

“Yes yet,” Hunter barked. “Her eyes are glazed, and she’s well and truly in subspace.”

I blinked and tried to laugh.

Subspace?

I didn’t know what that was, but I was here, not there.

I was in bed with two men, my body possessed by someone I thought I had a mere crush on, but it turned out...I was in love with him.

I’m...I’m in love with him.

It’s not a crush.

The moment I admitted that to myself: every stare, every feeling, every conversation we’d shared—every emotion that I’d done my best to protect myself from *roared* into being.

The black room rippled and shimmered. My vision went soft at the edges as a glimmer settled over my mind.

I love him.

And he must love me.

He’s claimed me.

Enchanted me.

I didn't exist without him inside me.

He's inside me.

Yes.

God, yes.

I moaned and gave over every last piece to the man who'd finally decided to adore me.

Every cell heightened into an eviscerating awareness. I didn't just feel his hardness inside me, I felt his heat, his heartbeat, and his secrets.

I faded from everything into just one thing.

Just a vessel.

An element at the mercy of another.

Being granted pleasure beyond comprehension.

Pleasure that tore me in two and stitched me back together in entirely new ways.

I tightened and tingled. I flew and fell. I had no power to focus because all my focus was on *him*.

Us.

This.

Him inside me.

Him riding me.

Him forcing me higher and higher into a rainbow-raining sky. A merciless release ribboned around my heart and laced around my lungs, cracking my ribs, threatening to snap every bone.

Voices sounded far away, down a tunnel and deep beneath the cold blue sea.

I closed my eyes and drowned beneath the sensations of Nick claiming me.

Riding me.

Fucking me in a primitive dance of in and out, deep and dark, hard and deliriously consuming.

“Ella.” A voice that’d haunted me for months. A voice that’d been kind to me in my dreams only to be so harsh whenever I woke up. “Sweetheart?” Lips landed on my shoulder blades as the thrusts inside me slowed and seduced.

They braided with the sultry music still serenading us, scrambling my mind until I saw nothing but light and stars.

Sweetheart.

He called me sweetheart.

Just a silly pet name, but it made every part of me glow.

“Come, Ella. You have my permission to come.”

“She’s too far gone.” Another voice. “Give her to me. I’ll bring her back while you make her shatter.”

“You’re not fucking her while I’m inside her.”

“Just kick her legs out, will you?”

The thrusting stopped just long enough for something to yank my knees from beneath me, tossing me down onto my stomach.

My bound, throbbing hands were thrown upward all while my naked body plastered to equally bare skin.

My eyes flew open as the thickness penetrating me sank exquisitely deep again, grinding my hips against something just as heated and hard.

I blinked through the haze.

I struggled against the tide yanking me down into the endless tingling dark.

“That’s it. Come back to us.” Hunter’s handsome face appeared in my vision just as he kissed me.

It wasn’t just any kiss.

It was *everything*.

It started off sweet, testing me, teasing me back into sanity.

His tongue stroked my bottom lip before dipping inside. He taunted me just enough to make me react. I kissed him back, swept into a different dance. A dance that complemented the one that Nick fucked me with.

But then, it turned sharp.

Nasty.

Bitter.

Hunter bit me.

He drew blood.

And the lacerating, ricocheting pain was the match to all the drugging, drunken pleasure curdling in my veins.

I ignited.

“That’s it.” He grimaced, running his hands down my waist, holding me splayed on top of him. My blood painted his lip as his eyes shot black. “Let him fuck you, little witch. Let him make you come.”

Looking past me, he nodded. “She’s ready.”

Nick planted his fists on either side of Hunter’s head. He folded over me, pressing me beneath him, sandwiching me on top of another man as his cock drove deep, *deep* inside me. “Come, Ella. Now.”

I cried out as Hunter thrust up at the same time Nick thrust deep.

Two cocks.

Two men.

Two ecstasies.

Nicholas hit my G-spot.

Hunter stroked his shaft along my clit.

It wasn’t Nick who snapped this time, but me.

I broke.

I shattered.

I screamed as Nick lost all control and fucked me like he was a demon straight from hell. The devil himself determined to baptise me with sin, burning me alive, flaying me into pieces, smashing me into shards.

“Oh God. Oh *God!*” I balled my roped hands above Hunter’s head. I couldn’t move. Couldn’t do a damn thing to get away from such agonising possession.

“Harder,” Hunter snarled. “Give it to her harder.” His cock lurched against my clit, wetness smearing between us from his arousal. “Do it. Do it now.”

Nick lost it.

He gave me every shred of his madness and I ruptured.

I absolutely, irrevocably shattered.

My orgasm didn't just centre in my core, it denoted outward to my teeth, my eyes, my fingertips. It tore through my heart, set fire to my mind, and smashed apart every single bone.

I screamed.

Loudly.

I jerked and tremored as Hunter kept rubbing his cock on my clit, and Nick took every quake of my release for his own.

“Ah fuck. Ah fuck. Ah *fuck*,” Nick roared in my ear, plastering his full weight over me, driving into me with savage desperation.

“Bloody hell,” Hunter growled, rocking upward, keeping me trapped between their brutality.

We were animals.

Nothing more than a writhing pile of beasts.

The debasement.

The freedom.

The utter abandonment of rules and shame only made me come harder.

Nick bellowed and spilled inside me. His climax only added to mine, driving me higher, higher, hurting me, killing me, freeing me.

Fear came on the coattails of euphoria.

Fear that I wouldn't survive the pleasure-pain.

Fear that I wouldn't have a heart left to beat.

“Let it crash over you,” Hunter grunted, his hands on my hips, his fingernails digging into my oversensitive skin. “I've got you. We've got

you.”

Nick spurted inside me, again and again, setting off another detonation.

I didn't know if this was the same climax or another. I lost all sensation in my extremities. My throat went hoarse as I screamed again, succumbing to the mind-lacerating rapture.

With another roar, Nick collapsed on top of me, his breath gusting in my ear, his body weight crushing me against Hunter.

I wanted that satedness.

I wanted to sink into soft, wonderful silence, but my body wasn't finished.

It wanted more.

Needed more.

My release flickered with pain, taunting me, making me mewl and moan and writhe over Hunter, desperate to finish, beyond sane to free myself from such toe-curling, teeth-tingling pleasure.

“She's not done,” Hunter barked. “Get out of her.” He pushed Nick's shoulders hard. “Withdraw unless you want her to suffer.”

Nick groaned as he raised onto his hands, twitching behind me. “She's still clenching around me. She's still coming.”

“And you're not. That's the problem. She needs to finish. You can't leave her in that state.” Hunter bared his teeth, looking every bit a demon as Nick. “Get out of her if you care about her.”

I couldn't catch a breath as my body spindled and tightened. My clit throbbed. My bones ached. Tears poured down my cheeks as frustration blended with need. “Please. God, please...*please* make it stop.”

“I’ll make it stop.” Hunter kissed my cheek. “I’ll make the pain go away.” Glowering at Nick, he hissed, “Get your fucking cock out of her. Right now.”

With a gasp and a wince, Nick obeyed. Withdrawing, he flopped onto his side, landing beside Hunter and me.

He caught my eyes.

I froze in his stare.

In the endless affection there.

The awe.

The wonder.

The dread.

And then, my mouth dropped wide as Hunter grabbed my hips, shifted me upward, and plunged his huge, hard cock inside me.

Oh God.

I couldn’t think, breathe, move.

The invasion.

The penetration.

He thrust inside me mere moments after Nick had come.

The wetness inside me.

The thick lubrication of mutual releases echoed in the room as Hunter withdrew and thrust back in.

If I had any sanity left, I’d blush.

But I merely groaned at the delicious depravity.

I threw myself headfirst into the new claiming of another man as Hunter jack-knifed his hips up, his belly flexing, his chest dripping with sweat. He fucked me from below, holding me aloft with arms bunching with muscle all while my hands remained bound, and my legs turned to jelly, and Nick watched every stab of Hunter's cock vanishing inch after inch inside me.

The way Nick stared at me.

The aching, breaking longing in his face.

With his cock still full mast and his eyes absolutely tortured, Nick grabbed my chin and kissed me.

He kissed me like he loved me.

Kissed me like he cursed me.

He kissed me and kissed me, and when Hunter thrust achingly deep inside me, I screamed into his mouth.

I moaned and groaned and exploded for a third blinding time.

Over and over, wave after wave. Banding, cutting pain sliced through my every cell as I came all over Hunter's cock.

"That's it. Give it to me. Yes. Fuck yes. Yes!" Hunter rutted into me, his fingernails drawing blood. His ferocity passed demonic, slipping straight into fiendishly frantic.

"Fucking hell," Nick groaned as he ripped his mouth from mine and watched as Hunter jerked and spent inside me. His jaw clenched and his eyes clouded as I accepted yet another man's quaking, pouring pleasure.

I wanted to say something to ease his agony, but my release kept going. On and on, wringing me dry, coiling me tight, threatening to stop my heart and slaughter me.

Throwing his head back, Hunter clamped me down on top of him, grinding his cock a final time, feeding me the last splashes of his climax.

And that was where my final pulse found me.

Impaled on his cock.

Entirely at his mercy.

Fucked by two men and covered in their cum.

I cried out and rode that final wonderful wave.

And then, I flopped over him.

I went utterly boneless as my own release finally stopped torturing me, and I clawed for sweet after such savage sharpness.

Nicholas shifted beside us.

Hunter sighed heavily beneath me.

I waited for the sense of completion.

I wanted to rest. To explore the girl left behind in the rubble of such a night.

But then, hands were grabbing me, wrenching me off Hunter's cock, pulling me across the bed until I tripped off the side and almost fell down the three steps.

"What...?" I blinked and swayed as Nick grabbed my roped wrists and shoved them above my head. The bindings latched onto a hook on the four-poster bed I hadn't noticed, holding me upright even as my knees threatened to give out.

"Nick...?"

I didn't recognise him.

Didn't see the scientist who had to wear glasses to read. Didn't recognise the man I shared a home with.

All I saw was a man wracked with absolute agony. A man too far gone to be reasoned with. "He can't be the last one to have you. He can't."

Grabbing my leg, he hitched it over his hip and stepped into me. "I'm sorry." Ducking from his tall height, he fisted his still hard cock and slammed into me with a guttural bellow.

I clenched around his invasion, burning, burning, burning.

My body clamped down on his cock, making him curse.

"Jesus Christ." Nuzzling his face in the crease of my throat, he licked me, then bit me. "You're so wet. From me. From him. So fucking wet."

I struggled to breathe as I stood there, head swimming, body singing. Rivulets of cum ran down my inner thigh. Mine, Nick's, Hunter's.

My nerve endings didn't know how to survive this new ruling.

I'd been fucked into oblivion, yet I had to endure more.

Strung up like a sacrifice.

Consumed like an offering to some deranged god.

"Nick...I-I can't. I'm—"

"Please." He stood tall, holding himself still but twitching inside me. "I need you, Ella. I need to come inside you one last time. To erase him. To ensure it's me you feel. Only me."

Not waiting for my reply, he ducked his head and kissed me.

As he took my mouth, he took my body.

One hand caressed my waist while the other cupped my face. I expected him to drive into me as hard and as fast as before. I braced against such a rutting, not sure I would survive it.

But he surprised me by trading savage for seduction.

He rocked into me with soft, deep reverent strokes.

He fed me every inch of himself as if it was his heart he gave me and not just his body.

Steady and sweet, worshipping and wanton, touching my soul with every unspoken prayer.

My skin prickled as Hunter shifted to kneel beside me on the bed. He ran his hand through my hair and whispered into my ear. "Let him love you, little witch. Let him break himself because that's what he's doing."

I opened my eyes.

I kissed Nicholas back as he made love to me.

And I nodded at Hunter as he sat back and watched the show.

I lost all sense of time as I closed my eyes again and sank into Nick's spell.

I let him direct me. Allowed him to tug my hips forward so he could angle a little deeper. I moaned as he dropped his hand and rubbed my clit. I gasped as he sucked on my tongue and kissed me with respect and homage.

My body reacted.

Quieter this time.

Billowy and feathery, no longer able to reach those excruciating heights of delirium. This new spindling was gentle. Satiny and silky as Nick's cock

slid in and out in the slowest, softest rhythm, gradually replacing the shared pleasures of the three of us with just him.

Every thrust, he invaded my heart.

Every kiss, he made me trip a little more.

He ran his hand up my leg still hitched over his hip, fondling me as if I belonged to him.

I'd been fucked multiple times tonight. I'd had sex with other men before today. But until that moment, I'd never known the difference between the act of sex and the art of making love.

Nick moaned into my mouth as he deepened the kiss. His hands trailed up my body, skating his fingers over my nipples before his palms locked around my wrists, still tethered to the hook on the four-poster bed.

I waited for him to release me.

I sucked on his bottom lip for him to turn wild.

But he merely took me a little harder, a little deeper, a little more, and...I fell.

More was what I'd been afraid of.

More would get me hurt.

But as Nicholas sucked in a breath and pulled back just enough to stare into my eyes, I didn't care that he had the power to destroy me. I didn't care as he pressed his forehead to mine and whispered, "I'm going to come. Do you want to join me?"

I didn't care as I nodded and gasped as his hand went between my legs to my oversensitive clit.

I didn't care as he stroked me.

I didn't care as he pumped inside me.

And I didn't care as he choked on a breath, and his cock rippled with bliss. Spurt after spurt, coating me in his cum, triggering my own release.

My last one.

One full of petals and sunlight, granting me the oblivion I so desperately needed.

As subtle as my fourth release was, it was my favourite because it filled me to the brim of emotion. A pink light beaming with love. A white light glowing with satisfaction.

I didn't care...because I was in love with him.

And it was more than I could've possibly imagined.

Basking in the gentle lapping of tenderness, I shivered as Nick held my stare and poured everything he was deep, deep inside me. He gave me his secrets and his tortures, his hopes and his dreams. His release lasted longer than mine as his lips pulled back in a grimace, and he spilled the final few drops of his seed.

He never looked away.

Never blocked me from seeing the way he felt about me.

He didn't try to lie.

He didn't try to hide.

And I knew, without a shadow of a doubt, he felt more too.

CHAPTER EIGHT



WE STOOD THERE FOR AN ETERNITY.

An endless moment where our breathing slowed, and our awareness of where we were and what we'd done slowly ruined the only thing that truly mattered.

Us.

Me and Nick.

As one.

We'd slept together.

No, that was wrong—a massive, colossal understatement.

We'd stepped into hellfire together. We'd forged into one person, one heart, one life.

The weight of such a transformation choked my soul even as I hesitantly embraced it.

Did Nick feel the same things I did?

Did he feel reborn?

Did he feel as if we'd stepped into this circus fighting the tide of inevitability, and now that we'd given in, we'd drowned?

The languid delight I'd been waiting for cloaked me, heavy and warm.

Regardless of what the future held, I floated on wispy wings of contentment.

Sagging in the binds, I struggled to keep my eyes open as they begged to close and drift into sex-addled sleep.

I'd never been so tired.

Kissing me ever so sweetly, Nick reached up and unhooked my wrists. Pressing me against the four-poster, he hissed between his teeth as he disengaged, and a gush of wetness rolled down my inner thigh.

I'd entered this room with a fetish I hadn't even known I had for body fluids. And now, the multiple orgasms of two men dripped down my leg and stained the black carpet below.

They'd given themselves to me.

They'd painted me in their cherishment.

And covered me in their carnal debasement.

It was lewd and sticky and all kinds of wrong, yet I positively adored it.

Inhaling my first deep breath in a while, the musty scents of sex shot up my nose.

Propriety interrupted my serenity, whispering that I should have a shower and leave. That the dream was over, and it was time to return to reality.

I did my best to move, but the thought of leaving...of dressing and going home...it was too much.

Tears sparkled on my eyelashes as I swayed into Nick.

"I've got you." He caught me with strong arms and scooped me up like a bride. Placing me on the bed beside Hunter, he unwound the black rope imprisoning my wrists. Once I was free, he tossed the rope away, then kissed

the red abrasions left behind as if his lips held healing magic and could cure me.

It was nice.

Too nice.

So nice to be doted on and treasured.

I didn't know if it was Nick's lips or the knowledge of what we'd done tonight, but parts of my soul felt as bruised as my body. Fragile and breakable, all while my blood flowed with the worst kind of sedative.

I yawned as the cloaking satedness turned even heavier.

Glancing at Hunter who sat beside me, his body relaxed and cock slowly going flaccid, I did my best to smile. I tried to remember how to be human, when really, I was just a puddle of pleasure.

His purple eyes caught mine; my heart skipped a beat.

I felt connected to him. Bonded through sharing ourselves in the rawest possible way.

"You're absolutely radiant," he whispered. "Well fucked looks good on you."

I blushed as Nicholas pressed kisses up my arm, slowly making his way to my shoulder and neck.

Goosebumps broke out, and my nipples pebbled.

Taking one in his mouth, Nick sucked me softly before sitting tall and looping an arm around my waist. "Thank you, Ella. You've given me a night I'll remember for the rest of my life."

I yawned again and flopped my head on his chest. His heartbeat thundered in my ear, skipping occasionally as if it hadn't calmed down.

I had no strength to reply.

Considering what we'd done together, sitting side by side with our naked thighs all sticking to one another and our skin as bare as the day we were born, it felt chaste and wonderful.

Hunter wrapped his arm around my waist too, cradling me between them, their hands cupping my opposite hips, their possession strong, even now.

I could get used to this.

I could fall for two men.

I could very easily be shared for the rest of my existence...if these two were doing the sharing.

I tensed for Hunter to say our time was over and we had to go, but he merely pressed a kiss to my temple and fell backward, taking me and Nick with him.

The bed cocooned us.

Sleep clouded.

Sighing, I snuggled deeper into their powerful arms.

With unspoken agreement, Hunter turned me away from him, pulled me higher up the bed, then spooned me while Nick cuddled me close from the front.

Warm muscle enveloped me.

Masculine strength guarded over me.

I felt exquisitely safe and endlessly precious.

Perfect.

Absolutely perfect.

“Hunter?” I asked sleepily.

“Hmm?” He nuzzled into the back of my neck.

“Can...can we sleep here tonight?” I breathed, nerves scattering up my spine. “Me and Nicholas?”

Hugging me tighter, Hunter shot Nick a look over my shoulder and grinned. “Don’t want to say goodbye just yet, huh?” His fingers drew patterns on my hip, sending scores of bliss through my blood.

Even now.

Even after an evening of the best sex of my life, my skin reacted. It hummed and thrummed and welcomed.

“He has a business to run, Ella,” Nick murmured. “I need to take you home.”

I frowned and made an annoyed little groan.

Hunter chuckled. “I like you too, little witch. And you’re both welcome to stay but...I don’t have showers in the big top. Sourcing water in the parks where we set up is always an issue. It would make me very happy if you spent the night here...with me. But before we can rest, we need to take care of you.”

I shook my cotton-wool-stuffed head. “You *have* taken care of me. A little too well. I can barely feel my legs.”

Hunter snorted and kissed my cheek. “I don’t mean in that way. I meant aftercare.”

“Aftercare?”

Before Hunter could reply, Nick ran his thumb over my cheek. “It’s a Dom’s job to look after his sub. We’ve used and abused you, Ella. You’ve

been the recipient of our lust and are covered in our cum. Your back is lashed, and your wrists are raw. You have scratches on your hips and a wound on your bottom lip. What sort of monsters would we be if we hurt you and then didn't try to heal you? Especially after what you gave us."

Hunter nodded. "Nick's right. We were rough with you. You deserve us to worship you now."

"But you did worship me. Many times."

Hunter chuckled. "Fine, call it pampering, then." Untangling himself from the nest of body parts we'd made, he scooted off the bed and stood with a pop of his spine and an impressive stretch. Even with his erection softening, his body still sent pinwheels of attraction through me. His abs, his muscles, his effortless power.

A lance of jealousy filled me.

How many other girls had he fucked until they were speechless, only to tend to her as if she was the most precious thing in the world? How many towns had he found a girl like me? Sexually repressed and just waiting for him to wake her up?

He's not yours, Ella.

It was just one night.

And besides...

I focused on the man embracing me. The man I'd lived with for so long.

I had Nick.

An effervescent glow filled my chest.

Nicholas.

After what happened here tonight...he couldn't deny that something existed between us. Something passionate and real and raw.

Sucking in a breath, Nick nudged his knuckles beneath my chin and stared into my eyes.

I smiled with my heart wide and trusting, but then I stiffened as ice trickled down my spine.

“Ella, I...” Whatever openness he'd shared while his body had been inside mine swiftly closed. A door over his soul and blackout curtains over his eyes. Just like I hadn't been able to read him for the past eight months, I struggled to read him now.

My glow extinguished.

“Nick?”

Frowning, he ran his tongue over his bottom lip.

He went to speak—

Someone knocked on the door.

All of us glanced at the exit, freezing into statues.

No strangers watched us anymore, drifting onto other rooms where circus goers still played, but I wasn't prepared for it to open and Giselle to step inside.

Gasping with embarrassment, I snatched for the bedsheet, wrapping the black satin around me the best I could. Nick draped the end over his lap while Hunter stepped down the three steps and padded toward his second in command as if she'd seen him naked all the time.

“What is it, Gis?” He cupped between his legs as he reached her, shooting Nick and I a look before forcing his entire attention on her.

Giselle shot me an apologetic glance before squaring her shoulders and saying, “I waited for you to be done, but...we have a situation.”

“What situation?”

“Two guests brought a girl with them. Their paperwork checked out, and their identifications showed the appropriate ages, but...”

“Fucking hell, not again,” Hunter snarled. “Bloody predators.”

“What...what’s happened?” I asked, fisting the sheet between my breasts.

Hunter stalked to his slacks strewn on the floor. Yanking them on, he zipped up, then stabbed his arms into his shirt. “Instead of following the rules, lowlife scum think they can do what they want. In my circus! A place of freedom and enjoyment, not abuse and terror. I’ll gut them if they’ve laid a single finger on her.” Whirling on Giselle, his voice tightened. “Why did you wait for me to finish? You should’ve alerted me the moment they stepped foot on my ground.”

“I’ve been watching them. They’ve merely been taking in the sights so far. The girl is currently having a good time. Either she’s open to being with them or they’ve lied to her, but right now, she hasn’t been touched.”

“How old?” Hunter balled his hands.

“I had my suspicions when her ID said she was twenty-two. I used the automatic photo capture and ran a facial recognition check.” Giselle spoke quietly but calmly. “The two men she’s with are her uncle and one of his friends. Her true age is fifteen.”

“And how old is her sleazy uncle?”

“Forty-seven.”

“Jesus.” Nick cursed beside me. “What sort of place are you running here, Hunter?” Standing, he shot down the steps and grabbed his jeans. Shoving his legs into them, he hoisted them up and tucked himself away, judgement oozing out of him. “Those sick bastards have brought a minor here, and you’ve given them the space to—”

“I haven’t given them anything. *Yet.*” Hunter charged at Nick and shoved a finger in his chest. “Stick around, and you’ll see what they’ll get for being such raping bastards. I have a special treat for predators who think they can prey on innocents.”

“What are you going to do?” I asked, glancing at my dress on the carpet, craving the thin fabric to wrap around my nakedness.

“I’m going to teach them a lesson.” Hunter smirked with sin in his amethyst eyes, the lightning bolt on his cheek slightly smudged from our evening. “I’m going to show them exactly how it would feel to be on the receiving end of whatever games they were about to play with his underage niece, and then I’m going to hand deliver them to local law enforcement.”

“Is that wise?” Giselle asked quietly. “You remember what happened last time you took police matters into your own hands? Perhaps we should just print out the file on him and make a citizen’s arrest? He’ll be dealt with.”

“Not dealt with enough, in my opinion,” Hunter muttered. “You know how I like to make these guys suffer, Gis.”

“File? What file?” Nick asked, glowering at Giselle.

She flicked a look at Hunter, asking permission to share. When Hunter nodded, she said, “We have an advanced database—courtesy of agencies we shall not name. We have technology and protocols in place to protect our guests in every way possible. Every town we go to there are always one or

two bastards who can't help themselves and think they can use our big top as a safe place to do God knows what to victims who are either known to them or snatched off the street."

Tensing, she muttered, "You wouldn't have noticed, but...all kinds of biological data are being recorded when you stand in front of my booth and fill in that questionnaire: your temperature to see if you're sick, your pheromones to see if you're excited or scared. We even have a sensor on the pen that takes trace samples of your sweat to see if you have noxious substances in your bloodstream."

So that's why she looked at her laptop screen as I held it.

Nick glanced between Hunter and Giselle. "I thought this was just a kink fest? Yet now I find out you're travelling vigilantes ridding the world of rapists?"

Hunter smirked. "Your words, not mine."

"How many?" Nick crossed his arms. "How many men have you stopped?"

"Don't forget women." Hunter shuddered. "They can be deadly when they want to be. I've had to save a few unsuspecting boys from being eaten alive by femme fatales."

"How many?" Nick asked again, deceptively quiet.

Shrugging, Hunter glanced at Giselle. "What's our last number, Gis? I'm starting to lose count."

Giselle stepped closer to Nicholas with a beaming smile on her pretty face. "*Spectacle of Secrets* has operated for seven years. We've travelled the world. We've satisfied hundreds of thousands of people and..." She puffed up

her chest. “Have personally ended the reign of nine hundred and eighty-two paedophiles.”

“Nine *hundred*...?” I coughed. “That’s...insane.”

A sickening number. And even worse, it represented a fraction of the monsters that truly existed out there.

“When we get to one thousand, I’m hiring someone to help me.” Hunter caught my eyes. “I’m getting jaded. I wasn’t aware of how jaded until I spotted you in your car today.”

My stomach flipped as Hunter came toward me and gathered me in his strong arms. Pulling me off the bed, he wrapped the black sheet around me, then hugged me tight. Pressing his forehead to mine, he stared painfully deep into my soul. “I haven’t felt the kind of lust I did for you in a very long time. Sex has become tainted for me. I mingle with horny guests every night, yet all I see are the monsters who shouldn’t belong.”

Kissing me softly, he whispered, “So thank you, Ella. Thank you for reminding me of why I run this circus. I made this business, not as bait to trap those who deserve to die, but because sex truly is the greatest pleasure we have. Sex given with consent. Sex between one or multiple partners. Sex because lust is agonising and love is consuming.”

Licking the wound he’d left behind on my bottom lip, he sighed. “I doubt we’ll see each other again, little witch, but I want you to know...you took my body tonight but you also took a piece of my heart. I’m half tempted to carry you away with me. To steal you from this town and keep you for myself, but...” He looked up and caught Nick’s eyes where he glowered at us by Giselle.

“Come.” Unwrapping his arms from around me, he took my hand and pulled me toward Nicholas. I couldn’t breathe as he pushed me gently into Nick’s side. “I have a feeling if I stole you, I’d break more than just one heart.”

Nick didn’t touch me.

He sucked in a breath, and in a heartbreaking, horrible move, he stepped away from me.

I froze with my black sheet pooling like nightmares around me.

Hunter narrowed his eyes at Nick but then captured my cheeks and kissed me one last time. “I will never forget you, Ella, and I hope you never forget me. But...a word of advice. It seems as if you’re drawn to men who like to help others. Nick has the unwavering commitment to eradicate the world of cancer, and I have the undying desire to slaughter every single sick son of a bitch I come across. Maybe, through our tireless work, we can make a difference and the world will one day be a happier, healthier place, but...no matter our responsibilities and pledges to our chosen causes, you should never, *ever* come second best. You should be the only commitment a man makes. That’s the least you deserve, and it’s why I can’t steal you even though I would very, very much like to. I can’t because I don’t deserve you. I know in myself that when we leave this town tomorrow and go to another, my focus will be on hunting monsters, not providing you with a safe and stable home.”

Tears welled and rolled down my cheeks.

