



Scorch

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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Ashes Teaser...

Prologue

One

Acknowledgments

*To every reader out there who believes even the darkest soul
can be claimed by the right woman.*

I

“He stepped down, trying not to look long at her, as if she were the sun, yet he saw her, like the sun, even without looking.”

—Leo Tolstoy



GARRETT

Deciding to meet with The Judgment MC's president was more of a family matter than business. Since the president, Liam Walsh, was my daughter-in-law's father and there had been bad blood between us in the past, I felt it was time to remedy that. This would be my belated wedding gift to Blaise, my oldest son, and his wife, Madeline. It also didn't hurt to have The Judgment as backup when needed. The more men I had in my pocket, the more power I held.

The family had never associated with MCs before, but then times were changing, and I had to learn to accept that. Our world couldn't just exist among the elite. We had to broaden our attachments. This was a good start. I imagined my father was rolling over in his grave. But then perhaps not. Madeline's grandfather had been his best friend. If there was an afterlife, then I would hope he'd see this as the right thing to do. For Madeline and the family.

Liam Walsh fit the biker persona with his combat boots,

leather vest, tattooed arms, and ripped jeans. It had taken a lot for me to come here. To face the man who had been the cause of Madeline's mother, Etta's, disappearance that led to her death. His side of the story was still one I questioned, but for Madeline, I was willing to fucking try. Madeline had given me my first grandson. The heir to the Hughes place as boss among the Southern Mafia. For Cree, I could accept this.

"I'm sorry, Garrett," Liam said as he handed me a glass of whiskey.

It wasn't what I typically drank, but I doubted Liam could afford my preference in scotch.

"Micah was called to meet with us before we went to church. The others will have all gathered. I'll get Micah on our way down."

Not smirking at the way he called a meeting among his men "church" was difficult. I had always found biker clubs to be cliché. It was a dirtier, uncivilized gang of criminals. The family at least had a standard, unlike the men here. Again, I was judging them. I had to control that if this was going to work.

"This way," Liam said to me as he headed for the door of his office.

I downed the amber liquid in the glass, then set it on the bar as I followed him into the hallway. There were doors that I knew were rooms for the higher-up members in the club. Liam walked down the hall and stopped at the third door on his right.

“FUCK, that’s it! Suck it like a good little slut,” a voice shouted inside the room.

Liam sighed and shook his head, then banged loudly on the door.

“MICAH! CHURCH NOW!” Liam yelled.

“Fuuuck!” Micah called out from inside the room. “Yeah, okay.”

Liam scowled. “Get your dick out of her goddamn mouth! We have business.”

“Fuck, baby, suck that dick ... take it deep ... TAKE IT! I’M COMING!”

Liam looked disgusted as he glanced back at me. “I sometimes wonder why I put up with his shit.”

“Why do you?” I asked.

If one of my men disobeyed me this way, I’d have them killed.

“I raised him,” Liam replied. “He’s like a son.”

Now, that, I could somewhat understand. He wasn’t his flesh and blood, but that wasn’t what made family. Loyalty made family.

The door swung open, and Micah was grinning while zipping up his jeans.

“Sorry, Liam. It’s hard to walk away from a blow like that.”

His gaze swung to me then, and I saw him stiffen. We’d never met officially, but like I knew who he was, I knew that

he was well aware of who I was.

“Mr. Hughes,” he said, closing the door behind him. “I didn’t realize you were here.”

“If you could keep your dick out of her mouth, then you’d have seen my text. And stay out of Tex’s goddamn room,” Liam said, sounding disgusted. “Now, let’s get to church.”

I followed Liam as he led me down the stairs I’d come up when I arrived. The black walls seemed all very forced. As if they were trying to be dangerous by color choices alone. The paint on a wall did not make you threatening. The willingness to end a life did. I doubted these men had much of that in them. Especially the pretty boy who would rather get his cock sucked than listen to the chain of command. But then my youngest son wasn’t much different. He, too, struggled to obey when it came to his pleasures.

“This way,” Liam said as he opened a large wooden door and stepped inside.

Leather jackets, which they all called cuts with their emblem on the back and their title patched on the front; tattoos; scarred faces; beards; cigarettes hanging out of most mouths—it all fit the description of a biker club. Except for the surprising number of younger men scattered among the others, who seemed almost too pretty for this life. I knew not to judge a man on his looks. My most dangerous man had a face that made women fucking swoon. He could have been a damn model.

Only the unavoidable twitch of my nose reacted to the stench of stale beer and nicotine. A good cigar I could respect.

A Marlboro I could not. It was just a waste of a good set of lungs.

“Men, I’d like you to meet Garrett Hughes,” Liam began.

For the next fifteen minutes, he discussed the decision to work with the family and the benefits it would mean for them. I listened and didn’t speak. These weren’t my men, and I respected that. Liam was their leader. I took in their expressions. I was an expert at reading people. Men at least. Women I wasn’t always the best at, but what man was?

For the most part, his men seemed happy about the connection. I could see doubt in the eyes of a few older ones, but nothing to be concerned with. This wasn’t something I offered to just anyone, especially a biker club. They all seemed to realize that.

When Liam was finished speaking, the men all stood, and I spoke to a few who approached me. Even in their need to appear as if my presence didn’t intimidate them, I could see it in their mannerisms. The way they struggled to meet my gaze. Yes, every one of them knew if I wanted them dead, they would be within minutes.

“My girl is waiting on me,” Micah said with that cocky smirk on his face.

“Oh, yeah? Which one?” the man who had been introduced as Tex called out, and the others laughed.

Micah scowled then, and I was surprised to see he had it in him.

“Shut the fuck up, Tex,” he warned.

“Stay out of my goddamn room with your club whores,” Tex replied, then stuck a cigarette in his mouth and stalked past him.

“Men!” Liam raised his voice, slamming his hand down on the table, and the room went silent.

I liked that. He had control. Good. I was beginning to wonder.

“That’s enough.”

Micah turned and opened the door. I started to turn back to tell Liam I was leaving when my eyes locked on a face that took my fucking breath away. Exquisite perfection. Eyes the color of spun gold, full pink lips, long, pale blonde hair, framing the face of an angel. Who the fuck was she? It was then Micah walked to her and pulled her into his arms, lowering his head and taking her mouth. Jesus Christ, that was whose mouth he’d been fucking earlier? Lucky bastard. I couldn’t blame him.

Disappointment sank in as I realized that angelic, heart-shaped face belonged to a club whore. What a waste. She probably wasn’t that perfect up close, and she was used goods. I didn’t want a virginal innocent in my bed. An innocent couldn’t give me the shit I demanded, but I sure as hell wasn’t interested in a biker slut.



ONE

FAWN

It must have been the pale blue of his eyes that had made me stupid. Crossing my legs, I tilted my head to the side and studied the male who had turned me into a cougar for a short time. He grinned at me with that sexy smirk that drew women in, not knowing I'd just overheard him letting Dylan—one of The Judgment's porn stars—suck him off in Tex's room only ten minutes ago.

Living in their little biker den of iniquity hadn't been my best mom moment. I loved an adventure, and this time, I'd let it go too far. My daughter, Gypsi, deserved better from me. I had failed her with this decision. Thank God for the slap in the face I'd just had to get my head on straight.

"Damn," Micah drawled, walking toward his bed that I was perched on the edge of, wearing nothing but his T-shirt from last night. "Looking at you never gets old. It's unfair for a woman to be so fucking beautiful."

I gave him my own smirk. Silly boy. I wasn't one of his female worshippers. Poor Dylan seemed to always be waiting for him to toss her some attention. It seemed he still obliged her even though he had moved me into his room and promised me that I was all he wanted. He wasn't the first player I'd ever dated, and I doubted he'd be the last. I had a type, and unfortunately, he checked the boxes. All the boxes.

"Get a good look," I told him, then uncrossed my legs slowly for his benefit before standing up.

The way his gaze heated with instant arousal made me want to roll my eyes. The man was a machine. His erection was always on the go, it seemed.

I chuckled softly and stepped around him before he could reach me. "I'm going to get my things together."

"What?" he asked.

I didn't look back at him as I pulled his shirt off and dropped it on the floor, knowing he was currently taking in my naked body. It was the last time he would ever see it. I picked up the sundress I'd had on last night and slipped it over my head before glancing back at him.

His eyes were on my legs, but they snapped up to meet mine. A confused expression was on his ridiculously handsome face. Those thick black lashes outlined his crystal-clear ocean-blue eyes, and I couldn't truly beat myself up over this. The man was gorgeous. I'd had a weak moment. It was over now though.

"You heard me," I told him, then just smiled and shook my

head. “I’m not one of your girls, Micah. Did you think that I would become one of the many females to worship at your feet?”

“What are you talking about, Fawn? You’re the only one in my bed. I moved you into the club. Into my room. I don’t move women into my room.” His brows were lowered as he studied me.

I shrugged. “Yes, well, I’m not the only one on your cock, now am I?”

He stilled. I could see the realization dawn in his expression. He knew he’d been caught.

“It’s for the best really. I’m not mad. It’s time for Gypsi and me to move along anyway. We’ve stayed here longer than I intended.”

Micah moved then and took the five long strides to reach me. His fingers wrapped around my upper arm as he stared down at me. The pleading look in his eyes wasn’t going to change my mind, but I did feel a little sadness that I wouldn’t see him again. He had made me laugh, taken me on an adventure in his little world. I’d had a good time, but all good things must come to an end.

“Wait, Fawn. That was nothing. I didn’t touch her. She—”

“Just sucked you off while you called her a hot little cumslut. Yes, I know. I heard it clearly. You were rather loud while you got off in her mouth.”

He had the decency to wince.

I reached up and patted his cheek. “It’s okay. I’m not

destroyed. This wasn't love. It was fun, and it's over."

He inhaled sharply and shook his head. "Fawn, I'm sorry. Fuck, please don't leave me. I shouldn't have let her. I messed up. Just give me one more chance. I swear to God it won't happen again."

I laughed and took his hand off my arm. "You're right; it won't. At least not with me. I don't give second chances. If I'm not enough for a man, I don't stay."

"FUCK!" Micah ran his hand through his blond hair. "You are enough. You are more than enough. Jesus, Fawn, it was one mistake. I don't feel shit for Dylan. I'm ... I think I'm falling in love with you."

I wanted to cackle with laughter, but I didn't. This boy was entirely too young for me. He had no clue what he was saying. I was only thirty-six, but when you'd had a daughter at the age of seventeen and you were alone in the world, you grew up fast. Dating a twenty-six-year-old was dumb. I should have known better.

"Micah, you are not falling in love with me. I can promise you that. We had fun. We laughed a lot. Sex was great. It will be a fond memory for both of us. Let's end this as friends."

He let out a short, hard laugh. "That's really how you feel, isn't it?" He shook his head, as if he was in disbelief. "You don't know your power, Fawn Parker. I've never met a woman like you. You're fuckin' perfect. Not only are you the sexiest female I've ever seen, but you're also not afraid of new things, you love life, and your laugh is the most addictive sound I've ever heard. There is no jealousy or clinginess, and I thought

I'd hit the jackpot, but dammit. The one time I want a female to be clingy to me, she isn't. If you walk out of that door, I'm pretty damn sure you're taking the only chance of me loving a woman with you."

I doubted Micah could love only one woman. Maybe one day, when he had lived more of this wild life, slept with enough Dylans, and felt like he'd gotten it out of his system, he would meet a female who would be enough for him. He'd love her. I hoped so. He had a good heart. He was just a whore. A sweet, sexy manslut.

"One day, she'll come along. I'm not her," I assured him.

"You're leaving before we had a chance at love," he argued.

"There was never going to be love. That was never going to happen. You have a lot more living to do, and I'm not the kind of woman who falls in love. I think I'm broken when it comes to that. When we started this, I told you this was just a good time. I didn't want anything more from you."

Micah sighed in defeat as he stared at me. "Yeah, well, that wasn't the first time I'd heard that from a female."

"But I'm not like the others." I winked at him, then turned to get my duffel bag.

I needed to go find Gypsi. It was time to go home to our camper. Then decide on where we were headed next. I was thinking we could go up the East Coast.

"There is nothing I can say to make you stay, is there?" he asked me.

I shook my head. "No."

“Fuck, I’m gonna miss you.”

I smiled, but I didn’t reply. I couldn’t say the same to him. Not honestly. Sure, I’d think about him and remember the good times, but my heart wasn’t damaged. I wasn’t attached. I never got attached.

I hadn’t been lying when I said I was broken. The torment in my past hadn’t destroyed me. How could it when I’d been given Gypsi in the end? She was where I found my happiness. The darkness had severed whatever emotion it was that made a woman love a man. My heart was guarded from everyone but my daughter. There was an impenetrable wall that kept me safe. No man would ever be able to get through. And that was a good thing.



TWO

FAWN

TWO WEEKS LATER

Morii—the desire to capture a fleeting moment. I decided that this was my favorite new word. I'd never heard of it until today. It was the name of the elite club that I'd just been hired at in Ocala, Florida. Gypsi and I hadn't made it that far when we left Miami. Mostly because I had been low on cash from not working enough while I was dating Micah. I meant to rectify that by working somewhere the paycheck was good and the tips were high.

Silas Tatum, the manager over the servers within the club, had seemed overly relieved by my interview. They had just fired two of their servers for breaking the rules. He didn't say what rules they'd broken, but I'd been asked to sign a contract stating that the members of the club, as well as their guests, were private. I would never divulge names, repeat anything I overheard, along with about fifty other things.

My age was something Silas had seemed pleased about. He mentioned that the other servers were younger, but due to the appearance requirements of the servers at Morii, it was difficult to find females over twenty-eight, which, until me, was the oldest server they'd hired. My being more mature was much-needed, apparently, among the servers. There was, as he'd put it, unnecessary drama. I was raising a teenage girl. I wasn't scared of female drama.

I followed Silas down a long hallway lit by elaborate chandeliers. He finally stopped at a wide, ornate white door with a fancy gold doorknob.

“This is the dressing room. All servers will enter through the back entrance you came in today, come directly to this room, and follow all the steps necessary before entering the Hughes Floor. The Winchester Parlor is where you will train by shadowing Eliana. She's not who I typically have train the new servers, but she's the only one capable of it tonight. However, she's been here the longest among our current servers.”

He turned the door handle and pushed the heavy door open, then waved a hand for me to enter the room. I stepped inside, not surprised by the opulence at this point. It seemed every inch of this place was extravagant. White velvet lounge chairs were set in the middle of the room under yet another chandelier. The walls were made of mirrors, and a line of dressing tables were against the back wall. Black cocktail-style dresses hung on a long silver rack with glass embellishments to the right of the room.

Silas pointed at the rack of dresses. “You will find sizes zero

through six in dresses, and there are three different styles that you may choose from. We prefer that our girls aren't all identical. It gives visual variety to our patrons. However, we only allow black in color so that you blend in enough and don't stand out so much that you make any female visitors feel uncomfortable. Classy is our goal. Make sure the size you choose isn't too tight." Silas paused and looked me over. "I think you'll require a six because of your breast size, although if it is too loose in the waist, go down to a four."

He pointed then to a wall I hadn't noticed near the door we'd entered that held shoes. All were black heels. Like the dresses, there were different styles to choose from. "Shoes are sizes six through nine. You are a seven, and we have all styles in abundance in that size. You should be able to find one that you prefer among the selections. Now, the showers are through that door beside the dressing tables."

I didn't see a door. I started to ask him, but he must have already guessed my question because he continued, "Just push the mirrored panel by the left of the last table, and it will swing open. You are to shower here, using only the body wash we supply, then apply the lotion from the selection of three different scents you will find on the counter before dressing for your shift. No other perfume is permitted. If you wear any, it must be cleansed from your body before working. Once you're washed and moisturized, take one of the robes hanging back there and go to your table. Apply your makeup with the products supplied in the drawers at your table. Yours is the fourth one. There is a cabinet beneath it with a keypad. Your code to unlock it is the last four of your Social. Keep your

personal things in there. Your hair must be pulled up or back. The options you have with your long length are a side braid that lies over your shoulder, a bun on your head, or curled and pulled up in a twist. Dressing will be last. Please give yourself one hour or more if needed to do all the steps required before you are expected on the floor.

“Allowing a new server to train in the Winchester Parlor is not common procedure. It’s the most exclusive room we have here. Not every member is allowed into the parlor. Eliana is always in the Winchester Parlor, so that is where you must be too. With your age, I am trusting that you can handle the pressure.”

The more Silas talked, the more nervous I became. The hourly pay was more than I’d ever made in an hour, and the tip money Silas had mentioned was hard to pass up. I should have realized that with that kind of money, it wasn’t going to be some easy server gig.

The fact that I’d gotten an interview today was sheer luck. Silas had been picking up a to-go order at a restaurant when I walked in and asked if they were hiring. Before the younger girl could answer me, he spoke up and asked me if I had experience, and it had all just happened from there.

“I’d like for you to begin at six this evening. That gives you two hours. You might want to take the two hours to prepare since it’s your first time.”

I nodded. All the steps that were required of me seemed less daunting if I had two hours instead of one. I would give tonight a shot. See if I could do this and if it was worth the

money.

“That would help,” I replied.

“Very good.” Silas seemed pleased. “I feel like you will be an excellent fit here. When I saw you today, I assumed you were twenty-seven or twenty-eight. I knew we needed some more mature servers, and your appearance fits our requirements. I believe having someone with your maturity is going to change things for the better. I hope I’m right.”

That was the one thing that didn’t make me nervous. I could handle catty females and their drama. This other stuff, however, seemed entirely too over the top. We had to smell a certain way? Did the members here truly care about what body wash and lotion we used? I wanted to roll my eyes at the entire thing, but this money—for even one month—could set Gypsi and me up for a while. We could afford campsites in coastal towns along the East Coast. That would be exciting. The one I had us in now made me nervous. I had to move us as soon as I could afford it.

“I do too,” I finally replied. Because I needed this money.

He nodded and went back toward the door. “I’ll leave you to it. Eliana will arrive within an hour to prepare. I’ll let her know now that you are to shadow her tonight.”

“Thank you,” I told him before he closed the door and left me alone in the bougie-ass dressing room.

Sighing, I turned around, slowly taking it all in.

“Looks like you’ve got yourself another adventure,” I whispered.



THREE

FAWN

Eliana had barely spoken three words to me before we left the dressing room. She appeared to be in her early twenties with dark red hair that fell to her waist. She'd twisted it up with curls cascading down to her neck tonight. Her high cheekbones, cat-shaped brown eyes, and porcelain skin were a stunning combination. She belonged on a runway somewhere in Paris.

Other than a scathing once-over from her and short, clipped responses to the three questions I'd asked her, trying to make conversation while we prepared, she didn't acknowledge me. It was clear she didn't think I belonged here. If the other servers also looked like young twenty-year-old fashion models, I was going to have to agree with her. The size zero strapless dress she'd chosen showcased her thin, perfect limbs and flawless skin.

When she reached the dark wooden door with an engraved

brass plate that said *Winchester Parlor* on it, she paused and glanced back at me. “Don’t speak unless spoken to. Don’t make eye contact with the patrons. Even when I converse with them on friendly terms. You don’t have that privilege yet. If they choose to acknowledge you, which is unlikely, then you’ll be allowed to make eye contact.”

I nodded but wanted to ask why it was unlikely. Did one need to look like her to be acknowledged? I was here for the money, and I needed those tips. Silas had seemed sure that I’d do well here, but Eliana was not in agreement with him. She had made that very clear with her stunted use of words when it came to me.

Eliana opened the door and sauntered inside as if this were in fact a catwalk. I followed her, closing the door behind me. The speakeasy feel of the large space made me smile. I wasn’t sure what I had expected, but the blue velvet couches, low lighting, soft jazz music playing, and the glass wall of expensive bottles of liquor behind the dark wooden bar made me want to curl up and stay awhile in one of the corners, where there were areas with more private seating. From here, I could see curved buttery-yellow leather sofas in those spaces.

She led me over to the bar, where two men in white dress shirts and black slacks stood, talking while making drinks. “Felix, Leo, this is Fawn. Silas hired her today, and she’s shadowing me tonight.” Eliana continued to speak of me as if I were distasteful.