Not because I’d wanted him to take me but because he spoke with such conviction and apology. “I’m endlessly grateful I met you, Hunter. That I got to share this incredible night with you. I’ll never forget you or what we did.”

“You too.” Giving me the softest smile, he whispered in my ear, “Don’t let his coldness hurt you, Ella. Nick is an imbecile, waging a war on himself. He’s completely besotted with you, but if you want him...you’re going to have to break him. He won’t have the power to do it himself.”

Catching my stare, he rubbed away one of my tears then rounded on Nick with a hurricane of animosity. “And you...” Crowding Nick, he seethed, “I get why you’re focused on work. And I get why you don’t want to love another or for someone to love you, but...you’re a fucking idiot.”

Nicholas balled his hands. “I suggest you back off or—”

“She’s out of your league, man. She deserves a lover who will rule her in the bedroom and cherish her in life, yet you don’t have a life, do you? She wants you, but you have nothing to give her in return. No heart. No soul. You’re content to stay lonely and miserable, and I can’t change that. Even Ella can’t make you change, so...that’s on you. I have no idea what’s going on in that head of yours after what we’ve done here tonight, but what I do know is, if you don’t take Ella home, if you don’t bathe her, tend to her injuries—injuries you gave her—and care for her the way she deserves to be cared for, then I’ll pay you a visit before we leave and ensure that by the time I’m through with you, someone will need to provide *you* with aftercare.”

Marching to Giselle, Hunter stopped with his hand on the doorknob. Turning back to us, his gaze softened on mine then hardened on Nick’s. “I’ll never forget what we shared. I hope you enjoyed your visit to *Spectacle of Secrets*. Goodbye.”

He swept out of the room.

Giselle ran after him.

And I never saw Hunter Dixon again.

CHAPTER NINE



A BLACK CAR SLID OUT OF THE NIGHT the moment Nick and I exited the big top's fence line. I flinched and went to get out of its way, but the window rolled down, and a girl with a huge halo of ebony curls grinned. "Mr. Dixon requested I drive you home. His words were, quote, unquote, 'Please drive my friends back to their place as they've had a strenuous night and aren't in a state to walk.'"

"How does he know we walked?" Nick asked, his nose wrinkling with suspicion.

The same way he knew how we felt about each other without asking.

...Magic.

I shot him a look, doing my best not to prickle with heartache but unable to stop it. With every second that passed, he pulled away even more. He hadn't spoken a word to me as we bypassed the rooms where plenty of other circus-goers still indulged in sinful games. He jerked away every time I inched closer, and refused to make eye contact with me.

His entire body language throbbed with...regret.

He regrets what we've done?

He regretted the joy of being free? Of indulging in something that I doubted we'd ever indulge in again?

Tears stung, but I sniffed them back and smiled at the driver. “A lift would be great, thanks so much.” Not looking at Nicholas, I opened the back door and slid onto the cold leather seat. Nick waited for me to shuffle to the other side before slipping inside and closing the door.

“What’s your address?” The girl twisted in the driver’s seat, holding her phone with the map app open.

“It’s forty-four Tagon Crescent,” Nick murmured, looking out the window.

The tension between us already fogged the small space.

“Great.” Inputting our location and placing her phone in the dash holder, the girl eased the car into a comfortable speed and drove us away from Hunter and his secrets.

The purple-and-silver big top vanished into the night, replaced with familiar streets flickering beneath glowing lights. Cosy homes lined the pavements, judging us as the car turned into our cul-de-sac and slowed outside our unassuming rental.

I studied it like a stranger.

I noticed the weeds around the steppingstones. The wilted spinach I’d planted last month and the cherry tree that desperately needed a prune. I’d left my bedroom light on in my rush to chase euphoria, and my lonely bed with its cream and lacy cushions seemed woefully uninviting.

I’d been lucky enough to know what it felt like to be wanted so badly by two men that my body held remnants of their desire even now. My inner thighs were disgustingly sticky from their pleasure. My lips sore from their kisses. My back stinging from Nick’s lashes.

But now...now all I felt was rejected and forsaken and...unwanted.

I thought he felt what I did...

“Thanks again for the lift.” I gave her a watery smile. “Please tell Mr. Dixon we appreciate it.”

“Will do.” She beamed. “Have a great rest of your night. Not that it can be called night for much longer.” Pointing at the glowing digits of the dash clock, she giggled. “Four thirty-seven. Past the witching hour and ready for dawn.”

Nick grunted in shock. “We were in there for six hours?” For the first time since leaving that decadent black room where he’d fucked me harder than any man, he met my eyes. “Six *hours*?”

“People seem to lose track of time when they’re in *Spectacle of Secrets*.” The girl grinned. “I’ve seen one couple be so deep in their scene that the work crew had to start dismantling the circus around them and wait for them to finish before we could leave town.”

My heart ached.

I rubbed it and opened the door. “Guess they had a good time, then.”

“Pretty sure it was the first night of their honeymoon.” The girl laughed. “They pitched up in a tux and a wedding gown. Said they’d just got hitched and the afterparty had been arranged by their very religious parents. They’d been holding off for marriage, but after a few drinks and finally admitting that a quick wham-bam in missionary wasn’t what they wanted to solidify their nuptials, they turned up at our place.”

“Guess there’s a deviant in all of us,” Nick muttered, opening his door and climbing out.

I flinched as he slammed the door.

The girl gave me an apologetic wince. “You know...I’ve driven home quite a few people who’ve spent the night together, and it’s not unusual for some to shut down.”

My fingers curled around the door handle. “Do they turn on again?”

She shrugged. “I guess it depends if they liked who they were in the big top better than who they’re trying to be.”

“Wise words. Thanks again.” Giving her another smile, I climbed out and followed Nick as he stalked up the garden path and into our home. It welcomed me back with a breeze of scorn.

Throwing the deadbolt into position, I tossed my heels against the shoe rack holding my sensible flats for long days at the lab and padded barefoot into the kitchen. White cabinets, honey wood dining table, and a huge fridge groaned with two lots of groceries. Nick’s food and mine. Food that had its own shelf and was never permitted to touch because my surly flatmate never wanted to feel indebted to me for making him a damn lasagne.

Ugh.

I can’t...I can’t do this.

My head pounded as I stared at Nick’s back. He fisted the tap, holding a glass under the streaming water before drinking with desperate thirst.

I didn’t interrupt as he drank down one, two, three glasses before turning off the tap and turning to face me.

He stilled as our eyes met.

Tension crackled.

Pain bruised.

Dropping my stare, I moved to where he stood and held my hand out for his glass. “May I?”

“Of course.” Passing me the tumbler, he raked both hands through his hair and moved away.

I didn’t look to see if he left the room and drank my own share of liquid, unaware of how thirsty I was. Turned out sex worked up quite the hankering for refreshments.

Rinsing the glass and placing it on the draining board, I jumped a little as I turned and found Nick leaning against the dining room table.

“Are you...are you going to bed?” I asked quietly, hating the strain between us. The knowledge of what the other looked like naked and the very real evidence that we’d slept together.

I suddenly craved a shower.

I didn’t have the strength to be back in this house, staring at the same man who’d made me second-guess and doubt myself for eight months when all I wanted was for the man who’d sunk inside me and come a second time all because he didn’t want Hunter to be the last one I felt spurt inside me.

“Ella...I...” His face twisted as he struggled with what to say. “Tonight was—”

“Over.” I cut in, not brave enough to hear whatever excuses he was about to give. “Tonight is over. Let’s just go to sleep. I have a few errands to run today and might even go into the lab so I can—”

“Avoid me?” he asked, his eyes dark beneath furrowed brows.

Crossing my arms, I begged for courage. “I’m pretty sure you’re the one who’s going to avoid me.”

He nodded. "It has crossed my mind."

"So...what's the problem?" I tipped up my chin.

"There..." He sighed and came toward me. "There is no problem. We both know where the other one stands. We shared an incredible night. I won't lie and say I didn't enjoy myself. But I also won't lie by making promises I can't keep."

"I didn't ask you to make any promises."

His nostrils flared as he stopped before me. "You're telling me that sleeping together hasn't made you want more from me?"

More.

That damn word again.

I'd felt it.

He'd felt it.

Yet standing here now...it wasn't enough to give me a fairy-tale ending where we lived happily ever after.

"What do you want me to say, Nick? That I've had a crush on you since you moved in—a crush that turned out to be far bigger than mere liking—or that I'm so cold-hearted that sleeping with you—which happened to be the best sex of my life, by the way—hasn't affected me at all?"

"I'm not saying it didn't affect me too, Ella. I like you. I've *always* liked you. But I meant what I said. I don't want a relationship. With anyone. It's not you—"

"It's not you, it's me? Oh please." I threw my hands up. "That line is the worst excuse ever."

"It's the truth."

Exhaustion slithered through my veins, siphoning away my fight.

Hunter's words rang in my ears. He'd said I'd have to break Nick if I wanted him. Maybe tomorrow I'd be up for the challenge, but right now...I just wanted to be alone. "I'm going to bed." I brushed past him. "Goodnight."

"Wait."

I winced as his body heat enveloped mine, drenching me in electrical currents and oversensitivity. With a quick inhale as if fortifying himself, he curled his fingers around my wrist and tugged me toward the corridor.

"Come."

I tripped behind him, shocked stupid he'd touched me willingly.

I thought...

What...what does this mean?

"Nick, what are you doing?"

He didn't reply as he dragged me into the white and grey bathroom and trapped us inside together. My moisturiser still sat on the vanity from when I'd had a quick shower before running to the big top. My towel haphazardly tossed on the ratan hamper after I'd spritzed myself with honeysuckle perfume.

With shaking hands, he turned me around and fumbled with my zipper.

I caught my reflection.

Holy crap, is that what I look like?

My hair looked like Medusa's snakes. My mascara and eyeliner smudged into one sultry smoky mess. My lips were swollen and red with the faintest cut from Hunter's teeth. My cheeks held stubble burn from the two men who'd fucked me and my gaze...it churned with emotions. Emotions far too

complex to solve in one night. Love and awe and thankfulness existed but so did fear and guilt and terror.

Terror that the man currently undressing me was going to pulverise my heart.

“Nick...” I shook my head, cupping my breasts through my dress. “What are you doing? Go away and leave me alone.”

Dropping his head, he pressed his lips to my bare shoulder. “Not yet.”

“I thought you couldn’t wait to get away from me?”

“I won’t lie and say I’m fighting every instinct to shut down and go back to the way things were, but...I have a task that needs doing. A task I can’t ignore.”

“What task?” My temper sparked.

“Providing aftercare.”

I stiffened as he tugged my dress, doing his best to strip me. “I...I don’t need aftercare.”

He scowled, meeting my eyes in the mirror. “Look at your back and tell me that.” Spinning me around, he glowered at the crisscrossing lines practically glowing on my skin. I looked over my shoulder and gasped. A few had turned a faint blue on the edges where bruises had already set in.

“I’m so sorry, Ella.”

I let my dress fall, my eyes growing wider at the full extent of what Nick had done to me. I hadn’t been aware. The pain had become a blanket of fire, so I couldn’t distinguish one stripe from another.

But this...? Seeing it painted into my skin like a violent work of art made fresh tears spring to my eyes. Not because he’d hurt me but because I wanted

him to do it again and again and...*he never will.*

“Goddammit, don’t cry,” he whispered. “I’m sorry. So fucking sorry. I’ll never hit you again. You have my absolute word. I...I got carried away. I got...jealous. So fucking jealous that you let him kiss you, lick you...fuck you.” His voice turned pitch black. “Even now, even though we’ll never sleep together again, and I have no right to feel anything when it comes to you, I’m so unbelievably jealous that his dick has been inside you. That even now, his cum still marks you.”

I let my dress fall, shivering as it kissed my legs and died like fallen petals on the floor. “There’s nothing to be jealous of. Don’t you see? I like you, you idiot. I lov—”

“Don’t.” He smashed his hand over my mouth. “Don’t say another word.” Letting me go, he shrugged out of his blazer, ripped off his white t-shirt and jeans, then scooped me into his arms and carried me into the shower.

I gasped as he placed me down and turned on the water. Trapping me against the grey hexagonal tiles, ice rained down, followed by scalding heat.

“Nick...you don’t have to bathe me. I’m perfectly able to—”

“Quiet.” He pushed me under the spray, soaking my hair and every inch of my very used, very abused body. With the roar of water cascading around us and the heaviness of so many unspoken words, he grabbed my favourite coconut bodywash and squirted a generous amount into his hands.

He didn’t use the loofah and when his palms landed on my back, turning me away from him so he could wash away the pain he’d caused, I was infinitely glad.

My abraded skin stung just from the softest stroking, let alone rough scrubbing.

Nerves danced down my spine as he massaged my muscles and followed the lash marks all the way down to my ass. His fingers dipped into my crack, unapologetically claiming me with soft pets after fucking me until I screamed.

I swayed into the wall, grabbing hold of the soap rack.

My pulse sped up; my poor, abused clit pulsed for attention.

Almost as if he sensed my gathering need, his hands trailed from my back to my belly and down, down, down.

I groaned as he ran his fingers over my pussy. “Nick...what...?”

“Let me wash you,” he breathed. “Nothing more.”

I did my best not to let my heart run away with me, hoping so damn much that this meant he’d changed his mind and tonight wouldn’t be the end. But that hope slowly perished as his hand dropped lower, spreading my folds and rubbing coconut suds into my sex.

His touch was methodical and almost clinical, dipping inside me a little as if scooping out whatever remnants of semen remained. Only once he’d cleaned me thoroughly, did he bend his knees, turn me around, and nudge my legs apart.

His eyes locked on my core as his hands ran along the insides of my thighs.

Shadows darkened his face as he washed away the stickiness, the silver streams of dried pleasure.

I flinched as he washed right down to my feet before standing to his full height and trading body wash for shampoo. I lost track of time as his fingers

slinked into my wet hair and the scrape of his nails on my scalp threatened to buckle my knees.

“Hold onto the wall,” he breathed as he massaged my wild chestnut curls.

I obeyed with trembling hands, swept away by his every touch.

By the time he rinsed me, applied conditioner, then ran his powerful hands over my every inch to ensure he’d washed away all our sin, I was dripping wet and desperate for him.

Blinking back haze, I drank in his bareness.

His cock hung heavy with another erection.

Whatever rules he wanted to keep between us had no sway over his body.

Reaching for him, I whispered, “The night isn’t over. We could be together...one last time.”

His fingers snapped around my wrist, just as mine latched around his hardness. “Ella...don’t.”

“You want me.”

He looked away, his dick jumping in my hand. “Doesn’t mean I’m going to take you.” His eyes shot to the bathroom window, where the sun slowly lightened the navy night. “Besides, dawn is here. The night *is* over.” Yanking my hand off him, he shut off the water, then stumbled out of the shower. With jerky motions, he wrapped his towel around his waist, trapping his erection against his belly.

Without looking back at me, he tossed my towel in my direction, then stalked from the bathroom.

All the heat from the shower. All the aching from his hands. All the softness from his caring...every single emotion solidified into the coldest,

harshest ice.

My heart fissured.

My soul fractured.

I refused to look at myself in the mirror as tears fell.

I didn't bother brushing my hair or putting on my usual nighttime skincare. All I wanted to do was go to bed and forget tonight had ever happened.

How could he be so heartless?

How could he turn off his feelings?

How could he hurt me so easily?

Enough.

Anger stomped all over my grief.

He's not worth it.

You knew that.

That's why you wanted him to share you with Hunter.

You wanted to make him suffer, just like he's made you suffer.

The threesome was to empower you, not to make you sad.

Forget him.

With my hands balled and skin puckered in goosebumps, I marched to my room and slammed to a halt.

Nick sat on my bed in black cotton trackpants, his chest bare and glittering from the shower. He'd closed my curtains, removed my throw pillows, and turned my sheets down.

My room glowed with soft light and in any other fantasy, I would drop my towel, climb onto his lap, and make him take me.

But this wasn't a fantasy, and I was done with him hurting me.

“Get out, Nicholas.”

“Not until I tend to your wounds.” Holding up a tube of manuka honey and aloe vera cream, he shrugged. “They're bad. I wish I had some arnica to stop the bruising, but at least this will heal the superficial cuts.”

Stalking toward him, I held out my hand. “Give me the cream. I can do it.”

Standing, he fisted the tube. “It's my duty.”

“I don't care about your duty.” I curled my upper lip. “Duty is what got us into this mess. Duty is what's stopping you from giving in to this connection between us. Duty can bite my ass.”

He chewed a smile. “Pretty sure I bit your ass at some point this evening.”

“Don't do that.”

“Do what?”

“Try to change the subject.”

He stilled, his hazel eyes going unreadable. “I told you why I can't be with you, Ella. It's not because I don't want to...I physically can't.”

“Because you're dying.”

He flinched. “Eventually. My brother was only thirty-six when he was diagnosed with what our dad had. Pancreatic cancer works fast. He was gone within two years, despite immunotherapy and trial drugs.”

“So you think you will be dead by thirty-eight.” I didn’t say it as a question, more like an incredulous statement.

“Seven years is nothing in the scheme of a life.” His gaze softened. “A life I very much want you to have.”

“What about what *I* want?”

Unscrewing the cap, he refused to meet my eyes. “I’m protecting you. I know you don’t see it that way right now, but you will. I refuse to make you live through what my mother did when my father died. I refuse to fall in love and play happy families when there are millions of families losing their loved ones to cancers that I could potentially cure if I could just figure out the right recipe.” Grabbing my arm, he swung me toward my bed. “I swore on my brother’s death bed that I would dedicate my life to preventing others from feeling the same pain we did. I can’t break that promise just because I—”

The inertia of his swing made me sit heavily on my mattress. I braced myself and asked, “Just because you what?”

He froze and bit his bottom lip.

“Because you love me?” I asked quietly. “Because if you do...isn’t that worth all the pain? Isn’t love worth—”

“Love isn’t worth living the rest of your life in misery when you lose the one person you can’t survive without.”

“You don’t believe that.”

His eyes snapped to mine. “I do. With every part of me.”

My heart palpitated, priming for a fight.

I wanted it.

Needed it.

I couldn't be flayed so expertly with sex and return to *before*. I wasn't hardwired that way. Things had changed. *I'd* changed. I was fine with the knowledge I'd never see Hunter again. After all, I went into that room knowing our relationship was only going to last a few hours, but Nick?

He'd punctured my very soul.

He'd proven just how worthy he was. Just how desperately I wanted to be the one he came home to...not because we'd been forced to rent together but because we chose to share a *life* together.

He couldn't return to the closed-off version I'd grown to despise. He couldn't hide the passion I knew dwelled inside him. He couldn't because I wouldn't survive it.

He wanted to protect me from surviving his possible death?

So how could he explain why I mourned him already?

Why did grief percolate inside me as if I'd already lost him when he was still alive, still here in my room, holding out a tube of cream to give me aftercare, all because he thought it was his duty to tend to me after tearing me into pieces?

So honourable.

So noble.

So tragic.

"W-We need to talk about what happened tonight," I whispered.

Anger flared in his eyes. "It's dawn, Ella. Whatever happened was yesterday, and we'll never discuss it again."

My head pounded with no warning, crushing my spine into a slouch.

I wanted to scream and shout.

I wanted to hit him until he saw sense.

But...I was done.

Endlessly tired.

Eternally sad.

For a moment, we didn't move or speak. Nick watched me warily as if expecting me to do exactly what I wanted and attack him. But when I just sniffed quietly and a single tear rolled down my cheek, he stepped toward me and gently undid my towel.

I didn't stop him.

I didn't care he bared my nakedness to him or resist when he pushed me higher up my bed and shifted me until I rolled over.

I lay on my stomach with wet, crazy curls covering my face and choked on tears as he slowly rubbed soothing cream into my stinging skin.

He hurt me more in that moment of tenderness than he ever had when flaying me alive with the flogger.

He hurt my heart.

He hurt my soul.

And when he finished coating my back in honey and aloe vera, once he'd applied dabs of cream to the fingernail crescents Hunter had imprinted on my hips and the rope burn on my wrists, he pressed the gentlest kiss to my shoulder and whispered, "Happy birthday, Ella."

And then, he left.

CHAPTER TEN



SATURDAY SHOT ME AWAKE WITH A LOUD clap of thunder shaking the glass in the window frames. The storm from yesterday decided to have a booming encore, and I wanted to tell Mother Nature to eff right off.

Groaning, I rolled onto my left, wincing a little as my back twinged. With a sigh, I snuggled deeper into my comforter as rain lashed and hissed against the metal roof. My alarm clock said I'd only been asleep for two and a half hours. Any sane person would still be in bed on a lazy Saturday morning, especially if they'd been to *Spectacle of Secrets* last night and stayed up till freaking five thirty in the morning.

But I was restless and achy, both physically and spiritually.

Most days, I woke early and ran five kilometres around our local park before work, but the thought of doing that this morning?

Ugh, no thanks.

Burrowing into my bed, images of last night came back to haunt me.

Images of Hunter as he offered himself to me, all because I told him I wanted to be ruled. Snatches of him naked and the look in his eyes as he sank inside me while Nick whipped me.

Nick.

My core clenched; my breath caught.

The way he'd commanded me to crawl, ordered Hunter to lick me clean, then wrapped rope tightly around my wrists. The way he'd groaned as he plunged inside me for the first time—

Stop it!

I slammed a pillow over my face.

Stop it, stop it, stop it.

For the first time in my life, I had a real sexual experience to relive whenever I made myself release. Instead of fantasising about faceless men with growly voices and depraved demands, I had a night other girls would kill for. I had memories instead of fantasies and I couldn't afford to recall a single one because the object of those hot and kinky thoughts was in a bed across the corridor, determined to pretend nothing ever happened.

“Arghhh!” I screamed into my pillow.

It was a mistake.

Last night was the biggest mistake of my life.

I should've just slept with Hunter.

I should've just fallen into an intense little crush and let Hunter rule my vibrating escapades for the rest of my life.

What wasn't to like about him? Deliciously good looking, attentive, passionate, dominating. He even hunted bad guys and did his best to make the world a safer place, for goodness' sake.

I was lucky I didn't fall in love with the guy and if I was honest, I would never forget him. If I ever saw Hunter again, I doubted I'd be able to stop myself from begging for a repeat performance.

But...instead of last night belonging entirely to an unattainable man who'd probably already left this town, I'd had to stupidly include the surly one I lived with, and now my life was ruined.

Sitting up in bed, I flinched as my covers fell away from my bare skin.

I never slept in the nude, but after Nicholas finished smearing me in healing cream, I'd yanked up my blankets and hugged a pillow. I hadn't moved—fiercely determined not to cry or follow him or bolt from this house and never return.

I'd managed not to do any of those things, but now I was awake, I wasn't sure how successful I would be.

“If you want him, you'll have to break him.”

Hunter's voice echoed in my head just as the water boiler started humming and the shower hissed down the corridor.

My heart lurched.

My belly clenched.

Nick's up.

Every muscle in my body tensed, earning me lashes of aches and pains. I flopped onto my sore back and glowered at the ceiling.

The click of the shower door opening and closing sounded. The hum of the boiler switched to a deeper groan as Nick fiddled with the temperature like he always did.

I liked my shower hot enough to boil lobsters.

Nick preferred it tepid enough not to get frostbite.

In many ways, that was the only thing we differed in.

As much as I didn't want to admit it, we were awfully similar.

We watched the same Netflix docos. We'd moved up the ranks of our company thanks to discipline and diligence. We cleaned up after ourselves. Believed in ghosts after a particularly spooky show. Didn't like centipedes and believed all marine parks should be shut down. We even bought the same brand of washing powder and hummus. He didn't like soda...like me. He gave up sugar around the same time I did after we'd read a book linking strong evidence that cancer thrived on glucose and the diets of today only contributed to this rampant disease. He ran on the same days I did, sometimes lapping me around the park as if keeping an eye on me even though he couldn't stand me.

He always seemed to program the gas fire in the lounge to come on ten minutes before I was due home from my shift, even though his shift wouldn't end for hours. He was quiet and didn't like music like me. He preferred non-fiction books rather than make-believe. He'd taken up meditating in the lunchroom because I'd told him one night that meditation could activate parts of our brain currently inaccessible. By learning how to awaken the pineal gland, also known as the Third Eye, we might find a cure that everyone else had overlooked.

He always listened to me, even if his eyes stayed cold. He never laughed at me when I shoved a passage under his nose on a newfangled therapy. We stuck to ourselves at the lab. We didn't have many friends. We didn't like crowds, and neither of us had any interest in hosting parties.

On the rare nights when he'd sit and read with me in the lounge and not retire to his room, the silence had always been comforting, even though we barely spoke. His favourite thing to snack on between meals was tamari almonds...like me. He'd adopted my eating habits, preferring not to eat until eighteen hours had passed since dinner, so we started each day with a mini-

fast that was said to lengthen the telomeres on our mitochondria so they cleaned up bad cells, purging our bodies of any illness before it could evolve into worse things.

My heart began to thunder as I tripped into our similarities and all the moments I'd taken for granted.

He made me a smoothie every morning when he made one for himself. He always folded my blanket on the couch if I'd gone to bed, so it was neat and placed just so on the armrest for me the next night. He mowed the lawn every week, even though we had a written agreement that we'd take turns. He bought me veggie seeds last time he was at the store, all because I'd been determined to start a small garden.

Oh my God.

How had I not seen it?

It wasn't just our similarities but the little things he did for me. The constant little things that I hadn't even noticed. The things that said a thousand words even while he gave me none.

He cares.

He's always cared.

Eight long months of his little kindnesses that'd either been way too subtle, or I'd been way too blind.

I gasped and pressed my hands to my mouth.

And the worst thing?

The biggest connection we shared...past being lab geeks and bookworms and science nerds. Past our desire for a quiet and healthy life. Beyond our

attempts to find cures and drugs that actually worked...he'd lost two of his immediate family...

Just

like

me.

I froze.

Oh God.

How had I not seen it?

I'd lost my parents when I was seventeen, thanks to a drunk driver ploughing headfirst into them on their way home from weekly date night. I'd already known I wanted to work in medicine in some form or another, but when they died, I didn't have the stomach to become a doctor, which had been my first choice.

The thought of being in an emergency room when traffic accidents came in, drenched me in cold sweat. All I could picture was my mum and dad as they lay dying on the road waiting for first responders, seeing their mangled bodies on stretchers as doctors did their best to save them.

Their loss had irrevocably changed me, but I supposed I'd buried the trauma just enough not to dwell on it. I used work and long hours to keep me distracted...just like Nick.

I-I understand him.

I...I get it now.

I moved before my mind stopped whirling.

Dashing out of bed, I groaned as I left the warm cocoon, snatched my pink satin robe from the back of my door, and darted down the corridor.

The storm raged outside, making me doubly glad the heating was at a cosy temperature, and Nick had started the gas fire.

Yet another little kindness.

Another thoughtful gesture.

Damn...I've been so blind.

All this time, I thought he hated me. Every scornful look and chilly sneer when I pushed for him to cook with me or share a meal in the lab's staffroom. To begin with, I'd wanted to hang out with him to get to know the guy the company had added to my rental agreement, but by the end...I just wanted to know him. I *needed* to know him because I already felt so drawn to him.

I supposed a part of me that noticed his gestures wanted to pay him back, only to find the exact opposite of the generous man who did such sweet things.

All that disinterest and aloofness. Now I saw it for what it truly was...fierce, feral restraint.

My fingers shook as I twisted the bathroom doorknob.

Not locked.

Was that a sign?

Did he want me to go to him or did he not lock the door normally?

The glass shower door billowed with steam, obscuring him. His silhouette bowed, his forehead touching the tiles as water streamed over his head.

My heart tripped with so much want and need and...love.

I wanted to share my epiphany.

I wanted to tell him it was far too late to keep me at a distance.

I'd fallen for him last night in a haze of drunken sex.

But now...now I realised I'd been falling for months, confused by his curtness, shaken by his animosity but never able to put my finger on why.

My heart thundered as loudly as the storm outside as I slipped out of my robe and let it tumble to the floor. My little black dress remained on the bathmat where Nick had stripped me last night. It represented everything we'd done and gave me hope.

Swift, savage hope that he wouldn't push me away.

Not today.

Not now.

Here, in our home, there was no Hunter.

No sharing or jealousy or circuses.

Just us as I stepped toward the shower door and cracked it open.

My legs locked as my eyes drank in the most delicious sight.

My core clenched as Nicholas worked himself. With his eyes closed and head under the pouring stream, he didn't hear me as his stomach tensed and his fist pumped his cock.

He stroked himself painfully hard, jerking up and down with punishing speed. Thighs spread wide, back rippling with energy as he stroked himself to a release.

Oh God.

Every part of me melted.

Seeing him self-pleasure.

Watching him masturbate...

The act set fire to my blood, and moisture gathered between my legs.

I couldn't speak as he groaned softly, barely audible over the spray of water. His hips thrust into his hand, so close to making himself come.

I didn't want him to come.

I wanted to be the one who did that. I wanted to take him again, to make him a part of me. If he climaxed now, it would siphon down the drain and be an empty release. With me, it could be a new beginning.

Before I could stop myself, I whispered, "Don't."

He froze for a millisecond before spinning to face me, his hand still around his cock and eyes flared. His stomach muscles, so smooth and defined, caught rivulets of water, turning the droplets into a merry-go-round of swirls and lines before journeying down his powerful legs.

My breathing turned shallow.

He...he's stunning.

How could he keep his sexuality hidden beneath a drab lab coat? How had I ever been so stupid not to notice?

"What the fuck, Ella? Get out." He tried to cover himself with his other hand, flinching a little as he battled not to finish.

He was close.

I knew that now because he'd come in me twice.

I knew his tells.

I knew his triggers.

I also knew that if I answered him—if I spoke a single word, he'd most likely throw me out of the bathroom and never speak to me again.

So...I dropped to my knees.

I opened my mouth.

And I looked up at him, kneeling on the bathmat as the shower spritzed me from the open door. My nipples pebbled. My chest rose and fell with nerves, but my eyes never left Nick's. I didn't look at his hard cock. I didn't drop my stare. If I did, the spell would be broken. And I had every intention of weaving whatever magic I could around him so he forgot about his stupid nobility not to be with me. Forgot that he wanted to push me away. Forgot why love was the worst pain in the world but also the pain I would gladly pay to deserve him.

Gritting his teeth, his eyes dropped to my parted lips. "You shouldn't be in here." Brimstone flared in his hazel gaze, turning them a vibrant green with lust. His thighs twitched, and his cock jerked in his fist. Tension thickened around us. So, so much tension. Sharp and slicing, prickly and poignant.

Desire crippled me.

Need corrupted me.

"Are you going to say anything?" he snarled.

I merely lowered my chin and licked my lips.

"Jesus Christ." He sucked in a breath as his gaze dropped from my mouth to his cock.

I waited for him to kick me out. To revert back to the icy bastard from before, already choking on tears of his denial.

But then...

He stepped closer.

“*Fuck,*” he growled, his control snapping. “I hate you for this. Hate you for making me lose control.”

He ducked just enough to cup my chin with a wet hot hand and tipped my head back. With his teeth clenched and his cock weeping precum, he ran his thumb over my bottom lip and pushed down. “You want me, Ella? Then open fucking wide.”

I let him hook his thumb over my bottom lip and shove my jaw down.

I let him tower over me.

And I let him rub the crown of his cock all over my lips, painting me in salt and water.

“Fucking hell.” He pulled his thumb out of my mouth, then pushed his length along my tongue. “Suck me. Drink down my cum like a good little girl.”

I moaned as he fed me every inch he could.

“I’ll never forgive you for this,” he groaned, his voice rumbling with earthquakes and destruction as I closed my lips around his velvety hardness, doing my best not to choke as he pressed against the back of my throat. “Never, do you hear me?”

True tears pricked my eyes, but I sniffed them back and reached for him. I went to squeeze him, but he slapped my hand away. “Don’t touch me.”

Dropping my arm, I looked up the length of his perfect body. Our eyes caught, and just like last night, the harsh unreadability in his gaze fractured until every need, every wicked, monstrous feeling glowed.

And then, shadows overtook him as he embraced the Dominant he always hid from. “Hold on to my ankles. Now.”

My fingers obeyed, locking into place. It arched my spine with my head tilted back, forcing me to lean into him. His skin burned, and the bones and ligaments in his legs jerked beneath my hold.

“Can you breathe?” he asked curtly, feeding me even more of his erection.

I nodded.

“Did you come in here expecting me to change my mind about being with you?”

I narrowed my eyes and didn't answer.

“Did you come in here wanting me to fuck you?”

I nodded.

His entire body shuddered. His cock rippled on my tongue. “Did you like me fucking you last night?”

I nodded.

“Did you like *him* fucking you?”

The way he glowered warned me not to reply. In that moment of absolute servitude, a bolt of genuine fear filled me. He looked dangerous and unhinged, ruled by lust and broken by need.

I held his stare and opened as wide as I could.

He bared his teeth as he thrust into me.

“This changes nothing.” He drove his cock past my lips with a sudden fierceness. “This is the last time I'll put my dick in your mouth. The last time you'll drink my cum.”

I shivered.

I pressed my thighs together, riding the echoes of need pulsing through my body.

Bending over me, he grabbed two handfuls of my hair and held me ever so tight. “This is the last time you’ll ever see me naked so take a good look, Ella. Feel me as I take you. Get wet for me. Create a puddle on the bathmat for all I care. But don’t expect me to return the favour. I told you where we stood. You know how I feel about relationships. You brought this upon yourself. You came in here with your tits out and pussy begging. You dropped to your goddamn knees and opened your gorgeous, tempting mouth. How am I supposed to have the strength not to take what you’ve so stupidly offered me? How am I supposed to say no when your eyes are begging me to destroy you?”

I gasped as he pushed inside me, holding my head with handfuls of my hair, treating me as nothing more than a vessel to thrust his cock.

“Goddammit.” His eyes narrowed as he watched his length vanishing past my lips. “You look so fucking good with my cock in your mouth. So.”
Thrust. “Fucking.” *Thrust.* “*Good.*”

I stopped breathing as Nicholas—the quiet scientist who wore glasses and took care of me in so many selfless, unassuming ways—turned into a primitive beast.

Tears tracked down my cheeks as I shook on the bathmat.

The way he spoke set my nerve endings on fire. The air on my naked skin was gasoline. His harsh grunts as he thrust faster the match to set me alight.

I kept my hands locked around his ankles, obeying him even though I desperately wanted to finger myself. I stayed prone and submissive as he turned harsher, harder.

“I’m not going to hold myself back,” he hissed. “I’m so close. So goddamn close.” His eyes shot black as his lips drew away from his teeth. “Are you ready? Ready to drink? Ready to gag on every drop?”

I nodded, my eyes streaming.

“This is your fault,” he panted. “All your fucking fault.” His eyes rolled into the back of his head as he fucked my mouth. “I have no defences when it comes to you. I jerk off twice a day picturing you like this. At my beck and call. Kneeling for my dick. Begging me to fuck you. I have daydreams of you sucking me off under my desk at work. I have fantasies of fucking you in the park when you run. I can’t sleep anymore without dreaming of you chained to my bed, your legs spread wide, your pussy always ready for me to eat.”

Freaking hell.

An orgasm raced through my blood, summoned by his words, throbbing in my clit to come undone.

“I can’t fight you anymore.” He groaned long and low, his stomach flexing as he drove into my mouth. “I can’t do it. I-I can’t. I can’t stop—*fuuuuuck.*”

He came in a river of splashing seed.

Choking me with thick salt.

Pouring directly down my throat.

Holding my head, he roared and kept coming, spurting over and over as his hips kept thrusting and his cock kept twitching.

I lost all sense of time and space as he used me just the way I wanted him to.

The soft haze I'd tripped into when Hunter held me on his lap and Nick whipped me returned, turning me mute, empty, and calm. So wonderfully, perfectly calm.

I was barely aware as Nick withdrew from my mouth and scooped me from the bathmat. Barely conscious as water streamed over me and his thumb swiped over the corner of my lips, capturing the last few droplets of his pleasure.

My eyes opened, slightly unfocused as I floated on a cloud of obedience and bliss. I'd given him pleasure. I'd obeyed him without question. The dynamics and feelings of being subservient to him when it came to sex overwhelmed me.

Dropping my lashes, I murmured, "Did you enjoy my mouth, Sir?"

He stiffened and let me go. "You forced me to take your mouth by showing up here naked and far too willing."

I nodded meekly. "I'm sorry, Sir."

"Stop calling me that. We're not at the circus anymore, Ella. I'm not—"

"Do you prefer Master?" I looked up. "I...I like that one. I like feeling powerless against you. I...I like being owned by you." I hunched my shoulders, gathering my exhausted courage to say, "That's what I've wanted all along. That's why I went to the big top. I wanted to know what it felt like to be ruled."

Groaning loudly, Nick dragged both hands over his face. Shaking his head, he dropped his arms and tripped out of the shower. I trembled as I turned off the water and watched him snatch his towel with panicked desperation.

“Nicholas?” I stepped onto the bathmat. “It’s okay. I *like* being at your mercy. We can make this work. I *want* to make this work...”

Whirling on me, he hissed, “There’s nothing to make work, Ella. I told you that!”

“And I just realised you’ve been lying the entire time we’ve lived together.”

“Lying?” He reared back. “How the hell have I been lying? I’ve been nothing but black and white with you. I don’t want to be your friend. I don’t want to cook dinners with you. I don’t want to watch movies with you. I don’t want to be anything more than colleagues!”

“Liar.” I stormed into him, stabbing my finger into his wet chest. “What about all the sweet things you do for me? The thoughtfulness that I never noticed until now but are an everyday occurrence. You care for me, Nick. I know you do.”

“Doesn’t matter how I feel.” He swatted my finger away and crossed his arms. “My stance on relationships hasn’t changed.”

“If your heart is already invested, don’t you think that’s a moot point?” I crossed my arms too, mirroring him, pushing my breasts up. “There was more than just sex between us last night, and you know it. There’s been more between us for months and—”

“And now, there’s nothing. We got each other out of our systems. That’s all.”

“That’s all, huh?” I cocked my hip, my voice taunting with fury. “What about your possessiveness over me when Hunter fucked me? What about your anger whenever he touched me? You were jealous.”

“Don’t talk about him.”

“Why? Does it hurt you to remember that I fucked him as well?”

“Careful.” He gritted his teeth. “I’m warning you.”

“You enjoyed yourself too. You both enjoyed taking me. What don’t you like about it? Watching him or knowing he pleased me?”

“*Both!*” he roared. “I wanted to be the one to pleasure you. I thought I wouldn’t care watching him have you, but.... Fuck, it was the hardest thing in the world.”

“Why?” I whispered. “Why was it hard if you don’t care—”

“It crippled me when you moaned for him. Listening to you enjoying what he did to you? Those little cries, your pleas. Christ, Ella you *writhed* for him. It was the hottest fucking thing I’ve ever seen. I get hard every time I think about it, but...”

“You didn’t like sharing?”

He narrowed his eyes, flecks of green and brown kaleidoscoping. “Just stop. Stop talking about him.”

“Not if it makes you honest for once in your life. If I have to remind you that he licked me, touched me, fucked—”

“God’s sake, *stop.*” Charging into me, he wrapped his fingers around my throat and slammed me into the wall. “Do *not* remind me that he’s been inside you, Ella. You won’t like what I do in return.”

“What would you do?”

“You think I’d tell you? You’d like it far too much.”

I shivered. “If you know that about me then how can you deny yourself? We already know sex between us is explosive—”

“I was caught up in the night. It meant nothing.”

“If it meant nothing, then *why* do you care that I was with him? Answer me, because right now all I see is—”

“Because he didn’t deserve you.”

“Oh, I don’t know. He seemed rather deserving last night. He hunts bad guys and gives good orgasms. Pretty much a superhero in my eyes.”

“Ella…” he rumbled. “Please, stop.”

“No.” I cocked my chin, even as his fingers tightened around my neck. “I don’t think I will. I want to push you. I want to break you. That’s what he told me to do. He said if I wanted you, I had to break you, and you know what, Nick? I want you. I’m in love with you. So if I have to break you, I’ll —”

“*Enough.*” Choking me, he shoved his face in mine. “I’m done.” Letting me go, he backed away, raking both hands through his hair. “You want me to admit that I crave you? Fine. I crave you. You want to know how much I want to rule you? Fine! I want you gasping at my feet and dripping wet for me at all times. I want you bruised. I want you branded. I want you utterly obsessed with me because I’m utterly obsessed with you, and that sort of longing is wrong. It’s dangerous. It’s compulsive and consuming and…fatal.”

“It’s called attraction, Nick! That’s all.”

“No, it’s far, far worse. I want you, Ella. I want you every moment of every goddamn day. I ought to see you as the woman you truly are. So incredibly bright and smart and capable. You work tirelessly. You love freely. And when I hear you riding your vibrator at night, you tie me into fucking knots.”

His chest heaved as he shrugged. “Is that what you want to hear? You want to know all my twisted secrets? You ready? Ready for me to list all my

perversions when it comes to you?” He chuckled blackly. “Okay then, I want to debase you until you’re nothing more than my plaything. I want to gag you instead of talk to you. I want you begging for my touch and pleading for my dick. I want you all to myself. I want you bruised and bleeding and bare at all times. I want you to exist only because I allow it. I want to fucking *own* you.”

He wiped his mouth with a trembling hand and a horrified wince. “What sort of sick prick wants that? What sort of bastard wants to be in charge of your every single heartbeat, moan, and quiver all because if I can control your life, then I can ensure you will never die and I...I’ll never have to lose you like I lost—”

Cutting himself off, he snarled, “You’re an intelligent woman, Ella. You can see for yourself that I don’t deserve you. Just like *he* doesn’t deserve you. I can’t stop you from dying, just like I can’t stop myself from getting sick. Those facts will never change, so it doesn’t fucking matter if all I want to do is throw you down and fuck you hard enough to make you scream. It doesn’t matter that I can scarcely breathe with how much I need you. I won’t touch you because I can’t, so stop putting goddamn temptation in my path and leave me the hell alone!”

My heart galloped as my body throbbed with his every confession. I trembled with the most uncontrollable need. Never had someone been so angry and fierce and honest with me. Never had a conversation made me ache right between my legs.

“Fuck me, Nicholas.”

“*What?*” His eyebrows shot into his messy hair. “Have you not listened to a damn thing I said?”

“All I heard is that you want me as much as I want you and some other bullshit about not taking me when I’m standing right here, needing exactly what you do.”

“I would never hurt you.”

“Even if I asked nicely?”

“Ella, please stop. Just—”

“No, you said your piece. Let me say mine.” Balling my hands, I held his churning stare. “I love my job. I love my independence. I love that I’m smart and have my own savings and have the ability to do anything I want. I’m strong enough to live on my own. I could move overseas. I could start my own business. I don’t need a man to complete me. I don’t need a husband to survive. I don’t need anyone and yet...”

I stepped toward him. “There’s a part of me that needs to have all that responsibility and power stripped away...just for a little while. I want someone else to be in charge sometimes. I want my mind to turn off and my instincts to rule me. I want my Master to tell me what to eat and drink and how to serve him. Not because I need him to exist but because I deserve to be cherished and controlled. I trust him to be strong enough to shoulder all my burdens for a while and release me from the weight of life so I can be free.”

“Ella...stop. *Please—*”

“Don’t you see, Nick?” I spread my hands. “I want you to rule me, and you want to own me. Not because we’re sick or twisted but because we both have high-powered jobs. We have the stress of millions of people relying on us to cure them, even if they don’t know we’re fighting to keep them alive. We’ve both lost people we love. We both know the cost of that love. You’re drawn to releasing that pressure through discipline and absolute domination.

And me? I'm driven to find someone who can steal me from myself. I need to be consumed because only then—only once all my decisions are stripped from me—can I truly turn off my mind and find peace.”

Silence fell between us for a moment before Nick's face scrunched up, and he spat, “You can dress up this sick desire with pretty words and try to convince me with lies, but you can't pretend whatever this is between us is normal.”

“Who cares if it's normal? It's what we both need.”

“Are you not listening, Ella? What I need is *wrong*. I refuse to strip you of your power. Why on earth would I agree to steal who you are all because I want to fuck you until you bleed? Who even says that? Who gets hard at the very idea of hurting someone they lov—? No.” He shook his head like a maniac. “It's just an obsession. That's all. It will stop. I know it will. With time and distance, this disgusting need and these unwanted feelings will go away. They will fade now that I've had you. They have to.”

“If you truly believe that, then you're an even bigger fool than I feared.”

“Do you need yet more proof?” He shrugged. “More than I've already given you? *Fine!*” His eyes narrowed as ice replaced all fire. “As your lover, I wouldn't be able to walk away from you after you gave me such a bone-snapping blowjob. As your boyfriend, I would do whatever it took to return the favour. As your husband, I would worship you until you had two orgasms for every one of mine. But as your Master...I'm giving you none.”

“W-What?” I hunched into myself. My skin puckered as if he'd just thrown snowy slush all over me. “I didn't come in here expecting you to give me a release—”

“I believe you.” He exhaled heavily as if this conversation drained him beyond all limits. “But I can see how much you need me. I can smell your lust from here. You’ve opened your heart and spilled all your secrets, and I refuse to accept them. You deserve more. You are *worth* more. And...if I was in love with you, I’d drop to my knees, hook your leg over my shoulder, then stick my tongue as far as I could into your pussy until you screamed. But...as the Dominant you just seduced. A man who explicitly told you last night that we were through, you don’t get a single thing.”

My ribcage tightened as if his words were a vicious corset.

My heart floundered.

My hope died a horrible death.

If I was in love with you...

“You don’t mean that,” I whispered. “Not after everything we just confessed.”

“But I do.” He gave me the saddest smile. “I don’t want a woman. I don’t want a wife. And I definitely don’t want a submissive. I don’t want anything more than to find a cure to a disease that takes far too many, so when it’s my turn to die, I can say I did my best and didn’t let distractions or deviants destroy me.”

I had nothing to say.

No words to utter.

With a heavy breath, Nick whispered, “I’m sorry, Ella. Truly I am. I never meant to hurt you, and I’m so sorry I couldn’t stop myself from having you last night...and this morning. You’re right that I care. More than you’ll ever know, but...that’s where this ends. At least now you know where we stand. I’ll move out next week. It’ll be the best for both of us.”

He left as my knees gave out, and I slithered down the bathroom wall.

He didn't come back.

CHAPTER ELEVEN



I GLOWERED DOWN MY MICROSCOPE EYEPIECE where slithering, happy cells mocked me. Today, we'd merged two strains of mould together to see if the byproduct would result in something that would rival the finding of penicillin in 1928. So far, the only thing I could see were two different entities mingling and splicing, procreating or possibly just fighting with wild abandon.

Lucky things.

I sighed and glanced up at Kate, my fellow scientist and friend.

“Anything on your end?”

She shrugged and tucked flaming red hair behind her ear. “Nope. You?”

“Lots of bumping and grinding but nothing spectacular to report.”

“Bumping and grinding, huh?” She giggled. “Sounds like my lacklustre night last night.”

“Another one?” I smirked, leaning back in my chair. “Seems like Tinder isn't the place to find a man who knows what he's doing.”

“Ugh, tell me about it.” She rolled her eyes and made a few notes on her tablet before scooting away from the bench and putting her petri dish into the incubator. “I held out until date three to make sure he wasn't a murderer, as you do. And...he was nice. Good conversation. Great smile. He even booked a hotel, so I felt more comfortable than going to his place or mine. And...”

She sighed dramatically. “It was so bad, Ella.”

I winced on her behalf. “What happened?”

“He never really got super hard, you know? I’ve heard that some men can’t get fully erect ’cause of blood flow issues and what-not. And I feel for them, I do. It’s not their fault. But...I’ve never been the recipient of one. I went down on him; he seemed super into it. He even almost came in my mouth, but...when it came time to do the deed, I...” Her cheeks went a vibrant red.

Clipping toward her in my heels, I took her by the shoulders and looked her square in the eyes. “You...?”

She flinched. “I barely felt him.” She ducked her face into my shoulder. “That makes me sound like I have a giant twat, but...I don’t. I swear!”

“A giant twat?” I burst out laughing just as the door to our lab swung open, and Nicholas appeared.

Oh, good lord.

The sight of him after a week of nothing stunned me silent.

Kate shot Nick a look, noticing the way my face drained of all colour.

A full week since Nick had come down my throat and we’d yelled our truths at one another.

A week of split shifts where we didn’t see each other very much.

A week of returning home to either find him out or locked in his room.

He no longer made me smoothies in the morning. He still followed me when I went for my run, but he didn’t come close enough to make eye contact. He ate out. He didn’t answer my texts checking in on him. He completely cut me out of his life, and living with him was a thousand times worse than anything I’d endured before the big top.

If I could rewind time and refuse to let him join me and Hunter, I would.

At least if we never slept together, he'd still talk to me. Coldly and with distance but at least I wouldn't feel as if I'd lost someone ever so dear to me.

God, that night was a massive, massive mistake.

He froze as he noticed my hands on Kate's shoulders, and her blushing cheeks bright enough to set the lab on fire. "Eh...did I interrupt something?"

Ripping my hands from Kate, I shook my head. "Nothing. Definitely nothing."

Kate snickered. "Just telling Ella about my latest failure in the dating scene."

"Ah." Nick nodded, his white coat clinging to his muscular arms, unbuttoned and hanging over his black shirt and slacks. He still wore his glasses from whatever work he'd been doing, and his hair was neatly smoothed back, thick and begging to be messed. "Dr. Fitzgerald...can I speak to you for a moment?" He shot Kate a look. "Sorry to steal her away."

"Not at all. I'm sure you have *far* more interesting stories to tell her." Kate grinned, winking in my direction.

I frowned as Nicholas raised an eyebrow then slipped back into the corridor, closing the door behind him, obviously expecting me to follow.

Doing my best to get my jangling heart and racing pulse under control, I asked, "What's with the wink?"

"Didn't you hear?" Her mouth dropped open. "Everyone in the staff room is talking about it."

"Talking about what?"

Stepping into me, she lowered her voice. “Apparently, a sex circus came to town last weekend.”

I stiffened.

Oh, no.

“A-A sex circus?”

“Yeah, I wish I’d known. I would’ve so gone. I’ve had enough shitty sex to last me a lifetime. Give me someone who knows what they’re doing, and I’ll pay for it if that’s what it takes to actually get an orgasm these days.”

I laughed, even though my heart kept skipping. “So...if you didn’t go to the circus, then how...?”

“He did.” She cocked her head at the closed door. “Dr. Nicholas Davis—the unassuming molecular biologist who meditates in the staffroom and doesn’t seem to know a boob from an elbow apparently shared a threesome with a guy and a chick.”

Ice.

It rolled down my spine.

Freaking hell.

This wasn’t supposed to happen. Hunter promised me no one repeated what went on in his big top. Had someone seen me? Had they recognised me being railed by Nick or Hunter? Would I be fired?

Why would I be fired?

It was consensual and on my personal time.

If people were prudes, that was their problem, not mine.

Doing my best to keep my voice level, I said, “Who’s saying such things? Can’t imagine slander is a good image.”

“Slander? Oh, no.” Kate shook her head. “It’s not slander. More like praise! Maybe a bit of envy thrown in too, but definitely not slander. Apparently Dr. Fraser was there as well. You know? The woman who looks like she has a stick up her ass? She was seen eating candyfloss off some guy’s dick.”

I swallowed hard. “And was she reprimanded? Does the company know?”

“Course they know. Everyone’s talking about it.”

“Is she in trouble? Is Nick in trouble?”

“Trouble?” She frowned as if she genuinely couldn’t see the problem. “Who cares what people do on their time off? As long as they’re not stabbing people or being a nasty criminal, then we all deserve to blow off some steam every now and again. Don’t you think?”

She swooned against me, resting her head on my shoulder. “What I wouldn’t have given to be the lucky girl between a Nick Davis and a stranger sandwich. Bet the lucky bitch couldn’t walk after they were through with her.”

There were two things I could’ve done.

Number one: laugh politely and extract myself from the conversation.

Or two: blurt out that that girl was me.

In another life, I would’ve chosen option one.

But in this life? The one where I refused to use my vibrator because I didn’t want to give Nick the satisfaction of hearing me moaning through the walls? This life where I walked around with constantly wet knickers because

I needed him more than I needed air? This life where I was dangerously close to begging Nick to reconsider just so he'd damn well talk to me?

I was jumpy, needy, and...recklessly possessive.

If people were talking about Nick as if he was some sort of sex god, then...it wouldn't be long before women started propositioning him. Everyone knew it was always the quiet ones who were freaks in the sheets.

The thought of him with anyone.

The very idea of him kissing someone else...*touching* someone else.

No.

Just...*God no.*

Please no.

It hurt.

So, so much.

"Ella...is everything okay?" Kate pulled back and stared into my face.

In a flash of regrettable passion, I blurted, "It was me."

Kate studied me for a moment before bursting into hysterics. Hanging onto my shoulder, she laughed and laughed and laughed. "Oh, that's the best thing I've heard all week! You! Good lord, can you imagine?" More giggling, followed by a strange sort of snort.

I scowled, my back bristling. "Why is that so funny?"

Tears gathered at the corner of her blue eyes as she tried to control her mirth. "Why? I mean...look at you, El. You're gorgeous, but...you're a one-man kinda girl. I can see you enjoying a climax or two, but in the dark with some classical music on or maybe the National Geographic channel blabbing in the background."

My annoyance cracked into amusement as I pictured it. Pictured Nick slowly rocking into me as we both watched a doco on the intelligence of a dung beetle.

Crossing my arms, I stuck my chin up. “I’ll have you know music was involved, but it definitely wasn’t classical. I’d call it tribal with shamanic drums. The erotic beat throbbed in your bones and stole all your propriety. All your preconceived conceptions of who you were and what you should and shouldn’t do vanished, especially when they gave demands.”

She froze.

I didn’t move.

Self-consciousness and a fair amount of regret scratched me as her eyes grew round.

Was it so hard to believe I was desirable enough that Nick would want me in that way? So hard to picture me brave and wanton enough to share a threesome?

Admittedly, she probably had it right about me before I met Hunter. And...if someone had told me what I would end up doing the moment I saw Hunter wielding a sledgehammer in the rain—that I would end up having sex with two men, without a condom, and be filled to the brim with their cum—I would’ve laughed just as madly as Kate...but...

Ever since that night, I’d changed.

I still loved my job. I still dedicated my days and most of my nights to research and work, but I also wanted other things.

I wanted bruises.

I wanted commands.

I wanted ropes and whips and orgasms and—

“Hold up.” Kate blinked and blinked again. Slowly, she let me go and peered into my eyes. “Ella?” Whatever she saw there made her mouth drop open and her attention snap to the door Nick waited behind. “You?”

Snatching her wrist, I dragged her into the supply room housing all our extra beakers, Bunsen burners, and stationery. “Forget I said anything. I don’t know why I just told you—”

“Liar.” She bounced on her work-appropriate high heels as I let her go. “You told me to stake a claim on him. And why wouldn’t you?” She fake-swooned against a shelf. “If I’d been the lucky duck to be with Dr. Davis, I’d be taking out flyers and leaving them all over the building.”

I chuckled. “I must admit, I’m feeling rather possessive over him. While he had the reputation for being a standoffish asshole, I didn’t care who he spoke to. But now that I know what he’s like in bed? Now that I’ve caught feelings...”