The men gave me appreciative smiles.

They both had dark hair, cut short and neatly kept.

The taller one with brown eyes and the more charming smile put down the glass he was holding and held out his hand to me over the bar. "I'm Felix. It's nice to meet you."

I slid my hand in his. "It's nice to meet you too," I replied. It was a relief to meet someone with a friendly face.

He held my hand and nodded his head toward Eliana. "Don't let her scare you off." Then, he winked before letting my hand go.

Leo lifted his chin at me and smiled. He was farther away. "You'll do good here, Fawn."

That reassurance was more needed than I wanted to admit. I wasn't one to ever get intimidated, but Eliana was managing to make me nervous. Here I had thought, I could handle catty females just fine. Perhaps my age was getting to me.

Ignoring the men, Eliana continued to walk toward the swinging wooden doors to the far right beside the bar. "The kitchen is back here," she said to me, and I hurried to catch up.

Stopping the doors before they slammed in my face, I followed her inside. It was surprisingly quiet for a full, busy kitchen staff. I was used to the laughing, joking around, and shouting, which always went on in the kitchens of restaurants where I had waited tables in the past. These people didn't even glance up from their tasks and said nothing to each other. It was also a much bigger space than I'd ever seen for a kitchen and so clean. It appeared as if no one had ever cooked in here, but they clearly did and were doing so at this very moment.

I listened as she began telling me how to place orders into

the computer system and where to pick them up. Unlike the guys at the bar, she didn't introduce me to anyone in the kitchen or speak to them herself. She acted like they were invisible.

When we were back in the main room, she walked to the bar, then stopped and looked back at me. "Blake will be here at seven, and Arya arrives at eight. Until then, it will only be me on the floor. We don't have a heavy crowd at this time or ever in the Winchester. Those with privileges to enter this room are few. The other servers are in the Monte Cristo Lounge or the Cohiba Library. You won't be placed in here after training. The members prefer that Arya, Blake, and I serve them. The other rooms are similar, just with less important clientele."

I knew she was trying to speak down to me, but I was relieved that I wouldn't be working with her in the future. She wasn't the most pleasant person to be around. Hopefully, the servers in the other rooms were more friendly.

"You willing to place a wager on that, Eliana?" Leo asked, and I glanced over to see him drying a glass and smirking.

"I'll happily take your money," she replied.

He raised his eyebrows in response. "Your tip from the boss tonight," he replied.

She let out a soft, amused laugh. "Done."

Leo seemed pleased as he placed the glass on the bar, then gave me a head nod, as if we were in this together. I didn't want him to lose money, and I had no idea who they were

referring to. Silas wasn't going to tip her, was he? I mean, why would he? I was confused and decided to stay that way.

“Remember, stay silent and don't make eye contact,” she snapped at me under her breath as the door opened and two men walked inside the door.



Two hours later, I was finally relaxed. This wasn't hard, and not one of the members we had served ignored me. I'd been spoken to, warmly welcomed, and even conversed with.

Eliana was the only negative part of the evening. The more the patrons spoke to me, the colder she got toward me. Blake, a gorgeous brunette who arrived at seven, just like Eliana had said, seemed to understand that Eliana was anti-new server and shot me annoyed glares when possible.

I ignored both of them and continued to smile. My being here was not something they liked at all, and honestly, I wasn't sure why. There seemed to be a competitive streak among them. Even Blake and Eliana, although they seemed to be friends, had this need to be more desired by the patrons than the other. It was odd.

It was almost eight when I followed Eliana from the kitchen with an order, and Felix cleared his throat, causing Eliana to pause and look at him. Felix nodded his head to the back right corner—the only secluded area we hadn't been yet. It seemed larger than the others and more private. I hadn't seen much inside the closed-off space.

“Eagle has landed,” he said under his breath.

Eliana appeared pleased by this information and turned to me, shoving the tray into my hands. This was a first. She hadn't let me carry any of the food or drinks yet. "Take this to the Hilton table. See if there is anything else you can do for them right now," she said to me before turning and heading to the back right corner with more of a sway to her hips than before. Which was saying a lot.

I glanced over at Felix, who was grinning and shaking his head before I headed to deliver the food. Both men wanted another drink, and I handled that before leaving them. Eliana wasn't in the main area, and I hadn't been given permission to do anything else, so I walked to the bar, where Leo was setting two drinks on the counter.

"Take this to the back right corner. Eliana is in the back, placing an order, and we do not let the boss wait," he said.

I looked at the drinks, then back at him. "Um, you sure that's a good idea?"

He nodded. "Yes. These can't sit here, letting the ice melt even a little. Not for him."

Him who? The boss?

I reached to pick up a tray, then placed the drinks on it.

"Leo," Felix warned, then chuckled.

I looked at the other man. Was Leo trying to get me in trouble?

"Should I not do this?" I asked Felix.

"Leo is stirring the pot," Felix said. "Eliana will be furious."

“Eliana isn’t in charge,” Leo argued with a look of distaste. “Besides, you know you’re curious about him getting a look at her.”

Felix shrugged but looked apprehensive.

I narrowed my eyes at Leo. “If I get fired for this, will you be able to sleep at night?”

He grinned and placed both his hands on the bar, then leaned forward toward me. “I won’t let you get fired. Promise.”

I shook my head at him. “It’s not smart to promise things you can’t keep.”

About that time, the door to the kitchen swung open, and Leo groaned as Eliana came out.

Her eyes went to the tray in my hand, then snapped up to glare at me. “What do you think you’re doing?” she snarled and took the tray from me. “I didn’t tell you to touch anything.”

“I did,” Leo interrupted her.

Eliana swung her angry glare at him. “That’s not your job,” she said quietly.

“You’re afraid to let him see her. Admit it,” Leo replied, reaching for a new glass, looking pleased with himself.

She let out a hard laugh and glanced back at me. “That’s ridiculous. She’s old and country. Have you not heard her talk?”

The fact that she was speaking about me like this with me standing right here annoyed me.

“If you’re not threatened, then let her shadow you into his lair,” Leo replied.

Eliana rolled her eyes. “I’ve not let her in there because he has Ford in there with him. They are talking business, and I know he wouldn’t appreciate someone else listening.”

“Sure, Eliana. You keep telling yourself that. Fawn isn’t old, and her accent is as sexy as she is.”

Thank you, Leo.

Eliana shot me a disgusted look, then turned on her heel. “Fine. Follow me,” she hissed.

I didn’t look back at the bar, but fell into step behind her as she made her way to the right corner. Blake walked by, carrying an empty tray, and her gaze shifted from Eliana to me before we passed by her. She seemed surprised, but I wasn’t completely sure that I’d read that right.

They all had me curious now. Who was this man?

Eliana paused for a brief moment before entering the area that Leo had referred to as a lair. I didn’t make eye contact, but it was difficult not to look at the men in the room directly. I clasped my hands behind my back and stood only a few steps into the space. The curved sofa in here was a deep burgundy velvet, unlike the others that were a buttery-yellow leather. There was also a larger table and an antique piece of furniture that held cigars that I could see through the glass.

“I have your drinks, gentlemen.” Eliana’s tone had taken on a deeper, sultrier sound.

Interesting.

“And who do we have here?” one of the men asked.

“We have a new server who’s shadowing me tonight. I can keep her out, if you’d prefer,” Eliana said apologetically.

“That won’t be necessary—at least not for me. What about you, Garrett?” the man asked.

I made eye contact with the gentleman speaking and smiled at him. He was an older of the two with salt-and-pepper hair and a little on the heavy side.

“As long as she doesn’t bother us with chatter or mess up my drinks, I don’t mind,” the deep voice replied, and my eyes swung over to the man who had spoken.

I shivered. Startling bluish gray eyes met mine.

“I don’t have to bring her back with me,” Eliana replied, sounding pleased.

“Garrett might not have a preference, but I would like her to return. I’m never one to turn away a beautiful view,” the other man replied.

Eliana’s smile seemed forced now. She didn’t like that response.

I realized I’d stopped breathing when my lungs began to burn. I dropped my gaze and silently sucked in a breath. Dear God, that man was gorgeous but terrifying. The warning of danger in his gray depths, mixed with the air of power that seemed to come off him in waves, was intense. I didn’t think I wanted to come back in here. I had never reacted to someone like this before, and I didn’t care for it. At all.

“Of course, Mr. Ford,” she replied. “Can I get either of you something more at the moment?”

“Cohiba Behike,” Garrett said.

Eliana turned to me and pushed the empty tray at me. I took it, then watched as she went over to the cigars.

“What’s your name?” Mr. Ford asked.

I swung my eyes back to meet his. His gaze slowly took in my body instead of meeting mine.

“Fawn,” I replied.

His eyes finally made it back to my face. “That’s a lovely name.”

“Thank you,” I said, wishing Eliana would hurry up.

Garrett was making me feel unsteady.

“Anything for you, Mr. Ford?” Eliana asked him.

He didn’t look at her, but continued watching me as he waved her off instead of responding.

Eliana walked over and held out a wooden case to Garrett while opening it. He reached inside and took out a cigar. Why was it that I thought his hands were sexy? Because they were. Big and tanned. I could see the veins in them, and the image of those hands on me came into my thoughts. I shut that off quickly. Nope. Not going to go there. This man was powerful and important, and without saying anything, he was still terrifying.

When Eliana turned around, she glared at me. “Take the tray away, please,” she told me.

I hadn't realized she had wanted me to leave. I nodded, then turned and exited the lair, now understanding why Leo had called it that. It felt like it, although it was far nicer than the other private areas. With Garrett whoever he was in there, it had a dark feel to it.

Leo was watching me as I walked out. He seemed curious. A little too curious. I took the tray over, and he leaned closer to me.

"So?" he asked.

"What?" was my response. I still wasn't sure what he had expected to happen in there.

"What did he say to you?" he asked as if that was an obvious question.

"Which one?"

I knew which one. There was only one man in that room who would get this kind of interest. I didn't want to admit that though.

Leo gave me a look that said he couldn't believe I'd asked that.

"Garrett Hughes," he whispered. "Who gives a fuck about Ford?"

I shrugged. "He said he didn't mind me shadowing Eliana if I didn't talk or mess up his drinks."

Leo seemed surprised. "Really? He didn't say more? Flirt?"

Flirt? Was he serious? That man, flirt with someone?

I shook my head. "No."

I could see the disappointment in Leo's eyes.

Eliana appeared at my side then. She was grinning at Leo. "I hope you make good money tonight. You're gonna need it," she told him, then turned her pleased smile toward me. "Come on. We have work to do." The chirpiness in her tone was new.

I followed her, glad she seemed less pissed off by my existence.



FOUR

GARRETT

There was no reason for me to be here again tonight. Thursday nights were my standing visits to Morii. I didn't want to think too deeply about why I'd found an excuse to be here on a Friday night. Using after-dinner drinks was weak. My evenings with Lydia were always dinner and then back to her place, where I fucked her as much as I wanted or needed before going home alone. This was out of character. During dinner, she'd been an excellent companion, like always. She never annoyed me with incessant talk about stupid shit.

Eliana walked into my private space in the Winchester Parlor. My gaze went to the area behind her, and for a moment, when no one else appeared, I had a flash of anger. Thankfully, what I'd come here for stepped inside, and I let out an easy breath. Those eyes looked nervously at me, then flickered over to Lydia before focusing on the back of Eliana's right shoulder.

Last night, I had let Gunther Ford speak to her and said nothing. I'd silently enjoyed the drawl to her voice and the way she spoke. Tonight, he wasn't here to interact with her, and if I was going to get to see those full lips of hers move and that sultry voice make my cock throb, then it was up to me to get her to talk.

I'd been wrong about her up close. She was just as stunning, if not more so. Forgetting she was a biker slut was hard to do when she looked at me with those incredible eyes. I'd had Silas send me her background check, then ordered one of my men, Levi, to run one too. She was the blonde I'd seen at The Judgment clubhouse even if it didn't show up on either of the background checks. That face was one a man didn't forget.

Eliana was asking me what we wanted, and I tore my gaze off the exquisite blonde to look over at Lydia. I'd believed Lydia was a stunning blonde, but in the same room as Fawn, she appeared average.

"A drink?" I asked Lydia.

She nodded, and I turned my attention back to Eliana. "My usual and a dirty martini with a twist."

Eliana was clearly pleased that I was here even if I was with a date. I'd let her get on her knees and suck my dick a few times, and every time I was here, it was clear she was hoping to do it again. I liked the redhead, and her dick-sucking abilities were superb. She was just so fucking young. I wasn't sure she understood that my desire to choke her with my dick meant nothing more. I'd had my share of hard-to-shake females.

She turned to leave, but before Fawn could follow her, I opened my mouth to stop her.

“Fawn can stay,” I said simply.

She stopped and slowly turned back around. When her eyes met mine, I could see the uncertainty there. I scared her. That wasn't new for me, but the fact that it made me instantly hard was. It typically took more to get my dick's attention. I'd fucked more gorgeous women than I could count. Even knowing this one was a biker whore, I couldn't manage to control my attraction to her.

“Sir?”

Eliana's question was brave. She knew better, and because this was her not wanting to leave Fawn near me, even with another woman beside me, I let it go. But I would only allow that once. She needed to remember her place.

“I didn't stutter,” I replied to her.

She tensed and nodded before leaving.

Fawn was standing silently, watching me or waiting for me to say something. Either way, I enjoyed it.

“How do you like working here?” I asked her, needing to hear her voice again.

If there could be a flaw that would make her unappealing. Anything to keep my dick from reacting to her. Before now, I'd have thought her being a used-up biker slut would work. Apparently, when your face looked like hers, it wasn't enough.

She swallowed hard, and my hand fisted as I watched her

throat bob. There were other ways I'd like to make her throat constrict. Micah's shouts of pleasure taunted me, and I hated it. I hated knowing she'd been on her knees for him and other men in that club. Unkempt, disgusting, uncivilized men. Had she been in one of their porn videos? The thought made my stomach twist into a sick knot.

"This is only my second day, but I'm enjoying it, sir," she replied.

Fuck, I loved the way she talked. It was pissing me off that she appeared to be so damn precious when I knew better.

"Who did you contact to interview for the position?" I asked, already knowing the answer.

I had read the detailed report of her interview that Silas had given me when I asked for it and the background check Levi had also run on her at my request. This was a test. I wanted to see how honest she was. Maybe she was a liar. Although would that even be enough to keep me from wanting to fuck her?

"I didn't. I was in a restaurant, looking for a job, and Silas—uh, Mr. Tatum ..."

Her cheeks reddened at her mistake, and the way her skin colored so prettily made me ache to make other parts pink. Taking her over my knee and spanking her for being a slut. With a face like hers, she could be so much more. Why had she sold herself short?

"He was picking up a to-go order—his lunch—and told me he was looking for a new server at the place he worked. I met

him here for an interview an hour later.”

She hadn't embellished the details at all. If anything, she'd played them down. She hadn't mentioned that Silas had told her that she was beautiful and exactly what he was looking for. She also hadn't mentioned that he'd basically begged her to come in for the interview and offered to have the local police chief vouch for him when she seemed unsure about it.

“Did you just move to town? Or were you looking for a new job?”

Again, I already knew the answers, but I needed something more to be wrong with this woman. Anything to keep me from obsessing over her. She had to have another fucking flaw that would snap me out of this. I would pull it out of her. I always did.

“We just moved here. From Miami,” she replied.

I knew *we* was her and her nineteen-year-old daughter.

“You're married?” I asked.

She shook her head. “No, sir. My daughter and I moved here.”

I thought for sure she would leave out the detail that she was a mother. But she'd fucking admitted it without flinching.

“How old is your daughter?”

She would lie here.

“Nineteen,” she replied with almost a flash of pride in her eyes.

Damn this woman for not being the low-class, conniving

bitch I had been sure she was going to be.

“How old are you?” Lydia’s question surprised me since she rarely spoke without permission.

The horror in her tone pissed me the fuck off. Lydia wasn’t one to judge anyone. She’d had five abortions that I knew of.

“Thirty-six,” Fawn answered truthfully, but the flare of annoyance in her eyes as she looked at Lydia told me she didn’t appreciate her reaction or question. Those incredible golden eyes of hers swung back to me, and the fire in them only made my cock throb harder. “If that will be all, may I go?”

I wanted to laugh at the tone she’d just used with me. When had anyone spoken to me like that, except my oldest son who didn’t give a fuck?

Letting Lydia—or anyone for that matter—see me allow that kind of impertinence, however, was impossible. This was what I needed to save me from making a mistake. She’d handed it to me by speaking with disrespect. I leveled my gaze on her, and when she paled, I felt guilty.

“Yes, you may. You may also take your things and leave the premises.”

Her eyes widened in shock. “Leave?”

Fuck, this was harder than it should be.

“Now. Please don’t continue to speak when you’ve not been invited to.”

I expected her to tear up and rush out. Or at the very least

make the mistake of begging me for her job. She did neither.

Those golden eyes glared at me. She fucking glared at me before she spun around, giving me a view of her perfect, round ass before stalking out. I heard Eliana ask her what she had done. I couldn't hear Fawn even though I had my complete attention zoned in to hear her voice.

Eliana let out a small laugh, and the sound of her amusement at Fawn's dismissal infuriated me. It took all my fucking willpower to sit there, acting as if firing her wasn't bothering me. The redhead sauntered into the room, looking entirely too pleased. She was thrilled Fawn was gone. I remained uninterested as I took the glass she'd set down beside me and drank from it.

"Do you need me for anything else?" she asked with a purr in her voice.

"Close the door when you leave," I replied, not looking at her, but over at Lydia.

Perhaps my having Lydia suck me off here would get the message across to Eliana that we were never going to be anything. She was just a young piece of ass for me to shoot my load down her throat.

When we were alone, Lydia took a drink of her martini. I watched her throat work and tried to get my dick even remotely interested. My hard-on, however, seemed to have left with Fawn Parker.



FIVE

FAWN

Telling Gypsi I had been fired on day two was just too humiliating. I hated lying to her though. I needed to just admit that I'd lost the best-paying job I had ever had and we might not be heading north in a month—or even a few months. Although, if the asshole she'd dated in the stupid biker club showed up here, we would move with or without the money. Micah had promised me he'd handle the kid and Gypsi would have no more issues with him. I wanted to believe he had followed through on that. Especially since I now had to find a new job, thanks to my inability to keep my mouth shut.

I had to drop Gypsi off at the coffee shop she had gotten a job at, then head back to the camper to get ready for a job hunt. I hadn't wanted to get ready before and make Gypsi question why I was fixing up when I had work tonight and would have to shower again anyway. She knew me too well. I would have to tell her about losing the job tonight. It wasn't

like I could hide the fact that I wasn't going into work.

The Harley that was sitting outside my camper when I pulled up made me groan. I knew that bike. Why was Micah here? I parked my car and scanned the area, but I didn't see him. Just as I stepped out of the car, the camper door opened, and Micah stood in the doorway.

I shook my head and walked toward him. "I can't decide if I should be asking why you are here or how you got into my camper first," I said as I approached the door.

He gave me a cocky grin that used to turn me on. "I miss you, and the lock on this place is shit. You need a new one. I'm going to go get one and put it on after you talk to me."

I put my hands on my hips and looked at him. "We aren't talking, and you aren't changing the lock. I'll go do that. I do not need a man to handle things for me."

He stepped forward with his eyes roaming down my body. "You miss me, right?"

I shook my head. "No, I don't."

His blue eyes seemed lackluster now, and I realized it was because of the piercing gray color of Garrett's eyes.

"Damn, baby. You're killing my ego."

I raised my eyebrow. "Micah, there isn't a force on earth that has the power to kill your ego."

The corners of his mouth curled up. "You miss me." It wasn't a question. It was a statement. As if he was telling me something that was a fact.

I sighed and waved my hand at him to come outside and exit my camper. “You need to leave. I ended this. It’s over. I have to get ready and go find a job.”

Micah groaned. “You’re still doing this? I gave you some time. We’re good together, Fawn.”

I was about ready to swear off men. Even if I liked sex. I could go buy a really good vibrator. When I had money again.