Ella, shut up!

“Oh no.” Kate wrinkled her nose. “You slept with him and now you love him?” She sighed heavily. “Dude...no. Don’t be that girl.”

Crossing my arms, I did my best not to get defensive, but I couldn’t help it. “It’s not like that. I...you know how the company subsidises rent for out-of-town staff? When I was offered employment, I had to move across the country and move into one of their properties. I was on my own for a while, but then they hired Nick and placed him with me.... We’ve lived together for eight months.”

“Oh wow.” Her eyebrows shot up. “How did I not know that?”

I shrugged. “It’s not like it comes up in conversation. He barely talks to me at home, let alone at work. He keeps everything strictly professional...apart from...things.” I sighed. “Or at least, he used to do things.”

“Things? What things?”

A headache suddenly pounded in my temples.

Guess I wasn’t going to shut up, after all.

“He...ummm, he used to make me a smoothie each morning. He likes the same snacks as me. He makes sure the heater is on for when I get home. He follows me when I go for a run. He—”

“Oh my God.” She grabbed my hands. “Do you think he likes you, too?”

Likes?

What an uninspiring word.

No one ever wrote a love story about someone who liked another.

You liked potatoes.

You liked going to the gym.

You didn’t like the one person who completed you.

Obsessed.

He used the word obsessed.

That was the opposite of like.

Like was something you could forget.

Obsession was something you would kill for.

“Dr. Fitzgerald?” Nick’s harsh voice cut through my thoughts.

Kate stiffened where we hid in the supply room.

“Are you coming?” he barked, not able to see us but not entering our lab. “I don’t have all day to wait out here, you know.” The door slammed shut again, making me flinch.

Kate snickered. “Is he that bossy in bed?”

It was my turn to fake-swoon. “God, you have *no* idea.”

“Ooooo.” She fluttered her eyelashes. “Please don’t tell me he’s one of those unassuming types who turn out to be a complete maniac when it comes to sex? If you tell me he’s prickly on the outside and absolutely depraved on the inside, I might lock you in here and go climb him like a tree.”

I merely held her stare. Pointedly. Firmly.

She got my message in an instant. “Oh, sweet baby Jesus.” She fanned herself. “What the hell are you doing hiding in here then?” Grabbing my elbow, she dragged me out of the supply room and across the lab to the door. “Go talk to him. Perhaps he wants to do inappropriate things to you in the broom closet.”

Before I could tell her he probably wanted to put me over his knee and spank me for making him come in my mouth last week, she shoved me out the door, and I fell directly into Nick’s chest.

“Whoa.” His strong hands cupped my shoulders, holding me upright. “You alright?”

I shivered beneath his touch, but then he let me go and moved away, putting professional distance between us. “Yes, sorry. I tripped.”

He looked back at the closed door as if not believing me but then tensed and ran a hand over his mouth. “Eh...are you having a productive day?”

I blinked. “Did you seriously come to my lab to make small talk with me after ignoring me all week?”

He stilled, then shook his head. Reaching for his glasses, he took them off his nose and folded them. Placing them into the front breast pocket of his white coat, he looked at the floor before licking his lips and bracing himself. “I came to tell you the news personally. It...it’s the least I could do, and...”

When he didn’t continue, I said quietly, “And...?”

“I’m leaving.”

I turned stone cold. “What?”

“I put in for a transfer. It was accepted this morning. I’ve been given a position in the branch in Singapore. I...I leave in three weeks.”

I waited for him to pinch me and say it was a joke.

I waited for the pulverising pain that I knew would eventually come.

I waited for my heart to stop, my eyes to water, my soul to do whatever it damn well could to stop him.

But...all I felt was aching, hollowing emptiness.

A vacuum within me.

A blackhole sucking away every part until I swayed on the spot and struggled to breathe.

When I didn’t say anything, he stepped a little closer and ducked from his tall height to look into my eyes. “Ella...did you hear me?”

A tsunami.

A prickling, drowning wave of loss.

The pulverising pain I expected slowly gathered, tighter and sharper, hot and deadly. I couldn't be around him when it crested.

Tipping up my chin, I clung to every shred of strength I had left. "I hope you'll be very happy there."

And then, I turned and marched down the corridor.

My heels clipped on the linoleum.

My hands balled into shaking fists.

And when I turned the corner where Nick couldn't see me, I sprinted to the bathroom and sobbed.

CHAPTER TWELVE



I DIDN'T GO HOME.

How could I?

The man I was in love with just told me he was moving across the world to get away from me. The same man I lived with and who was probably packing up his belongings at that very moment.

No.

I wouldn't go home.

He said he had three weeks before flying out?

Well then, I would live in this four-star hotel until he left.

Asshole.

Bastard.

Heartbreaker.

I sat on the queen-sized bed, hating how hard it was compared to my comfy mattress at home, and stared blankly at the TV as some stupid reality program showed two women fighting over one man. They screeched and shouted, and in the end, the man didn't want either of them.

Story of every single girl's life.

Flopping onto my back, I stared at the white ceiling.

I closed my eyes, hoping if I shut out the world, I could shut out Nicholas Davis too.

A sharp rap on the door sent me shooting upward again.

Is it him?

Did he come to get me?

Does he realise he's made a massive mistake and—

“Room service.”

Argghhh.

Digging my thumbs into my eyes, I scooted off the bed and went to the door. Swinging it open, I forced a smile at the uniformed server and signed the docket before accepting the silver-covered tray. “Thank you.”

“No problem. Have a good night.”

Closing the door, I carried my pathetic dinner to bed, yanked back the covers, and climbed in. I didn't care I still wore my black skirt and cream blouse from work. I didn't care about a damn thing as I dragged the full-fat cheeseburger and onion rings onto my lap.

Fuck it.

I didn't need to look after myself, not when a broken heart would kill me.

I didn't need to worry that dairy was bad and red meat was bad and fried foods were definitely bad. Working in pharmaceuticals had stolen every bit of pleasure out of my life, all because I studied collaborated data that said all of those things were bad, bad, bad.

But tonight, science was wrong.

Sometimes...bad could make us feel good, and I really, *really* needed to feel good.

I didn't switch to a more intelligent channel or surf until I found a documentary. Instead, I shoved the dripping, delicious burger in my mouth and watched trash television.

Three weeks in this place wouldn't be so bad.

Just twenty-one days and then Nicholas would be gone.

I would get another housemate, and then...I could finally be free of him.



“He’s such a jerk,” I mumbled at my drunken reflection as I cleaned my teeth with a toothbrush I’d bought from the supermarket on the way here. I hadn’t gone home to get an overnight bag, and tomorrow, I would have to buy at least one other work outfit and some underwear because I had absolutely no intention of going back to that house where Nick existed.

No way.

Nuh-uh.

Never in a million years.

I tapped my toothbrush against the mirror, smearing minty paste everywhere. “He’s such a stupid *jerk!*”

My eyes unfocused as the bathroom tilted.

“Uh-oh.”

The burger in my belly did little to soak up the two bottles of tiny champagne I’d sucked back or the four miniature Jack Daniels, courtesy of the minibar.

I hadn’t looked at the price list.

I figured it was either alcohol or therapy, and alcohol would be cheaper.

Didn't matter that I also knew the statistics of alcoholic organ dysfunction and why governments kept increasing taxes on liquor to try their best to stop people from drinking the stuff. Didn't matter that I'd personally dissected livers that'd given up from too much drinking, doing our best to formulate a drug that reversed such damage.

Right now...I wanted to be smashed.

Because if my brain was pickled, then my thoughts would be nonsense, and I could go to sleep without thoughts of him.

Him.

My blue eyes welled with angry tears as I looked at my reflection again.

Damn him.

Screw him.

Good riddance.

Go to stupid Singapore, you stupid jerk.

Stay alone forever.

Find some stunning Singaporean girl.

See if I care.

Spitting out minty froth, I rinsed my mouth, tore off my skirt and blouse, ripped off my bra and knickers, then padded naked back to bed.

No lights glowed, only the harsh blue flickers of the TV.

I'd never felt so sorry for myself.

Never allowed myself to slip into such a sorry state of affairs.

Even when my parents died, I kept my chin high and did what they would've expected me to do. They always called me their little scholar.

Always rolled their eyes at my determination to learn all the things instead of playing.

They'd wanted me to have a childhood and be reckless. To climb trees, swim in lakes, and make mistakes. But even as a young girl, I preferred to sit on the shore and read heavy texts. I spent Friday nights in my room watching YouTube and subscribing to cardiologist channels and naturopaths, chiropractors and brain surgeons, studying medicine in all facets so I was prepared for when it came time to go to university.

I'd never snuck out.

Never drank underage.

Apart from losing my virginity because I was sick of it classifying me as a kid, I never did anything rebellious.

They'd encouraged me to have a life outside of study, of course, but I was happiest with pages spread and words jumping from the paper. When they died, I buried myself even deeper into books because I was their little scholar, and knowledge would protect me from the emotional fallout of losing them.

And it'd worked...until now.

Now...I felt their loss far, far too keenly.

Books couldn't save me.

Words held no power.

Whatever Nick had done to me had succeeded in ways my parents had failed in my youth.

They'd wanted me to *feel*.

To experience.

To fall and grow, try and fail, live and laugh and...love.

Damn you, you stupid jerk.

Curling into a little ball, I hugged the spare pillow and let sobs wrack me.

Sobs I'd choked on ever since my parents died.

The two people who made me and then left me all alone.

I'd unwittingly let Nick drag me out of the metaphorical library where I'd hidden my terrified heart and made me *exist*. Made me human and not just a recipient of knowledge.

He'd made me feel. He'd bruised me, marked me, consumed me...and now, he'd tossed me aside, all because he was too much of a coward to love me, despite death coming for us all.

I'd been brave enough to love him.

I let him change me.

I cried harder.

I could never go back.

Never turn it off again.

Never stop wishing for the more that he'd given me.

I wished I'd never gone to *Spectacle of Secrets*.

Wished I'd never confessed to Hunter how much I wanted someone to take away my power.

I would give anything to forget the joy I'd felt at being dominated. To never know what the act of being subservient did to me.

It wasn't because I needed violence to get off.

It wasn't because I'd read the books and fantasised about the lifestyle.

It was as simple as I'd told Nick.

As profound as finally learning the truth about who I truly was.

I wanted him to rule me because for those short few hours in the big top—for those wonderful moments where two men told me what to do, what to think, and how to obey, I'd been *free*.

Free from the pressure.

Free from letting my parents down.

Free from my endless expectations of myself.

In Nick's arms, I'd found peace.

Peace I'd never known before.

And now, all I felt was torment.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN



“DID I SAY YOU COULD CRY?” HUNTER demanded, dragging the thick leather of a crop over my bottom lip.

I shook my head, dropping my chin as I squirmed in the cuffs trapping my wrists. “No, Sir.”

“Did I hurt you, little witch?”

“No, Sir.”

“Did he hurt you?”

I flinched.

Hunter ducked before me and tipped my chin up with the crop. “Did Nick hurt you, my darling?”

I nodded. “Yes, Sir.”

“I’ll kill him.” Hunter wrung the crop as if it was Nick’s neck. “Your tears are meant to flow because you’re in ecstasy, not heartbreak.”

I cried harder. “I’m the opposite of ecstasy.”

Tugging me onto his lap, his jeans brushed against my nakedness as he pressed a kiss to my temple. “Tell me how to stop your pain.”

“Make him love me.”

He groaned. “No one has that power, little witch. Even you with your magic over us.”

“Then erase him from my mind.”

“I would if I could, but I can’t.” Cupping my cheek, he ran his thumb through my tears. “The only thing you can do is consume his mind in return. I told you before...if you want him, you’re going to have to break him.” He kissed me softly. “Don’t let him break you instead—”

I gasped as I shot upright.

The dream dissipated like wispy smoke.

My head ached from my drinking session, stealing some of my wooziness and dumping me firmly back into reality.

The TV still flickered silently.

I hadn’t even noticed I’d fallen asleep.

Shit, what time is it?

Am I late for work?

I was never late.

The hotel clock glowed a neon pink, revealing the time was two in the morning.

Oh, thank goodness.

No way did I have the strength to return to the lab in my current state.

Falling back against my pillow, I let my mind skip back to the night I’d spent with Hunter. What had we been doing at two a.m.? Which man was inside me then? Was it Hunter or Nicholas? What was Hunter doing right now? Was he inside another woman? Sharing her with another Dom? Worshipping her until she felt like a dirty, desirable queen?

Faint jealousy curled through me. The feeling was nothing as vicious as what I’d felt at the thought of people flirting with Nick at the lab, but it was there. Pulsing in my alcohol-laced blood, itching me to call him.

Call him?

I sucked on my bottom lip.

How on earth would I call him?

And *why*?

I'd accepted that I'd never see Hunter again. He had his life; I had mine.

But if Nick doesn't want you...perhaps Hunter could give you peace?

The peace I'd only just discovered and now desperately craved. The freedom that came at the end of a lashing whip, tongue, and stroke.

Clicking on the bedside light, I reached for my phone before I could stop myself.

If he was still close by, I could travel to the town he was in and ask him to erase Nick from my mind, once and for all.

If I fell into his spell, just the two of us, perhaps he could help me move on.

Bringing up a search page, I typed in *Spectacle of Secrets Contact Us*.

Immediately, the familiar purple and silver colours of his company appeared. The website was scant and purposely vague with just a picture of the big top, a flashing R18, and the latest park address where they were pitched.

Damn.

He was at least five hours away.

Having sex with him tonight was out of the question, but...would he speak to me?

Would hearing him help heal all these wounds, old and new inside me?

With alcohol bolstering me, I clicked on the cellphone number listed at the bottom of the website.

It rang and rang.

Too long.

With every ring, I felt a little more stupid.

A lot more needy and miserable.

God, what are you doing?

Hang up.

The call connected, and Giselle's chirpy voice came down the line.

"Spectacle of Secrets. How can I help?"

Shit, now you've done it.

Trembling, I whispered as if people in the hotel would hear me.

"Giselle?"

"Yes. Who's this?"

My heart pinched that she didn't remember me. But why the hell would she? I was just one of the many patrons who'd been serviced in her boss's establishment. Just a silly little girl who'd experienced something monumental that'd forever changed her humdrum life.

"It's me...eh, the woman who had a threesome with Hunter? El—"

"Ella? Oh, hey! Nice to hear from you. I take it Cath got you home safe? How's tricks? Broken that boy of yours yet? Has he continued to accept his true nature? Bet you two are at it like rabbits. Good for you."

I clutched my phone, not having the words to answer her questions. "I-Is Hunter there by any chance?"

She paused before her tone quietened, somehow filling with understanding even though I hadn't said a damn thing. "You're in luck. He's just returned from doing a walkabout. I'll see if he has time to talk."

She put me on mute, and my heart rate exploded.

What was she saying to Hunter?

Was he laughing at how I'd tracked him down and called?

Did he think I was a clingy little conquest who couldn't live without him?

Partly true, I suppose.

"Ella?" Hunter's rich, deep voice filled my ear. Instantly, a blanket of syrupy ease fell over me, giving up my power, ever so thankful to just *be*. My body went loose, preparing for whatever command he would give, already embracing the newfound knowledge that while I was happy and blessed with a successful career, I was also exhausted by it. Terribly tired of being alone and having to make every damn decision. Was it wrong to want someone else to make those decisions once in a while? Decisions on how to make me come so I could drift away on a cloud of bliss, recharging me for yet another day full of responsibilities?

"Ella? You there?"

I shook myself out of my stupor and cleared my throat. "Hey, Hunter. I'm surprised I managed to get you."

"Yeah, serendipitous timing." He chuckled, the background noise of voices and laughter fading as if he'd stepped somewhere quiet. "No bastards are here tonight—or at least, not yet—so my evening is spent overseeing the shows and making sure everyone stays respectful and consensual."

"Sounds...nice?"

He laughed. “The first few years of owning a big top full of porn was a dream come true. I’d come twice a night just watching the kink people got up to. But now...” He sighed. “Now all I seem to think about is what you looked like as I fucked you and the noises you made as you came around my dick.”

Fire.

Everywhere.

Instantly.

My heart pounded as I clutched my phone harder. “Y-You think about me?”

“Of course, I do. I told you, you’re the first in a while to make me lust as hard as I did. I’ll admit I wanted to pay you a visit before we travelled north. But then I figured Nick would have a problem with that so...I didn’t.”

Silence fell as I tried to figure out what to say.

“Is he treating you well, Ella?” he finally asked when the silence got too heavy. “Is he playing with you or still struggling with his needs? I know how tricky it is to accept you’re a Dominant. For years, I feared it made me exactly like the men I punish. I fought against my natural tendencies. I forced myself to be sweet and soft, but it never truly satisfied me.”

My heart warmed, ever so grateful to get to know pieces of him. To bind us together in friendship as well as sexual conquest.

“What made you finally accept that part of you?” I asked softly.

“A girl like you actually,” he replied with raspy history in his tone.

“Can...can you tell me about her?”

He took a moment before replying, “She was a nurse in the ER. Her nights were full of blood, broken bones, and people dying. To everyone at

work, she was insanely capable and was every doctor's favourite with how well she coped under pressure. But...the cracks of that praise and responsibility finally led her to a club where I'd sometimes venture. A club where I'd just watch, doing my best to convince myself that what I wanted wasn't wrong. That the men and women who went there were perfectly happy trading ownership and orgasms."

"What happened?" I asked when he paused.

"Well." He sighed. "I took one look at her and could see how much she needed someone to take it all away. I saw her need to rest. Not to sleep or relax with a friend but to truly, honest to God *rest*. The kind of rest that turns your mind blank and strips you back to absolutely nothing. The kind of rest that only comes from drowning your senses and plummeting into wicked sensation."

I swallowed hard as he added, "She had the same look in her eyes as you did when we stood on the pavement, and you told me that you wanted to be ruled."

I didn't speak.

I couldn't.

"Anyway..." Hunter sniffed. "She needed what I could give her, and I needed what I could take from her. That night, I slipped onto a dark and wonderful path, and by the time the sun rose, we were both reborn."

"Did you...did you ever see her again?"

"Once or twice at the club but we didn't date, if that's what you're asking. I started *Spectacle of Secrets* not long after that. Realising that if I was fighting my true nature for that long—living in a state of misery and discomfort, not fully able to be me—then there would be others. Many

others. Some not brave enough to go to a club. Some unable to chase their true wants. So...I took their truth to them.”

I ran my fingers over the crisp sheets. “That’s actually rather noble.”

“And lucrative.” Hunter chuckled. “I didn’t charge you that night, but the experience you had...if it’d just been us and I’d agreed to let you hire me—which I very rarely do these days—you would’ve walked away a few thousand dollars poorer.”

I fought a smile. “I’m grateful for the discount.”

“And I’m grateful to have fucked you.”

I gasped, my nipples pebbling.

Leftover champagne bravery had me whispering, “I’m glad you fucked me too. I’ll never forget it.”

“Goddammit, you still have a magic over me.” His voice went dark. “You’ve made me hard now.”

My pulse picked up. My skin went hypersensitive.

I’d called for advice, but...I wouldn’t be opposed to phone sex.

It couldn’t be classified as cheating on Nicholas since he’d never accepted me in the first place. But...it would only add to my confusion, and...I honestly didn’t know if I’d come or cry if Hunter demanded I finger myself while he masturbated in my ear.

“Ella...” His tone turned gentle, almost as if sensing my fragility. “I find you truly remarkable. I like you. A hell of a lot. If I didn’t have my business and the side gig of putting down monsters, I’d be tempted to go back to your town and keep you.”

Heaviness settled between us again before Hunter cleared his throat and said, “So...now that you know I’m hard. And I’m pretty sure you’re wet. Did you want to tell me why you called, or would you rather hear what I’d do to you if you were here?”

I teetered on the options.

I swayed toward both decisions.

My body primed for a release, but my heart ached for guidance. “Do you mind if we just keep talking for a bit?”

He sucked in a breath, not because he was offended but because whatever he’d heard in my tone set him on edge. “Are you okay, Ella?” He shifted and spoke with tight restraint. “You didn’t answer my question before. Is Nick worshipping you every night? Is that why you’ve called? Has he figured out the art of pain and pleasure? Do you have a safe word with him? Because you really should with him being a new Dom.” His voice softened. “Not to mention how are you coping with being a new sub? Have you accepted that part of yourself, or are you trying to convince yourself that you’re an independent woman who doesn’t need a man? Especially his commands or cum.”

My cheeks blazed.

I wanted to get on my knees and thank this open-hearted, unflappable guy for talking so frankly.

He’d gotten straight to the issue with no judgement or scorn.

I had no one else.

No one in this lifestyle.

No friends to understand.

No parents to confide in.

Not that I ever would.

Good lord, my mother would have a fit if she knew.

But then again...I think she'd be secretly proud that I'd finally learned how to live.

“Ella...speak to me. You're scaring me a little. If I came on too strong, I apologise—”

“He's leaving,” I blurted. “In three weeks. To Singapore.”

Hunter didn't reply for the longest moment, almost as if weighing his words. “Is he leaving because he's wanted to for a while, or is he running away from you?”

I gritted my teeth and turned off the TV, ridding the room of flickering blue light. “Pretty sure he's running away.”

“Did something happen?”

“I...” Balling the blankets in my hand, I confessed, “The morning after we were with you, I caught him jerking off in the shower. I got on my knees and opened my mouth even though he told me that he would never be with me again.”

“So...you presented yourself to him?” He clicked his teeth. “What did he do?”

“He says I forced him.”

“He accepted what you offered?”

“Yes.”

“Did he come?”

“Yes.”

“Did he return the favour?”

“No.”

“No?” He growled. “That fucking bastard. If that’s his version of power play you can do much better, Ella. No self-respecting Dom would ever let his sub go wanting. Your happiness and pleasure are what we live for. We ache to see you give in. We burn to make you shatter. If I don’t have your climax on my dick or tongue at least twice during a session, then I failed you as your Master.”

A full-body shiver shot through me. “Can I just say how much I love the way you talk.”

He breathed heavier. “You like me being honest?”

“I like that you hold nothing back.”

“I’ve learned not to. It took time, I won’t deny that. Speaking so crudely comes with its drawbacks, but it also comes with great reward. Why should I censor myself when I’ve got my tongue in your cunt, and you’re the most delicious flavour I’ve ever tasted? Why should I stay silent on how fucking good you feel as I drive inside you? Words have a power all of their own. I can’t tell you how explosive they can make sex when a Dom talks to his sub—not to demean or belittle her but to praise and reprimand her. To tell her exactly how hard she makes him by giving him everything that she is.”

“You’re making me wish I was at your big top.”

“Fuck, me too.” He groaned. “I’m stroking myself and could come right now if you said you’d travel up here and pay me a visit.”

“I have work in the morning.”

“Have you never heard of a sick day?”

I laughed. “I’ve never pulled a sick day in my life.”

“What? Ever?”

“Nope. Not even at school.”

“God, no wonder you needed to be ruled so badly. You’re fighting a lifetime of restrictions chaining you down. Let me guess...you never did anything bad as a kid, right? Never sucked off the wrong guy at school when you were meant to be in a math test? Never smoked weed with the rebel crowd? Never tried to seduce your teacher for better grades?”

“Eww.” I giggled. “My teachers were all old.”

“And I bet at least one of them spanked himself to thoughts of you.”

I shivered. “Why does that make me feel powerful when I ought to be grossed out?”

“Because we’re just human. Driven by instinct. Part creature, part monster, part saint. Knowing that someone in a position of authority wanted to fuck you takes back some of that power they have over you. You realise you hold all the cards, all the time. You realise men are nothing more than beasts, panting for a smile, aching for a touch, and ready to die for the barest chance to sink inside you.” A rustling sound as if he stroked himself. “Fuck, I want you. I’m so close.”

“Hunter...I—”

“I know.” He cut me off. “You didn’t call me to hear me jerk off in your ear.”

The swift change of subject made me flounder.

I shivered for an entirely different reason. “It’s okay—”

“No, it’s not. I’ve stopped. I won’t take advantage of you in any capacity. You called me to ask about him.” Sighing heavily, his clothing rustled again as if he tucked himself away and removed his hand. “Do you want some advice? Even though I gave it to you that night?”

I nodded far too eagerly. “Yes. Yes, please. Tell me how I can forget him. Tell me how I can get over him. If he’s running away, then he doesn’t deserve me. I should have more self-respect than wondering how I can change his mind. If he can’t love me, then—”

“He does love you. He’s a fucking idiot, but he does love you. Even if he hasn’t fully admitted it to himself yet, he has an inkling. Believe me.” Hunter’s voice softened. “You didn’t see his eyes when he was flogging you. Each lash he gave you absolutely shattered him. He fucking adored it, but he adores you more. He could barely stand upright; he shook so badly. He looked as if he wanted to get on his knees and marry you then and there, all while forcing you onto *your* knees so he could come all over your beautiful face.”

“How on earth can you say such dirty things and make them sound so romantic?”

“Talent?” He laughed. “But seriously. I get it. I get him. I hoped he wouldn’t have to go through what I did, but...it seems as though honourable guys just can’t accept that they house a beast within. We want to be perfect for you. We want to wrap you in cotton wool and give you every diamond imaginable. We want to keep you safe. Keep you happy. So when we have dark, dirty thoughts of making you bleed and cry and scream, that can mess with a guy’s head. It can make him run away...just like I did.”

“But you eventually accepted who you truly are. You ended up using your truth to help so many others.” I dropped my voice. “I know I would never have had the courage to ask a man I met by usual dating methods to tie me up and bruise me. God, just the thought of that conversation sends me into hives. It was the knowledge that I’d never see you again. The recklessness of one dirty night that gave me just enough strength to surrender myself to you.”

He groaned low in my ear. “On your birthday, no less.”

“Yes.” I smiled. “You gave me a present I will *never* forget.”

“And you took a part of me that I’ll never get back. I know you assumed you’d never see me again, and...if things work out with Nick, then I suppose that will be the case, but...I’ll be back in your town in a year or so. If you’re still single by then. If I’m still single and not gotten myself killed by beating up the wrong bastard, then...I’m going to keep you.”

I gasped. “You’re saying I’m yours in a year if Nick doesn’t claim me?”

“Even if he does, he shared you with me once. Perhaps he’d be open to giving me another taste. From one Dom to another. A gift of the girl he most cherishes, all because he knows how well I can pleasure you. If you ask him, he’d have no choice but to agree. His purpose in life is to make you happy...or at least it should be.”

“Pretty sure moving to Singapore is a giant clue that my happiness is not in his top five goals.”

“And that is the cue for me to tell you what you need to do.” His voice slipped into all business. “You asked me how to forget him? I’m not going to answer that. Not yet. Call me back if this doesn’t work and then I’ll tell you. Better yet, if he’s being a prick about it, book some vacation days and come

to me. I'll make it my personal duty to erase every shred of that man from you, one release at a time...but for now..."

He paused.

He gathered his thoughts before saying, "I stand by what I told you. If you want him, you're going to have to break him. But now that I know he's probably dealing with the same shit I was, then you need to be smart."

"Smart?"

"He doesn't want you to love him 'cause he's afraid of dying early and leaving you heartbroken, right?"

I nodded, glad Hunter remembered everything Nick had said that night.

"He also probably can't stomach the thought of you dying and leaving *him* heartbroken. Especially after what he said about his brother and father dying. There's deep-seated trauma there for sure. Has he said as much?"

"Yes." I nodded. "In almost those exact words."

"Okay then...here is what you do."

I leaned up and peered into my gloomy hotel bedroom. "Tell me."

"He thinks he can avoid the pain of a broken heart if he doesn't claim you as his. He thinks he's protecting you from that same pain by refusing to love you back. So...replace him."

"R-Replace him?" I choked. "But..."

"Go to a club. There's one in your town called The Black Peacock. You're a natural submissive, Ella. There's no reason why you shouldn't seek out what you need."

"I...I can't go to a club. I can't sleep with a stranger."

"You did with me."

“Yes but—”

“Regardless, the chances of you having to sleep with someone are extremely slim.”

I wrinkled my nose. “I’m not following.”

“Tell him where you’re going. Leave a note. Tell him face to face. Do whatever you want, but make sure he knows exactly where you’re going and for what purpose. Prove to him that just because he’s not willing to give you what you need, then someone else will. Gladly. You’ll eventually find another who will rule you and adore you. You’ll fall in love. You’ll give your heart away. And one day, that lucky man will die, just like he will.”

“So...you want me to make him jealous?” My voice turned small. It sounded so petty, so juvenile...like it would never work against someone with his mind made up and flight tickets booked.

“No.” Hunter chuckled. “Show him what it feels like to miss you when you’re *alive*. He’s so focused on not having you when you’re dead that he’s completely missed how he’ll feel if you’re with someone else. Someone not him. Someone just as killable. Someone just as vulnerable to life and its pitfalls. He thinks he’s being noble by not making you his, but in reality, he’s only ensuring his future will be agony. If he wants you as much as I think he does, then the moment he sees you with another, all his morals and rules will come crashing down.”

“But he already saw me with you...”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“I wasn’t a threat. I was merely an inconvenience he had to share you with. He knew my business was my top priority. Our night together and what

you felt toward me was purely pleasurable not marriageable.”

“Oh, I don’t know. I’d say you’re definitely marriage material.”

“And maybe one day, I’ll take that leap. With you or with someone else...but that’s not the point. The point is...” Sucking in a breath, he murmured, “If he sees you with someone else. Someone who could give you everything you want for the rest of your life, then he’ll finally realise that the pain of not having you when you’re alive and willing is a thousand times worse than the pain of having you and losing you to a hypothetical grave. A million times worse. Show him what he has to lose while it’s still his to lose. Make all those years he could love you flash before his eyes. Make him see another in his place. Another man fucking you. Another man taking care of you. A man who will be lucky enough to adore you for decades.”

“But...”

“Make him choose life over death, little witch. Make him choose love over loss, and I personally guarantee, he’ll have you kneeling at his feet before you can open your mouth to say hi.”

His voice darkened. “And if he doesn’t. If he’s so fucking cowardly not to finally admit that he needs you, then I’m coming to get you. I’m going to follow through on my threat to keep you barefoot and bound, and then we’ll see just how long he can survive without the one thing he needs to exist.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN



THE FRONT DOOR CLOSING BEHIND ME MADE me jump.

My hands shook as I slung my handbag strap on the coat rack and dumped my keys in the pretty amber-and-white glass bowl I'd bought at a market last year. The clinging of metal on glass might as well have been a foghorn.

I flinched and toed off my high heels, sinking down a couple of inches as my bare feet kissed the polished floorboards of our small foyer.

I'd done the unimaginable this morning.

I'd not only checked out of my hotel sanctuary—after promising myself I'd stay for three weeks—but I'd also called in sick to work.

A first.

Guilt kept pestering me but...needs must.

I'd only had the strength to do it because today was Nick's rostered day off, and he probably thought he was safe to stay at home, knowing I was at work.

A scuff and a quick curse came from his room before he appeared in the corridor holding a roll of cellotape. "Ella?" He scowled, his handsome face wearing the frown far too well.

I cursed him for looking so good in black cotton trackpants and a white t-shirt. A smudge marked his hem, looking like dust.

“I thought you were working today.” His frown deepened, his trimmed beard framing tight lips.

Doing my best to stay casual and super chilled, I shrugged and padded through the lounge. “I decided to take a personal day.”

“A personal day?” His shoulders tensed. “Why?”

Cutting over the shagpile rug, I glanced at the couch. The pillows were plumped perfectly, the TV remote placed just so by the trio of vanilla candles I’d put in the middle of the wooden coffee table.

Everything looked the same, and yet...something was wrong.

Something isn’t quite right—

My heart sank.

The side table by the stressless chair he favoured was empty of his current stack of books. His cell phone charger that always remained plugged into the wall was missing, and the one and only item he’d added to my decor—a picture of him and his late brother with a river and two kayaks behind them—was gone off the mantel.

A rock lodged in my throat, and my sleepless night pressed on my temples. The slight hangover didn’t make things any better, and I hoped I managed to act my ass off, so he didn’t have a clue how close I was to ugly crying.

Sniffing as if I’d found fault in the cleanliness of our lounge, I headed toward him and narrowed my eyes. “Already started packing, huh?”

“Yes, well...” He dropped his eyes, unable to look at me. “I did tell you I was moving out. I’m going to start shipping my stuff over now. I’ll stay in a hotel for the final few weeks. Easier that way.” He shot me a look, his hazel

gaze a murky shade of brown—a shade that looked a lot like shame—instead of the blazing emerald of lust.

I didn't say anything for the longest moment, dragging out the uncomfortableness as he fought the urge to fidget or run. Finally, I forced a smile. "Perfect. That works great."

"Oh good." His forehead scrunched. "Wait...it does?"

"Yep." Brushing past him, I padded into my room and unbuttoned my blouse. He froze on the threshold, not taking his eyes off me as I shrugged out of my cream top and dumped it onto my bed. My lacy ivory bra was charmed with the push-up variety of magic and my breasts sat perky and plump.

I would never admit that I'd hoisted the straps a little bit higher this morning, just in case I had the opportunity to strip in front of him, using whatever tricks I had to do exactly what Hunter had said.

Break him.

Pulverise him.

Shatter him into teeny tiny pieces so he couldn't exist without me holding those pieces together forever.

"Ella...c-can you put on a shirt?" His voice sounded as if a boa constrictor had wrapped around his windpipe.

Flicking my hair over my shoulder, I glanced at him as I dragged the zipper of my skirt down and let it fall to the floor. "Nope." My sheer black thigh-high stockings were an indulgence and one I was insanely grateful I'd decided to wear yesterday, despite my melancholy mood.

"Jesus Christ," he growled, his eyes dousing me in fire.

“Oh, I’m sorry...am I making you uncomfortable? This is my room, after all. You can leave any time you want.”

Nick swayed into my doorway. Midnight shadows gathered on his face as his eyes locked between my bare legs. “Do you go to work every day without underwear, or did you lose them wherever you spent the night?”

“Oh...this?” I embraced every dirty, dangerous part of me and pressed two fingers against my clit. I couldn’t control my reaction. The soft little gasp. The quick little clench.

Nick noticed.

Fuck, he noticed.

His nostrils flared as if he could smell me.

He stiffened against my door, turning into stone.

Struggling to keep my voice level, I said, “I didn’t have a clean set...so...” I shrugged and reached up to unclasp my bra. “I figured the short trip home wouldn’t be too scandalous to stay bare.”

He groaned as I tossed my bra onto my bed, standing there in just my stockings.

“Why didn’t you have clean underwear?” he strangled.

“Because I spent the night at a hotel.”

His hands fisted around the cellotape.

How many boxes had he already packed while I was gone? How much longer before he’d extracted every part of his life from mine and never looked back?

The urge to cover myself whipped through me. My nipples pebbled. My skin broke out in goosebumps, but I forced myself to stand there. To let him

look. Let him drown. His trackpants tented. His palm slapped against his rapidly swelling erection, pushing it back down. “Why did you spend the night in a hotel?”

“To get away from you mainly.”

He flinched. “Were you alone?”

Narrowing my eyes, I murmured, “Last night I was, but tonight...I plan on having company.”

“Fucking hell, Ella. You’re doing this on purpose.” He closed his eyes and shook his head. “You’re trying to make me fuck you when I said that will never happen again.”

Every instinct said to press myself against him. To take his hand off his cock and yank down his pants. I could break him in that way. I could force him like he claimed I did by offering my mouth last week. I could have him inside me in a few moments...I knew that.

Every girl could sense when a man was just waiting for that final invitation to maul.

If I took a single step toward him, he’d have me on my back and fucked on the floor before I could sneeze.

But then...he’d pull away again.

He’d refuse to look at me.

He’d just keep packing and hiding and...no.

I wanted more than just a quick roll on my bedroom carpet.

I want your heart, you stubborn son of a bitch, and...I have to trust that Hunter knows what he’s talking about.

When I didn't give him the invitation, when the air crackled with far too much electricity, Nick opened his eyes and bared his teeth. "Put some goddamn clothes on."

"Actually, I'm going to take a long, hot shower. I'm going to shave every inch of my body. I'm going to pamper myself like I haven't in a very long time. I'm going to stay naked for most of the day, if you must know."

"To punish me?"

"Not everything is about you, Nicholas." I cocked my hip.

"Then why—"

"Because I have special plans tonight."

"What plans?"

"I'm going out."

"You never go out. You never stay away. If you're doing this to get back at me—"

"I'm doing this for me, you stupid jerk," I snapped, crossing my arms and shoving my breasts up. "What happened in that big top changed me. I can't and won't go back to who I was. What Hunter gave me...what *you* gave me. I never had the courage to ask for it before. Never knew how I'd feel being completely owned before. It was the best night of my life, sexually speaking, and—"

"Did you fuck him?" he growled. "Is that who you were with in the hotel?"

"Fuck who?"

"Hunter."

“I already told you I was alone.” I shrugged with a pout, making it seem as though being alone was the last thing I wanted. “Besides, he’s not in town anymore.”

“And you know that how?”

“Because I called him.”

“You *what?*” His voice bled straight into nightmares. “Why would you do that?”

“Because, you moron, I need more. I want more. I *deserve* more. I offered you that right. I gave you my heart and my body. I asked you to be mine, Nick, and what did you do?” I marched into him and stabbed a finger right over his thundering heart. “You took a job thousands of kilometres away. You told me, pretty loud and clear, that you’re not interested in loving me or ruling me, so...I’m going to find someone who is.”

He went dangerously, lethally still. “Someone *else?*”

“Yep.” I nodded. “Hunter told me there’s a club here. The Black Peacock. I’m going.”

“A club? What sort of club?”

“What sort do you think?” I spat. “One offering me what I need. A club full of Dominants not afraid of their own needs. A club full of submissives ready to be commanded. I’m new to this world, but I’m not afraid to become a part of it—unlike some people I know.”

A terrifying growl percolated in his chest. “Careful, Ella. I’d be *extremely* fucking careful if I were you.”

Planting my hand on his taut, tense belly, I shoved him into the corridor and clung to my doorknob for support. It was now or never. It would work or

fail. By tonight, I could be at the mercy of a total stranger or...I could belong to the monster currently snarling at me as if he wanted to murder me, bury my body, and piss a ring of ownership around my grave.

Standing to my full height, I pushed him so he crashed against the opposite wall and said as clearly and as coldly as I could muster, “I intend to go to The Black Peacock tonight and every night until I find a man worthy of claiming me. A man who will worship me and love me. A man who will spend the rest of his life making me crawl for him, spread for him, and come for him. I will fall in love. I will commit myself to him and only him because he is worthy of loving me in return. Someone who’s smart and sexy and obsessed with me, just like I’m obsessed with him. We will live a life full of lust and love. A life of happiness as well as pain. He may die young. I might die before him. But in the years we’re alive, we will have a love story that most can only fantasise about. And you...”

I sighed heavily. “You will be exactly as you are. Precisely as you want to be. Alone.”

Agony tore through him. Terror and disbelief as his mouth parted, and he shook his head. “You can’t do that. You can’t let another man touch you. Not in that way—”

“Why?”

“Because...” He wiped his mouth with a trembling hand. “I-I forbid it.”

I caught his stare.

I gave him the saddest smile. “You relinquished all rights to me, remember?”

The blackened yearning pouring off him tangled with his rage. “You said you wouldn’t make this difficult! That you wouldn’t try to stop me from

leaving.” His teeth tore at the words. “You said that at the circus. You *promised* me.”

“What can I say? I lied.”

“You’re going to get hurt.”

“Already am.” I held his stare. “I’m looking for someone brave enough to cure that hurt.”

His eyes turned black. “Ella. Stop. Just...fuck. It’s not safe. You can’t let another have you. You can’t give them what you gave me.”

I shrugged, just the tiniest twitch of goodbye. “That’s the thing, Nicholas...I can. And I will.”

Closing the door in his face, I flicked the lock and tumbled to my bedroom floor.

Tears breached my eyes.

Rivers tumbled down my cheeks.

And I curled up into a little ball, empty of courage, vacant of hope, just needing a moment to grieve.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN



OH GOD.

Are you sure, Ella?

Truly, positively sure?

I gulped as I entered The Black Peacock and froze on the threshold.

All the nerves of today. All the uncertainty that I was doing the right thing and the heartache of hearing Nick stalk out of the house and not return churned in my stomach.

I hadn't been able to eat anything.

I'd nicked myself twice with my razor because I couldn't stop shaking long enough to shave my legs.

I'd paced my bedroom a thousand miles while waiting for the afternoon to pass and night to fall, fighting the urge to run the entire time.

Run to where?

I had no family to turn to.

No friends I could be this honest with.

The only person I could share this mess with was Hunter, and I didn't want to call him during the day because I had a feeling he worked all night and slept while the sun shone.

Besides, if he told me to hop in my car and drive to see him instead of offering myself to a total stranger, I would probably do it. 'Break Nick Plan'

be damned.

Better the devil I knew than the devil I didn't.

He'll come...

He has to.

Tears pricked my sore eyes.

I wasn't so sure.

The roar he'd made as he slammed the front door had been loud enough to rattle the bricks loose from our porch.

I'd waited for him to come back.

I'd braced myself for him to be waiting outside for me—to tie me up and prevent me from going.

I hoped against all hope that he'd see how much he needed me *before* I even had to step foot in this place, but...he'd vanished.

I'd spent two miserable hours trying to decide what to wear, googling what was most appropriate for a first visit to a club such as this and fought the diabolical urge to go shopping for corsets, leather, and buckles.

Apparently, leather had to be earned or gifted.

There were rules on hierarchy and wardrobe.

According to most of the beginner sites—the webpages full of wannabe subs and hesitant Doms—they all said the same thing: fetish wear, theme appropriate, and costumes were welcomed, but if you were going to a munch (a casual meet-up outside of a club, usually at a restaurant or bar) then anything went—work uniforms, scuffed jeans. If it was your first time at a club, then it was best to wear something comfy and cool because no one did well stressing and sweating in tight latex.

Thanks to my internet surfing, I'd probably flagged a number of bots to track my internet history and learned a stack of new words that I'd never heard of before. Terminology such as Drop: for those emotional exhaustions that took place after a scene. Similar to what I'd experienced after Nick and Hunter had finished with me. Dungeon: the place where a scene took place. Dungeon Monitor: an overseer of safety and consent—which I supposed that was what Hunter was in his big top. Edge play, impact play, breath play, role play, and blood play. So many plays. So many tricks and temptations and—

“You alright, standing there all alone?” A woman dressed in a flowing black dress that trailed on the floor behind her smiled. Her dark stunning skin soaked up the lowlights of the club and her short cap of tight curls made her savagely sharp bone structure look as if she had blades beneath her skin instead of cheekbones.

I swallowed hard and nodded. “I...I think so?”

She chuckled with a bell-like laugh. I didn't know how she did it, but my heart skipped into a little crush. Thankfulness that she'd talked to me. Gratefulness that she was so kind.

“First night?” she asked with a cant of her head.

“That obvious?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” She grinned, taking in my choice of ‘street legal’ attire. I'd decided to go with a suggestion I'd seen on a Fetlife community board and took their question to heart: if my father saw me in this outfit would I die?

Well...no chance of that happening, but...if my boss saw me, at least I wouldn't be mortified.

Smoothing down the same black dress I'd worn when I'd gone to *Spectacle of Secrets*, I stepped down the two stairs, leaving the entry foyer behind. Two bouncers had checked my ID and asked me a bunch of supportive questions to check I was here of my own free will and knew what stepping inside entailed before even allowing me to get to this point.

"I'm Ella." She held out her hand, a droplet of condensation from her champagne glass glittering on her fingers.

I slipped mine into hers with a quiet laugh. "Seriously? That's my name."

Glancing around at the milling men and women—all dressed neatly and normally—she smirked. "Real name or nickname?"

"Nickname?"

"You're welcome to go by your given name of course, but some of us prefer a pseudonym." She grinned. "My real name is Mary, but...my nickname is Ella."

"Well, I suppose seeing as there's already one Ella here, I better come up with another."

She laughed. "You can use it if you want. There are multiple Sarahs and Tims and Samanthas."

"No, I think...I think I'd prefer a different one. Something that makes me feel powerful, you know?" Biting my bottom lip, I tried to come up with something and, of course, every name vanished from my head.

Typical.

Watching me, Ella (*that's so strange*) smirked. "Do you have a middle name?"

“I do.” I smiled. “But it’s very unusual. My parents...” I winced, aware that for the first time ever, I willingly brought them up in conversation. I’d gotten so used to shoving their memory away—so I didn’t have to feel the pain—that it’d become second nature not to mention them.

Yet here...with a woman I’d only just met, I wanted to give her a piece of myself that I’d never given anyone.

Patting my hand, Ella sighed. “They’ve gone?”

I nodded but didn’t let sadness well around my heart. Instead, I smiled and made them come alive through reminiscing. Whether or not they’d appreciate being reincarnated in a sex club was a matter I didn’t dare dwell on. “They always called me their little scholar. Said I was all work, no play. Blamed me for my lack of interest in living, when books and knowledge were so much more interesting, but...it was their fault, really. Not mine.”

“Oh?” She sipped her champagne. “How so?”

“Well...my dad was a history professor and my mother a retired archaeologist. Knowledge to them was kryptonite. When they had me, they decided on a simple pretty first name and saved the crazy, meaningful one for my middle.”

“The suspense is killing me.” Ella winked.

“It’s Hypatia.”

“Can’t say I’ve ever heard of that one.”

“Hypatia was the leading mathematician, astronomer, and philosopher of her time. It was said she was a trailblazer in the city of Alexandria. That her death symbolised not only the downfall of intellect but also the end of the classical world.”

“Heavy.” She chuckled.

“I know, right?” I sighed, suddenly feeling lighter than I had in years. To talk about them. To pull their memories out of the shadows and share them.

A shiver of rightness ran down my spine.

My insides brightened.

My heart glowed.

Yes.

This...this is right.

I was meant to come here.

I was meant to live, even if that meant putting down the everlasting pursuit of information. I didn't want to be like Hypatia, whose death collapsed an intellectual dynasty. I wanted to be free.

“So...Hypatia. That's your name?”

“Tia.” I smiled. “Let's go with that.”

“Fabulous.” She gave me her champagne. “Have a sip of that to celebrate your new identity.”

“Thanks.” Taking a dainty mouthful, I passed it back and gasped as she captured my hand.

“Now, Tia...you said you were a little scholar? Well, I happen to know a teacher who very much enjoys punishing students who deserve it.”

My stomach tightened. “Y-You do?”

Pulling me into the crowd, she grinned. “It's your first night, so no one will bite. We all remember the nervousness of our first time. You've come to the right place. The Black Peacock is a small but loyal club. Some of us are

in 24/7 relationships. Others share. Others met and got married here but still do the occasional scene. Whatever you're into, you're welcome. Whatever you're looking for, someone will be able to provide. You're safe with us."

My knees turned shaky with another gush of gratitude. "I-I can't thank you enough."

I'd come here with my head swimming of Nick and my heart screaming for him to stop me.

But now...now I might just be brave enough to survive even if he never came for me. If he truly wasn't strong enough to claim me, then...I would accept it. It would hurt. I would grieve. I might always fear he was the one who got away. But...I didn't need him to exist. And that tiny coil of power siphoned through my blood, pushing my shoulders back and granting enough courage to follow Ella across the decadent space.

Just like the black bedroom in the big top where Hunter woke me to what I was missing, this club favoured midnight shades. Black-dyed peacock feathers covered an entire wall. Plumes of feathers framed the impressive bar, and black suede love seats and low-slung tables invited drinks and mingling.

I caught a few people leaving the club through doors camouflaged in the feathered wall. A man leading a woman with a golden leash. A woman hurrying a man along with a whip.

No one stared. No one cared.

The level of acceptance and freedom was breathtaking.

After a lifetime of trying to fit in, of doing my best to *be the best*...I felt my tightly gripped control unravelling, trailing behind me like bondage I'd worn for far too long, trading it in for a very different kind.

Stopping before a man with glossy black hair and silvered temples, Ella coughed demurely until the gentleman turned from the bar and smiled. Dark-brown eyes, tanned European skin, and hands that ought to be illegal with how perfectly formed they were. How his tendons flexed over his knuckles. How his fingers fondled his glass as if it was a breast instead of an object. “Ella. What a pleasure.” He smiled, crinkling the skin around his piercing eyes as he kissed my new friend’s cheek.

I guessed he was late forties, but the way he wore his charcoal suit hinted he had no middle age spread beneath it.

My pulse picked up as his gaze landed on me.

His smile turned darker. “Hello.”

His presence was so intense, so sharp, so headily *masculine*, I dipped my chin on instinct.

His eyes flared as his tongue ran over his bottom lip. “A natural.” Sighing dreamily, he glanced at other Ella. “You know I’m restraining myself, Ella dear, yet you bring me the most delectable sub I’ve ever seen.”

Ella laughed like a matchmaking siren. “I thought you’d like her.” Looping a slim arm around my waist, she murmured, “Tia...allow me to introduce you to Rhodes.”

“Tia?” Rhodes bowed, sweeping, dashing, delicious. “What a beautiful name for a beautiful woman.”

“It’s actually Hypatia,” Ella said with a wink, obviously having insider knowledge about why she’d made this introduction and why she watched Rhodes like a cat with her teeth punctured into a very unlucky canary.

Oh lord, I’m the canary.

“Hypatia?” Rhodes straightened with a snap. “Named after the most learned woman in Alexandria, I suppose. A woman who read the stars and overcame the profound sexism of her time, only to be branded a witch by the Parabalani and torn limb from limb, signalling an end of pagans and the rise of Christianity.” He sighed heavily. “A dark day indeed for mankind. The day when faith was used against us and those who stayed loyal to spirituality—true spirituality governed by nature and frequencies we cannot see—was the day we were all enslaved by the church.”

My mouth fell open.

Who the hell is this man?

“You’ve heard of her then?” I smirked.

“Heard of her? I’m practically in love with her.” He chuckled. “I’m a curator for a well-known museum. My favourite era is the Roman empire and its overlap into Egypt and beyond.”

My heart kicked. “My mother used to be an archaeologist. That was her favourite era too.”

Twice I’d shared my parents with strangers.

Twice I glowed with newfound happiness.

“Well...it has to be fate that we’ve been introduced then.” Rhodes took my hand and kissed the back of it. His touch was dry and strong, but it failed to send pinwheels of heat through me. No crackle of chemistry. No conduit of electricity.

Not like when Nick touched me.

Not like the soft burn I felt whenever we’d sit in the lounge, ignoring one another while reading. Not like the tingle whenever he’d forget himself and

smile at me at work. Not like the overwhelming wildfire when he'd kissed me for the first time or the absolute evisceration of my soul when he'd branded me with a flogger, then sank inside me like a beast.

All my confidence that I could exist without him popped like dirty bubbles.

My enjoyment fizzled.

My bravery failed.

I fought the urge to tug my hand back all while I pasted a smile on my face. "It's a pleasure to meet you."

Nerves wriggled in my tummy.

I should just go home.

He's not coming...

Holding onto my hand, Rhodes murmured, "So...this is your first night?"

"Uh-huh." I swallowed hard; rising anxiety made me sweat. "I mean...yes. Sorry. I do know how to speak."

"Nervous?" He chuckled.

I dipped my chin again, unable to withstand his intensity. "Terribly."

He groaned low and dark. "You should know...bowing your head at a Dom is both an honour and a tease." He swayed away from me as if putting some distance between us, even while squeezing my hand. "Is Ella your sponsor for tonight?"

"Sponsor?"

"I found her as she arrived," Ella said (*still so strange*). "I've taken her under my wing and told her we won't bite."

“Won’t bite. *Much.*” Rhodes winked, sending me flinching with nerves.

What would I do if he asked me to be his? Was that a thing? How did this work? Would he ask me to be with him so soon? Was I expected to say yes if I was unattached and propositioned? How did I tell him what my limits were? What *were* my limits? Would he expect to fuck me bare, or were there rules in place for health and safety?

Oh God.

What if he wants to share?

What if he wants to—

“Ella.”

I froze into a million tiny crystals. Glittering. Fracturing. Cracking.

That voice.

That gruffness.

That command.

I didn’t turn.

I couldn’t.

Every part of me locked into place as another growl slipped into my ears.

“Let go of him. *Now.*”

Other Ella scowled and twisted to face Nick. Her gorgeous black dress whispered over the floor as she stepped toward him. “And you are?”

My ears throbbed for his reply.

My heart didn’t dare hope...

And then...the sweetest, most *wonderful* word.

Just one.

The best one.

“Hers.”

Pulling my fingers from Rhodes’, I turned to face Nicholas.

My heartbeat thundered as our eyes locked, hazel to blue, and I swayed as if I’d drunk a hundred glasses of champagne. “Nick...”

His jaw clenched. His entire body flinched.

My gaze ran all over him.

From his black jeans to his white t-shirt and rolled-up sleeves of his plaid blazer.

He wore the exact same outfit he did when he’d found me in Hunter’s arms and begged to share me.

And I knew.

Suddenly.

Completely.

Just how much that request would’ve cost him.

Just how hard that would’ve been to plead for one night to fuck me, all while knowing he’d have to watch me with another man.

The now familiar syrupy cloud of obedience slipped over me, quietening my worries, blanketing my questions. I turned empty. Empty apart from sensation and connection and the unfightable desire for him to take away all my control.

I longed for it.

Begged for it.

Came alive within it...

He didn't move.

He didn't have to.

Dropping his chin, his brows shadowed his lethally furious eyes as he said, "Come here."

Deep.

Dark.

Rough.

Raspy.

The perfect voice.

The perfect man.

The perfect command.

I went without a second thought.

I let biology rule me instead of intellect. I became the pagans that Rhodes had mentioned and willingly climbed upon an altar to worship the stars and planets, elements and magic because being a witch was so much better than being a disciple. Being free to live life the way *I* chose instead of following the paths of so many others.

I moved like water to him.

I burned like fire before him.

I sucked in air as he nodded his approval.

I sank to the earth as he pointed at his feet.

Four elements.

Four powers.

One choice.

Kneeling before him, I waited. I didn't look up at the men and women gathering around us. I didn't care if this was usual or frowned upon. We were in a sex club, but I hadn't seen such blatant ownership in this main bar.

Perhaps these power dynamics were saved for more private quarters.

Maybe we broke all the rules and would be asked to leave.

I didn't know.

He didn't know.

But it didn't stop Nick from bending down and cupping my chin, forcing my eyes up, my lips to part, my heart to race.

“Did you want to stay and find a man who will love you as well as bruise you?”

I licked my dry lips. “No, Sir.”

“Did you want to stay and belong to someone else? Someone who could probably care for you better than me. Someone who isn't afraid like me.”

“No, Sir.”

“Do you want someone who can give you a life, even though he doesn't know how long that will be?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you want to belong to him and only to him, even knowing he'll struggle with such a thing?”

“Yes, Sir.”

“Do you want to forsake all others? Do you agree to never share yourself with another? To never desire another? To never ask me to fuck you with another again?”

I closed my eyes; tears rolled down my cheeks. “Yes, Sir.”

“Yes, Master,” he snapped.

“Yes, Master.”