“Micah, listen to me. It is over. We are friends. I’m not interested in anything more.”

He reached out and ran his hand up my arm. “If you’ll go inside with me, I can make you rethink this with my head between your legs. You love how good I can eat that pussy.” His voice lowered as he moved his hand to cover my butt. “You pulling my hair. Screaming my name as you come all over my tongue.”

I started to tell him that his tongue wasn’t as magical as he seemed to believe when I heard the gravel crunching under tires and saw a frown form between Micah’s eyes as he stared over my shoulder. Turning, I watched as a Bentley pulled up in front of my camper. The only reason I knew it was a Bentley was because I’d once dated a guy who had been restoring a much older model.

“Did you make some rich friends, baby?” he asked behind me.

I shook my head. I hadn’t made any friends. Especially of the Bentley-driving variety.

When it came to a stop, two doors opened at the same time.

The driver's side, where a young blond guy with tattoos stepped out, and the back right door, where a man in a brown cowboy hat, jeans, boots, and a black button-down shirt that was tucked in appeared. He reached up and tilted the front of his hat back.

I gasped at the same time Micah whispered, "Fucking hell," behind me.

Why was Garrett at my camper? How did he know where I lived? I was so confused that I squinted my eyes and studied him closer to make sure I was seeing him right.

Micah's hand went to my hip, and he gripped it, tightening his hold and moving me back and to the side as he stepped around me. His entire body was tense, as if he was nervous about something. This was all so odd and out of place that I wasn't sure I was awake.

"Garrett," Micah said as a greeting, and my gaze swung up to him in surprise.

He knew Garrett? How? Why? This was a weird dream brought on from being fired last night. Nothing else made sense.

"Micah," Garrett replied.

"How do you know him?" I asked Micah, but he held me back, and his body was so rigid that my heart started to race.

What was wrong? I looked back at Garrett to see his focus was on me.

I tried to move forward, but Micah physically pushed me back.

Frustrated, I glared up at him. “What is wrong with you?” I asked.

“Move away from Fawn.” Garrett’s tone wasn’t threatening. It was casual. But somehow, it seemed laced with a warning.

“I wasn’t aware you knew Fawn,” Micah said, his hold easing up on me, but he wasn’t moving out of my way.

Garrett let out a low, deep chuckle. “Boy, don’t mistake my loyalty to Liam as one to you.”

Liam Walsh? The president of The Judgment? Garrett didn’t look like a man connected to a motorcycle club. He looked like a wealthy ranch owner in his cowboy hat and boots, being driven around in a Bentley.

Micah looked at me as he moved out of my way. I could see the fear in his eyes, and it unnerved me. What was he scared of?

I moved forward a step. “What do you need from me? I left Morii. I didn’t steal anything when I went. I don’t intend to return. If you and Micah would both leave, I could get dressed to find a new job.”

I refused to act scared of this man. I wasn’t at work, and he was at my home, uninvited.

“Fawn, Jesus,” Micah hissed under his breath. “Don’t talk to him like that, please,” he pleaded.

I glared up at him, then back at Garrett.

“You can leave, Micah,” he said simply, not taking his eyes off me.

“Fuck,” Micah muttered.

When he actually began to slowly walk down the two steps that led up to my camper door, I watched him, amazed at the fact that he was just doing what Garrett had told him to. He rarely obeyed Liam, and Liam was his boss.

When he stopped and looked back at Garrett, the blond man who was standing by the Bentley walked around the front of it and toward Micah.

“He didn’t say you could look at him,” the guy said to Micah.

“I’m leaving,” Micah assured the guy.

The guy seemed amused as he watched Micah go to his bike.

“When have you ever heard of me hurting an innocent woman?” Garrett asked.

Micah stopped walking and turned back to him. “Never.”

Garrett cocked an eyebrow. “Exactly.”

Micah flickered a glance at me before turning back around and getting on his bike. I stood there as he cranked it up, and with one last look, he drove away. My attention was now fully back on Garrett. I had more questions than I could count, but I wasn’t about to ask them. I didn’t want this man to think I cared.

“How do you know Micah?” he asked me.

“How do you know Micah?” I shot back at him.

The guy by the car moved, and Garrett held up a hand to

stop him without taking his eyes off me.

“Get in the car, Kye,” he ordered.

I watched the blond guy turn and do as he had been told.

“Liam Walsh is a family friend,” Garrett said. “Now, tell me, how do you know Micah?”

I wanted to tell him to get his arrogant ass in that car and leave, but I was curious as to why he was here. “I dated Micah for a short time.”

“Did you date just him, or were you involved with several of the bikers?”

He had not just asked me that. The freaking nerve of this man.

“If you’re insinuating I was a club whore, then that bodyguard you have driving you around had better be armed.”

He smirked. “I take that as a no.”

“You’d be correct,” I snarled, angry he’d even suggested it.

“Why was he here if you are no longer dating?”

Was he seriously going to keep asking me about my personal business?

“He is stubborn,” was my short response.

“About?” Garrett pushed.

I sighed and crossed my arms over my chest. “Why does this matter? I should be asking you why you’re here and how you found out where I lived. Was having me fired not enough?”

Garrett casually strode closer to me, and I really wished I didn't find this man sexy. Even the way his muscular legs moved in jeans was hard to look away from. I was going to need to get a job so I could buy myself a vibrator, pronto.

"I'm here to speak with you about your job, I got your address from Silas, and last night was unfortunate."

I let out a laugh. "*Unfortunate*. That's what we are calling it? I needed the money I could make there to get a safer location for my camper, pay bills, save for car repair. I have a daughter who is depending on me to have a job. Now, until I have to go pick her up from her job, I need to go get myself another job." I was heated, just talking about it. My voice had risen, and I expected the blond guy to step out of the car at any moment to threaten me by walking in my direction. What was his purpose anyway? Did Garrett piss people off so often that he required a bodyguard?

"Working at Morii means you have to respect the members. Your behavior last night was *unfortunate* because you forced my hand. Telling you to leave wasn't something I wanted to do, but I had no other choice."

Hearing him say it like that only furthered my belief that it was my fault. I'd already come to that conclusion last night. I didn't want to have him shoving it in my face. Sure, his girlfriend had been rude, but they were members. He was clearly important. I should have kept my mouth shut. Working there would have never worked. My mouth would have gotten me in trouble eventually.

"I understand that. Trust me, I paid for my disrespect with

more than one humiliation last night. It was a lesson learned. Is that all? I need to go get ready.”

Garrett rubbed his short, neatly trimmed beard with his thumb and pointer finger. “That depends. Do you want your job at Morii back?”

“What?” I asked.

“You heard me, Fawn. If you want the job back, it is yours. Trusting that you can tame your smart mouth.” The corner of his lips twitched. “At least with the patrons.”

I uncrossed my arms and let them fall to my sides. “Why are you offering me my job back?”

He studied me for a moment. His gaze traveled down my body, and I was suddenly very aware of the cutoff jeans, halter top, and flip-flops I’d tossed on this morning to take Gypsi to work. Why I cared that he saw me dressed like some trashy tramp I didn’t know. I wasn’t from his wealthy world, and I was happy about that.

When those gray eyes met mine again, I fought back the need to shiver.

“Do you really need an answer to that question, Fawn?”

I didn’t respond. I wasn’t sure I could. I felt breathless and flushed, and all the man had done was look at me. Lord, if he could do this with a look, what could he do with his hands? NO! I was not thinking about that. I was not. Besides, it was never going to happen.

“I’ll let Silas know you’ll be at your shift tonight,” Garrett told me, then walked back to his Bentley.

The driver was out of the car and opening the back door before he reached it. Garrett pushed the brim of his cowboy hat back down, then climbed inside.

I stood there until he drove away, trying to make sense of what had just happened.



SIX

FAWN

Tonight would be my first night not having to shadow Eliana. I was relieved.

She'd been so pissed about my return and the fact that she had to train me some more that she had made my last two nights hell. I'd survived it.

Garrett hadn't returned, and tonight, Silas would place me in another room, so I doubted I'd see much of Garrett or Eliana again. I would miss Leo and Felix though. They had been fun to work with. I still hated that Leo had lost the bet—which I now knew was if Garrett was going to flirt with me and want me to serve him—simply because it cost him five hundred dollars. Once I found out that Garrett had tipped Eliana five hundred dollars, I'd wished Leo had been right. Okay, fine, if I was honest, I'd wished Leo had been right because I was attracted to Garrett.

I was putting all of that behind me now and starting in my

new position, wherever it might be. Just as I was slipping on my shoes, Eliana and Blake walked inside the room. Thankfully, I was about to walk out of it.

Eliana glanced at me and smirked. “Silas wants you in the Monte Cristo Lounge tonight.”

I forced a smile. “Thanks,” I replied.

The best I could do was try and be polite even if she was a snarky bitch. She’d made sure my humiliation the night Garrett told me to leave was awful. Her gloating over it and telling Leo he had to pay up, that Garrett didn’t like old country women, only made things worse. When I’d come back, she had made sure everyone knew it was probationary and I wasn’t allowed near Garrett when he was here.

I headed for the door and heard them giggling behind me. I wasn’t playing their silly games. I had a job to do. If it entertained them that Garrett didn’t like me, then fine. Whatever. He had come to my camper and offered me the job back. He must not hate me.

Silas met me in the Monte Cristo Lounge and looked pleased to see me. That was nice after having to interact with two members of the mean-girls wannabes.

“You’ll like it in here. Josephine will be working with you this shift. She’s much more, uh, pleasant.”

I laughed. “It’s not a high bar,” I replied.

He shrugged and nodded.

The friendly smile on the curly-headed blonde walking my way was definitely a welcome change. She held out her hand

and gave me a bright grin. “I’m Josephine. It’s nice to meet you.”

I shook her hand. “Hello, Josephine. I’m Fawn.”

She giggled. “Everyone knows who you are,” she replied. “Other than the obvious, you’re gorgeous and the guys all talk about it, no one has ever been sent away by Garrett Hughes and brought back.”

I sighed. “I was taught a lesson,” I admitted.

She wiggled her eyebrows. “It’s easier to take lessons when they look like him.”

She couldn’t be much older than Gypsi. Knowing she, too, thought Garrett was hot seemed strange. But then I wasn’t sure how old he was. I just knew he was older than me. But who was I to judge? I’d dated Micah.

Josephine scrunched up her nose. “Although the fact that he likes Eliana is a turn-off,” she said, then leaned in and whispered, “Did she go in and close the door while you were there?”

I shook my head.

“I had to work in there a few times, and when she goes in there and closes the door—which only his area has—it’s because she’s giving him head.”

My eyes flew open. “What?” I asked, horrified.

Josephine pressed her lips together and nodded. “She’s his favorite. He likes redheads, is what I’ve heard, and she gets all the best shifts and gets away with being mean to everyone she

doesn't like because he protects her.”

“Why is he so powerful here? Just the wealthiest member?” I asked, disliking him more now than ever.

“This is the Hughes Floor,” she said. “As in he bought and paid for it. All the rooms on this floor are his to control.”

My mouth dropped open. “He has that much money?” I asked.

She nodded. “Garrett Hughes is richer than God. He's also dangerous, but I'm not going to say any more. That's not something I'm willing to talk about and lose my life over.”

Dangerous? Apparently, he wasn't that dangerous. He had a bodyguard drive him around. I was always attracted to the worst guys. At least, this time, I wouldn't be making that mistake. Especially knowing he allowed Eliana to be nasty and cruel and protected her job when he sent me away for that one little thing. Yuck. Garrett Hughes was no longer starring in any more of my fantasies.

“Anyway, you're here tonight. I'll show you where everything is, and then we have to get back to the few we have in here already.”

I followed behind her and tried not to think about Garrett and Eliana, although it was hard not to. Eventually, I got busy enough with work that it was out of my head. Hopefully, it stayed there.



Silas walked into the room an hour before my shift was over

and came directly to me. I had a tray of drinks in my hand. He took the tray from me.

“I need you to go to the Winchester Parlor. Garrett is here and is requesting you.”

Me? Oh, heck no. I wasn't his new blow-job bitch.

“Why me? Why not Eliana?”

Silas gave me a pointed look. “We don't ask Garrett questions. We do what he says. Did you learn nothing from him firing you? Now, go.”

I wanted to blurt out that I wasn't going to whore myself out for this job, but there was that dangerous thing, and I didn't want to get Josephine in trouble for telling me about the blow jobs. Reluctantly, I headed for the door. If Garrett thought I was going to go down on my knees in gratitude, I would just quit. The walk to the Winchester Parlor, I hyped myself up, telling myself that this was going to be okay. Maybe he just wanted to ask me about work, or maybe Eliana had lied about me and he was going to fire me again.

When I opened the heavy wooden door and went inside, my eyes met Leo's. He grinned at me, then nodded his head back toward Garrett's area with a knowing look. I made my way back to the right corner.

The sight of Garrett alone sent off warning bells, and I paused, staring at him.

He held a cigar between his teeth and took it out as his eyes met mine. “Fawn,” he said in that low, deep voice.

For a fleeting moment, I completely understood Eliana's

willingness to get on her knees, but I shoved that thought away. I needed to be slapped.

“Hello, Mr. Hughes. What can I get for you this evening?” I replied as formally and respectfully as I could muster.

A half grin played on his lips, and then he put the cigar back in his mouth while he studied me. I stood there, going over every scenario that could play out here and tried to prepare myself for how I would react to it.

Finally, he took the cigar from his lips. “I’d like a glass of my scotch.”

I nodded once. “Yes, sir,” I replied, then quickly escaped the lair.

Leo was watching me as I approached.

“He wants his scotch. I am hoping you know what that is,” I told him.

Leo slid it across the bar to me. It was already prepared. “I think I might just get my five hundred back, but even if I don’t, the look on Eliana’s face when he requested you will keep my heart warm and happy for years to come.”

I rolled my eyes and took the drink, placed it on a tray, then headed back to Garrett.

Eliana walked from one of the other nooks, and her eyes locked on me. The hateful gleam in them was more intense than usual. She took two strides until she was almost so close that she was touching me. “Don’t think for a second that this means anything,” she said under her breath. “He won’t choose you over me.”

I said nothing and continued on my way. She wanted a reaction from me, but I wasn't going to give her one. Truth was, I might not be here long anyway. If the man wanted me to suck him off, then I was quitting. I was no one's whore.

Stepping under the arch, I found Garrett reading a newspaper. I was unaware people still read newspapers. That one looked like one of the rich-men papers. The one with stocks and stuff in it. That fit Mr. Rich Rancher Man.

He lifted his gaze to mine as I walked over and set his scotch down on the side table beside him. "Can I get you anything else, Mr. Hughes?" I asked him.

He said nothing, but kept his eyes on me as he laid the paper down and picked up his glass. I waited patiently while he swirled the liquid around, making me uncomfortable with his steady gaze. Why wasn't he talking? Telling me I could go? I wanted out of here.

"Silas says you have learned quickly and will be an asset," he finally said.

"I'm glad he's happy with my performance," I replied.

Garrett set his glass down. "Yes, well, Silas is a man. A weak man. Good worker, intelligent, but weak. I can't help but be concerned, knowing your past behavior, that his praise isn't because of something more than your work here."

What was he talking about? My past behavior? What past behavior? I stood there, staring at him, completely confused. Was this still about the night he had fired me? Was he not going to let that go?

“I’m sorry, sir. I am not sure what you mean.”

He raised his eyebrows, as if he was amused. I shifted my feet, feeling like I was missing something important here, but for the life of me, I had no idea what it was.

“Our servers here are expected to do their job well. This isn’t a biker club, and sleeping with those in charge won’t benefit you.”

If he had punched me in the stomach, it would have been less of a shock. The air left me, and I just stood there, staring. Had he just said that? Was he calling me a club slut? Had I not clarified that already? I had dated Micah. Only Micah. I tried to shake my head, but I couldn’t manage to move. I was floored. He was the one who let Eliana suck him off, yet I was being accused of using sex to get a leg up.

I blinked and finally managed to find my words.

“I’m sorry,” I said, my voice sounding hoarse. “I don’t—” I stopped. What did I say here? If I told him what I wanted to say, then I was going to be fired. For good this time. Did I care? Yes. I needed this job, this money. I wanted to get the hell out of Ocala.

“Yes, you do understand. Now, if you will please send Eliana in here to see me, I am in need of her.”

He was in need of her. Oh my God. This man was a bastard. I hated him. He was calling me a club whore, yet he wanted his own little club whore to come in here to service him. What was this world? Even the biker club wasn’t this insulting. There was a level of respect for women. At least the women

who demanded it, like I did.

I nodded, but said nothing more. I knew if I opened my mouth, all the things going through my head would fly out and could end in me telling him what a dick I thought he was. As I walked past two members on one of the blue velvet couches, I stopped to get their empty glasses and ask them what else I could get for them. How I held the smile on my face, I had no idea. Once I reached the bar, Leo was looking at me expectantly.

Eliana walked up then and placed her tray on the bar beside me. I could feel her hateful glare. There was one thing I would not tolerate tonight, and it was letting her know she bothered me. I forced a smile and turned to look at her.

“Mr. Hughes would like to see you now,” I told her as sweetly as I could.

The pleased smile that curled over her red-painted lips made me want to slap it off. I refrained, of course, and turned back to Leo and placed my next drink order.

“I might be a while. Be sure to cover my tables,” Eliana said with a flippant tone as she strutted away, back to do whatever it was Garrett needed from her.

“I did not expect that,” Leo said as he slid the drinks over to me.

“What?” I asked.

Leo nodded his head back to the right corner and that privacy door I’d heard about but never seen was in place. Josephine hadn’t made that up. A sour taste settled in the back

of my throat as I turned back to Leo and shrugged.

“Why? Isn’t that something she does often for him?” I sounded as uninterested as I hoped.

Leo nodded. “Yeah, but you’re here, and, well, in case you weren’t aware, you are way hotter than Eliana.”

I disagreed with him, but I was a better person than Eliana.

“Thank you, Leo. But the day I get on my knees for a man like that will never come. I’m not a whore,” I replied. Although I’d been called one by the devil in the back.

Leo grinned. “No, you’re not. You’re also not a bitch. I’m not sure you have any flaws, Fawn Parker.”

He was flirting. Not good. I wasn’t doing the cougar thing anymore. Those days were gone.

I smiled at him and patted his hand. “Trust me, my flaws are there. I just hide them well. It comes with age,” I told him, then took the drinks and headed back to work.



SEVEN

FAWN

The Harley and the man leaning against it outside my camper was not what I wanted to see today. I groaned in frustration and got out of the car. The past two nights at work had been hell. Although last night, Garrett Hughes hadn't shown, and Eliana had been there. She had taken every chance she could to talk about the previous night, when she'd been locked away with Garrett.

Knowing that the man had made fun of the way I talked, that he thought I was too old to be a server but was being charitable since I lived in a camper, and considered me barely tolerable had been hard to hear. Leo and Felix had accused Eliana of making that stuff up and come to my defense, saying there wasn't a man on earth who thought that about me. I knew she wasn't lying. The fact that she knew I lived in a camper told me that Garrett had told her that about me. I refused to let those two defeat me. I would work my ass off

and get the money we needed, then leave them behind.

Micah, on the other hand, was getting on my damn nerves. Why had he come back? Didn't he have better things to do than drive all the way here from Miami twice in one week?

"Micah, you have got to stop showing up here," I told him, walking past him on my way to the camper door.

"I wanted to check on you, babe," he said as he followed me.

I slapped a hand on the closed door, wanting to scream. "I don't need you to check on me."

His hand touched my arm, and I flung it off and spun around.

"Listen, Micah, I have had a bad week. I am not in the mood for this. We are done. Over. Finished. We were the moment I heard you getting your cock sucked by Dylan. She wants you. She will put up with your whorish lifestyle. I don't want to. I want to take this camper and travel up the East Coast with Gypsi. That is what I want!" I was shouting when I finished.

I hadn't meant to lose my temper, but Micah had decided to stop by on a bad day.

His beautiful face looked so defeated. Was he serious? What we'd had wasn't that life-changing. Why was he not letting it go?

Feeling like I'd just kicked a puppy, I reached out and touched his cheek. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to yell. I can't do this with you. Please, go back to Miami and stop coming here. Okay?"

He closed his eyes and inhaled sharply. “You’re breaking my heart, Fawn. I can’t get you out of my head.”

The urge to grab his shoulders and shake him was strong, but I didn’t. “Micah, I am too old for you. Right now, it’s not a big deal. But even if you could keep your dick out of other women, in fifteen years, I’ll be fifty-one. You’ll be forty-one. This was never going to be long-term. It was a moment in time.”

He covered my hand with his, and I dropped mine from his face, not wanting the contact.

“Age doesn’t matter to me,” he argued.

“It does to me,” I replied. “And it will to you, too, one day.”

He ran his hand over his face and growled, “Fine. If this is how you want it.”

“It is.”

When his eyes met mine, I could see his acceptance. Finally.

“Why was Hughes here?” he asked me.

I should have known he’d want to know. “He fired me the night before and came to give me my job back.”

Micah narrowed his eyes as he stared at me seriously. “Fawn, you need to stay away from him. You don’t know him like I do. He’s a bad man.”

I let out a laugh. “That won’t be a problem. He doesn’t like me. I disgust him.”

Micah looked at me as if I was crazy. “No, you don’t, and, yes, babe, he likes you. Keep your distance. Hell, find a new

job. One where he isn't. Better yet, get out of this town. He owns it."

I squeezed his hard bicep. "I'll be fine. A couple of weeks of making the money I am at the Morii, and we are out of here."

He didn't like that answer. I could tell by the scowl on his face.

"Let me give you money so you can leave today."

I shook my head. "No. I'm not taking money from you."

"This is not the time to be stubborn, Fawn. You need to get out of here. Out of fucking Florida."

"You are overreacting. I have things to do before work. Get on your bike and go home. Don't show up here again. I mean it."

"Fuuuck," he muttered. "Fine. I'll go, but please listen to me about Garrett."

I nodded. "I promise, I won't go near him."

That seemed to appease him. Thankfully.

Micah turned and headed for his bike, and I unlocked the camper and went inside. Glad for that to be over. If I was lucky, he would listen and not come back again. The next time, I might lose my shit, and I wasn't one to do that often. I liked being happy.



Garrett's arrival at Morii and request for me had not gone over well with Eliana. Leo taunting her about what she'd claimed

Garrett said about me being a lie only fanned the flame. I would have gladly let her serve him. I didn't need to be insulted tonight. Eliana made it her life's mission to do that every chance she got.

Leo slid Garrett's scotch over to me, and I put it on my tray.

Garrett had barely glanced at me when I went to ask what I could get for him. He was reading *The Wall Street Journal*. I had taken that as a blessing and gotten out of there as fast as I could. Hopefully, it would be the same when I delivered his drink.

On my way, Eliana stepped out of one of the semi-private areas. Those hateful eyes locked on me and the tray in my hand. If I wouldn't get fired, I'd hand her the damn thing and tell her to do it herself. I didn't want to.

"He's tolerating you out of charity and because he always does this after I suck him off. He thinks he needs to distance us for a few days. This has nothing to do with him wanting you in there," she said under her breath while holding a smile for anyone watching our interaction.

I opened my mouth to respond, *Okay*, when the tray in my hands was flipped up, and the scotch spilled all over the front of my dress, then trickled down my legs. I somehow managed to save the glass from falling to the floor by pressing it against my body with the tray.

"You need to be more careful, Fawn. Do you have any idea how expensive that scotch is? You'll have to work a week to pay back what you just spilled." She sighed, as if exasperated with me, then walked away. "I'll go get Mr. Hughes a new

drink. You need to clean yourself up and pray you aren't fired again."

I just stood there and watched her walk away. My stomach was in knots over the fact that I was going to have to pay for this drink. I fought back tears as I walked back over to the bar and placed the tray and now-empty glass down.

"She's a fucking bitch," Felix growled under his breath. "Go get changed. I'll clean up the floor."

"You're not paying for that drink. I saw her do it," Leo told me.

Yeah, well, that meant very little. Garrett protected Eliana. He didn't protect me. I wasn't going to be the one he sided with. I should just quit. Go find another job and get enough money to move us out of this city. The thought that I would be giving up bothered me though. I didn't like bullies.

"Maybe I should wait until he fires me. No reason for me to go change dresses, then have to change again," I replied. The defeated sound in my voice was hard to mask.

"Fuck that. If he fires you, I'm walking out too," Leo stated.

I shook my head. "No, you're not. This is a great job. I can find another one, and I'll be fine."

Felix tossed me a towel. "Dry off, then go get changed. You aren't letting her have the upper hand."

I took the towel and started to dry my legs.

When I straightened, Eliana was walking back with an empty tray, smirking. "Mr. Hughes would like to see you," she

said in a singsong voice.

I took a deep breath and handed the towel back to Felix.

“You got this,” Leo told me. “Just bat those eyes at him. He’s a man; it’ll work.”

I tried to smile, but I didn’t have it in me. The short walk back to him made my anxiety worse. Why was I letting him get to me? Why was I letting Eliana get to me? I didn’t have to stay here and take this. If he was mad, fine. They could take my first paycheck and all my tips. Surely, that would cover the cost of the scotch. I wasn’t sure how I would pay the electricity bill, but I’d figure it out.

Garrett’s eyes were locked on me as I entered his space. I waited for him to say something. I had no idea what he’d been told.

“That glass you spilled cost almost three thousand dollars,” he stated.

I winced. “I’m sorry, sir. I’ll pay it back.”

He studied me as he took a drink from the glass Eliana had brought him. “Jealousy isn’t attractive. One would think, at your age, you’d be over the drama and pettiness.”

My hands fisted at my sides so hard that I felt my nails biting into my skin. I was not going to stand here like a child, pleading my case. I was a grown woman.

“I agree, and as much as I appreciate your allowing me to return, I see now that it is best I leave. This isn’t working out.”

My words didn’t seem to affect him in the least.

“If that’s what you wish.”

“It is,” I replied.

“Silas can deduct the cost of the scotch from your check,” he told me.

I nodded, although there would be nothing left of the check once the scotch cost was taken out. No need to point that out though. I just wanted to leave. Get away from all this and move on with my life.

“You may go,” he said, then put the cigar back between his teeth.

I turned and left, fighting back tears the entire time. Leo’s eyes met mine, and he took in my expression, then scowled, setting down the bottle in his hand. I was glad I’d made a few friends here, and I would miss them. It was best I left before they became real attachments. I reached the bar and tried to smile for Leo’s sake.

“I’m leaving,” I told him.

He narrowed his eyes. “Did he fire you?”

I shook my head. “No, I quit. He thinks I spilled it and accused me of being jealous and causing drama. I can’t do this. I don’t want to do this. I’d rather forget it and go get a job elsewhere.”

“Did you tell him she lied?” Leo asked, looking furious.

“There was no reason to. He didn’t ask me what happened. He believed her and accused me. That’s not something I want to deal with.”

Felix looked angry as he listened to me. “I wish you’d tell him. See who he believes,” he said.

Leo nodded his head in agreement.

“I don’t want to. I’m not a kid in school who has to defend herself to a teacher. He can believe whatever he wants. Anyway, thanks for being my friends. You two made working in this place easier.”

Leo reached into his pocket and pulled out his cell phone, then handed it to me. “Put your number in there. We’ll go have drinks or coffee or something.”

I took his phone and added my number into his Contacts, then texted myself so I could save his number in my phone. After I handed it back to him, I said my goodbyes to both of them and made my way out of the door with my self-respect intact.

The dressing room was empty as I took off the shoes and dress, then changed into the sundress I’d worn here. I went to get my purse from the locked cabinet under my dressing table, only to find it empty. Panicking, I looked around the room, trying to remember if I had put it in here. Had I forgotten and left it lying around somewhere? I rushed into the shower room and checked the places I had been. It wasn’t anywhere. I thought I’d put it in my cabinet. It was always the first thing I did when I arrived.

No one knew my code to get my purse out. Silas knew, of course, but no one else would know it. I couldn’t imagine Silas taking my purse. My heart was racing as I walked back into the dressing room and began looking under everything. My

keys, my wallet, my phone, a hundred dollars in cash. I felt tears stinging my eyes as I opened all the drawers in the dressing tables. I had to find it.

The door to the dressing room opened, and I spun around, ready to question whoever it was, when I was met with Garrett Hughes. I wiped at the tears now rolling down my face, hating that he was seeing me cry. He had already accused me of needing to grow up and act my age. Crying wasn't going to help his opinion of me. Not that I cared what his opinion was—or at least, I didn't want to care.

“You were going to leave and not tell me what happened with Eliana,” he said in an accusatory tone I was not in the mood for.

I sniffled and straightened my back. “You didn't ask me what happened,” I replied and went back to looking for my purse.

“You're right, and I'm sorry.”

I froze. Had he just said he was sorry? I slowly turned back around to look at him. Garrett Hughes did not seem like the sort of man who apologized. Ever.

“I should have asked you. I didn't. That was unfair.”

I managed to nod my head, but I was too shocked to speak. Garrett Hughes apologizing was the last thing I'd expected to happen tonight.

“Eliana has been dealt with, and she will be coming in here to gather her belongings and leave once you're not in here. There is no need for you to be subjected to her any longer.

Both Felix and Leo have informed me of not only this incident, but also her behavior toward you since you started here. I'd like for you to reconsider and stay."

He had fired Eliana? For me? Did this mean he was going to replace her with me? As in make me his favorite server who served him things ... things I wasn't willing to do?

"I'm not sure I would be a good replacement for her," I replied honestly.

He tilted his head to the side. "And what makes you say that?"

There was no way I was telling him what I'd learned. Scrambling for another answer, I managed to come up with one I hoped would work.

"I'm older, less attractive, and the way I talk is barely tolerable," I replied. I threw the things he'd said about me to her back in his face. I wanted to see his reaction.

He gave me an incredulous smile. "You're serious." It wasn't a question. Just a statement.

He didn't seem to recognize the words as something that had come out of his own mouth.

I nodded. Had Leo and Felix been right? Had Eliana lied about that?

He took a step in my direction. "Please, stay."

I sighed heavily. "Let me go home and think about it. This has been more drama than I anticipated. Silas did warn me before I started, and I assumed I could handle it. Turns out, I'd

rather work on a garbage truck than deal with this. Tonight, I just want to go home.” I looked around helplessly. “But something has happened to my purse, and I can’t find it so that I can leave.”

“Did you lock it up?” he asked me.

I fought the urge to roll my eyes. “Yes. At least, I thought I did. I always do that first thing when I arrive. It’s not there, and I’ve looked all over the dressing room. I can’t find it, and —” I stopped and inhaled deeply because I was on the verge of stupid tears again. “I just want to go home.” *And curl up with Gypsi on our small sofa, share a bowl of popcorn, and watch an episode of The Office.*

“Come with me.” Garrett’s words weren’t a request, but I doubted the man ever did anything but order people around.

“Why?” I asked him. I didn’t like being told what to do.

He leveled those gray eyes on me. “Do you want to find your purse, Fawn?” he asked.

“Yes. I think I mentioned that several times.”

He held out his hand toward me. “Then, come with me.”

I looked down at his hand and then back to his face. “Fine,” I replied, walking to the door and ignoring his hand.

I was not touching that man. For several reasons, but the main one was, I feared my body’s response. His eyes alone made me feel weird things I’d never experienced before. I wasn’t about to let him touch my body.

I swung open the door to the dressing room and stepped out

into the hallway, then waited for him to follow. Garrett had an amused smirk on his face as he came to stand in front of me.

“This way,” he said, then walked farther down the hallway to an area I’d not been before.

I tried not to stare at the way his butt looked in the slacks he was wearing. This man could make anything look good. Businessman attire, cowboy attire—I didn’t need to think about him without anything on at all. I was sure that was a spectacular sight. One I would not be seeing.

He stopped at an elevator and pulled out a card from his pocket and swiped it, causing the door to slide open. He waved his hand for me to enter. The inside was by far the fanciest elevator I had ever seen. Complete with a black marble floor and small, fancy chandelier.

I stood as far away from Garrett as possible and tried not to look at him.

“Leo has worked here for four years. Felix almost five years. They’re good employees. They’re paid exceptionally well,” Garrett said.

I glanced at him and saw he wasn’t looking my way as he spoke. He could have been having a boring conversation that he wasn’t interested in from the way he stood.

“Yet both of them told me that they would quit if I didn’t come after you. They were fiercely protective of you.” He turned his gaze to me then. “Which makes me wonder if it is your exquisite face, centerfold body, or your charm. Perhaps all three. I’ll admit, for a moment, I considered you’d done

what I warned you not to do, but there had been a purity to their defense of you. One that doesn't come from merely sex."

I tensed, unsure of what he meant by that. Yes, I was a woman, and hearing a man like Garrett Hughes call me exquisite and suggest my body was worthy of a centerfold made my heart speed up. I hated that because although he wasn't accusing me of having sex with Leo and Felix, he'd still admitted it had crossed his mind.

Why did he think I was some club slut because I'd dated Micah? It seemed to be an unfair assumption.

"Felix and Leo are my friends. Nothing more," I replied tightly.

"That might be so for you, but men are easily swayed by beauty like yours."

The doors to the elevator opened, and he stepped back for me to exit first. The smell of cigar smoke and spice wafted by me as I passed too close to him. I wanted to turn around and bury my nose in his shirt and inhale some more. Why couldn't the man smell bad at least?

"This way," he said as he walked by me.

This floor was less elaborate and appeared more like an office building should. We passed a few closed doors until we reached one, and he stopped, used that card again, and then opened the door.

He walked into the room before me this time, and I followed slowly. I paused as I stopped inside the large square area. The entire back wall was a television screen with small boxes from

floor to ceiling of different parts of the club. A man stood up in a black suit with a shaved head and scar on his nose that looked like he'd been sliced once. His brown eyes swung to me, then went back to Garrett.

“Boss,” he said simply.

“I need footage of the dressing room from four o'clock. I would also like you to pull up the Winchester Parlor from forty minutes ago,” Garrett said to the man as he looked at the large screen.

“Yes, sir,” the man replied and picked up a remote, causing the left side of the room to light up as a screen came to life.

I stood, watching as the dressing room came into view. Did they see us naked? I felt my face warm. Silas had said to always dress by the clothing in the right corner. Was this why? Oh God, I hoped so. I tried to think if I'd walked around in my panties and bra at any time.

“Stop,” Garrett ordered.

The screen showed Eliana and Blake laughing as Eliana bent down and pressed numbers into my cabinet's keypad. The door opened, and Eliana took out my purse.

“Turn up the volume,” Garrett said angrily.

I could hear Blake's laughter now.

“White trash,” Eliana said, holding my purse with her finger and thumb, as if it were something gross. “The cheap-ass purse fits her.”

“What are you gonna do with it?” Blake asked, giggling.

“Put it where nasty shit goes,” she replied and flashed her stunning white smile at Blake.

The evilness in her expression, however, made her appear cold and callous. When she walked to the door that led to the showers, I frowned. I’d checked in there. Then, it slowly dawned on me ... she’d said *shit*. She meant it literally. I hadn’t gone into the toilet stalls.

“Bitch,” Garrett swore. “Send Core to retrieve Fawn’s purse and have her things cleaned and dried for her. Now, pull up the Winchester Parlor.”

“Yes, sir,” the man replied.

And there I was, walking away from the bar with the single drink on my tray. Eliana came up to me, and the look on my face made me feel weak. I should have stood up for myself. Why had I let that kid run all over me? Because I had been scared of Garrett?

Her words played over the speakers in the room just as she took the tray and flipped it. I flickered my eyes from the screen to Garrett. The veins on his neck stood out as he clenched his jaw. The way he glared angrily at the screen made me suddenly worried for Eliana. The threat that hung in the air when this man was unhappy was terrifying. How could someone so beautiful be so impossibly chilling as well?

The other man reentered the room, and I realized I hadn’t heard him leave. He said something in Garrett’s ear that was so quiet I couldn’t hear him.

“I’ve seen all I need. Make sure Eliana is handled before she

leaves,” he said, not looking back at the man but turning to me. “Let’s go.”

He moved past me, giving me another whiff of his alluring scent before opening the door and standing back for me to exit.

Once we were in the hallway, alone, he looked down at me. “Your purse is being cleaned, and everything that can be salvaged inside will be. Whatever was ruined will be replaced. I’m going to have my driver take you home. Your car will be waiting for you at your place in the morning.”

I shook my head. “Just put my purse in a plastic bag. I’ll handle it all when I get home.”

He raised his eyebrows at me, as if my request was ridiculous. “Your purse was in a toilet. A used toilet.”

I covered my mouth, horrified. I had already guessed it was in a toilet, but she’d gone as far as to then use the toilet on top of it. That was sick. I hadn’t realized she was twisted as well as being cruel.

“Why would she do that?” I asked, shaking my head.

I didn’t understand what about me brought out such ugliness in her.

“She’s a jealous bitch. I would think, in your life, you’ve come across many of them. Nevertheless, that kind of treatment will not be tolerated in my establishment. If she wants to act like a criminal, then she can be treated like one as well.”

I frowned. “What do you mean?”

“Exactly what I said, Fawn. Now, come with me. My driver is waiting on you at the back entrance.”

He started walking, and I had no choice but to follow him. I was getting more annoyed by the way he was controlling everything. Giving me no choice in the matter. Just telling me what I was going to do. I wasn't a child. I had been making my own decisions since I had been a sixteen-year-old girl, running away from an abusive foster home.

“I would like my things, and I want to drive myself home,” I stated as we stepped into the elevator.

“You'll get your things tomorrow,” he replied.

“I want them now. I want my car,” I demanded.

His gaze swung to me, and I felt a shiver run down my spine.

“No. I will not allow you to touch or see your things in their current state. You will be driven home in my car.”

I placed my hands on my hips and tried to glare at him, but it was difficult when my head was screaming, *Back away. Danger. Proceed with caution.*

“I don't appreciate you making decisions for me.”

The elevator doors opened, and we were on the bottom floor.

Garrett raised a singular eyebrow at me. “I am helping you.”

Maybe so, but the way he did it made me feel as if I had no say so in any of it. He had found my purse. I should have thanked him, but he'd started controlling everything, and I had

reacted to it.

I dropped my hands to my sides and let out a deep sigh. “Thank you for your help. It’s been a long day,” I explained.

“Yes, it has,” he replied, motioning for me to walk out of the elevator.

I went, suddenly feeling exhausted. My fight was gone. Let the man get my purse cleaned. What harm was in that?

Garrett walked to the door and opened it for me. I saw the Bentley he’d come to my camper in parked outside with the blond man he’d called Kye standing at the passenger door. He’d been leaning against it, but straightened when he saw me emerge from the building.

“Kye will see you home safely,” Garrett informed me. “Good night, Fawn.” Then, he closed the door and left me outside with this man.

I made my way to the car as he opened the door.

“Thank you,” I said to him, and he grinned.

I realized he was young. His smile was charming and not-at-all menacing.

“You’re welcome, Ms. Parker. There is a bottle of water waiting on you. If you would like something more, I can pour you some wine or champagne.”

I shook my head. “No. The water is good. Thanks.”

He nodded his head once, and then I climbed inside the car. The caramel-colored leather was soft and warm. The door closed behind me, and I buckled my seat belt as I took in the

luxury. The car smelled like Garrett.

Closing my eyes, I laid my head back. This was a world I knew nothing of, and I doubted I'd ever set foot in a car this nice again. I wished I weren't so mentally tanked and could enjoy the adventure.



EIGHT

GARRETT

Placing false crimes on someone to have them locked up wasn't moral, but I wasn't moral. Besides, Eliana was getting a much easier punishment than if she were a man. The only reason I was handing her over to the police to deal with her was because the forms of punishment I dealt in would end with her dead. She was a lying, twisted bitch, but her crimes didn't necessarily deserve death. Perhaps I was getting soft in my late forties. There had been a time I'd have handled her differently.