“Get up.” Snatching his hand off my chin, he straightened and glowered at me as I obeyed. I trembled on the spot, glancing at the crowd we’d summoned. Men and women. Dominants and submissives. All of them smiling softly, knowingly. Eyes full of understanding and acceptance. Ella grinned. Rhodes smirked. Even the bartender chewed on a smile as Nick hissed, “Undo my belt.”

My eyes shot to his.

Did he expect to take me here?

Right in the middle of the bar?

Will I let him?

I hesitated.

“Undo my belt, Ella. I won’t ask you again.”

My hands shook as I unthreaded the leather and unhooked it.

“Slip it out of my jeans.”

I did as he asked.

“Secure it around your throat.”

I stiffened.

The part of me not intoxicated by freedom wrinkled her nose.

Rhodes laughed behind me.

Other Ella muttered something I couldn’t hear.

Nick didn't move as he stood to his full height and never took his lethal eyes off me.

Slowly, carefully, I raised his still-warm belt to my throat and threaded the leather through the buckle. With no holes tight enough to secure it, I pulled until it looped me like a choker.

"Give me the end." Nick held out his hand.

I placed the dangling tan leather into his awaiting palm.

Tugging gently, he pulled me into him.

His cinnamon breath kissed my lips as he hissed, "Do you give yourself to me? And only to me. Totally and unreservedly. Knowing that I might fail. Knowing that I might struggle. Knowing that I will love you with every fucking part of me, despite being so afraid of death and all its heartaches?"

A soft sob escaped me.

I wanted to fling my arms around his shoulders and kiss him.

Instead, I bowed my head and took every part he gave me. "Yes, Master."

"In that case, let's go home."

Pulling me forward with the leash he'd formed with his belt, he paused as the crowd slowly parted.

Other Ella walked with me, squeezing my hand as she murmured, "You're okay with this, right? This is what you want?"

I smiled so damn bright. "It's what I hoped would happen when I came here."

"So...you were using us?" She wrinkled her nose. "But I thought—"

"Not using us," Rhodes interrupted, wrapping his arm around other Ella's slim waist, keeping pace with us. "Testing to see if this is where she

belongs.” He smirked. “Where they both belong.”

Nick pursed his lips but tilted his head in acknowledgement. “Sorry for barging in and breaking any rules. I’ve yet...I’m still not sure what I’m doing.”

“Oh, I don’t know about that.” Rhodes chuckled. “You’re doing a pretty fine job already.”

Nick accepted the compliment with a polite nod. “I’m also sorry for forcing her to stop touching you. I, eh...I wasn’t prepared for the fury—”

“A word of advice?” Rhodes grinned. “Don’t apologise to another Dom unless it’s absolutely justified. And you did nothing wrong. You’re possessive, as you should be. Your task is to protect her. Cherish her. And you did that by claiming what’s yours.”

I thrilled.

I tingled.

His.

I’m his.

The Neanderthal terminology wasn’t frowned upon in here. It wasn’t slandered by feminists or forbidden by outraged protesters.

In here, it was simple: a heart for a heart. A life for a life. A soul for a soul.

And that means...he’s mine.

Rhodes gave me a soft smile. “She’s special. I’ll admit, I’m sad that I didn’t have the opportunity to get to know Hypatia better, but...you’re both welcome back. To drink. To play. To talk and just hang out—to find friends who understand what you’re going through.”

“We appreciate that.” Nick’s shoulders softened a little.

We.

Had there ever been a more magical word?

Other Ella squished my fingers again as we reached the steps to the foyer. “You *do* belong in this world, Tia. I knew it the moment I set eyes on you.” She flicked Nicholas a glance before whispering in my ear, “He’s a natural, just like you are. And my good lord, does he love you.”

I shivered. “I hope so.”

“You also know you hold all the power, right?” She kept her voice too low for Nick to hear. “You hold his heart and soul, so...be careful with them. Just because you’re the collared one, doesn’t mean you haven’t leashed him right back.” Her voice turned sharp with seriousness. “Don’t ever forget that. Don’t forget that you rule him, even while you kneel for him. Remember to talk to one another. Lean on one another. Our world isn’t just about power exchanges but the depth of connection it brings. The bond that will be forged between you will be unbreakable...so be wary of the intensity your new dynamics will bring.”

“Thank you.” I squeezed her hand back. “You’ve been so kind to me.”

She smiled and kissed my cheek. “Once you’re both secure in your new affection, please do what Rhodes suggested and return. I need to hear how you just broke a Dom. How you came here with no man and ended up with one chasing after you. I need to know your story, Tia.”

Nick rounded on her, hearing the final parts of our conversation. With his face stern and eyes swimming with possession, he tugged me into his side and staked every claim he could. “Her name is Ella, and she’s mine. The only story you need to know is...she didn’t just break me tonight, she broke me the

moment I opened the door to my new rental and found her hanging a welcome sign over the mantel for me. She turned to face me, lost her balance, and fell off the chair she was standing on. I dropped my bags and caught her. And the moment she landed in my arms, I knew.”

He looked at me, his face etched with stern, savage affection. “I knew the moment she looped her arms around my neck and gave me all her trust. So freely. So fully. No one had ever trusted me with their life before. It’s her fault that this urge awoke inside me. This need to possess her, all because she possessed me.” Forgetting we were surrounded by people, he murmured only for me, “You gave me something I didn’t know I needed.”

“Said like a man who’s always needed to be needed,” Rhodes said quietly.

Nicholas didn’t look at him, his hazel eyes locked on mine. “I want you, Ella. So fucking much.”

The club faded around us. My new friends vanished from my attention.

All I saw was him.

His domination and his desperation.

His power and his weakness.

“Then take me home, Master.”

All the softness, all the wary tenderness in him snapped back into fierce authority. Fisting the leash around my throat, he glowered at those watching us, then bowed his head at Ella and Rhodes. “We’re leaving. Goodbye.”

Yanking me forward by the belt, he pulled me up the steps, out the door, and into the clean night air.

Voices trailed us.

Laughter and knowing whispers.

“Remember your safe word, Tia!” Ella shouted after me. “You’re gonna need it!”

I gasped.

Nick groaned.

He pushed me into his black Ford and drove us home.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN



THE DOOR CLOSED QUIETLY BEHIND US, TRAPPING us into our shared house, blocking out the world and keeping our sinful secrets.

Nick hadn't spoken a word the entire drive home, but that hadn't stopped our bodies from shouting. Tension built and built until I had a permanent case of goosebumps and ached exquisitely painfully between my legs.

He didn't drive too fast or too slow.

His hands strangled the steering wheel; his eyes narrowed on the road.

His belt still fastened around my throat.

I'd done my best to come up with something to ease the stinging, sizzling awareness between us, but...each time I opened my mouth, only air came out.

Should I apologise for going to the club?

Should I thank him for coming after me?

What was going on inside that head of his?

I jumped as the front door clicked into place before the deadbolt slid home. Looking over my shoulder, I caught Nicholas's stare.

Every question, every worry, every thought...all vanished in a puff of smoke.

No hazel now, just green. Blazing, smouldering green full of fury and desire. With bronze hair tumbling over his forehead and lips framed by a

manicured short beard, I'd never seen a more handsome man or a more terrifying beast.

My heart rate soared as I spun around to face him, keeping my eyes on the dangerous predator I'd invited into my heart, all while tripping backward in my patent heels until my ass hit the back of the couch.

I froze. "Nick...I'm sorry."

He bared his teeth as he stalked toward me. "Sorry? You're sorry. What are you sorry for, Ella? Are you sorry you stripped for me this afternoon, then went to a club for another man to taste you? Sorry that you forced me to spend a day from hell wondering if I had the strength to come after you? Sorry that you forced me to watch another man proposition you...*again*? Sorry you forced me to accept pieces of myself that I'm still not ready to accept? Or..." Unthreading his belt and yanking it off my neck, he tossed it to the floor, then curled his hand tightly around my throat. "Are you sorry you forced me to fall in love with you?"

I gasped as he squeezed.

I longed to touch him back. To be soft in the face of his hardness. To melt his coldness with warmth he desperately needed.

But...just as I'd known when I'd offered him my mouth after *Spectacle of Secrets*—if I gave him soft now, I'd lose him.

He didn't need apologies when my actions still bled him. He didn't want my acknowledgement that I'd pushed him into emotions that were far, far too intense.

Right now...he needed a fight. A fight he could win. A fight that would appease him and give him back all the power I'd stolen by making him come after me.

Grabbing his wrist, I narrowed my eyes. “I didn’t make you fall in love with me. You said you fell the moment you caught me as I tripped off the chair that first day.”

“Don’t use my words against me.”

“Then don’t blame me for this. You had a choice. You made that choice —”

“I *never* had a choice,” he roared, squeezing my neck with just enough pressure to kick instincts into genuine fear. “I told you why I didn’t want this. I told you why I wouldn’t survive it. I told you I didn’t want to hurt you, and look at what you made me do!”

“You’re right.” I clawed at his fingers. “You’re hurting me.”

Instantly, horror flooded his eyes.

His fingers loosened.

He backed away, shoving both hands into his thick hair. “Fuck. I didn’t mean—*fuck*.” Shaking his head, he muttered, “Don’t you see, Ella? I’m not good at this. I’m not safe at this. I-I’ll hurt you...I know I will. Either playing these games or when I die of—”

“Don’t.” I ran to him and slapped my hand over his mouth.

No way would he utter the C word ever again.

No way would he believe that anymore.

“Haven’t you learned anything?” I whispered, slowly taking my hand away from his lips. “Your thoughts become you, Nick. If you keep telling yourself that you’ll die—”

“It’s a biological fact.”

“It’s your own fear, not fact.” I cupped his cheek, giving him softness, after all. “You have authority over your own body. Diet and meditation and exercise. Just those three things are the best prevention in the world. Not to mention all the methods we’re still learning.” My voice dropped to a caress. “You’re mine now, Nicholas Davis, and I say you’re not going anywhere.”

Wincing, he cupped his hand over mine. “I’m yours?”

“Yep.” I smiled. “I hate to tell you, but the moment you went to The Black Peacock after me, your every thought, every word, and every heartbeat is *mine*.”

Bowing closer, he sucked in a breath. “I want to wring your neck for putting me in such an impossible situation.” Running his hand up my arm, he didn’t stop until his fingers curled around my nape. “I didn’t want to go after you. I tried to let you go. I spent the entire day pacing the fucking park, trying to convince myself it would be better if you *did* find someone else. Someone with better genes. Better morals.”

My heart crashed against my ribs. “So...why didn’t you?”

“Why?” He laughed coldly. “You know why.” Pressing his forehead to mine, he seethed, “I know what it feels like to watch another man fuck what’s mine. I know how much it crucified me to watch him kiss you, touch you, fall for you. It’s too damn easy to fall for you. Too damn easy to lose myself in you, and that’s exactly what I’ve done.”

Tears pricked my eyes. “I don’t want you to feel lost, Nicholas. If this is too much—”

“Too much?” he snorted, backing me into the couch again. “It’s gone beyond too much, Ella. I’m fucking drowning.”

I squirmed against his hold as he dropped his head and pressed a kiss to my throat. “I’ve lost all my control. All my power. You had to come along and mess everything up.” He bit me, layering the kiss with pain. “I feel so fucking guilty that I’ve put myself above my promise to my brother. So guilty that I’ve chosen love over duty. Wretchedly afraid that I’ve chosen a path that will only end in the worst kind of heartbreak.”

Placing my hands on his hips, I tilted my head for him to kiss and nip my throat. “I’m not going anywhere, Nick. And neither are you.”

“You can’t promise that,” he moaned into my skin. “Death has taken so much from everyone, not just me. I know what loss feels like. I know what helplessness feels like...but with you? I’m absolutely paralysed.”

Wrapping my arms tight around him, I yanked him closer until he fell against me.

The moment our bodies touched, his arms lashed tight, and we tumbled into the fiercest embrace.

He groaned as he hugged me.

“My intention was never to make you feel weak, Nicholas.”

“Well...you succeeded,” he breathed into my hair, trembling hard. “I’m utterly defenceless against you, and...I honestly don’t know how to survive it.”

Before I could reply, he cursed quietly. “What a selfish man I turned out to be.” Pulling away, he nudged my nose with his. “I’m selfish because I fell in love with you eight months ago, and I’ve done my damndest to pretend I felt nothing ever since. I’ve been mean to you. Rude to you. Downright cruel to you. I did everything I could to convince myself that what I felt meant nothing, only to find out you’re fucking *everything*.”

He panted hard, anger and surrender tainting his voice. “I’ve known every day you go to work and every night you cry out in the dark. I think I’ve known my entire life that I belong to you, searching for you through death and grief, so afraid of finding you because then I’d have to make a choice. A choice you forced me to make by showing me how much it hurts to lose you...all while you’re still mine to lose.”

Hunter’s advice flashed through my head.

A mirror image of Nick’s confession.

My heart glowed with gratitude; my eyes stung with fresh tears.

“I love you, Nick. Even when you were nasty, I sensed something was there. I told myself it was just a silly little crush...but I think I’ve always known you were mine—asshole and all.”

“Fuck,” he choked. “You shouldn’t say things like that. Especially when I can’t keep you.”

“You can keep me. You *will* keep me.” My voice hardened with certainty. “I’m yours.”

“And Christ, that turns me on.” He ground his erection into my lower belly. “Even though I should never have claimed you, I can’t seem to let you go.”

I gasped as heat blistered between us.

But it was more than just that. It wasn’t just lust...it was *more*.

More connection.

More truth.

More everything.

I wanted to know him, just like I’d longed to ever since I first met him.

I wanted him to talk about his family.

I wanted to talk about mine.

To break a habit of not talking about our loss because, maybe, just maybe, we needed to stop hiding from grief and embrace it. Our ghosts weren't there to haunt us but to support us. To prove to us that even though they were missing from this life, they weren't gone...not really.

They were still here.

Helping us, guiding us, nudging us in the right direction.

So many conversations we needed to have. So many secrets to confess and problems to overcome, but all that truly mattered was this.

Us.

And I'd done something unforgivable by taking away his power.

Just like the other Ella had told me.

I might kneel for this man and trust him to be strong enough to shoulder all my burdens, but...I had to be prepared to do the same for him. I had to prove that he could be paralysed, and I would keep him safe. That he could be defenceless, and I would protect him. That he could be his most vulnerable, fragile self, and instead of finding pain and heartache, he would be shielded and unconditionally adored.

I'd stolen his heart before he was ready to give it to me.

And now...now, I had to prove to him it was safe within my grasp.

With the softest breath, I gave everything I was to him and slowly, ever so slowly, folded to the floor.

“Ella—?” He cupped my elbows as I flowed down his body and out of his arms. His eyes flared as I landed on the carpet and looked up at him with no

walls, no secrets.

I didn't speak.

I didn't move.

I merely bowed my head and waited.

He breathed hard, towering over me. His jeans tented; his nostrils flared. The room came alive with electricity.

Fear trickled down my spine that perhaps he still wouldn't accept me. That he'd chased after me purely to tell me that his fear of tragedy was stronger than his desire for love, but then...in a heart-clenching, tummy-melting move, he stepped back, squared his shoulders, and growled, "Did you mean what you agreed to back at the club? That you want me and only me?"

I nodded. "Yes, Master."

A flood of moisture.

A kick of lust.

"Do you accept that I might stumble, might struggle, might have days where I second-guess this commitment—not because I don't love you, but because I'm so fucking terrified of losing you?"

"Yes, Master."

Ducking, he pressed his fingers beneath my chin, forcing me to meet his eyes. "And do you swear on everything holy that you won't let me ruin this? Do you vow to me, here and now, that you won't let me fuck this up?"

A tear rolled down my cheek. "I swear."

"You swear what?"

"I swear, *Master*."

His lips twitched. “Because if you fail. If you don’t do everything it takes to keep me yours, then...I won’t survive, Ella. You killed me the moment you stole my heart, and as long as you hold it tight...I’m trusting you not to let me die.”

I flung my arms around him.

Sobs caught in my throat.

“Always.” I kissed his neck, his cheeks, his lips. “Forever.”

“Well then.” He smirked the barest of smiles. “Seeing as I don’t have to worry about dying—now that my heart belongs to you—and you won’t dare die on me—because I need you to survive—I suppose there’s only one thing we need to do.”

I stilled and lowered back down onto my knees. “What’s that?”

He stood and crossed his arms.

A cloak of authority draped over his shoulders.

A mask of absolute control etched his handsome face. “For you to apologise.”

I shivered.

I waited.

I melted.

“You pushed me before I was ready, Ella. You’re about to pay the consequences of that choice. Stand up.”

Obedying, I smoothed down my dress and dared to meet his eyes. “I’m ready for my punishment...Master.”

He shuddered. His hand landed on his erection, squeezing it through his jeans. “Go into the kitchen and bring back a wooden spoon.”

My heart leaped. My eyebrows rose.

All manner of questions filled me. A spoon? Why a spoon? What did he have planned?

“*Now,*” he snapped.

I jumped and dashed into the kitchen. Ripping open the utensil drawer, I grabbed the first wooden spoon I spied, then flew back to him.

Holding out his hand, he barked, “Give it to me.”

I placed it reverently into his outstretched palm.

“Go into my bedroom and bring back four ties. You can choose what colours you prefer.”

Four?

God almighty...

Kicking off my high heels, I bolted down the corridor and opened his door.

I paused.

I hesitated.

I’d never gone into his domain before. I’d spied into his space whenever he’d left his door ajar, but I’d never been brave enough to go inside. Never been given an invitation.

Inhaling, my stomach clenched on the lingering scent of him clinging to his navy bedspread and white sheets. A simple side table and black lamp, a tallboy with a small TV, and a mountain of textbooks, science magazines, and other reading material rested in towers beneath the window.

On the sill, lovingly lined up and dust free, rested pictures of him and his brother. Him and his parents. Him in a past that no longer existed.

Tearing my eyes away from the photos, I yanked open his wardrobe and sucked in another lungful of Nick.

Spicy, woody, masculine.

My core fluttered as I plucked four mismatched ties from the hanger and ran back to him.

“Good girl,” he whispered, accepting the ties into the same hand holding the wooden spoon. “Grab a towel from the laundry cupboard.”

“A towel?”

He grinned. “Better ensure we protect the carpet, right? I seem to remember the last time we had sex it got rather...messy. We don’t want to stain the floor and not get our security deposit back, do we?”

I almost fainted.

With my blood singing, I dashed to the laundry cupboard at the end of the corridor and snatched a fluffy white towel from the shelves.

I panted by the time I draped it over his arm and waited for another command.

“Close the curtains.”

I obeyed while Nick placed the spoon and ties on the couch before shaking out the towel and draping it on the coffee table for later.

I went embarrassingly wet.

Once the streetlights from outside were banished and the lamps dimmed to an erotic glow, Nick turned to face me. “In the bathroom, you’ll find a bag. Earlier today, while you were here getting ready for a night at a sex club, counting down the hours to offer yourself to another man, I went berserk.”

Stepping into me, he grabbed my jaw with angry fingers. “After a few hours of pacing that damn park, punching a few trees, and generally losing my ever-loving mind, I had to accept that I couldn’t let you go anywhere, with anyone, and I was royally fucked.” He swallowed hard. “The only way I could accept that decision was to promise myself...if *I* was fucked, then...*you* would be too. By me. Hard. And deep. And every which way I wanted.”

I shuddered. “Freaking hell, Nicholas.”

“No speaking.”

I dropped my eyes as his delectably deep voice rumbled over me. “Once I decided to fuck you and keep you, I went shopping.”

“Shopping?” I squeaked.

“Again...no speaking.” With a tight smile, he added, “I searched for an adult store. I wanted a flogger like the one I used at the circus. I adored the noises you made as each lash landed. *Fuck*, Ella. Your moans. The way you writhed. The colour your skin turned. How fucking wet you were...” He shook his head, drowning beneath the tingling lust between us.

“Unfortunately, it turns out this town is too prudish for such things, and buying toys will have to wait. For now, kitchen utensils will have to do. My palm will have to do.”

I moaned beneath my breath.

Leaning into me, he whispered darkly, “I plan on hurting you, Ella. Extracting your apology out, scream by scream. I want to hear you beg. I want to hear you cry. I want you to be in as much pain as I am because loving you has cracked me wide open and flayed me fucking alive.”

“Nick.” I reached for him.

He grabbed my wrist and pinned it behind my back. “Only once you’re fully contrite for your actions. Only once you vow to me that you’ll never do it again. Only once you’re as broken as I am will I fuck you.”

Desire trickled down my leg, soaking through my drenched underwear.

I squirmed at the wicked sensation.

He grinned. “Are you dripping, Ella? Does knowing that I’m going to punish you turn you on?”

I nodded breathlessly. “Yes, Master.”

“Thank hell for that because I’m harder than I’ve ever been in my life.” With a flash of darkness, he let my wrist go and ordered, “Touch me. See for yourself.”

My hands shook as I rubbed my palm against his throbbing heat.

He hissed between his teeth, his hips rocking into my touch. “Jesus Christ, I need you.” Snatching my hair, he jerked my head back and kissed me.

Hard.

With teeth.

And tongue.

And hot, dark savagery.

I kissed him back, my fingers curling around his cock, squeezing as hard as I could through the denim.

With a guttural grunt, he pushed me away and pointed toward the bathroom. “Go. Before I bend you over the couch.”

Stumbling in a sex fog that turned my entire body into a pulsing storm, I tripped into the bathroom and grabbed the large paper bag from the sink.

Taking it back to him, I did my best to stop shaking as he gave me a rewarding smile. “Good girl.” Taking it, he commanded, “Now...strip.”

I froze.

My heart thundered as he raised an eyebrow.

“I won’t ask again, Ella. Undress. Show me what belongs to me. Show me how wet you are.”

With my blood burning and bones aching, I reached for my zipper and struggled out of my little black dress. The noise of each zipper-tooth coming undone echoed in the thick sexual haze between us.

Nick stiffened as my dress puddled around my ankles, leaving me in a see-through white underwear set with little silver flowers stitched over my nipples.

“Christ, you’re stunning,” he choked. “How...how in the world did I deserve you?”

His worship was out of character for the scene, but it only made me trip deeper into him.

“Because I was born to be yours,” I whispered, unhooking my bra and stepping out of my knickers.

I stood bare before him, proudly, bravely, desperately.

He drank his fill. His eyes lingered on my breasts before following the glittering wet trail of my arousal down my inner thigh. “You’re so ready for me.”

“Always,” I confessed. “Every night you heard me with my vibrator, I was thinking of you. I imagined you coming into my room, snatching it out of me, then filling me with your cock—”

“Fuck.” He fisted himself and squeezed. “You’re going to make me come before I’m even inside you.”

I smiled. “Get inside me then, so you can come.”

His eyes narrowed. “And forget about your punishment?” He licked his lips. “Oh no, my sweet little submissive. First, you’re going to cry for me, and then you’re going to moan.”

My entire body jerked.

Letting himself go, he dumped the contents of the bag onto the couch. Tubes of arnica, lube, antiseptic, massage oil, electrolytes, painkillers, and burn gel tumbled out.

Burn gel?

My eyebrows shot up.

Nick noticed with a smirk. “For the carpet burn you’ll undoubtedly get on your knees as I ride you from behind.”

No words.

Gone.

In a puff of dirty desire.

For a man who’d been fighting this side of himself for so long, he’d stepped wholeheartedly into his role. He both orchestrated the abuse and then foresaw the aftercare. Two sides of him. The dark and the light. The Dominant and the lover.

I shivered and sank deeper into his dominion.

I felt so *safe* with him. So cared for. So seen.

“I love you, Nicholas,” I breathed.

His spine jerked straight as he palmed a small box from the contents on the couch. With calculated steps, he pressed against me and cupped my cheek. His green-hazel eyes dove into mine, stripped back, totally open for me to ransack his soul.

“I’ve never felt this way about anyone, Ella. Nor will I ever again.” He kissed me ever so softly. “I’m yours. Every broken, reluctant, useless piece.”

I opened for him, stroking my tongue along his.

A groan escaped both of us, all while his hands worked between our chests.

I wanted to look down to see what he was doing, but then a soft thud of the box landed by my feet, and his fingers smoothed my hair over my shoulders.

Pulling away from the kiss, he turned me to face away and fastened something around my throat.

I touched the necklace as it settled firmly above my heart. Glancing down, I studied the solid gold medallion with an infinity knot carved into the middle and a border of stars around the edges.

My heart stopped. “Nick? What...”

“There’s a part of me—the part that’s well and truly prehistoric—that wants to keep you at my side at all times so everyone knows you’re taken. If I could, I’d collar you and mark you, but...I’m also not completely insane. So...this is my compromise.” He smiled almost sadly and kissed the tip of my nose. “Wear this so I know you’re mine. Maybe one day, if you don’t get sick of me or fail to keep me alive with your control over my heart, we’ll get married, and I’ll be able to trap you with a ring, but for now...this is my promise to you.”

“A promise?”

“That I will try every damn day to deserve you.”

I traced the infinity symbol as his eyes followed my finger.

“It’s your new safe word,” he whispered. “Because infinity is what we are. We do this and that’s it, Ella. Forever.”

I stood quaking on the carpet.

“Do you still want me?” he suddenly groaned, unable to hide his fear.

“Do you still accept me, knowing how much I need you?” Fisting my hair, he bared his teeth. “I’m not kidding when I say I’m obsessed with you. Utterly, *completely* obsessed. I’m obsessed with how smart you are, how courageous and brilliant and kind. I’m obsessed with how you smell and taste and sound. I love that we’re in the same field. That you share my thirst for knowledge and aren’t afraid to step outside the mainstream doctrine to find cures that might exist elsewhere. I love that I feel so comfortable with you, even when trying to push you away. I love that you feel like home...even on the very first day I moved in.”

An avalanche of love.

An explosion of so many feelings.

Slinging my arms around his neck, I breathed into his throat. “I want you, Nicholas Davis. For infinity and beyond.”

He hugged me back.

Vicious and vice-like.

And then he let me go, stepped away, and snatched up the ties.

In the harshest, hottest demand, he growled, “In that case, press against the wall between the TV and the side table. Spread your legs and arms. It’s

time for your punishment.”

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



MY NIPPLES GRAZED AGAINST THE CREAM-PAINTED walls as I panted hard. I tried to look over my shoulder at Nick, but my neck refused to contort that far.

The sound of his blazer being shrugged off and his t-shirt being ripped over his head gave me a perfect mental image of a washboard stomach, bulging jeans, and a man who would well and truly ravage me.

His shoes clunked against the floor as he kicked them off. His bare feet appeared between mine.

Every nerve ending stung with overwhelming intensity. His proximity. His threat. His self-control. It made me gasp and shudder and an embarrassing amount of desire rolled lazily down my inner thigh.

I flinched as his fingers suddenly cupped me. Spearing his index through my wetness, a feral growl escaped him. “Jesus, Ella, you’re soaking already.”

Because of you...

I gasped as he breached my entrance. Shallow and teasing.

“If I wanted to make you come like this...how long would it take?” he breathed, sinking a second finger exquisitely deep.

I squirmed against the wall. My hips rolled.

In a single second, he reverted me from woman to want.

Just want.

I wanted, wanted, *wanted...*

Words acted like a noose around my throat. Unable to give him a reply, I arched my ass back, rocking myself against his touch, forcing him to finger me deeper.

Seconds...I'd come in seconds if you give it to me hard.

“No reply? Well, then...no orgasm.” He tutted and withdrew his fingers, smearing liquid lust over my clit. “You are a dirty, filthy girl, Ella Fitzgerald, and I suppose it’s up to me to redeem you.”

Freaking hell.

I could add another fetish to my new list.

Bodily fluids were definitely up there after what Hunter and Nick had done to me.

And I could safely say dirty talk set my entire body on fire.

“What are you going to do to me, Master?” I moaned, my voice hitched and breathy.

“I already told you,” he whispered into my ear, pressing me against the wall with his bare chest. “I’m going to make you scream.”