Silas walked back into the club beside me as the police cruiser left with Eliana handcuffed in the backseat. Blake had been terminated and sent home already. I'd made my point. There would be no other problems for Fawn here. No one was stupid enough to make the same mistake.

"I'll need to find two new servers," Silas stated the obvious.

"Yes, you will. Be more selective this time," I informed him.

“And make sure that they are aware any cruelty toward Fawn will end unfavorably for them.”

Silas nodded. “Yes. I will be sure that all the servers are aware of exactly what will happen to them.” He cleared his throat and messed with the bow tie at his neck. He did that when he was nervous. I often made Silas nervous. “Will, uh, Fawn be returning? She didn’t seem sure.”

My hands tightened at my sides. I had that same concern, except for a very different reason.

I wanted Fawn Parker. She wasn’t the whore I’d assumed. I now realized she had thought she was exclusively dating Micah. I wanted to get to know her better. The woman I’d seen, the way she handled things, intrigued me. It was the opposite of what I had expected. The fucking piercings in her nipples, which had been obvious in that sundress she’d changed into, had my dick and curiosity piqued. I was going to see those tits bare. Having her here at the Morii would make it easier for me to get close to her.

I had made mistakes, and she wasn’t a fan of mine. She might even hate me. She was going to take some work, but I had complete faith in my ability to warm her up to me. I wasn’t a man who was told no, yet this woman kept throwing that response at me with no fear. It made my dick so damn hard that it hurt.

I was going to have her. She just wasn’t aware of it yet. Soon, she’d be begging me to fuck her. She’d crave my hands on her. All it would take was one taste of how I could make her body feel, and she’d give me what I wanted. Knowing

Micah had touched her infuriated me in ways I didn't want to think about. I didn't typically care about a woman's past relationships, but with Fawn, I found myself wanting to kill every man who had ever been inside her.

"She will be back," I finally said.

"Yes, sir," was his only response.

I walked off and left him at the elevator. I had some things to handle before going home. The humiliation and embarrassment on Fawn's face while watching the security footage had ignited my need for violence that having Eliana arrested hadn't managed to tamp down. I wasn't sure how I was going to ease it, but I had some ideas.

Pulling my phone from my pocket, I found the number I needed and dialed it. First, I had to focus some of this pent-up rage on something other than revenge. I had a female to win over. The sooner I got to fuck Fawn Parker, the sooner I could get over this insane pull she had on me.



NINE

FAWN

When I walked into the kitchen the next morning, Gypsi was sitting in the bench that served as our seating for the built-in table. She had a Pop-Tart in her hand and a glass of milk in front of her. She lifted her eyes to mine and smiled.

“You must have gotten paid. I’ve never seen our car so clean,” she said, then took a bite of the Pop-Tart.

I yawned and stared at her, trying to register what she had just said. “Huh?” I replied.

She waved a hand toward the window. “The car. It’s all shiny and clean. I almost didn’t recognize it when I looked outside this morning.”

I walked over to the window and stared out at our thirteen-year-old Honda Civic. Gypsi hadn’t been exaggerating; it was shiny. I stood there, trying to decide if I was thankful for the fact that Garrett had had my car cleaned or annoyed. Maybe a

little embarrassed that he'd seen it. I shouldn't be. That car had served us well. We could hook it up to the back of the camper and pull it when we moved. It was dependable. Sure, it needed some work done, but it was still running.

"How late were you at work last night?" Gypsi asked me.

"Uh, I was home by ten thirty. You were already asleep," I replied, turning from the window to look back at her. "I had wanted a Netflix-watching buddy."

She shrugged. "Sorry. I was exhausted. We had been busy at the shop yesterday, and then the walk back did me in."

I chewed on my bottom lip. I hated that she had to walk home some days with my schedule. If the club wasn't so far away, I could walk and let her have the car. Maybe I should quit. Get a job where I had hours that coincided with hers. That way, I could drop her off and pick her up. Or I could get a job closer to the camper so she could take the car and I could walk.

"Oh, the electricity bill is late. We got a disconnect notice. I get paid tomorrow. I can cover it, but it will take all of my check. I'm hoping that the car wash didn't take too much of your check. We are out of dish soap. Using it as our body wash and shampoo used it up." She held up her glass of milk. "And I just drank the last of the milk."

There was no check for me yet. I hadn't cleaned our car. I would never waste our money on that with bills due. Which meant I also couldn't quit the club yet. I had to work at the club until I got paid.

I went to the cookie jar, where we put our tip money, and counted out the four hundred seventy dollars I'd made last night before I was sent to the Winchester Parlor.

"Here. This should cover the electricity bill. I was going to use it to get the car looked at. Another light had come on yesterday, and we are way past due for an oil change. But I'll go to work tonight and hopefully make enough in tips to handle the oil change."

Gypsi nodded. "Okay, then I will go get groceries after work with my check."

I started for the coffeepot when the gravel sound, alerting us someone was driving up, caught my attention. Turning around, I went back to the window to see the familiar Bentley. I stilled, waiting to see who stepped out of the car. The driver's door opened, and Kye appeared. The back door remained closed as Kye walked toward the camper with a shopping bag in his hand.

"Who is that?" Gypsi asked behind me, and I spun around to look at her before hurrying to the door before she could.

"It's, uh, one of the club's drivers," I explained and knew my daughter well enough to know she was going to need more of an explanation than that.

I opened the door just as Kye approached.

"Good morning, Ms. Parker. I was sent to deliver your purse."

I reached out and took the bag from him. "Thank you, Kye," I replied.

“I was also asked to see if you needed me to take you or your daughter anywhere today.”

Frowning, I shook my head.

What was Garrett doing—washing my car, offering his driver? Was it because of what had happened last night?

“Thank you, but we are fine,” I replied.

Kye nodded, then turned and walked back to the Bentley. I quickly closed the door and hoped Gypsi wasn't about to ask me twenty questions.

“Why is a chauffeur in a Bentley returning your purse?” she asked me, narrowing her eyes.

I was always truthful with my daughter. I'd taught her the importance of telling the truth. However, in this moment, I wished more than anything that I could lie. I set the bag down on the small counter space and turned to her.

“Last night, one of the servers stole my purse and put it in the toilet. The management had it cleaned for me before returning it to me.”

Gypsi's eyes went wide. “What the hell?! Why would someone do that? Did they fire her?”

I nodded. “They did fire her, yes. She had disliked me from day one.”

Gypsi looked livid as she jerked her glass of milk up from the table. “Jealous bitch,” she said angrily. “Are the other servers treating you badly? You can quit and work somewhere else, Mom. We don't need that money.”

I shook my head. We did need that money. “Everyone else is very nice. I’ve made friends. I promise it’s okay. Besides, in a month, with these tips, we can head up the East Coast and have a new adventure.”

A small smile touched her lips as she nodded, then walked over to me, set her glass down, and wrapped her arms around me in a hug. “I’ll go find her and beat her up if I need to,” she said.

I held my daughter tightly and kissed her head. Gypsi’s fierceness was cute. But we both knew she was never going to win in a fight.

“That’s okay. No need. All is well.”

She nodded and stepped back from me. “If you’re sure,” she replied. “But I am not afraid to take her on.”

I laughed and reached out to cup her angelic face. “I am positive. Now, go get ready for work.”

She walked past me to the bathroom that was right past the kitchen sink. I waited until the door closed before opening the shopping bag to check on my purse and belongings.

Looking down inside the bag, I froze as I stared at a hobo-style bag, which had been the style of my purse. However, this wasn’t the purse I’d bought at Target four years ago on clearance. The hobo style was where the similarities ended. The LV monogram that covered the leather purse made my hands tremble as I stared down at it. I knew two things about Louis Vuitton purses. One, they were ridiculously expensive, and two, I would never own one.

Slowly, I reached into the bag and lifted the purse out. It even smelled like money. Was this a mistake? Had I gotten the wrong bag? Surely, Garrett hadn't bought me this purse. He barely knew me. I wasn't even nice to him.

I set the purse down on the counter and unzipped it. Inside was a matching wallet and my keys, my silver compact that Gypsi had bought at a consignment store three years ago for my Mother's Day gift, and my lip gloss—or a new tube of the same lip gloss that had been in my purse—along with a small bottle of hand lotion. Again, the same brand as mine, but it was clearly new.

Then, I noticed the shiny phone and knew that wasn't mine. I reached inside and picked it up and held it as the screen came alive. The picture of Gypsi and me on a boat that Micah had taken us out on was the screen saver, just like my phone, but this was a brand-new iPhone, and I would guess it was the newest model. I shook my head and stared at it. What was this? Sure, my phone had been ruined in the toilet water. I understood that, but my phone was an older model iPhone that Micah had given me when he upgraded.

The water in the shower shut off, and I grabbed the purse and shoved it back into the shopping bag. I didn't want Gypsi to see this. It wasn't like I was going to keep it. I had to take this back and get my purse and wallet back.

Garrett had had no right to take my things and replace them. Even if they had been soaked in someone else's urine and... poop. I cringed, thinking about my things. Maybe they'd been impossible to clean. If the club wanted to replace my purse,

then I would accept that, but it had to be the club, and it had to be a purse of equal value. Not something that cost more than my car was worth. As for this phone, it was going back too.



TEN

FAWN

The car was so clean inside that it almost smelled new.

Gypsi stared at me in shock after we opened the doors to get inside. “Holy crap, Mom! What did you have done? It’s as shiny inside as it is outside.”

I stood there, staring at the immaculate interior of my car, unable to form words. What in the world? This car hadn’t been this clean when I bought it. I sank down onto my seat that no longer had the coffee stain from when I slammed on the brakes and spilled my entire cup in my lap.

“Uh, the club had a detailer there and offered the employees a good price,” I lied, wishing I hadn’t been put in this position to lie to her.

She climbed in, and I stuck the key in the ignition.

“Why are all the lights gone? The engine, oil, and that strange one we didn’t know what it was—they were on

yesterday,” Gypsi pointed out.

I watched, waiting for the lights to pop on. When nothing happened, I gripped the steering wheel tightly. What the hell?! Where were my lights? How had he gotten the car fixed and cleaned overnight?

“I’m not sure,” I admitted. I wasn’t willing to tell her another lie.

“Mom,” she said in her serious tone, “what is going on? That shopping bag in the house doesn’t have your purse in it. If it did, you’d have brought it with you. The car is ridiculously clean and is magically fixed. You’re not telling me something.”

I wasn’t telling her a lot of things. All of them revolving around Garrett Hughes.

I sighed and made myself loosen the grip I had on the steering wheel. “There is a wealthy member of the club. I think he did this. I’m going to talk to him tonight. I don’t want his charity. I’m not for sale.”

Gypsi let out a drawn-out, “Ohhh,” as if that made complete sense.

I glanced over at her. “What?”

She shrugged. “You and men. You draw them in without trying. Some rich dude got one look at you, and now, he’s tossing money at you. At least this one has money,” she said.

“I don’t want his money,” I stated firmly.

She smirked. “Is he ugly?”

He was so far from ugly that I doubted he even knew that word. I shook my head and backed the car up to face it the right way.

“So, he’s hot?” she asked.

Beyond hot.

“He’s not my type.”

“Ah, so he isn’t into illegal things, doesn’t drive a motorcycle, and has the potential to be stable,” she teased.

I knew she wasn’t judging me. She was making light of my choices in men, and she was right. If there was a bad boy, I would find him. It was a curse.

I smiled over at her. “Pretty much.” Then, I added, “All right, Gypsi Lu, don’t be a smart-ass.”

Her musical laughter filled the car.

After I dropped Gypsi off at work, I called Silas to see if I could come in later to work so that I could drive Gypsi home from her shift. We were now short two servers, and he needed me in earlier than normal, but assured me he’d have a driver pick her up and take her home.

I mentioned the purse to him and was met with silence. I then brought up the phone, and again, silence. He finally cleared his throat and explained that the club wanted to replace my things and make up for the trauma that it had caused me. The man was lying. I could tell by the way he spoke. He kept pausing as he made it all up. When he was done, I thanked him and ended the call.

It was Garrett Hughes I needed to speak to. Not Silas. Just as I'd thought.

I stopped and looked at the purse several times during the day. At one point, I almost got dressed and went on a job hunt. Something about the way Garrett Hughes felt like he could just decide that my purse wasn't usable and replace it with one so extravagant bothered me. It was just another form of control. I didn't like it.

There were two more hours before I was supposed to be at the club, but I was unable to look at this purse any longer. Wanting to touch it, put it on my arm and admire myself in the mirror, and even smell it showed a weakness in me that didn't feel good. This kind of thing was never important to me. I didn't have to own anything designer. Sure, I often appreciated the beauty of a purse on another woman's arm. I'd let myself imagine owning one. I wasn't against nice things. I just knew that was a different world from mine, and I was happy in my world. I had my Gypsi Lu, and our life was full.

Taking the bag with the gorgeous purse and ridiculous phone back to the club, I refused to glance over at it sitting in the passenger seat. My exceptionally clean car was already mocking me. It smelled nice and looked good, and I wasn't concerned it would break down on the side of the road at any moment. All because of a man. A man who wanted something from me. I couldn't be bought. I didn't need his charity or bribes or whatever he thought he was doing with all this.

When I walked into the club, I carried the shopping bag and headed for Silas's office. I didn't feel safe taking this to the

dressing room. Even if Eliana and Blake were gone, the locked cabinet in there was not enough security. I knocked once on the door and waited for him to answer.

“Come in,” he called out, and I entered the room.

Silas was sitting behind his desk, and he looked at me, then the shopping bag in my hand. Since he had taken responsibility for the bag and phone, I decided to continue this farce.

“Hey, Silas. I’m returning the purse and phone. If the club wants to give me two hundred dollars instead, I can replace my purse and phone. Neither of them was expensive.”

I almost felt sorry for Silas. It was clear he didn’t know how to handle this. I had no doubt he was scared to upset Garrett. Well, I wasn’t. I probably should be, but I refused to let that man intimidate me.

“Also, if you would, take the cost of the car detail and the work done on it from my next few checks. I can’t afford to pay for all of that at once, but I do intend to pay for it. Just break it up into whatever amount you feel is fair over the next month or however long it takes to cover all the costs.”

The surprise that flashed in his eyes was the only thing that gave him away. He cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie before standing up. “If you insist. However, the club feels responsible for your troubles that Eliana caused. We wanted to make it up to you in good faith that you would remain working here. We do not want to lose such a hard working employee.”

He was good. I wondered how often he had to lie off the

cuff like that. Probably a lot when dealing with men like Garrett.

I smiled at him. “That’s very kind of you. I will gladly accept the two hundred dollars to replace my purse and phone, but nothing else. Please take the money from my future checks.”

He swallowed nervously, then nodded. “If that is what you want,” he replied. “But please reconsider. The club has insurance and funds for this kind of thing.”

Sure they did. The funds that came from Garrett’s wallet. I forced a smile and nodded, then set the bag on Silas’s desk before walking out.

I would admit, as I walked away, I missed the way the purse had felt and had a moment of sadness that I’d never see it hanging on my shoulder again. But other than that, I felt good about how I’d handled it.



It was almost ten when Garrett Hughes walked into the Winchester Parlor, alone. I was carrying a tray of drinks to another small group of men. One of the men called out a greeting to Garrett as I set their drinks in front of them. I didn’t look back at him as I waited for the men to continue their conversation before asking if they needed anything else at the moment.

Garrett turned down their offer to join them and made his way to his lair. I glanced back at Leo to see him wiggle his eyebrows at me. Both he and Felix had teased me when I came

into work about Garrett Hughes's reaction to Eliana last night. They had replayed his reaction and how he'd talked to her, as if it was the best movie they'd ever seen.

I shot Leo an eye roll before heading to Garrett's area. I had no doubt he knew about my meeting with Silas. I just wasn't sure if he'd mention it to me or not.

Garrett was leaning back on the couch with his right ankle propped on his knee as he watched me walk into his semi-private space.

I gave him a polite smile. "Hello, Mr. Hughes. What can I get for you tonight?"

He smirked and slowly ran his thumb over his bottom lip. "That is a loaded question," he replied.

I shifted my feet, suddenly feeling restless.

"Let's start with your returning the purse and phone," he began.

Ah. So, he was going to admit it.

"Yes. What about it?" I asked as professionally as I could.

A low chuckle came from his chest. "Are you always so fucking difficult?"

I tensed, and my attempt at politeness evaporated. Glaring at him, I tried to remind myself to remain calm. "Are you always so presumptuous?"

Those gray eyes seemed to dance with amusement. "It's presumptuous to replace a woman's purse and phone, which were ruined, with new ones? Most women would be thanking

me.”

“I’m not most women,” I bit out.

He dropped his propped-up leg to the ground. “No, you’re not,” he replied, then stood up.

Why was he standing up? I watched him, unsure of what to do as he stepped around the table and closer to me.

“In fact, I’ve never met a woman even remotely like you,” he said.

I took a step back, unable to stop myself. “Is that right?” I asked, fighting off the fleeing reaction that was suddenly hammering in my chest.

“Prideful, difficult, hardheaded.” He began to list off all these things as faults, and as I heard him say them, they did sound rather bad. “So fucking beautiful that it’s almost painful.”

He reached out and ran the back of his finger over my cheek and along my jawline. I couldn’t breathe. When his hand slid down and gently wrapped around my throat, I knew I should be frightened. I should turn and run. Instead, a zing of pleasure lit up my entire body.

“I don’t like being told no. I’ve never been told no.” His voice was low and threatening as he lowered his head toward me.

His hand flexed on my neck, and I let out a small cry, although it wasn’t painful. His thumb caressed the skin beneath it, and his mouth hovered over mine.

“I’m not a patient man, Fawn.” His breath smelled like cinnamon as it warmed my skin. “I could force you. Bend you over and spread your legs, then bury my face between them. Lick, suck, and eat your pussy until you were screaming my name and your sweet cream coated my tongue,” he told me. “Bite down on those pierced nipples you flaunted without a bra in that sundress.”

My body trembled, and I wanted to reach out and grab him to keep from falling if my knees suddenly buckled. I’d been debating on taking my nipple piercings out. I was thirty-six, and it seemed like I had outgrown them. Maybe I needed to reconsider.

“But I won’t. Because when I take you, when I touch you, it will be because you asked me for it.” His hand fell away from my neck, and he stepped back.

I stumbled slightly, feeling lightheaded, and he reached out and grabbed my arm to steady me.

“Easy, pretty baby,” he whispered in a husky voice.

I stared up at him. I couldn’t decide what I felt. He caused so many emotions inside of me. Arousal even if I wished he didn’t. Anger at how he spoke to me, but then excitement by it as well. My chest rose and fell as my breathing quickened.

“I can’t be bought,” I blurted out, more as a reminder to myself.

A slow, sexy smile that held a touch of evil in the way it curled over his lips only made my panties wetter than they already had been.

“If I thought you could be, I’d already have paid whatever price you asked.”

I had to get out of here. Distance. Space. Air that wasn’t saturated with his alluring scent.

“I’ll get your drink,” I said to him needing a reason to escape.

“No need. I didn’t come for a drink. I came to see you,” he replied. “Good night, Fawn.”

Then, he walked away, leaving me there with an empty tray, racing heart, and a sudden feeling of loss.



ELEVEN

GARRETT

I walked down into the underground cellars on my ranch and followed the sound of my oldest son's voice. He was taking over more and more of this side of the business. I found myself stepping back and trusting him with something new weekly. I wasn't sure when I would hand the reins over to him, but I knew the day was sooner rather than later. When the time came, I would know. I wasn't there yet.

When I stepped into the concrete room, I saw the man hanging by his wrists from the chains attached to the ceiling had already experienced Gage Presley's blade. The man loved his knife and inflicting it as a form of torture.

He'd not been born into the family, but he had become my son's best friend in school. Blaise trusted him as much as he trusted the boys who had grown up in this life with him. Add the fact that Gage was a crazy son of a bitch and lethal as hell, and he made a great weapon. I liked to think that fifty years

from now, Gage would have a son to stand behind my grandson, Cree, as he took the role as boss. Especially since the psycho had found the only woman on earth who seemed to ease his tortured soul.

Blaise looked at me. “He’s not said much. Which Gage has only enjoyed,” he told me.