“Oh God.”

“On second thought.” He pushed away and padded from the living room before returning with another tie. “Open.”

My lips parted for him to wedge the silky material between my teeth.

“Bite down.”

I obeyed, shivering as he tied the gag around the back of my head.

“That’s better. I want you screaming but not so loudly the neighbours think I’m murdering you. Then again...” Running his hand from my nape, down my spine, and along my ass crack, he growled, “I *have* thought about strangling you.”

I stiffened.

“Oh, not like that, sweetheart,” he purred. “Not because I’m a bastard who would ever take it that far but because I really, really need you to be as destroyed as me. I want you to know what it feels like to gasp for air whenever I see you making coffee in the morning. Or the way I struggle to speak whenever you smile at me in the lab. You’ve strangled me a thousand times since I met you, Ella. It’s only fair I return the favour.”

My entire core clenched on nothingness.

Needing to be filled.

Desperately.

“Nick...” A garbled mess thanks to the gag.

“Master to you,” he snapped. A sharp spank landed on my ass cheek.

“Ah.” I slammed into the wall, trying to get away.

“Think you can go somewhere? Let’s erase that silly idea right now, shall we?” Dropping to his haunches behind me, he ran his hands down the back of my thighs, his thumbs massaging me, smearing my arousal, coating me in shivers and heat. “You really are delicious, Ella. When I saw you bare for the first time, wedged between Hunter’s legs, ready for me to whip you, I almost came in my jeans.”

His hands landed around my left ankle, shoving it away from my right. “Open your legs so I can see every dripping inch.”

My heart raced fast enough to incinerate itself.

Holding onto the wall, I obeyed with a wanton moan.

“You should see the view I have.” His voice was pure devil. “Every fold, every swollen part of you. You look as if you’re covered in sweet thick honey. Nectar just for me, soaking from your pussy.”

“Freaking hell, Nick.” I tried to speak around the gag, but once again, I sounded like a moaning illiterate.

If he kept being this filthy, I’d be humping the wall before he even started.

Not speaking again, he wrapped one of the ties around my ankle, then knotted it to the leg of the entertainment unit.

Looking down, I tested the hold with a quick tug.

“Not too tight?” He looked up from where he bowed at my feet. “Not too loose that you can run away from your punishment?”

I shook my head.

“Good.”

Shifting to my right, he yanked my legs even farther apart, leaving them splayed wider than hip distance. Not uncomfortable but definitely vulnerable. The cool air of the living room licked around my throbbing centre, making me highly aware of how exposed and defenceless I was.

Tying my right ankle to the heavy side table, Nick slowly ran his fingertips from my ankle, up my leg, over my hip, and to my breast.

Hefting the weight of it in his palm, he thumbed my nipple, making me groan.

“You can’t run, and you can’t hide.” Letting my breast go, he captured my right wrist and imprisoned it with the third tie, looping the golden satin through a hook screwed into the drywall that I’d never seen before.

I frowned, catching his smouldering stare as he tethered me into place.

He gave me a wolfish smile. “Oh, didn’t I tell you? Along with my shopping trip, I did some DIY once you’d left for the club. Not much. I have plans for more. But I knew I needed somewhere to restrain you and...I got the idea of turning you into a brilliant work of art.”

Moving to my left side, he stole my arm and guided it to a second hook. The silver circles looked like picture hangers but larger—able to hold a heavier canvas.

Once all four of my limbs were spread and bound, Nick moved to the couch and sat down. Gravity leaned me against the wall, plastered and panting.

His reflection gleamed in the black TV screen, and my heart flopped out of my chest as he unzipped his jeans, pulled out his cock, and sat with his legs arrogantly spread.

I moaned. Loudly. Frustratedly.

Struggling in the binds, I tried to go to him. To suck him, bite him, force him to put me out of my misery by sharing the same cock he currently stroked.

“Nick...”

“I was right,” he groaned, his voice dangerously dark. “You really are an exquisite piece of art.” He grunted, his hips rising as his hand pushed down. “I could come like this. I could come all over my hand, watching you strung up and dripping for me. I could be cruel and use that as your punishment.

God knows you deserve to feel a fraction of the lust that I do. The lust I've fought so damn hard. The lust that got me into this mess."

I whimpered.

I rolled my hips.

Nick hissed and shot off the couch. Trying to stuff his uncooperative erection back into his jeans, he gave up and left them unzipped with his cock sticking out the top. His reflection blurred as he stepped too close, his presence making my skin burn like a dying star.

"But why would I masturbate over you when I have you bound and wet for me?" He pressed a worshipping kiss on my shoulder blade. "Why would I do what I've done every night since I moved in with you when I could shove my dick inside you and fill you with my cum?"

My heart skipped and tripped and perished.

Good God.

He was too much.

Too dirty. Too depraved.

Could I handle him?

Would I survive being his toy to use and abuse?

Would I cease to exist when he finished playing with me and tucked me into his arms to cherish instead of punish?

Pushing hair away from my ear, he ran his tongue along the shell. "Are you ready to begin, sweetheart? Are you ready to cry for me? Scream for me? Drip and clench and come for me?"

I nodded like a madwoman.

"What's the safe word?"

“Infinity.” The words twisted over the gag but were audible enough.

“And you’ll use it if I become too much?”

I nodded.

“Alright then.” He kissed my neck. “Let’s begin.”

I froze until every muscle trembled with fear and need.

I strained to hear what he did behind me. I begged to know what he planned on—

Pain.

I jerked and fell into the wall.

Tears immediately sprang to my eyes as the sharp smack of the wooden spoon across my ass echoed in the living room.

“Ow!” I moaned behind my gag.

“Ten will be your punishment, Ella. Ten strikes for the ten infractions you’ve made against me.”

Infractions?

What the hell did I do?

I’ve been a saint.

A darling.

A—

“Ah!” I groaned, fighting against my restraints as the second one landed. My ass cheek smarted, blazing in a throbbing hot line where the spoon struck.

“The first was for being exactly what Hunter called you. You’re a witch, Ella. A succubus who stole my heart right from my chest and have ruled it ever since.”

Running the edge of the spoon down my crack, he murmured, “The second is for being a dream come true when I didn’t even dare to dream.”

I braced.

I balled my hands.

I still wasn’t prepared for the wallop.

“Ow!” My hips bucked against the wall as he hit me. Short and sharp, a perfectly delivered whack that coated me with heat, misery, and mortification.

“The third is for turning me into this...this beast. This hungry, thirsty beast who longs to drink up all your tears and feast on all your screams.”

I sobbed as he delivered the fourth.

My body boycotted.

My heart hated.

Every instinct told me to shout the safe word and tell him to get the hell away from me. But then the fifth landed and rationality flew out of my swimming, drowning mind.

“Four for making me share you. Five for making me watch another man fuck you.” His voice hitched as if the pain of that truly undid him.

I wanted to see him.

I wanted to let him know I’d never request that ever again.

He was who I wanted.

Only him.

Another lash. Another bruising chastisement.

“Six for finding me jerking off in the shower the morning after the circus. Seven for kneeling at my feet and opening your mouth for me to fuck.”

I groaned as images of him towering over me and driving his hardness over my tongue tangled with my current vulnerability.

That morning, I’d offered myself completely.

Right now, I was tied and trapped for his pleasure.

Both times, I’d been totally at his mercy.

And that knowledge did something to me.

It cracked open a gushing floodgate. It turned the key on whatever chemicals switched pain to pleasure within my naughty, demented blood.

The lessons Hunter had given me about surrendering to agony instead of resisting it flowed through my bones. I floated. I flew. I settled on a cloud of abdication and gave myself entirely to the man I’d chosen.

Nick noticed.

Of course, he noticed.

He let loose a savage snarl as I sagged in my binds and whimpered with every longing, every lusting chaos within me.

“Fucking hell, Ella.” The TV reflection showed him fisting himself. His cock speared up like a deadly weapon, his hand pumping hard flesh, granting a tenth of the pain he’d delivered to me with the spoon. “You’ve undone me, woman. You’re all I ever think about, and you’re all I ever see as I jerk off. I wish I’d snapped one night and broken down your door. I wish I’d found you with your legs spread and your greedy pussy waiting for me. I wish I’d fucked you when we were both half-asleep and barely aware, so I never had to watch another man pleasure you.”

Tears poured down my cheeks and soaked into the tie gagging me.

With a roar, Nick whacked my ass with the spoon. Once. Twice.
Together. Apart.

I surrendered to all of it.

To the night we'd shared with Hunter and the future where it would just be us.

To the days we'd ignored our true feelings and the nights where we would be our true selves.

I gave myself over to this and then and before and after and when Nick's harsh breath panted over my shoulder blade, I sobbed at the beauty of letting go.

At trusting him to put me back together again.

At knowing he might hurt me, but he'd been hurting for months, and now we were even.

“Eight for making me beg to become immortal to keep you. Nine for terrifying me that forever might not be enough. And ten...”

Rearing back, he palmed my ass, squeezed the branding fire he'd painted, then delivered the final crack without warning.

I screamed. Loudly. Incoherently.

The strike ricocheted through flesh and muscle and bone. It echoed through my entire body as Nick threw the spoon onto the couch, dropped to his knees, and shoved his face between my legs.

“And ten...” he said against my clit, his lips teasing me, feeding the words directly into my core. “Ten is for making me yours, just as you are mine. Ten is for forcing me to chase after you, forcing me to claim you for my own,

forcing me to put aside my fears of death and dying all because...you never forced me. Not at all. You made me wake up. You made me see. You made me be honest with myself, and in return...I'm free."

Free.

My heart sprouted wings and soared.

In his passion, I was free.

In my surrender, he was free.

Uncaged and uninhabited, we had power and privilege and the absolute knowledge that we could be honest with each other.

Open and abused and adored.

No lies.

No secrets.

Our desires matched, and all it'd taken was eight long months and one dirty night at the circus to tumble our walls, blow up all our defences, and prove to us that we had everything we could ever want...in each other.

"Ten punishments, sweetheart," Nick growled against my clit. "You took them so well. You're so red and swollen, and it makes me so goddamn hard. You pleased me, Ella, so...here's your reward."

My moan bordered on a wail and a yelp and a shriek as his mouth clamped right over my pussy.

Clit to entrance.

Wetness and heat.

He sucked me down.

He licked me deep.

He rubbed his entire face in my arousal, and when he twisted between my legs so the back of his head hit the wall and his nose nudged my clit, I looked down at where he devoured me and fell.

I dangled in my binds as the man I was madly in love with ate me like a ravenous animal. Our eyes locked where he glared from below. I held his stare as his teeth nipped and his hands fisted my thighs, holding me in place, forcing me to endure every harsh lick and possessive bite.

He didn't say the words that I could come, but his feverish eyes glowed with permission.

He never looked away from me as he plunged his tongue inside me, triggering an avalanche of pleasure.

Oh God, oh God, oh *God*...

Soft rumbles began.

Shelves of scalding snow as they cracked and slid from their mooring inside me.

The roaring of disaster as the spindling weight gathered speed and strength, threatening to snap me into pieces.

No, oh no, oh God...

I climbed the cliff.

I clung to the edge.

And when the edge gave way, I plummeted into painful, beautiful, *agonising* pleasure. I exploded with a whiteout of pulsing, bone-breaking bliss.

On and on.

Wave after wave.

Milking his tongue and begging for more, for everything.

Sliding out from between my legs before I'd finished, Nicholas planted a hand on my nape, pinned my chest to the wall, then wedged his hips behind me. His undone jeans scraped against my throbbing ass, but then...with a primal, heart-stopping snarl, he bent his knees, fisted his cock, then slammed like a monster inside me.

He penetrated and mounted and plastered me against the wall as his cock stretched me into delirium.

I screamed behind my gag.

I groaned and whimpered as he rutted into me from behind.

He didn't speak. He just rode me. Rode me through the tumbling, thrilling pulses of my orgasm, fucking me ruthlessly and dangerously hard.

He didn't hold himself back.

He didn't temper his pace or ask if I was strong enough to take it.

He crushed my entire body to the wall and took and took and *took*.

"Fuck!" His release hit him like a gunshot to his gut.

He fell against me, his hips still pistoning, his breath tattered and torn. He roared in my ear as he fed me his orgasm. Filling me up. Spurting every thick droplet as deep as he could get.

On and on, he came.

Wringing out my own climax until we both choked and shuddered, and with a gasp of absolute wonderment, we ceased being two people and became one.

Time seemed to slow as we came down from our pleasure high. My ass stuck to his sweaty stomach. His cock continued to twitch inside me. My

shoulders ached from my arms being spread and my legs threatened to break.

With tender gentleness, he disengaged with a hiss, unplugging the mess we made and letting gravity take it to the floor. For a second, I worried about the carpet, but then, with hazy, unfocused eyes, I noticed he'd moved the towel beneath me, ready to catch the white liquid as it gave up rolling and dripped instead.

With a low chuckle, he untied my wrists and then my ankles, swaying against me a little as if his head swam just as woozily as mine. Undoing my gag, he whispered, "Told you the towel would come in handy."

I sighed in my sated bubble as he scooped me up into his strong arms and carried me down the hall to his bedroom.

I winced as he placed me down on his dark bed coverings; I made a protest of leaving yet more mess behind. But he didn't let me go. He didn't care. He cradled me close and lay beside me, spooning me until our entire sweat-slicked forms glued to one another.

It took a while for words to find us in the afterglow of love.

An endless moment for reality to intrude on our dishevelled dream.

But finally, with a great sigh of contentment, Nick nuzzled my ear and whispered, "I know I need to wash you, care for you, and worship every inch that I defiled, but for now...I just want to do what I wished I could've done for eight long months."

I snuggled deeper into his arms, smiling as he threw a leg over mine, trapping me in his embrace. "Oh? And what's that?"

"To hold you." He kissed my cheek. "I just want to hold you because after what we just did, after my heart just burst wide open and I came harder

than I've ever come before, I'm so fucking afraid that you won't be here when I wake up."

I smiled and pressed a kiss to his forearm. "I'm not going anywhere. For the rest of your life and beyond."

He groaned with a harsh chuckle. "I suppose that will do as an apology."

I wriggled even closer. "I'm sorry, Master. For making you fall in love with me."

"I'm not." His arms banded excruciatingly tight. "And it's Nicholas, if you don't mind. When you're crying for me, I'm your ruler. But when we're cuddling, you're my fucking queen."

No one.

Not even storybook knights, warriors, and princes could hold a candle to this man.

Mine.

All mine.

I couldn't contain the joy, the tingling, blood-singing joy.

"Nicholas..." I kissed his arm, my heart glowing brighter than a nebula. "I ___"

"I love you, Ella," he murmured into my hair. "Fear, pain, and all."

I twisted in his arms.

I cupped his cheek as our eyes locked and tangled.

Leaning in, I kissed him. "I'm obsessed with you."

His cock twitched.

Our hearts stirred.

And our shower didn't happen until dawn.

We fell into one another. We kissed and stroked, petted and worshipped. For the first time, we had sex without discipline or whips or others. We rode each other and clung to one another and when we found that pinnacle of delirious pleasure, we promised infinity and forever in the dark.



The next morning, as I sat at the dining room table and Nick made us keto pancakes with fresh fruit, I did my best to step outside my besotted addiction and set aside my rose-coloured glasses long enough to message Hunter.

I'd done what he said.

I'd earned what I wanted.

I owed him the biggest thank you.

You were right.

He came.

He claimed.

He's mine.

Thank you, Hunter.

For everything.

I sipped the coffee Nick had brewed and set my phone aside, only to snatch it up again when a short text replied.

Told you.

No one can withstand your magic, little witch.

I'm happy for you.

I guess our date in one year is null and void, but I'm okay with that.

As long as he adores you, he deserves you.

I wish you guys nothing but kink and love.

Hunter xxx

Replying a final time, I typed:

I'll never forget you.

I hope you find the same happiness one day.

Stay safe.

Goodbye.

I got up and wrapped my arms around my Master and mate.

I tipped up my chin for his kiss.

I ate the food he made me.

I accepted the creams he rubbed on me.

And then, I kneeled for him and melted for him as we began to play...

EPILOGUE



ONE YEAR LATER

A BOUQUET OF WILDFLOWERS PERFUMED THE HOUSE AS I opened the front door and stepped inside. My eyes instantly locked on their riot of colour, my heart glowing with love.

He remembered.

I wondered if he would.

A lot had happened this year, so I would've understood if he'd forgotten our unofficial anniversary.

Unofficial because we'd never really announced we were going steady.

But also official because the night he took me, spread and trapped on the living room wall—the night where he stripped me back to sobs and screams, then filled me with love and devotion—had bound us together stronger than any vow or ceremony.

The other Ella from The Black Peacock had been right.

This lifestyle of ours was intense.

We were the air and sustenance to each other. We played and protected and did everything together, and...it was absolutely perfect.

Kicking off my heels, I padded into the kitchen and plucked the card from the flowers.

Dear Miss Infinity,

An incomparable year where I go to sleep every night with you in my arms and wake with you in my heart every morning.

Happy anniversary, sweetheart.

I'm still madly obsessed with you.

See you soon.

N

Xxx

Hugging the card to my chest, I stuck my face in the flowers and inhaled.

Sweet and sensual...just like him.

Nicholas...the perfect contradiction of ruler and partner: fierce and kind, dominating but attentive, ruthless but loving.

God, I'm so lucky.

A year and I just kept falling.

A year and we couldn't stop tripping deeper and deeper into one another.

We'd tried to keep our secret from work, but...it hadn't been long before we'd been called out.

Mainly because of me.

The passionate mistake I'd made a year ago when I'd told Kate it was me in the middle of a Nick and Hunter sandwich had ensured we'd become office gossip to the point where we'd been summoned to explain ourselves.

The moment we'd stepped into our boss's domain, Nick had taken all the blame. He'd offered to quit, even though he wanted to stay at our lab instead

of relocating to Singapore. He'd said he would give up his career—the same career that drove him to find a cure for men like his brother and father who'd been robbed of so much time—to keep me.

His devotion broke my heart, and I'd stood beside him and handed in my resignation before he could.

We'd argued.

The boss had told us to sit back down.

He didn't care what we did in our personal time. There was no nonfraternization policy in our contracts and no morality clauses that we'd crossed. He'd called us in to chat. Not to scold us, but to ensure we were handling the gossip mill okay.

Nick and I had shared a look of absolute relief. We'd even managed to joke about it. Kate had been right that none of the rumours were malicious, merely curious and a tad envious.

It'd been a simple matter of signing some paperwork outlining our consensual, committed relationship and consolidating our house lease into one rent payment instead of two.

A few months later, I'd had a breakthrough with soundwaves and mould. I'd taken the study of visible sound and vibration called cymatics—a fabulous phenomenon discovered by Hans Jenny in 1967—and used the same experiments he'd done on different liquids and membranes to see if I could change mould compounds. I didn't care that some scientists claimed cymatics was a pseudoscience; to me, the ability to rearrange the structure of molecules already proven to have medicinal properties had the undeniable potential to create new drugs and healing.

Kate and I had run multiple tests on multiple strains of mould until we were finally able to say...eureka.

A brand-new molecule. A molecule that devoured cancer cells within days.

To upscale the experiment, Kate and I partnered with Nicholas and his lab partner Ralph. Together, we'd fallen down the rabbit hole of hope.

Working together as well as living together had been an absolute joy. We'd gone from barely talking and carefully avoiding one another to living in each other's pockets, and I couldn't be happier.

My head ripped up at the sound of the front door opening and closing.

"Nick..." I dashed toward him and flung my arms around his suited waist. The prim grey dress I'd worn to work fluttered around my knees. "Thank you so much for the flowers and for remembering."

"Of course, I remembered." He kissed me and cuddled me close, his chin shadowed with scruff and his eyes alight with love. "How could I forget the night you gave me everything you are? I also seem to remember you in delirious sobs as you came all over my dick. Definitely not something I'll forget in a hurry." Tugging on my infinity medallion, he smirked. "If only people at the lab knew what this symbolises."

"What? That it's your version of a collar, and you make me crawl on a nightly basis?"

"Not nightly, Ella. I'm not that much of a sadist to give you carpet burn every night."

I laughed under my breath and kissed his black shirt-covered chest. "I'm not complaining that you're home early, but...I thought you were pulling another couple of hours at the lab?"

He squeezed me, then let me go, heading into the kitchen and placing his satchel on one of the chairs. “That was the plan, but then...I got a message.”

I followed him with a frown. “What message?”

“Take a look for yourself.” Fishing his phone from his trouser pocket, he tossed it at me. Going to the fridge, he snagged a beer for himself and a lemon and lime for me while I sat down and opened his messages.

The latest one blazed at the top of the screen.

A name I never thought I’d see again.

Hunter Dixon.

Shit.

Guilt swamped me.

Not that I’d done anything wrong.

Hunter had messaged me a few days ago.

I’d never replied as I had no idea what to say or how Nick would react if he knew.

So why...

My gaze ripped up. “Why is Hunter messaging you?”

“Read it and see.” Nick placed the cold beverage beside me before cracking open his beer and taking a healthy swig.

I did as he said and froze.

Hey, Nick.

It’s been a year. I messaged Ella but never got a reply. So...I tracked down your number, courtesy of my contacts, and wanted to ask...are you still

together? Or did you fuck it up, and she's single?

My hands shook as I looked up before reading Nick's reply.

True panic filled my veins.

God, if he thinks I'm cheating on him...

"I didn't reply to him, Nicholas," I rushed. "I would never. Not now—"

"I know, sweetheart." Nick grabbed my hand on the table and raised it to kiss my knuckles. "I trust you one thousand percent. And you can text whoever you want. Whenever you want. Keep reading."

My eyes lingered on his before returning to the message thread. Nick's reply was harsh and firm.

Hunter,

She's taken.

She's mine.

This is your one and only warning.

I gulped as I skimmed Hunter's reply.

I'm happy for you guys.

In that case, my next question is...do you want to celebrate your relationship by reliving where it all began? I'm in town tonight. Same park. Same big top. Should we share?

My insides tangled.

I sucked in a shaky breath.

The time stamps on the messages said Nick hadn't replied for a while, but when he did, the words stopped my heart and made me drop his phone.

Fine.

We'll be there.

"W-What?" I shot out of my chair. "Y-You want to share me? After everything we've done? Every night you've possessed me? All that talk of being obsessed and keeping me forever and—"

"Hey." Nick stood and bundled me in his arms. "I am obsessed, and this is forever. Just...trust me, okay?"

I pushed him away. "*Trust you?* You just agreed to share me, for God's sake!"

"Yes, and as your Master, I command you to obey me."

My mouth dropped open.

He'd never pulled that card.

Apart from being subservient to him in the bedroom, he never treated me as less than equal outside it. Never made me smart against his commands. Never thought I'd ever curse him for the power he held over me.

"Nick...what's got into you? This isn't like you. I don't understand—"

"You don't need to understand." He kissed my forehead. "All you need to do is shower, put on that white summer dress I bought you, and obey me." He

strolled from the kitchen without a care in the world, leaving me shattered behind him.



“I hope you know I won’t forgive you for this,” I hissed as Nick pulled me toward the silver fence ringing *Spectacle of Secrets*.

He tensed as if I hurt him, but he didn’t stop. “Just...trust me, Ella. That’s all I ask.”

“I trusted you when you said I was yours. And only yours. You won’t even take me back to The Black Peacock because you can’t stand the thought of other men seeing me naked.”

“This is different.”

“How the hell is this any different?” I snarled as we crossed the road, and I lost myself to the storm of butterflies in my belly.

“Well, for one, Hunter has already seen you naked.” He stiffened. “Among other things.”

“You’re a bastard.”

“Remember you said that when you’re inside. I dare you.”

“*Dare me?*”

Wow.

Who the hell was this guy, and what had he done to my sweet, worshipping Master? He reminded me far too much of the callous Nick who’d done his best to hide his feelings beneath ice.

Hang on...

The way he refused to meet my eyes.

The tightness in his shoulders.

The regret that flashed in his stare every now and again.

I frowned.

If he regretted this, then...*let's turn around.*

Now.

Before it was too late.

I adored my night with Nick and Hunter. I'd dreamed about it for months afterward. But...I loved Nick. I wanted Nick. I *belonged* to Nick. Hunter was part of our pasts, and...as incredible as he was—as much as he'd helped me with Nicholas, and I would always be incredibly grateful for his gift of awakening—I needed him to stay there.

Not because of temptation.

Not because I didn't trust myself.

But because I was happy.

Blissfully, wonderfully happy.

Or at least...I was.

“Nicholas, please...” I tugged on his hand. “Talk to me. Help me understand this.”

Slamming to a stop, he cupped my cheeks and ran his thumbs ever so gently over my blush-dusted skin. “I love you, Ella, with everything that I am. If you want me to tell you what we're doing here, I will. I can't stand the thought of causing you misery or worry. So...ask me again, and I'll tell you.” His hands tightened around my nape. “Or...if you trust me like you say you do...then...please be patient. Come with me. *Obey me.*”

I hovered in his control.

A figure appeared out of the corner of my eye.

A man I'd recognise anywhere with his purple contacts, roguish black hair, and suave eclipse-coloured slacks and shirt. No lightning bolt on his cheek tonight, but a black heart with a jagged line right down the centre rested beneath his eye as if he cried a single broken-hearted droplet.

I froze as he blew me a kiss.

I sucked in a breath as Nick looked over his shoulder and glowered.

The way he reacted to seeing Hunter again didn't fit with what he'd said about sharing me.

He never said he'd share me.

I just assumed.

I—

No, Hunter definitely asked him.

And Nick said...fine.

Fine?

Fine!

As if I was a piece of rump steak?

As if I was nothing more than a toy he could rent out?

The nerve.

The audacity.

The pain...

My heart hurt.

My mind twisted and tangled, and my lungs forgot how to work.

The same sort of agony usually delivered by a palm or paddle coursed through me. Was this just another scene? Another torment before a great reward?

My eyes locked with Hunter's.

I did my best to read him but wasn't successful.

"Ella...please?" Nick murmured with a pleading puppy dog stare.

Holding his gaze, I did my best to remember the bliss Nick always delivered, especially after the worst sort of pain.

It took effort.

It took trust.

But...I did the unthinkable and let go.

I gave in.

To Nicholas.

To his command.

To what he asked of me.

"Okay," I whispered. "I trust you."

Groaning under his breath, he pressed a kiss to my mouth. "Thank you. Now that we're here, this seems like a foolish idea. But...it was romantic in my head." Giving me a lopsided smirk, he unravelled his fingers from my hair and took my hand. "Let's get this over with so I can grovel for forgiveness."

I smiled but still choked on nerves.

I couldn't breathe as Nick pulled me toward Hunter. Giselle grinned from her booth, and the night sky hid the circus goers already mingling in the

forecourt of the big top.

“Nicholas.” Hunter shook Nick’s hand before turning his full, piercing attention on me.

A buffet of attraction.

The same intensity we’d shared a year ago.

Back then, I’d been a sexually repressed girl.

Now, I was a dominated, liberated woman.

He was stunning, as always—undeniably a great catch, but...he wasn’t what I wanted anymore. What I needed.

“Ella,” he purred. “White is definitely your colour.” He kissed both of my cheeks, drenching me in his sinful scent of spice and sex. “The virginal shade is even more alluring now I know who you’ve become and what you two have embraced.”

Nick shifted on the spot. “Is the private room ready?”

“Always so eager. Just like last year.” Hunter chuckled. Glancing at Giselle, he said, “You’ll know where to find us if you need me.”

“Hi, Ella. Hi, Nick.” Giselle wriggled her fingers, her sparkling emerald leotard clinging to her perfect figure. “Welcome back to *Spectacle of Secrets*.”

I returned her wave but had no voice to return her greeting.