I grinned at Gage, who had blood on his knife and hand with that crazed look in his eyes he got from this kind of thing. The kid had some dark shit in his past, and that made him unstable, but loyal. He’d die for Blaise. That was the kind of loyalty my son needed when he took over as the boss.

Walking over to the bleeding man who looked full of rage, I wondered if we would get anything out of him. I knew he hadn’t stolen from me, but he was protecting the man who had. I scanned his chest and the place where his right ear had been. It lay on the ground now, just beside where his toes brushed the cold, blood-soaked cement.

“He enjoys this,” I told the man, then nodded toward Gage. “The more you refuse, the more joy he will get until you’re nothing but sliced-up pieces.”

The guy spit at me and began cursing at me in Spanish. Gage was beside me then, seething with his knife ready. I reached over and plucked it from his hand. Then turned back to the fool who’d dared to disrespect me. With a smile, I grabbed his hand and took off his pinkie while he screamed in pain.

“You won’t walk out of here alive,” I told him calmly, taking off his pointer finger next.

He thrashed and wailed.

“We might not get the name from you, but I will find out who it was. He’ll die a death just as gruesome as yours. Gage will enjoy every moment he gets to feel his blade sink into warm flesh. And what will be the point of your death then? Hmm?”

I laughed as he moaned in pain and blood poured from the places his fingers used to be. His eyes didn’t show any sign of giving in.

I handed the knife back to Gage as I turned to leave. “Make it brutal, boys. Then dispose of the pieces,” I told them as I headed for the door.

The man shouted out in Spanish, calling me a monster and a cocksucker and telling me to rot in hell.

I looked back at him and replied in his first language, which I spoke just as clearly as he did, “You first.”

The wails of pain eventually faded until they were completely silent as I reached aboveground.

Heading to the main house, I let my thoughts go to the golden-eyed beauty I intended to have begging for my cock before the week was out.



TWELVE

FAWN

When I stepped into Garrett's lair the next night, he was taking a cigar out of the case. Leo had already said that in all the four years he'd been working here, Garrett had never frequented the club this often. He usually came in on Thursdays, and sometimes, he showed up one other day within a week, but it was rare.

Garrett smiled at me with that wicked grin that was unfair to the female population, and then he held up a key. "You will need this," he said, walking toward me.

I looked at the key and him, then opened my palm for him to drop it in. "What is it?" I asked.

"The new key to your camper. The lock you had was pointless. Anyone could have gotten inside. It's been replaced with the best locks that can be put on that thing. Gypsi was given her new key when she was picked up this afternoon from work."

He had changed my lock! Now it was locks! More than one? When?!

“You can’t just go change the lock to someone’s home!” I told him angrily.

Garrett’s smile seemed to deepen. “Yes, I can, and I did.”

God, this man! He made me furious.

“It’s illegal,” I said through clenched teeth. “I could call the cops.”

He chuckled then, as if I were some amusing child. “Please, do that. Tell Harold I said hello. The chief of police has his job because I put him there.”

My hand tightened around the key that I wanted to throw at him, but knew I wouldn’t be able to get into my camper if I did. “You had no right to go to my camper, break in, and change the lock. What is wrong with you? Why would you do that?”

Garrett closed the distance between us, his face no longer smiling, but intense. “Do you want someone to break in on you and your daughter while you are asleep? Because I fucking don’t,” he said with a fierceness in his tone.

I swallowed and stared up at him. “We’ve lived in that camper for seventeen years. No one has ever broken in on us.”

He ran his knuckles against my cheek. “That was luck. I don’t trust luck to keep you safe.”

My heart started hammering in my chest so hard that I was sure he could hear it. How had I gone from being furious to

being excited by his touch within moments? Where was my backbone? Melted on the floor by my feet—that was where.

When his hand left my face, I instantly missed his touch. Garrett turned and walked over to the couch and sat down before lighting his cigar. I watched him as I stood, unmoving from my current spot. His gray eyes met mine, and I was suddenly fantasizing about throwing myself into his lap.

“You’re off work tomorrow,” he said. “I want to take you somewhere.”

I stared at him. Was he asking me out? He hadn’t said it was a date. Just that he wanted to take me somewhere. I should say, *No thank you*, and go get his drink.

Instead, I opened my mouth and asked, “Where?”

My response pleased him. It was clear in the way his eyes shone and the grin that spread across his face.

“I’m buying an island. I’d like a woman’s opinion on the house that’s already there. I’m unsure if I should keep it or have it torn down and build something else.”

A laugh bubbled out of me. For so few words, he’d said several funny things. For starters, he was buying an island.

“What’s so funny?” he asked, still smiling.

I shrugged. “Oh, I don’t know. Maybe that you are buying an island. I didn’t know people could do that. Then, there is the fact that you want my opinion on a house when I live in a camper. Don’t you know plenty of women in your world who would be better at giving you an opinion?”

He took the cigar from between his teeth as he leaned back and continued to look at me. “I own two other islands already. Yes, I know women, but none who I want to spend the day with, nor do I care about their opinion.”

I placed a hand on my hip as I stared at him. “But you care about my opinion? You realize any house is going to look good to me? I seriously doubt I will be telling you to tear it down and rebuild.”

Garrett raised his eyebrows slightly. “What if it’s a falling-down shack?”

Then, I was grinning. I was enjoying this conversation. I was enjoying his company.

“Is it?” I asked.

Surely, he already knew if he was buying the island.

“No,” he replied with a smirk.

I laughed again.

“I like hearing you laugh,” he said, his expression turning more serious. “Come with me tomorrow.”

I wanted to go. I shouldn’t go, but I wanted to. “How far is it? Is there a bridge? Can we drive?”

“We could drive and take a boat from the mainland, since it’s only two and a half hours away, but we will take my helicopter.”

His helicopter. He owned a helicopter. I’d never been in a helicopter. I’d never flown at all. The crave for adventure was clawing at me. A ride in a helicopter, a private island that he

was going to buy—it sounded exciting. Unreal and like something I would never get an opportunity to do again.

“Okay,” I replied. “I’ll go.”

The gleam in his eyes should be a warning, but instead, it only added to the thrill.

“I’ll pick you up at seven in the morning. We’ll have breakfast.”

I nodded, then remembered I hadn’t gotten him a drink yet. “I’ll go get your drink,” I told him before turning to leave.

“Fawn.” He said my name in a way that sent tingles through my body.

“Yes?” I asked, glancing back at him.

“Thank you.”

I blinked. What was he thanking me for? Getting his drink? He’d never thanked me for that before. I wasn’t sure how to respond.

Finally, I just asked, “For what?”

“For going with me tomorrow.”

Oh. That seemed odd. I should be thanking him for taking me. After all, it was my adventure.

“You’re welcome,” I finally managed before leaving to go catch my breath and get his drink.

Felix was the only one at the bar when I approached it. He was studying me as he took down a glass. When I got to him, he was already pouring Garrett’s scotch of choice into it.

“You were in there awhile,” he said with a crooked grin on his face.

I had been. I glanced around, realizing I’d left Arya alone to handle the other members in here tonight.

“It’s okay. Josephine is here, helping Arya,” he said to me.

I frowned. “It got busy enough to call for backup?”

He shook his head as he slid the scotch to me. “No. Mr. Hughes wanted you to only serve him. He sent for someone else to help Arya.”

I took his glass and placed it on the tray. Why would he do that? It was as if he was making me a target for the other servers to hate me. Besides, it wasn’t fair. He didn’t require enough for me not to wait on others too. Not to mention, I needed all the tips I could get.

Spinning around, I stalked back to his corner, ready to point this out. My moment of thinking Garrett wasn’t so bad had vanished. He’d gone and controlled me again.

When I stepped back under the arch leading into his space, his gaze lifted from the phone in his hand to meet mine.

“Why did you send for backup? I could have served you and others. It’s not that busy tonight,” I blurted out.

He lifted one of his broad shoulders in a casual shrug. “I don’t like to share.”

I stared at him incredulously. “Share your server?”

Those gray eyes felt as if they pierced through me. “Share you.”

I took his drink and set it down beside him while I let myself decide how to respond to that. Part of me wanted to bask in the attention while the rational part knew that would be a mistake.

“What do you want from me exactly?” I asked.

“I thought I’d made that clear last night,” he said.

I inhaled sharply as I straightened. He’d said he wanted to bend me over and put his mouth between my legs. Was that what he meant?

“This is ... about sex then?” I stammered over my words.

“Yes. Sex and the simple fact that I like your company. I like that you’re different from what I am used to.”

I sighed. “Sex is a bad idea, but I am good with the other.”

He tilted his head as he studied me. “Why is sex a bad idea?”

Because I was afraid he would ruin me and I’d never be the same.

“It complicates things. Right now, I work here, I need this job, and once you are done with me, you won’t like having me around.”

He appeared as if he wanted to laugh. “You think so?”

I nodded.

“My gut tells me you’re wrong, and my gut is never wrong,” he replied, then placed the cigar back into his mouth.

“Well, my gut tells me you’re dangerous and that I should

run like hell,” I replied.

He chuckled and took the cigar out of his mouth. “Perhaps your gut is right too.”

What did he mean by that? I waited for him to say more, but he just watched me while he took a drink from his glass. Even taking a drink, the man was sexy.

“Garrett,” a male voice said behind me, and I turned to see Mr. Aiken coming into the room.

“Judas,” he replied. “Order a drink and have a seat.”

Mr. Aiken looked to me and smiled brightly. “I’ll have what he’s having as long as he’s paying for it.”

Garrett smiled and nodded his head once. I left, glad to have a reason to get some space.

While everything in my head was telling me that spending time with him was a very bad idea, the rest of me was begging me to enjoy it while I could. I always told Gypsi to make memories of the good times so you could daydream during the bad. I was going to take my advice.



THIRTEEN

GARRETT

The camper door swung open before I completely stepped out of the limo. My fucking breath caught in my chest at the sight of Fawn. Her blonde hair hung straight down her back, long and smooth. I wanted to wrap it around my fist while I slid my cock between her full pink lips. The pink top she wore tied behind her neck and didn't quite touch the waist of her white linen skirt that hit mid-thigh, showing off her long, tanned legs. My gaze then fell to the toeless pink heels she was wearing. She wasn't wearing a damn bra again, and those piercings were visible through the fabric.

Jesus Christ, I wanted to fuck her.

I watched as she walked toward me with a white purse over her shoulder. It looked new. She'd gone and bought one to replace the one that had been ruined. If she'd let me, I'd give her a designer purse in every color. She could take my Amex and go buy whatever she wanted.

“I hope there is coffee with this breakfast we are having. I ran out and need to go to the grocery store,” she informed me. Then, she looked at the limo and beamed a bright smile at me. “A limo, huh?”

This woman and her smiles. They did things to me. I found myself doing whatever I could to pull one out of her. If a limo did it, then I’d buy her a fucking limo.

“I thought it would be more comfortable,” I explained. I left out that I wanted the privacy it provided.

I’d told Six, who was driving us today, to stay in the limo. I wanted to greet her alone.

“You look beautiful,” I told her, enjoying the way her eyes always lit up.

“Thank you,” she replied almost shyly.

I stepped back and motioned for her to slide into the limo. The view of her perfect, round ass teased me before I climbed in behind her. She was looking around at the inside of the limo like someone who had never been in one before.

“Is this your first time riding in a limo?” I asked.

She turned those golden-honey eyes to mine and smiled. “No, but the two others I was in were not like this.”

The Cadillac One wasn’t like any other limo. I didn’t say that or point out what it was. She might question why I had the exact same limo as the president of the United States. Explaining the security to her and why I owned it would just make her ask more questions that I couldn’t give her the answers to.

“Are you thirsty?” I asked her.

“Does this thing make coffee?” she asked, looking hopeful.

“Does Nespresso count?”

Her smile lit up the entire space. “Yes!”

Damn she got to me too easy. I moved over to make her a cup.

“This is unreal,” she said with awe in her voice. “Also, do I call you Mr. Hughes when we aren’t at the club?”

I glanced back at her. “Garrett,” I replied.

She looked relieved. “Good. Calling you Mr. Hughes would seem strange.”

I didn’t tell her that I often didn’t allow women I entertained to call me by my first name. It was a kink thing with me. I liked the control. With her, the only name, other than Garrett, I wanted to hear out of that pretty mouth was Daddy. But I doubted she’d like that very much.

“Sugar, cream?” I asked.

“One of each, please,” she replied.

I took a sugar cube and then added a splash of cream before handing her the cup.

“Thank you. You’re my hero,” she said enthusiastically as she took the cup and began to drink.

I watched her, enjoying the way she was so open and relaxed. There was no flirting or false silliness. She was simply secure in being herself. Had I ever been around a

woman like that? I knew I hadn't. It was part of what intrigued me about Fawn.

"God, that is good," she moaned, then sat back on the seat, crossing her legs.

My eyes went to the thigh that was revealed as her skirt moved up. I wanted to reach out and run my hand down it before grabbing it and forcing her legs open. Shifting, I mentally cursed myself. My damn cock was hard now.

"Where are we going for breakfast?" she asked me. "And does it have pancakes?"

I smiled at the hopeful look in her eyes.

"We are eating at one of my hotels. They will make whatever you want."

She gave me a pointed look, then shook her head with a small laugh. "Of course you own not one, but multiple hotels. Oh, what your life must be like, Garrett Hughes."

She had no idea exactly what my life entailed. If she did, she wouldn't be in this limo with me. While most women found the rumors about me exciting, I had a feeling Fawn would shut me out and take her camper and run.

"It's a life where if you want coffee or pancakes, I can make that happen," I replied.

"I appreciate all the effort. Now, tell me about this island we are going to. What's it like? Why are you buying it? How big is it?" Her eyes were bright with interest as she turned toward me.

“My broker contacted me about it before they officially put it on the market. It’s surrounded by crystal-clear water, and the beaches along the edges have perfect white sand. It’s eleven acres, give or take. It has one big house and a few bungalows scattered about. And I’m buying it as an investment.”

She tilted her head, causing some of her hair to spill over her bare shoulder. It was going to take every ounce of self-control I had not to touch her.

“Are you going to rent it out? Is that what you mean by investment?”

I liked that she was so interested. Even if I couldn’t tell her complete truths. She wanted to know about me. She wasn’t busy talking about herself, but was genuinely curious about me.

“I’ve not decided. It is an option. I rent out the villas on my other islands. I was considering keeping this one as my own personal escape.”

She narrowed her eyes. “You don’t expect me to believe you don’t own some other personal escape already.”

If I didn’t know her financial situation, I would swear those lips of hers were filler. I wanted to bite that bottom lip so fucking bad.

“I do,” I admitted. I left out exactly how many and their locations.

She nodded and smirked. “I figured. What’s your favorite place to visit in the world?”

Right now, I couldn’t think of anywhere else I’d rather be

than in this limo with her. “Santorini, Greece,” I replied instead.

Her eyes widened. “Oh, is that one of the Greek islands?”

I nodded. The wistful look on her face made me want to have Six drive us to the airport so I could fly her there in my plane instead of where we were headed.

“I bet it’s beautiful,” she replied. “Greece is on my bucket list, but France is first. I’ve wanted to see the Eiffel Tower in person since I was a little girl.”

I would tuck that piece of information away for future use. “It’s a tourist trap,” I replied.

She rolled her eyes at me. “Says the man who has traveled the world.”

“Where have you traveled?” I asked, wanting to know more about her than what the background checks had provided. I knew the basics, but I didn’t know the details.

She sighed. “Let’s see. I lived in two foster homes in North Carolina, and then after I won the camper, Gypsi and I traveled around most of the Southern states.”

“You won the camper?” I asked.

She grinned and nodded her head. “Yep. I hustled a group of men in a game of Texas Hold’em.”

“You hustled? What exactly do you mean by that?” I asked. My smile was so damn big that it hurt my cheeks.

“I mean, I hustled them. I acted like a silly, clueless nineteen-year-old girl who wanted to learn to play. I let them

teach me and then begged to play. Lost a few hands and laughed with them. Then, when I had nothing but a few chips left, I played like I knew how.”

Unable to help myself, I ran the back of my middle finger down her neck, then felt her silky hair between my fingers. “You’re full of surprises.”

She bit down on her bottom lip, and my gaze locked in on it just as the limo came to a stop. I let her hair fall through my fingers and tore my eyes off that damn lip.

“I promised you pancakes,” I said, reaching for the door when Six opened it up.

If I didn’t get out of this limo with her, I was going to fuck her.



FOURTEEN

FAWN

Frozen blueberry pancakes and homemade pancakes with fresh blueberries were two different experiences. Then, don't get me started on the difference between whipped topping in a can and freshly made. It was a good thing I couldn't afford to eat like this. I'd need a home gym if I could. This was the best food I'd ever put in my mouth.

"If you want more ..." Garrett drawled.

I felt my cheeks flush as I met his eyes. Then, I burst out laughing. I picked up my fancy cloth napkin and patted around my mouth for any whipped cream.

"I'm full," I told him. Then, I laughed again.

He was grinning at me as he sat there, looking all expensive and powerful with his cup of coffee in his hand. I looked at his plate. He'd ordered four scrambled eggs, two slices of wheat toast, turkey sausage, and a cup of coffee. It was very healthy.

Most of it was gone, but he'd not finished it all. Me, on the other hand? I'd all but licked my plate.

"I'm glad you enjoyed the pancakes," he said.

"I did. More than any pancakes I have ever had, and trust me, Nina and Goldie can cook." I paused for a moment, then decided there was no reason for me not to talk about my living at The Judgment clubhouse. "They are the two who cook for The Judgment MC," I explained. "They're married to members."

He nodded his head once. "I know who they are. My daughter-in-law's father is Liam Walsh."

I felt my jaw go slack. Was he serious?

"I didn't know."

He shrugged. "Why would you?"

Because I'd lived there for a short time. I didn't say that though.

Wanting to get off the subject, I smiled again. "Well, this beats their pancakes. And neither of them makes real whipped cream. They buy the canned stuff."

He seemed amused, and I was relieved. He hadn't seemed fond of Micah when he came to the camper. I wanted to ask why, but I didn't. We had a full day ahead of us, and I wanted to enjoy it.

"If you're ready, we can head out to the helicopter."

"It's here?" I asked, laying my napkin on my plate and standing up.

He nodded. “There is a helipad on the roof. It’s why I chose this hotel for breakfast.”

Well, of course. I should have known that. I didn’t say my sarcastic thought aloud though.

Garrett led the way toward the elevator, and we went up two more floors before arriving on the rooftop of the hotel. He motioned for me to go out first, then followed me. When his hand came to rest on my lower back, I managed not to react. He’d never done that before. I knew that the fact that I liked it wasn’t a good thing, but I couldn’t help it.

I liked it.

A man walked over to us. He was younger than Garrett. I would guess he was in his early thirties. He was attractive—clean cut with dark hair and friendly brown eyes. His gaze barely grazed me before they went right back to Garrett.

“Fawn, this is Wilder Jones. He’s going to be our pilot today,” Garrett informed me.

Wilder nodded his head at me. “It’s a pleasure, Ms. Parker.”

He already knew my name. Garrett was very thorough.

“It’s nice to meet you, Mr. Jones.”

His smile deepened. “It’s just Wilder.”

“Then, it’s just Fawn,” I replied.

His gaze swung to Garrett, as if he was asking permission.

“If that is what she wishes,” Garrett told him.

Wilder nodded, then turned to head back toward the

helicopter.

Garrett's hand was still on my back as he leaned down closer to me. "Wilder's family are close friends of mine. I just recently moved him here to handle some personal details at the hotel for me, including piloting the helicopter."

"I see," I replied.

We followed Wilder to the helicopter. I glanced back up at Garrett and grinned, excited to get inside of it.

"I've never been on a plane," I admitted. "Much less a helicopter."

His eyes dropped to my mouth. "We will need to rectify that."

I wanted to ask him what he meant by that, but didn't. For now, I was going to live in the moment.



A private island was exactly that. It was a piece of heaven, surrounded by water. I was sure I hadn't stopped smiling since we had gotten out of the helicopter. The cute bungalows along the sandy white beach were all at least four times bigger than my camper. I'd be happy living in one of those.

The main house that Garrett wasn't sure if he should tear down or not was a mansion. When the driver—who had met us at the helipad on the island—stopped in front of the main house, my jaw dropped open. Garrett opened the door and stepped out of the Hummer, then turned and held out his hand for me. Not wanting to fall out of this too-high-off-the-ground

vehicle, I placed my hand in his and climbed down.

It felt as if I couldn't take it all in fast enough. The palm trees, the flowers, the house itself. I'd never been in a house this big. Getting to just walk through it was making me giddy.

"What do you think so far?" Garrett asked, his hand once again on my lower back.

I looked at him. "I think that if you tear this down, you're insane."

His mouth twitched. "Is that so?"

I nodded my head emphatically. "Yes. Please tell me you are not seriously considering that."

He glanced back at it. "We've not seen the inside."

"No, we haven't, but I am willing to wager that it's just as fabulous."

Garrett's expression seemed pleased. "You're not someone I'm willing to gamble with. A nineteen-year-old that wins a camper is lethal."

I sighed dramatically. "I shouldn't have given away my secrets."

He leaned closer to me then. His warm breath tickling my ear. "There's plenty more I intend to unravel."

Goose bumps covered my arms, and it was ninety-six degrees outside.

"Do you want a tour, Mr. Hughes, or would you rather walk through the house alone?" the man Garrett had introduced as his broker asked.

“Alone,” he replied.

Then, his hand gently pressed against my back as he began to walk toward the arched entrance. I fell into step beside him.

“What style of house is this?” I asked.

“It’s a spin on Mediterranean architecture,” he replied. “I’ve seen photos, but it’s not the same as viewing it in person.”

“Did someone live here?” I asked, curious about what this must be like. Living in a home such as this one.

“No, it was a vacation home. Living permanently on an island like this is not convenient.”

I wanted to argue that I would be perfectly happy with the seclusion.

We reached the double doors at the entrance to the house, and Garrett opened the left one, then stood back for me to enter. The complete splendor of the foyer had me turning in a circle slowly, not wanting to miss one small detail.

“This is ...” I breathed, not sure I had words for it. “Unbelievable.” That was the only way to describe it.

“It has the tropical vibe,” Garrett replied.

My eyes swung back to his. He wasn’t looking at the house, but instead, he was watching me.

“Tropical vibe? That’s all you have to say?”

His mouth quirked at the corners. “What would you have me say, Fawn?”

I threw my hands up and let out a small laugh. “I don’t know. *Fabulous, glorious, incredible*. I think all those would work.”

Garrett chuckled as he closed the space between us until he towered over me. I stared up at him, feeling anxious, off-centered, dazed. He confused me and sent thrills through me, all at the same time.

His hand brushed my hair back over my shoulder, and then he slid it over my neck, much like he’d done in the Winchester Parlor. It was in a position to choke me, yet he never tightened it enough to actually cause any real fear. Those gray eyes almost blue right now seemed to penetrate right through all the warnings in my head about him and grab hold of me.

I swallowed hard, and his thumb brushed against where my throat had given me away.

“Let’s go see the rest of the house,” he said, finally dropping his hand from me and stepping back.

I watched him as he walked toward the wide, curved staircase and then followed him, hoping my knees weren’t weak from whatever it was he’d just done to me. No man had ever made me react like that. Not once. Not even when having sex. Yet he had the power to make my body weak from a simple brush of his thumb against my neck and those piercing eyes. I might be in trouble, and I wasn’t sure I cared.

It took walking through two rooms before I trusted my own voice. The master bedroom was so spectacular that I had to say something. I walked past Garrett and over to the large windows overlooking one of the beautiful beachfronts.

“Oh my God, to wake up to that view,” I marveled.

I couldn't even imagine what that would feel like. Sure, once, we had parked the camper at a riverside campground, and that was a nice view, but this was something on another level.

I opened my mouth to gush about the flower gardens when Garrett's body came up behind me. My gaze lifted from the ground below to the window and our reflection. Garrett placed a hand on my hip, and with his other, he took my hair and moved it away from that side of my neck. I watched helplessly as he lowered his head and brushed his lips over my ear, then the tender skin below it before moving to my bare shoulder. Needing some form of support, I placed my hands on the window as my breathing quickened.

“Your skin is like silk,” he said as he trailed his soft kisses up to my jawline. “And you smell sweet and delicate, like jasmine with a hint of vanilla.”

A warm rush filtered through my body as I clung to the flat windowpane. The hand he had on my hip slid around until his palm covered my bare stomach. I was struggling to breathe. My legs felt weak.

“You didn't wear a bra,” he said against my neck. “I've watched your full tits bounce all damn morning. Those pierced nipples taunting me.” He pressed against me from behind, and the hard ridge of his erection settled right above my butt. “You've got me so fucking hard that I can't concentrate.”

His teeth bit down on my earlobe, and I gasped. Then, the wet warmth of his tongue flicked it, making me tremble.

“Tell me to touch you, pretty baby,” he coaxed.

If I did, then what happened next? Was it done? He would be over this attraction to me, and I'd most likely be ruined for all other men. But if I didn't and I missed this—whatever it was he was doing to me—wouldn't I always regret it? Not having the experience. Sex had always been enjoyable, but this was something I hadn't known existed. My body was reacting to him in ways that made me think he alone knew how to please me. Didn't everyone deserve to know what that felt like? Even if the repercussions were painful.

“If I tell you”—my voice was just above a whisper—“what happens then?”

Garrett's hands grabbed my waist, and he spun me around to face him. The ferocity in his eyes startled me. “I'll fuck you until all you see and want is me.”

Well, at the moment, that was already the case. I didn't tell him that.

I simply took a deep breath and jumped off the cliff I'd been teetering on. “Touch me.”

The flare of vehemence in his eyes before his mouth slammed down over mine sent a thrill through me that I felt all the way to my toes. His hand clamped around my throat again as he turned me, backing me up until I felt the bed hit my backside. He grabbed me around the waist with his free hand and perched me on the bed while his tongue slid smoothly over mine. The hint of cinnamon and cigar made for a craving I hadn't known I had.

His teeth took my bottom lip in his, and he groaned as his hand squeezed my neck. My body arched against him, even with the rough way he was handling me. Instead of frightening me, it was creating a dark frenzy. I wanted more of this. I didn't want it to stop.

I cried out as he grabbed my thigh, his fingers digging into my skin while he jerked my legs open forcefully. It hurt, but at the same time, the way he was taking me only seemed to fan this insanity that was controlling my body. He shoved my panties aside, then thrust two of his fingers inside of me without any preparation.

"Oh God!" I shouted, grabbing on to his biceps that flexed under my touch.

He bit down on the curve between my neck and shoulder, causing me to buck underneath him. His fingers went deeper, and I gasped. That was going to leave a mark.

"That's a tight pussy, pretty baby," he growled as he looked down at me. "Barely handling my two fingers."

I was desperate. Whatever he wanted to do, I was willing. This was the best sexual experience of my life. I couldn't get enough of him.

"I'm gonna fuck it so hard that you'll feel me tomorrow. But first, I need a taste," he said just before he ripped the panties off me and shoved me back onto the bed.

Grabbing my legs with enough force to bruise my thighs, he opened me.

I panted as I watched him look down at my bare pussy. His

eyes darkened further, and I was ready to start weeping and begging. I didn't care how many bruises he left on me; I just wanted more.

“So fucking pink and wet,” he said in a thick, deep voice before burying his head between my legs.

The first swipe of his tongue almost sent me spiraling into an orgasm. I grabbed the back of his head and sobbed in relief. Like everything else Garrett Hughes did in life, he did this with a vengeance. He ate me as if he couldn't get enough. Growling and lapping at my tender flesh before taking nips at my folds, then diving back in to sink his tongue inside of me some more.

When the explosion hit me, I screamed his name while my body seized beneath his mouth. There was nothing normal about the orgasm that took me. The nirvana he had brought me to was mind-blowing.

My body continued to pulse as he stood over me and jerked his pants down. My eyes locked in on his swollen cock. It was as gorgeous as the rest of him. He tore open a condom, then slid it down over his length; it was so quick that I hadn't recovered before he sank into me with one hard thrust.

“FUCK!” he roared over me, his neck flexing as he threw his head back.

Watching the pleasure on his face was a thing of beauty. With one hand, he grabbed a breast and gently rubbed my erect nipple before he squeezed hard while his other hand went back to my neck and held me down with just enough pressure to cause a slight panic.

He began pumping his hips while he stared down at me with a savage gleam in his eyes. The bluish gray almost taken over by the black of his pupils.

“Such a hot little pussy,” he hissed. “Squeezing my dick and sucking me like your mouth is going to do.”

I let out a strangled sound as his hand tightened on my throat. The mixture of bliss and brutality was bringing me to some other form of release. One that terrified and thrilled me. My hands wrapped around his arm, although I didn't try and pull him from his hold on my throat.

“You want it. You want me to take it. I can see it in those golden eyes of yours. Begging me to fuck you, own this pussy. It excites you,” he panted as a devilish grin curled on his lips.

“Let me have it,” he urged, his movements getting faster as a sweat broke out over his brow. “Give it to me, pretty baby. I want to see your beautiful body come undone while I own it.”

In that moment, my body decided he was its master and did exactly what he'd demanded. I had no control over anything anymore. His hand gripped my throat so tightly that I almost couldn't breathe, and that seemed to be the trigger that ignited this mania inside me. It broke free, and I heard his name come from my lips in a choked plea as euphoria encased me.

“FUUUCK, pretty baby! FUCK!” he shouted, but it seemed far away.

I was floating somewhere in my own form of heaven. His body jerked as he let out more groans.

As I began to slowly come back to earth, I felt two strong

arms wrap around me and pull me against his chest. I collapsed against him, still struggling to breathe normally. Garrett buried his face in my neck as he continued to gasp for air.

His hand ran down my head and tangled in my hair. When I could feel my arms again, I wrapped them around him. I had known he'd ruin me, but I hadn't known just how completely. In the past, I had always been satisfied with the fact that a vibrator could get me off as good as a man. But this ... this ... no vibrator could do this.

"Now, you're mine," his deep voice said against my temple.

I stilled. What did he mean by that? I let my arms fall away from their hold on him and leaned back to look at him. The gray in his eyes was returning. A part of me missed the blackness that I'd seen there. What was wrong with me?

He cupped the side of my face, and his eyes trailed over my lips and then studied my neck. A fierce look in his eyes made me shudder.

"My marks are on your skin." He didn't say it apologetically. He said it as if he was pleased by my bruises. He teased my nipple with his mouth, seemingly fascinated with it.

I licked my lips, almost afraid to speak.

"Are you on birth control?" he asked me.

He had worn a condom, so I didn't see how this needed to be a concern.

"Yes, I take the shot."

The pleased gleam in his eyes as he ran his hand down my neck, then chest before finally cupping the breast he'd squeezed so hard in his hand. "When were you last tested?"

I didn't want to be annoyed, but I was.

"When were you tested?" I shot back at him.

He smirked. "Last week."

Oh. Well, I guessed he got tested a lot with his sex life. At least he was being safe. That thought snatched the little bit of bliss left away, and I straightened and tried to move back, but his hand clamped down on my thigh and held me there.

"When were you tested?" he repeated more forcefully.

"Right after I broke up with Micah," I snapped.

"Have you slept with anyone since?" he asked.

I was pissed. I understood he was just being sure I was clean, but dang, did he have to do it right now?

"No," I replied through clenched teeth and tried harder to get some space from him, which didn't work and only caused his hold on me to tighten.

"Easy, pretty baby. There's no need to get all worked up," he scolded.

I glared at him. "I'm sorry if being asked if you need to worry about getting a disease from me right after you fucked me is insulting."

His eyes twinkled with amusement, and I had the sudden urge to slap his face. He grabbed my chin with more force than necessary and held it so that I couldn't look away from him.

“I like your temper, but be warned: I will also spank your ass until it burns when you unleash it on me.”

I gaped at him. Was he seriously threatening to spank me? I had lost my mind and gone too far with this man.

“Stop looking at me like you want to slap me,” he whispered, smiling as he said it. “I just wanted to make sure the next time I fuck you, I can take you raw. I don’t like having the barrier there. I want to feel you and unload inside you. My cum needs to be leaking out of you and keeping your thighs sticky.” He bent down and pressed a soft kiss to my lips. “Reminding you who fucked you, who made this pussy come.”

My breathing stuttered, and he flashed me an evil grin before letting go of me and standing back up. I sat there and watched in silence as he took the condom off and tied it before he pulled his pants back up. His thighs were rock hard, tanned, and bulging with muscles. Lord help me, he was going to destroy me.

“Your panties aren’t usable anymore. I’m afraid I got carried away. I’ll replace them.”

I scooted to the edge of the bed and stood up, tugging my top down as I did so. I let my skirt fall back down over my now-bare ass. He tugged me to him and slid a hand over my bottom, then squeezed it hard.

“Are you ready to go?” he asked.

I glanced around. We’d made a mess of the bed. “I need to straighten this up, and don’t you want to see the rest of the

house?”

He shook his head. “I don’t need to.”

Confused, I frowned as he bent down and picked up my torn panties and shoved them into his pocket.

“Why?”

His eyes met mine with a satisfied glint brightening them. “I’m keeping the house,” he said. “I won’t tear down the first place I fucked you.”

I stood there, staring at him. Words didn’t come. I was going to do this. Ride whatever roller coaster he’d just put me on until he told me to get off. I just hoped I survived it.



FIFTEEN

FAWN

There had been no sign of Garrett since he had dropped me at the camper after our trip to the island. Two days had passed, and by the third day, I was realizing that my first assumption had been right. He was going to fuck me once, and he was done. My self-esteem was taking a hit. I wished it weren't, but it was. All I could do was think about how utterly amazing Garrett had been, but he'd not been as impressed with me.

I found myself going over everything that happened. What had I done wrong? He'd had me unable to think, and I hadn't focused on his pleasure. I had been too wrapped up in what he was doing to me. He'd probably been underwhelmed after he had time to think about it. The thought made my chest heavy and achy, unfortunately.

The helicopter ride home, he'd held my hand, and then the ride back to my camper, we had talked, laughed even. When he drove away, I was still smiling. I woke up the next day, still

smiling. Every hour that ticked by that day with no word from Garrett, my smile started to diminish. By day two, it had been wiped clean.

The cheap cell phone I'd bought and put my SIM card in worked fine when I needed to check on Gypsi. It wasn't that he couldn't reach me. He just didn't want to. I had also been placed in the Monte Cristo Lounge last night for work. The idea that Garrett had wanted me moved there to avoid me stung. No, it did more than sting; it burned a hole in my chest.

Thankfully, I wasn't working tonight, and I wouldn't be forced to smile and act like I was fine. I wasn't fine. Gypsi had even asked me if I was feeling okay. I'd lied and told her I had a migraine. Tonight, we were going to go see a movie and get burgers. I needed some time with my daughter and a distraction. Perhaps we should leave Ocala. Just go north a little. Even just to Gainesville. There were jobs there.

Turning on the shower from outside the tiny bathroom, I made sure it was on full blast. I needed it to be hot and steamy. I had hopes a shower and putting on my favorite cutoff shorts and cropped Van Halen T-shirt would put me in a better mood. Anything to ease this heaviness weighing me down.

I pulled the sundress off I'd put on to take Gypsi to work and slipped off my panties. The moment I stepped into the bathroom, there was a knock on my door. I paused and grabbed my robe before cutting off the water, then walked the six steps it took to get to the door. Peeking out the window, I saw the Bentley, and my heart did a silly flutter in my chest until I realized it was Kye outside my door.

Annoyed at myself, I jerked the door open and forced a smile.

Kye had another shopping bag in his hand.

“What can I do for you, Kye?” I asked him, unable to keep the sarcasm out of my voice.

He held the bag out to me, but I didn’t reach for it.

“I don’t know what that is, and I don’t want it.”

Kye gave me a nervous grin. “Uh, well, boss—Mr. Hughes said to deliver this to you.”

Had he now? Well, I didn’t give a shit.

“Mr. Hughes can take it back to wherever it came from,” I told him. “If that is all, I’d like to go get my shower.”

Kye nodded. “Yes, ma’am.”

“Don’t call me ma’am,” I said before slamming the door and locking it.

I placed my palms against the door and closed my eyes while I tried to force myself to get a grip. This was my fault. I’d wanted to know how sex would be with Garrett, and I’d gotten my answer. It was done. Over.

I spun around and went to turn the water back on before stepping under the weak water pressure that I was accustomed to. The shower at work had spoiled me. The water was always hot, and the massage option was amazing.

Yep, I needed to leave. No point in getting spoiled.



Gypsi had gone to sleep right after we got back from the movie. She had been working too much, and I hated it. She had no time for a life. I wanted her to have a chance at college, but at this rate, that wasn't going to happen. I stared down into my glass of cheap red wine and sighed.

So many dreams I had built for her since the day the doctor had laid her in my arms. I felt like a failure. I hadn't been able to give her any of them. Here she was, at nineteen, working a job at a coffee shop to help pay the bills and living in a camper with her mother. I needed more than this wine to ease my guilt and shame. She was such a good girl, and she deserved the world. How I could give that to her, living this life, I didn't know.

I put the glass to my lips and downed the rest of it. I wished I had cookies to go with my pity party. I started to stand up and go see what we did have in the pantry as far as sweets when headlights outside caught my attention. I put my glass in the sink and went to the window to see the Bentley pull in beside my car.

Crap! What was Kye back here with at this hour? More stuff I didn't need or want.

I slipped on flip-flops and glanced back at the bedroom to make sure the door was closed before I stepped outside. I did not want Gypsi seeing any of Garrett's people. She'd start asking questions again.

Wrapping my arms around my chest, I walked down the steps and toward the Bentley. The back door opened instead of the driver's door, and I stopped. Garrett stepped out and closed

the door behind him. I stood there, watching as he made his way toward me, carrying the bag that Kye had brought this morning.

I did not care that I wasn't wearing makeup and my hair was in a messy bun. I also didn't care that I was in a pair of cutoff sweatpants and a tank top. It was what I slept in. No need for pretending I was something or someone else.

Garrett stopped in front of me and held the bag up, letting it dangle from one finger. "I'd like to know the reason you refused these," he stated.

Not an explanation as to why he had been avoiding me. Just a demand to know why I hadn't taken his parting gift like a good girl. Well, screw him and his money.

"I don't want anything from you," I replied, glaring back at him.

His brows drew together. "I told you I'd replace the panties I ripped."

So, that was a new pair of panties. Great. He'd sent Kye to give me some panties. If I hadn't felt like a cheap whore before, I sure did now.

"I don't want them," I replied through clenched teeth. "Now, if you could, please leave before you wake up my daughter," I added before turning around to go back to the safety of my camper.

I didn't get anywhere though because Garrett's hand wrapped around my arm and jerked me back forcefully. I stiffened as he held me against his chest.

“It’s been a long three days, pretty baby. I’m not in the mood for one of your fits.”

I struggled to get free of him, but it was pointless. “I’m not having a fit. I am going inside and to bed.”

Garrett’s breath was against my cheek now. “Not until you tell me what is wrong.”

Was he joking?

I let out a hard, unamused laugh. “Let’s see, Garrett. You fucked me, dropped me off, avoided me, then sent one of your men to give me panties. Does it get any more insulting?”

I heard him sigh, and the scent of his cinnamon and cigar breath tickled my skin.

“I wasn’t avoiding you. I had business out of town, and if you’d opened the fucking bag this morning, you’d have seen the note I left for you inside of it, explaining my absence.”

Note? Okay, maybe I had overreacted.

“You could have called.”

“I was unaware you had replaced your phone.”

Oh. I was running out of reasons to be mad. Instead, I felt my cheeks heat from embarrassment. I’d acted like a crazy girlfriend. A clingy female who relied on a man for happiness and self-worth. I was not that woman. I never had been. Garrett was making me act like this.

I took the bag from his hand. “Thank you for the panties. But I need to get to bed.”

Garrett grabbed me by the arms and turned me around to

face him. “You’re not fucking leaving me until you tell me what’s wrong. I explained myself, but you’re still so damn stiff and withdrawn.”