Unlike the first night I was here, Hunter didn’t consume me with dirty promises, and Nicholas didn’t beg for a chance to fuck me. With my hand firmly in Nick’s, and Hunter leading us as if taking us to slaughter, we cut quickly over the grass, past crowds and laughter, and didn’t say a word as we stepped into the long, smoky corridor of the big top.

The same pedestal full of condoms waited in the middle, along with the familiar arcade games full of R18 toys. We skirted them and kept walking—far quicker than last time, not stopping to look at the scenes playing out behind closed doors.

I couldn't catch a proper breath the deeper we went, heading toward the den at the end. The dungeon where I'd been mauled by two men and transformed into a brand-new woman.

I squeezed Nick's hand.

He gave me a soft smile and squeezed me back. "It's okay," he murmured. "Just a little longer, and then you'll know everything."

Hunter looked at me over his shoulder as he pulled out a set of keys from his pocket and inserted one into the door. "Are you afraid of what *he's* about to do to you, little witch, or are you more afraid of me?"

"You?" Nick bared his teeth. "You know what I requested. You're not touching her. We discussed this—"

"I'm aware." Hunter laughed. "Just testing you."

Discussed?

What had they discussed?

And when?

Hunter opened the door and waited for us to cross the threshold before closing it, locking it, and flicking on the lights.

I'd expected the same darkly decorated room from before—with the midnight four-poster bed, studded black bedhead walls, and medieval rack holding floggers of every kind.

Instead, I got the opposite.

Just like Nick had told me to wear white, the entire room blinded me.

A white sleigh bed complete with fluffy snowflake-shaped cushions. The rack had been transformed with ivory lacquer, and the erotic toys all gleamed in creams and taupes. Handcuffs, blindfolds, shackles, whips, clamps, and more.

Despite myself, my core fluttered. The first flush of desire appeared.

Hunter gave me a knowing look before tipping his chin at Nick and strolling toward a white throne at the foot of the bed. Sitting down, he patted his knee. “Ella. Come here, please.”

“W-What?” I backed up, slamming into Nicholas.

My eyes sought his. Seeking permission. Horrified to find it.

If he tells me to—

“Go to him, Ella. Sit on his knee.”

My heart sank right into my toes. “Nick...” I shook my head, words failing me.

Fisting his left hand, he stuck his right into his jeans and clenched his jaw. “Do this one last thing, and you’ll know exactly why I’m doing it.”

Not sure if I loved or hated him in that moment, I clipped toward Hunter and sat primly on his knee.

The instant my weight settled on him, Hunter wrapped his arm around my waist and kissed my hair. “God, you smell just as I remember.”

I stiffened. “Don’t.”

I didn’t want to be mean.

He’d helped me with so many confusing things.

But...this felt wrong.

“Hands off, Dixon,” Nick snapped. “You know the rules.”

“Yes, yes, the rules.” Hunter drawled. Rolling his eyes, he sat back in the throne and smirked at me. “Did you know your Master called me this afternoon? We had a particularly interesting conversation.”

“He did?”

“Yep.” He popped the word. “He told me how grateful he is that you’re his. How much he loves you. How much he will *always* love you.”

“I-I don’t understand. If he loves me so much, then what are we doing here?”

“He wanted to bring you back to where it all began.” His purple eyes lingered on mine. “You called me once and asked for my advice. I gave it. It seems to have worked. And today, it was Nick’s turn.”

I shot a look at Nicholas standing stiffly by the door. “What advice?”

“He wanted to know how to prove himself to you.” Shooting another glance at Nick, he raised his voice. “What were the words you used again? To prove that you’re hers forever?”

“For infinity,” Nick growled.

“Ah yes, that’s right.” Smirking and looking as dangerous as ever, Hunter pouted dramatically. “You’re his. Never to be shared. Never to be doubted or taken for granted. He’s yours, through and through.”

“I’m so confused,” I croaked, never taking my eyes off Nick as he approached us. “If he said that, then...”

“Why are you sitting on another Dom’s lap?” Hunter breathed into my ear. “Good question, and you’re about to get your answer.”

I tripped into his amethyst stare.

We shared a moment.

A single second of goodbye.

Giving me a gentle smile, Hunter dropped his voice to a whisper and tapped his finger against my chin. “Look at him, Ella. Not me. See what your magic has done.”

I followed his push and froze.

Nick gave me a strained smile, kneeling at my feet.

Oh my God.

My heart relocated into my throat as Hunter rested his palm on my hip and laughed quietly. “Spit it out, man. She’s trembling like a leaf.”

“Ella...” Nick cleared his throat from choking gravel. “I...eh, it’s no secret that I’ve loved you for almost two years now. Every day I work with you, I fall a little more. Every night we play, I can’t believe you’re mine. Not only have you cured me of my grief, but you’ve also filled me with hope for the future. A future I wouldn’t have had unless you took my heart and kept it safe in your hand.”

Tears welled on my eyelashes, clinging to my mascara. “Nick...”

“He’s not done yet, little witch.” Hunter squeezed my hip. “Let him choke on the words. It’s his penance for making you think he could ever share you.” He shook his head with another roll of his eyes. “As if he ever could. I mean, look at the bastard. He’s so fucking in love with you, Ella, he’d massacre an entire city if they so much as glanced at you wrong.”

I looked and truly saw.

Without confusion or fear.

With trust and absolute affection.

And I knew.

Knew what this was and why he brought me here.

Love poured out of me.

The drifty, dreamy subspace I was well acquainted with these days swamped me without need of punishment or praise.

I sank into it.

I relaxed on Hunter's knee.

I sighed and glowed and—

“She's ready, Nicholas,” Hunter murmured. “You have her trust. Best reward her.”

Holding up a stunning diamond ring in a trembling hand, Nick held my stare and whispered, “I adore you while I work beside you in the lab. I love you when your mind creates such fabulous experiments. I worship you when you chase the same crusade as me. I respect you and yearn for you and can't believe how lucky I am. I'm utterly obsessed with you, Ella Fitzgerald, and...I brought you here to prove to you that I'm ever so thankful for the night we shared in this room...with Hunter. Without that night, I might never have faced how I truly felt about you. I would've done the stupidly noble thing and kept pushing you away until someone else made you happy. It was the hardest thing I've ever endured watching Hunter be with you...but I wouldn't change it. I'm grateful to him because...he gave me you, and I have no intention of ever letting you go again.”

Reaching for my hand, he swallowed hard. “If you can forgive the idiotic idea of bringing you here and making you think I would ever share you,

please, *please* say you'll marry me?"

I didn't remember falling off Hunter's knee.

I didn't remember Nicholas catching me.

But I did remember Nick's kiss and the absolute adoration he poured hotly down my throat.

He kissed me like he'd done that first night.

Aggressively, violently, and with the thinnest edge of control.

I kissed him back in relief.

I kissed him with every part of me.

And when we finally pulled apart and Nick slid his ring onto my finger, Hunter no longer sat on the throne but had his hand on the doorknob and a sad, wistful smile on his face. The broken black-glitter heart beneath his eye seemed extra symbolic in the angelic white room.

He didn't belong in this place.

He wasn't ready to fill with light like us.

He dwelled in the darkness.

Belonged to the night.

And with a tip of his chin and another heartbreaking smile, he said, "Congratulations, you two. I'm honoured to have been there at the start and participate in the proposal. I'll leave you now."

Opening the door, he stepped across the threshold and became the owner of a circus instead of the man who helped take my emotional and spiritual virginity. "Be bold, be naughty. Play with anything you want. Fuck each other senseless. Scream as loud as you can. Drip all over the floor." He winked. "You never know, I might watch. I might share in your love for a

little longer, but for now and for always, I wish you all the happiness and kink in the world.”

I bowed my head. “I wish that for you too.”

He smiled softly. “I know.”

“Thank you, Hunter,” Nick said, his voice shaking with gratitude. “For everything. For all of it.”

Hunter tipped his chin regally at Nicholas before his purple eyes met mine, one last time. “I’ll see you both at dawn. For now...enjoy yourselves and each other. Be free and love hard. I hope you have a wild, wicked night, courtesy of the one and only...*Spectacle of Secrets*.”

Thank you so much for reading!

*I truly hope you enjoyed this spicy standalone! If you’re after more high steam romances, try *Tears of Tess* (Monsters in the Dark Trilogy which is in KU) or *Debt Inheritance* (Indebted Series).*

*Please join my **NEWSLETTER** for upcoming releases. My next release is *Ruby Tears* which is an extremely depraved, high spice, dark romance coming soon...*

*If you liked Hunter’s kinky circus and would like more *Spectacle of Secrets* standalones, let me know! I love to hear from readers at **pepperwinters@gmail.com**!*

Keep reading for the first two chapters of *Ruby Tears*!

SNEAK PEEK OF RUBY TEARS...

Prologue, Chapter One, and Chapter Two!

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Ruby Tears

(Dark Romance)

Find out more at: <https://pepperwinters.com/upcoming-releases/>

“Ten thousand dollars.

That pitiful sum changed my entire life.

It bought my entire life.

*A measly ten thousand dollars, given to my boyfriend by a monster to fuck
me.*

He took it.

The monster took me.

And I never saw freedom again.”

I’m the bastard son of a monster.

My other half-blooded siblings have their own demons...but me?

I truly have the devil inside.

I try to be good.

To do my best to ignore the deep, dark, despicable urges.

But every day it gets harder.

I thought family could help.

*I reached out to my infamous half-brother, Q, begging for his secrets to stay
tamed.*

Instead, he gave me an ultimatum to prove I'm not like our father.
Infiltrate The Jewelry Box: a trafficking ring of poor unfortunate souls, kill
the Master Jeweler, free the Jewels, and don't lose my rotten soul while
trying.

Only problem is...my initiation into this exclusive club is earning a Jewel all
of my own.

She sparkles like diamonds, bleeds like rubies, and bruises as deep as
emeralds.

She's mine to break.

I can't refuse.

If I want to prove to my half-brother that I'm not like our sire, I have to sink
into urges I've always fought, plunge into madness, and lose myself so
deeply into sin that the only one who will be breaking is me.

SNEAK PEEK OF RUBY TEARS
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PROLOGUE

.....

Ily

TEN THOUSAND DOLLARS.

That pitiful sum changed my entire life.

It *bought* my entire life.

A measly ten thousand dollars, given to my boyfriend by a monster to fuck me.

He took it.

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CHAPTER ONE

.....

Henri

WHO THE FUCK WAS I kidding?

I can't do this.

I didn't have the morals, the self-control, the *strength*.

Even suggesting I try and do this was like dumping an oblivious goat into a T-Rex paddock. The goat thought he'd scored a good spot. A nice place for a snack and a snooze, only to end up decapitated and spat all over the foliage.

I honestly didn't know if I was the T-Rex or the goat in this scenario.

Honestly, I was both.

It took all my fucking willpower to restrain myself. To smother the parts of me that were rotten and monstrous all while doing my best to be good. To be a genuinely nice guy who didn't crave such debasement.

To be like *him*.

My half-brother who'd fought such urges and won. Who'd not only survived with the inherited compulsion to cause tears and get hard on pain but to find a wife capable of leashing him.

Fuck, I wanted that.

I wanted the freedom to be me all while too shit terrified to even approach a girl these days.

Not after what I'd done.

Not after what I'd wanted to *keep* doing.

The familiar black hunger clawed its way through me and every despicable part of me came out to play. My hearing seemed to sharpen, my nose became more acute to the scents of writhing, sweaty bodies dancing in the club around me; even my teeth ached as if they could lengthen, ready to puncture sweet flesh and lap up the hot blood inside—

Christ, stop it.

My fist spasmed around my glass of whiskey.

The cheap imitation crystal fractured, cracked, then exploded into shards, tearing through the meat of my palm, and drenching my newly purchased suit in liquor.

“*Merde*, you okay, Ward?”

Ward.

The name on my falsified birth certificate but not my true name.

My true name I’d only just found out and under no circumstances could it be uttered around this scum.

Cursing under my breath, I glanced at the man beside me.

The man I’d painstakingly stalked, befriended, and done whatever it took to gain his trust. Six months it’d taken. Six months to slime my way into his inner circle when I should’ve run in the opposite direction.

He was the type of human I did my utmost to avoid because he represented who I truly was at my core. Each time I hung out with him—slowly evolving from shared drinks with acquaintances to watching dark-web porn in his den—I came face to face with the monster inside me.

It clawed and snarled. It thirsted for things not normal. It howled for things not sane. My dreams were full of despicable deeds and my body

hardened at the foulest images. The first time I'd been invited to his house to watch some sick shit he subscribed to, I'd had to run to the bathroom to throw up.

Just because I had urges didn't mean I would ever, fucking *ever*, give in. I'd walked away when I'd wanted to keep going. I still had a shred of decency...unlike the animals in those movies. But, little by little, video clip by video clip, I shut down the parts of me that I'd clung to all my life. I turned my back on the last embers of light and embraced the disturbing darkness within me.

That choice had gotten me this far.

But at what cost?

My fucking soul, that's what.

"Yeah, I'm fine," I muttered, snatching a serviette from the holder on the bar, watching with morbid satisfaction as the pristine white soaked a vibrant red with my blood.

I shuddered as I imagined it was someone else's blood. A nameless woman with her eyes wet and legs spread—

Fuck.

Clenching my teeth, I scrubbed at the wound.

I was so fucking twisted.

I should've just killed myself when I had the chance.

The world would be a better place if I'd put myself down like the feral dog I was.

I should've just done myself a favour instead of being weak and reaching out to my half-brother. A sibling I hadn't even known existed until my

mother told me on her deathbed four months ago. I'd thought my father was a deadbeat who'd knocked her up then left her with nothing and no one.

Turned out, my origins were far, far worse.

"Looks deep, man." Rolland grabbed my wrist and inspected my wound. My skin crawled where he touched me, but I kept a perfectly schooled grimace on my face. It would not help my case if he learned how many murdering fantasies I'd had since entering this nightclub with him.

He was lucky I hadn't grabbed the velvet rope stands of the queue outside and bludgeoned him around the head. Incredibly lucky I hadn't shoved a microphone down his throat from the awful DJ singing or smashed a bottle of expensive Johnnie Walker and stabbed his jugular with the remains.

My nostrils flared as his fingers tightened around me then fell away.

Keep it together, asshole.

I only had one chance at this.

One.

If I succeeded in doing what my half-brother demanded of me, I would have a family for the first time in my godforsaken life. But if I failed...that family I wanted so desperately would slit me from ear to ear and bury me in an unmarked grave. Probably with my heart torn out and cock ripped off, just like he'd promised.

"Ah, *merde*, he's here. Mop up that massacre." Rolland chuckled nervously, sending his baguette and chocolate éclair-loving guts jiggling. "Then again, he might like it. Perhaps the Master Jeweler swings both ways and will make *you* bleed tonight instead of some poor girl."

I kept my lips plastered into a grin instead of reaching for the glass shards on the ground and driving them into his eyes. For a man who indulged in sexual appetites as much as he, I wasn't sure how Rolland hadn't burned off the layer of fat he carried.

He'd be such easy prey.

If everything went well, I would eventually have the pleasure of killing him.

Unless my half-brother killed me first.

Pressing the serviette a little harder against the still oozing cut, I looked up to where his watery blue eyes had focused. I'd befriended Rolland Oliven the Third thanks to my half-brother informing me he was one of the last remaining bastards who dared dabble in forced pleasure in France.

My older bro had done a particularly good job of exterminating most of them but there was the odd one that kept sprouting up like weeds, infected with the same curse I had. The same plague that was passed on by my father.

"Don't make me regret this, Henri." Rolland hastily smoothed down his custom-made navy suit. The expensive material shimmered under the crystal ball twinkling above, painting him with wealth, even if his eyes remained that of a thief. A thief who stole lives for his own pleasure.

"How would I make you regret this?" I growled, stuffing the bloody serviette into my black suit pocket and ensuring my dull bronze tie was perfectly smooth. My gold cufflinks sparkled, making my heart thud.

The simple birdcage emblems seemed to shout who I truly was. That I was descended from the Mercer line and in cahoots with the infamous Q.

The cufflinks had been his idea.

Not because he'd wanted to welcome me to his family but because he didn't trust me.

The tracking device no doubt told him exactly where I was right now and where I'd end up if tonight was a success.

Supposed I should be grateful.

If tonight went well, I doubted I'd be in France much longer. If it all went to shit, perhaps Q could use the cufflinks to find and save me. Then again, he'd probably conclude I'd lost myself in the cesspit of sin and come to kill me instead.

"Remember what we talked about?" Rolland asked, looking me up and down with a critical sneer. "You like gemstones. You enjoy taking raw stones and breaking them apart to show the priceless rock within. Tell him how much you enjoy smashing those jewels and—"

"You expect me to speak in code all night?" I turned to face him, balling my hands and wincing at the fresh pain on my palm. The pain was good. Helped me focus. The pain was bad. Made me lose control. "Pretty sure he won't care if I speak plainly." I swallowed the sour taint on my tongue and let the beast within me wake. "I think he'd appreciate my honesty if I say how much I crave their screams. How I can't sleep at night, picturing how skin bruises and bleeds. How I have dreams of helpless conquests all begging me to stop. And I bet he'd welcome me with open arms if I confess that the moment they start to struggle, I get hard as a fucking rock and—"

"It sounds as if you're listing my own fetishes, which is rather shocking, seeing as I've never met you before."

I froze.

The hair on the back of my neck prickled.

The monster inside me snarled to meet this other beast. To find kinship in shared sickness. But my struggling goodness did its best to remember this was a ruse.

I'd agreed to do this to prove I wasn't like them. Not to turn my soul over to the devil.

Fuck.

Sweat rolled down my spine as I slowly turned to face the Master Jeweler.

I did my best to smile like a human but the moment the suave, self-composed asshole—who was rumoured to have singlehandedly trafficked over a thousand women—met my eyes, he knew.

He knew, just like my half-brother had known.

I might want to be good.

I might have fought all my life to remain a worthwhile citizen who pretended to be like everyone else, cared for his sickly mother, and paid his taxes on time, but the truth was...I wasn't.

I was a monster.

Just like this bastard.

And I officially signed my death warrant by shaking his hand and stepping willingly into his den.

CHAPTER TWO

.....

Ily

“COME ON, IL, JUST ONE more drink.”

I looked at the sparkling disco ball above and said a silent prayer to whoever would listen. *Please give me the strength not to break up with him. Not tonight. Tonight is his birthday. He’s a spoiled little birthday boy who’s already smudged my carefully applied makeup with a blowjob. A blowjob I wasn’t all that keen on giving him, by the way—*

“Are you listening to me?” Sam waved his hand in front of my face. “Helllllooo. Dammit, Ily, you’ve got that spaced look in your eyes again.”

Was it my fault that I found my own thoughts more entertaining these days?

How had we ended up like this?

Four years together and every day was becoming more and more of a struggle. I’d had such high hopes that Paris would rekindle whatever spark we had. *But alas...I spent my final meagre pounds on a dream and now I have to wait until I’m back in England before I can tell him the bad news.*

“Jesus, woman. You gonna blink at me like a drunken owl all night or open your mouth and say something?”

I snapped out of my thoughts, smacking my coral painted lips together. “My mouth was plenty open back at the hotel. So open, in fact, you were able to put something of yours inside it if I recall.”

He sighed heavily, just like I knew he would. “It’s my birthday. A blowjob is tradition.”

“Not our tradition.”

“Every year you’ve given me one.”

“By *choice*, Sam, not by force.”

“*Force?*” His eyebrows shot up. The reddish-brown mop on his head glistened from the product he’d used to tame it off his high forehead. His green eyes glittered with anger. “I have never forced you. Not once.”

“I said I was feeling queasy. That the pastrami from lunch wasn’t sitting right. Yet you moaned and groaned and guilt-tripped me so badly that it was easier to drop to my knees and say ‘*ah!*’ rather than keep arguing.”

The anger in his eyes deepened. “You and I both know that your excuses when it comes to sex are getting more and more common.” His voice rose a few octaves, supposedly imitating me. “Oh, not tonight, Sam, I’ve started my period. Oh, sorry, didn’t I tell you? I agreed to go out with Alicia tonight. Oh, shit, I have to work late—”

“Working late is a legitimate reason to refuse—”

“Ever since you got that promotion, you’ve made it almost impossible for me to spread your legs.” He pouted and crossed his arms. He looked like a petulant brat instead of a twenty-five-year-old Pharmaceutical Sales Rep.

I honestly couldn’t remember why I once believed I was in love with him. Once upon a time, I found his pale skin, faint freckles, and cultured upbringing a turn on. When he’d walked into the Tower of London gift shop with his then girlfriend (a mousy girl who cringed from the meat-eating crows) I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

Seemed the feeling was mutual because he'd come back the next day and the next, which didn't make any sense because he lived in Stafford and had been force-fed England's morbid medieval history since the crib.

Turned out, *I* was the special attraction.

"I'm proud of that promotion." My chin tipped up like it always did when I got snippy. "It took years for them to notice me."

"You're a glorified office manager."

I didn't bother telling him how hard I worked for more responsibility. How most positions within the heavily fortified fortress were only given to the beefeaters and their kin. What I really wanted to do was work with the priceless crown jewels that only three people in the entire world were allowed to touch.

Knowing that I'd never put my gemmology qualification into use—unless I somehow became the Queen—didn't make my dreams any less real.

"Ah, I see where this is going," Sam muttered, planting his hands on his hips like he always did when arguing with me. He believed it made him look important. I believed it made him look like an arrogant ass. "You're still hanging onto the idea that one day you'll be allowed to fondle their crowns and sceptres and whatever other diamond-encrusted baubles they have under lock and key."

"Can I help it that I like pretty things?"

His nose wrinkled; I braced myself for another tirade but then he exhaled heavily, dropped his hands, and smiled stiffly. "You're a pretty thing. Can I help that I like *you*?"

I stiffened but accepted the olive branch for what it was. "I'm glad you still find me attractive after four years."

Smiling wider, doing his best to shed the tension between us, he slid his arms around my waist and pulled me closer. We stood on the outskirts of the busy dancefloor and the noisy racket that classified as dance music blared far too loudly around us. The fact that we'd been able to argue at all was a small miracle.

“I've always found you gorgeous, you know that.” His hand skated up my side and played in the dead-straight, blue-black hair skimming my collar bones. Sam definitely had Irish somewhere in his lineage, but—if I believed the fairytales my adoptive father whispered to me when I was younger—then I was the half-blooded descendant of a maharajah.

According to him, somewhere, somehow, a king had corrupted a maiden and created my family line. A line that had somehow stayed corrupt and broken until that corruption ended with me. If I hadn't been dumped outside the local hospital where my father worked as a heart surgeon, I might never have existed past a few days old. Bastard child of a long-ago maharajah or not.

Luckily, I now belonged to the best people in the world and a pang of homesickness filled me.

We'd only been in Paris two nights and already I wanted to leave.

I miss Krish. Wonder what he's doing right now?

Damn this was a mistake.

This relationship.

This holiday.

I..I'm done.

I'd been done for months, and it'd taken all my savings and a foreign country to finally admit that.

Sam brought me closer, his lips puckering to kiss me. His eyes closed in preparation of making out in a raucous French nightclub.

I braced myself.

I kept my eyes wide, ready to force myself to kiss him back.

I should push aside all these issues that'd slowly cluttered my heart and get tipsy. We could dance the night away, stumble back to our cheap hotel, and I could let him spread my legs the way he complained I didn't do anymore.

And then I'll wake up in the morning, headachy, annoyed, and still be in the exact same predicament.

In the time it took for his lips to meet mine, a surge of bravery washed through me. I didn't know what came over me and the strange courage was definitely ill-advised, but I couldn't fight it anymore.

I couldn't stop the urge to flee and be free.

"Sam." I swayed back, refusing his kiss. "Sam...we need to talk."

His eyes flew wide, the glittery disco ball dancing in his green gaze. "What?" He cocked his head against the music. "What did you say?"

Freaking hell, I finally get the balls to break it off and he can't even hear me.

I could just pretend I hadn't said anything.

I could still go with Plan A of dancing, drinking, and fucking or...I could stay true to what my soul was screaming at me.

I needed out.

Right here.

Right now.

Tonight.

Taking his hand, I tugged him away from the writhing dance floor. If I was going to do this, we both needed a drink.

His fingers latched around mine as he followed me.

We weaved around a sea of dancing, happy people, ducked around a few bouncers, then reached the crowded bar.

Taking a gulp of air that was no longer tainted by sweat, overpowering man's cologne, and overly sweet perfume, I tried to get the barkeep's attention.

"Hi!" I waved my hand as Sam plastered himself against my right.

"Hey, over here." I waved harder, desperate for something to bolster my rapidly flagging courage.

"Getting in the mood, huh? I like it." Sam's hand slid down my ass, following the crack and going far too deep and low. I flinched as his fingers probed between my legs, digging my flouncy rose gold skirt into my unmentionables. "Perhaps we could have birthday sex right here. No one would notice. There are far too many people." His fingers ducked under my short skirt and found the scrap of lingerie I wore.

My entire body jerked, not with passion or familiarity but with dreadfully building disgust.

Shifting my hips and doing my best to dislodge his fingers, I threw him a scowl. My lips parted to command he stop pawing me. I sucked in a breath to berate—

But...

Something further along the bar.

Someone.

Someone who stopped my heart and made the awful music screech to silence in my ears.

Oh, dear lord in fanciful heaven.

Who.

The.

Hell.

Is.

That?

My gaze completely bypassed Sam and zeroed in on a demigod.

The man had to be descended from gods because no one, I meant *no one*, looked as impossibly perfect as he did.

Dark hair cropped close to his head. Lips a shade too red that only seemed to paint him with violence instead of seduction. Shadowed dark eyes and impeccably shaven jaw. Cheeks that were slightly hollow and a throat clenching with power. His lips thinned as he rolled them together, nodding at something his companion said. His nose flared slightly as if he felt the same snap of awareness I did but couldn't understand why.

Slowly, his head tipped up.

His gaze scanned the pumping club, his entire body full of predatory calculation.

My tummy fluttered.

His tongue flicked out and ran over his bottom lip, searching.

Look over here.

I couldn't catch a proper breath.

I wanted him to see me. Just like I saw him. I wanted to know if he felt the same unexplainable flash of incinerating heat. A heat I'd never felt before, even in the hottest moment of passion.

His shoulders tensed as he kept looking.

My heart skipped twenty beats as it tried to remember how to work. My knees gave up being bone and became melted butter instead.

“What can I get you?” A woman leaned over the sticky bar and yelled in my ear.

All the music slammed back.

All the chaos and smells and...ill-advised courage.

Tearing my gaze from the demigod as he returned to glowering at the man beside him, I locked eyes with the pretty bartender and yelled far too loudly, “I'm breaking up with my boyfriend and we need shots.”

Sam went rigid beside me.

The girl's brown eyebrows shot to her pixie haircut.

And I swayed on the spot as the demigod suddenly looked past his companion and locked gazes with me.

Grey.

His eyes are dark grey.

And dear lord, he froze like I had.

Froze as if he smelled me from there and decided in a single moment that he very much wanted to eat me alive.

I didn't know if I wanted to run away as fast as possible or offer myself up on a silver platter.

“What the fuck is going on, Ily?” Sam's fingers dug into my upper arms, spinning me to face him. My nape prickled, hating having my back turned on the man who made my instincts sing with deep, dark warnings.

“You're breaking up with me?” His face contorted into something scary instead of English charm. “What the fuck?”

The bartender placed a long wooden board next to us with six shots of some sort of amber liquor. I looked from Sam's rage to the shot. I made the choice to bolster my courage with liquid strength.

Snatching two shots, I tossed them back, winced at the fire, gasped, choked, coughed, coughed some more, than sucked in a wheezy breath.

“I know it's your birthday, Sam, but...I've given you a blowjob, so I think it's only fair that you give me a divorce.”

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