I stared up at him. The genuine concern in his expression broke down the rest of the wall I’d thought I put back up—or at least attempted to. My wall had once been ironclad, but this man had brought it down so easily. As if it had been made of sand.

“Nothing,” I started, then sighed. “Me. It’s me. Not you. I’m not this person, Garrett. I don’t do this.”

His frown deepened. “You don’t do what?” he asked.

“Act like this. Get upset and ... and clingy. I was being needy, and ... and I don’t do that!”

He studied me for a minute before his lips twitched. The amusement danced in his eyes. “You’re needy, huh?”

I shook my head. “No. I had a moment of weakness after mind-blowing sex. It’s over. I don’t like that girl. I won’t be her.”

Garrett jerked me closer against him and then caressed the side of my face. “What if I want you needy, hmm? What if I like you being clingy?” His eyes roamed over my face, as if he wanted to memorize every detail. “Fuck, you’re even more beautiful without makeup on.”

My body leaned into him of its own accord. Again, he seemed to control it, not me. I became his marionette doll the moment he touched me. It should make me feel weak, but the desire in his gaze as he looked at me said something else. I

wasn't weak. He wanted me too.

"I missed you," he said, lowering his head until his lips brushed against mine. "So fucking much."

I opened for him and threw my hands around his neck as he kissed me. The tease of his tongue as it danced against mine lit a fire under my skin. His hands ran down my body until he cupped my bottom and pulled me up until his erection pressed against me. He used his teeth to tug my bottom lip into his mouth and sucked hard, then began trailing kisses down my neck until he found the mark he'd left on me. I'd had to use makeup to cover it from Gypsi and at work but clean from my shower it was in clear view.

He licked at it several times, and I shivered in his arms.

"Let me fuck you," he growled.

"Gypsi's inside," I reminded him.

"I'll send Kye around to the back of the camper. I can set you on the hood of the car and slide into you. Anyone who sees us in the dark will think we're just kissing."

I clung to him. I knew already that I was going to do this. The ache between my legs echoed through every cell in my body.

Garrett turned his head to look at the driver's side window. I heard the car door close, and I knew Kye had gotten out. He'd known what his boss wanted with one singular look.

"Other side of the trailer," Garrett ordered him.

Kye didn't ask questions, and I was too turned on by this

that I didn't care that he knew what we were about to do. Garrett picked me up and carried me over to the car, sitting me on the edge of the hood. He started kissing me again as I opened my legs, and he slid a hand under my shorts to find I wasn't wearing panties.

"Naughty girl," he said against my lips, pushing the fabric aside as he ran his fingers along my wet folds. He unzipped his jeans and shoved them down with his boxers until his erection was free of its confines. With one hand, he pulled my shorts aside as he used his other to guide his cock to my opening. "I wanted to fuck you raw the first time somewhere I could hear you scream, but I need in you now," he said in a husky whisper.

As he pushed inside of me, I bit down on my bottom lip to keep from crying out. His hands grabbed each side of my head as he sank in all the way. The darkness in his eyes started to take over.

"That's what fucking paradise is," he groaned. "God, pretty baby, you feel incredible."

His mouth covered mine again as he started pumping into me. Our breathing became ragged, and Garrett held my head as his mouth hovered over mine. The heat from our breaths mingled as small cries escaped me. Garrett's eyes locked with mine while he thrust harder, stretching me with a fullness I'd never had.

"No more, Fawn," he grunted. "No more being fucking difficult. When I send you a goddamn gift, you take it. Don't walk away from me when you're mad. No more." The

commanding tone as his pace quickened and he held my head, still not allowing me to look anywhere but at him, didn't insight my anger. It made me tremble instead.

"I don't need gifts," I panted, wishing I sounded as fierce as he had.

He snarled and slammed inside of me. "If I want you to have something, you fucking take it!"

God help me, why was this turning me on? He was controlling me while screwing me, and I was liking it. I feared after this man, I wouldn't recognize myself anymore.

"Tell me, pretty baby, what a good girl you are going to be, and I'll let this sweet pussy come."

The fight was there inside me to tell him no, but it was losing its steam. I realized I wanted to be his good girl, and it might be warped, but I was finding I didn't care. Whatever it was he did to me was worth it.

His mouth was so close to mine that our lips brushed against each other as he fucked me. "Tell me," he coaxed. "Tell me, and you can come."

It was right there. That euphoria was teasing me, taunting me.

"Okay," I consented.

"Not good enough. I want to hear you say you'll be my good girl," he pressed.

The tingle intensified, running down my spine. I was close. So close.

“I’ll be your good girl.”

His hips went faster, harder. “That’s it.”

The pleased sound of his voice made me want to agree to anything he asked.

“You’re gonna be Daddy’s good girl,” he assured me. “Aren’t you, pretty baby?”

Those words were some I’d never thought I would want to hear. But in that moment, with those words coming out of the mouth of this man, my body shattered into pure bliss as my orgasm claimed me. Garrett kept whispering dirty, twisted things in my ear, and I continued to convulse with pleasure.

When his body went rigid, he wrapped his arms around me, and when I felt the pulse of his release fill me, I climaxed again.



SIXTEEN

GARRETT

Having to watch her walk into that fucking camper as we drove away made me livid. I hated it. I hated the piece-of-shit scrap metal she lived in. She didn't belong in a goddamn trailer. She belonged in a fucking mansion, sleeping on my thousand-thread-count sheets in my king bed. I rubbed my temples. I was already picturing her in my bed, and I'd just fucked the woman twice. I had to get a grip.

"Boss, where to?" Kye asked from the driver's seat.

He knew this was the night I typically went to Lydia's. I'd forgotten about her. That was something I had to put an end to, but I wasn't dealing with her tonight. The past three days had been exhausting, and I'd gotten Fawn to fuck me outside on my car and tell me she was going to be my good girl. The only thing messing this night up was having to leave her there.

"Get Six on the phone and head to the house," I told him.

The ringer on the speaker started, and then Six answered.

“Yeah, boss?” he said.

“I want you at Fawn Parker’s camper. She can’t see you, and neither can her daughter, but I need it secured.”

“Yes, sir. You want me alone or two of us?” he asked.

“Take Mattia with you. I’ll send Huck in the morning to relieve you both.”

“Yes, sir. Heading that way now.”

I waved a hand to dismiss him, and Kye ended the call. Having her protected would at least give me some form of peace. Even if I hated the way she had to live. She acted like she didn’t want or need nice things, but the way she had lit up at the island when she’d only seen the goddamn bungalows told me something else.

Fawn Parker did want nice things. She just didn’t want to admit it. But tonight, she’d promised me she’d be a good girl. My lips curled into a grin when I thought about her coming so fucking hard when I called myself Daddy. She might not like it, but she had her own little twisted kinks, and I was going to draw them out of her and enjoy every fucking minute.

My cell phone vibrated, and I pulled it out to see Fawn’s name on the screen. I slid my finger over the screen to read the text message.

**Good night, and thank you for the panties.
They’re beautiful. I’m almost afraid to wear
them.**

Grinning, I replied.

The next time I fuck you, I want you wearing a pair. I'll buy you a damn closet full of panties. Wear them.

I read over her words while I waited for her to respond. When her new text appeared, my eyes dropped down to see what she had to say now.

I'll wear them. Don't go buying me a closet full of panties.

Brat. Fuck, she made me smile.

You promised to be a good girl. When a bag arrives for you from now on, you to take it.

I pressed Send and waited. I expected a long paragraph, telling me why she wasn't going to take my gifts. When the screen lit up and the words Yes, Daddy appeared, I almost came in my fucking jeans.

II

“I was never really insane, except upon occasions when my heart was touched.”

—Edgar Allan Poe



SEVENTEEN

FAWN

It had taken exactly thirty minutes before Silas appeared in the Monte Cristo Lounge to inform me I was being permanently transferred to Winchester Parlor. He followed me from the Monte Cristo to the Winchester, glancing at me nervously. I wasn't sure what it was about, but I would bet it had something to do with Garrett. When we reached the door to the Winchester, Silas cleared his throat and adjusted his bow tie.

“One more thing,” he added, his eyes flickering toward the door, then back to me.

“Yes?” I encouraged since it seemed that he needed it.

What had Garrett said to him? That had to be the only reason for this behavior toward my moving rooms.

“It, uh, seems that you will only be serving Mr. Hughes from now on. While you are in there, if he isn't present, then

you are to”—he rubbed the back of his neck, looking anywhere but at me—“stay in his private space.”

I frowned. “He said that? He wants me to just sit in his lair and do nothing?”

I wasn’t going to do that, and Garrett had to know that. The man was being ridiculous with such a demand.

“Yes, it seems that we shouldn’t expect you on the nights he won’t be visiting. I’m to take you off the schedule.”

My hands clenched, and I took a deep breath to calm myself before I lost my temper. “Well, you can rest assured that will not be the case. I’ll speak with Gar—Mr. Hughes tonight. Please don’t take me off the schedule just yet. I need this job and the money.”

Silas paled. “You shouldn’t make him angry. Just do what he says.”

I let out a sharp laugh. “Uh, no. The rest of the world might cower to his domineering ass, but I’m not going to be bossed around. He doesn’t own me!”

Silas looked as if he might throw up as his gaze flickered over my shoulder nervously, and his shoulders literally curved in as he backed away slowly. I opened my mouth to assure him he wouldn’t be reprimanded for this when a large hand pressed against my lower back and the scent of cigar and cinnamon wafted over me.

“If you’ll come with me, Fawn.” Garrett’s deep voice made sure there was no mistaking that this was a demand, not a request.

I considered turning now and dealing with this, but as angry as I was with him, I didn't want to cause a scene. The thought of disrespecting his authority in his establishment bothered me. I simply nodded and let him lead me into the Winchester Parlor. He spoke to several members that addressed him as we passed, but his hand never left my back.

I glanced over at the bar and saw Leo watching us as he dried a glass. His eyebrows shot up when we made eye contact, but then he quickly dropped his gaze. Garrett scared everyone. Except me, apparently. When we made it to his corner, he dropped his hand from my back, then walked over to take the remote that closed off his space, making it private.

I placed my hands on my hips, ready to do battle with this ego-driven man and win. He was not going to tell me when and how I was going to do my job. Garrett turned to look at me, and he smirked at my stance. Damn him for being so sexy. Even when he was being a controlling ass.

“We're private now. Please, feel free to proceed with the tongue-lashing you want to give me,” he said as he made his way over to the cigars. “I expected as much. We might as well get it over with.”

God! He was so damn full of himself.

“I need this job. I need the hours. You know that.” I seethed, hating that part of me wanted to go run my hands up his arms and press against him.

He opened the case and glanced back at me. “My allowing you to still work at all is unlike me. You don't need a job. I want all your time, and I take care of what is mine.”

What was this, the 1950s? Take care of what was his? UGH, this man!

“I’m not yours, and I’m also not a prostitute. I will provide for myself and my daughter.”

Garrett turned back around, and the scowl crinkling his brow was distracting. I wanted to smooth it with my fingers. I needed to be slapped. I was arguing here, not thinking about touching him.

Focus, Fawn. FOCUS!

“If I ever hear yourself speak the word *prostitute* again, I’ll put you over my knee and spank your ass until you can’t walk. Is that clear?”

I shivered. Not because his threat scared me, but because it made my body tingle with the thought of him putting me over his knee. How did he do that? What voodoo did this man have that made me crave his brutality? It wasn’t healthy. If I could afford counseling, I’d go get some. Was this because of my past? Was Garrett’s domineering behavior a turn-on for me because I had daddy issues?

“You expect me to just ... what? Let you pay for everything? Pay my bills? Move my camper to a safer location? I can’t let you do that, Garrett. Don’t you understand that?” My voice was pleading. I felt helpless with him. As if no matter what I said, I was going to let him have his way.

Garrett closed the space between us and reached up to cup the side of my face in his large hand. “You deserve to be taken care of, cherished.” His thumb ran over my bottom lip.

“You’ve awakened something in me I didn’t know was there. For the first time in my life, I want to fucking smile. You make my chest feel light when I’m with you, and to a man like me, that’s a gift. It’s not just your body I desire, Fawn. I crave the way your presence eases me.”

Holy hell. What did I say now? My eyes stung. No one had ever said something like that to me. The power behind those words were already derailing me. Changing my path. I wasn’t sure I’d ever be able to find it again.

“Give me this,” he urged. “Please, pretty baby. Please, don’t fight me. Let me give you an adventure. I know you love those. Your eyes dance with pure joy when you experience new things. I ache to see that more. To know it’s me handing you the world.”

I closed my eyes and took a deep breath. I wanted to give in. Tell him yes. Throw caution to the wind and just live. But I had responsibilities. I couldn’t pretend otherwise. Not even for him.

“Garrett, I’m a mom,” I said finally as I opened my eyes and met his piercing gaze. “I have Gypsi to think about.”

The corners of his mouth quirked up. “I’m well aware, and I would never ask you to neglect her. I intend to take care of her too.”

I shook my head. “No. This is too much. I can’t.”

His mouth covered mine, and I wanted to fight him, but the moment the tip of his tongue touched my lips, I caved and let him in. Sinking into him. My arms went around his neck as he

grabbed my hips and jerked me against his body. God, this man could kiss. All other worries seemed to fade into the distance as he owned me with just his lips.

“Fawn,” he whispered. He bit my bottom lip before licking it, then roughly kissed down my neck. “Don’t fight me. Please.”

My knees went weak as he reached up and wiped the makeup away that I’d used to conceal his bite mark. He pressed a kiss to the bruised skin, then growled before nipping at it gently with his teeth.

“You make me insane. No woman has ever had that ability.”

My hands fisted his hair, and I pressed my chest against him as he began kissing and nuzzling up my neck.

“You promised to be my good girl,” he reminded me.

“I didn’t promise to let you take over my life,” I panted.

He ran a hand down to the hem of my dress and tugged it up. His palm slid over my bottom and squeezed. I was wearing a pair of the silky lace thongs he’d given me.

“Not take over, just take care of,” he whispered in my ear as he pressed his fingers between my legs.

The urge to give in was almost overpowering my common sense. He made it sound so easy. I knew it had a time clock on it, and that was what I feared. What if I fell in love with him? I’d never worried about that before. When men had wanted to do things for me, buy me things, pay my bills, I hadn’t fought them. But Garrett ... he was different. If I let go and enjoyed the ride, then when the end came, I wouldn’t know what to do.

I had no experience with a broken heart.

His fingers slid inside of me, and my knees buckled. Garrett's arm wrapped around me and held me to him as he continued to pump in and out of me.

"This pussy is addictive," he murmured. "Let me have it."

I let out a small cry, and he picked me up, carrying me to the couch. I stared up at him as he laid me on my back. He shoved my dress up around my waist, and there was a tyrannical gleam in his eyes as he held my thighs open, staring at my wetness, barely covered by the expensive panties I wore.

"Such a delicate, flawless pussy. I love seeing it covered in French silk and Italian lace. This body should only be touched by beautiful, expensive things."

I whimpered. I couldn't help it. He was turning me into a complete mess. He ran a finger down the damp fabric and let out a pleased sound from deep in his chest. I watched helplessly as he pulled the panties down my legs, over my heels, and held them to his nose and inhaled.

His eyes were now black. "That's the sweetest musk I've ever smelled."

I was gasping for breath, ready to start begging him. The ache was so strong that I had to squirm. When I did, his large hand slapped down on my bare mound and held me still.

His gaze turned hard. "That's my job," he scowled.

My mouth was open as I lay there, desperate, panting, waiting.

Garrett took one of my legs and placed it over his shoulder, then did the same with the second one. His head lowered, and I watched in complete rapture as he stuck his tongue out and slowly ran it up my folds until he flicked my clit.

“Oh God!” I moaned, throwing my head back and arching my back.

That was the end of the gentleness. His teeth clamped down on my sensitive nub, and my hands fisted at my sides as I pressed my lips together to keep from screaming. Then, he attacked me, licking, sucking, growling. His beard felt incredible and only added to the pleasure.

“Garrett,” I called out in a strangled cry as my body grew closer to my climax.

He lifted his eyes to lock on mine. “You can come on my tongue now, pretty baby.”

And I did. I slapped a hand over my mouth to muffle my shouts of ecstasy as my body shook and his mouth continued its savage attack. When my tremors began to ease, he pressed one last kiss to my inner thigh, then reached for me and pulled me into his lap.

My body felt spent. I curled into him, letting him hold me, caress me, rub his bearded chin against my temple. I was done. I realized the little control I’d thought I held was a joke. I’d given that up already. If he wanted to do this, then I’d go on his adventure and pray he didn’t take my soul in the end.



EIGHTEEN

FAWN

I was silent as the Bentley drove under the massive arch that said *Hughes Farm* on it. Garrett's hand was on my thigh in a tight grip. He liked holding me that way, and I enjoyed the way it made me feel claimed. My eyes widened at the elaborate buildings, and I saw a man walking inside one with a horse.

"Is that ... are those stables?" I asked, aghast.

They didn't look like stables, but ... it was clear that was what they were.

"Yes," Garrett replied. "I raise racehorses. Train them, race them, breed them."

I had never seen a horse up close. I swung my gaze back to him to see he was watching me with a pleased gleam in his eyes.

"Can I see them?" I asked, excitement bubbling inside me.

He chuckled. "Of course. We'll go for a ride."

I bit my bottom lip, then looked back out toward the stables. "I don't know how to ride," I admitted.

His hand tightened on my thigh. "I'll teach you."

The car slowed, and I looked ahead to see where we had reached. My mouth fell open as I stared at the mansion in front of me. I had thought the island house was a mansion, but compared to this, it was not. This ... this was ... wow.

"Welcome to my home," he said simply.

His home. This ... this was his home. Holy hell.

"The island house was clearly not a mansion," I whispered.

He chuckled. "No, it wasn't."

The door beside him opened, and he let go of my thigh. I continued to stare in awe at the stunning structure this man lived in. How many rooms was in something like this? He just had two children, and one was married and didn't live here. Right? Or maybe he did. I mean, there was plenty of room for his son's family. There was plenty of room for six or ten families.

"Fawn," Garrett called, and I turned to see he had stepped out of the car and was holding his hand out for me to follow.

I slid over and placed my hand in his, and he helped me out of the car. Tonight, we were going on a real official date, but he'd wanted to bring me here first. I almost wished he hadn't. I was already feeling inadequate. I'd worn my nicest dress, but I still feared it wasn't going to fit in with wherever he was

taking me. Seeing this house, I was almost positive my dress wouldn't be enough.

No. I would not do that. I would not let insecurities take root. I wasn't the kind of person who allowed the world to judge me. Wealth did not make someone better than another. I was a good person, and that was all that mattered.

"Prepare the Cadillac One for this evening," Garrett told the driver.

I hadn't met this one yet, and I didn't know his name, but he reminded me of a Viking. He was massive.

The man nodded and turned to walk away.

Garrett slid his hand to that spot on my back. "Let's go inside."

I walked with him, unable to stop looking at things. The flowers were stunning, and the magnolia trees were in bloom, lining the walkway. I couldn't take it in fast enough. We walked up the steps to the house, and the two massive doors that greeted us were as ornate as the rest of the place. Garrett revealed a hidden keypad and pressed in a code before reaching for the door closest to him. When it opened, he motioned for me to enter. I stepped inside onto the marble floor.

The grandness of it all only solidified what I'd started to realize. Garrett Hughes wasn't just a millionaire. This man had to have billions. This wasn't normal. It wasn't even *Lifestyles of the Rich and Famous*. It was ... more. So much more.

A short, round woman with dark brown eyes and a warm

smile walked into the foyer. Her gaze went from Garrett to me. The black dress she wore came to her knees, and a white apron covered the front.

“Fawn, this is Ms. Jimmie. She keeps things running smoothly here,” he said with genuine respect in his voice as he spoke about her.

I liked that. It said a lot about his character. This was the first female employee of his I’d met, and I appreciated the way he treated her as someone important.

I left his side and walked over to her, then held out my hand. “It’s a pleasure to meet you, Ms. Jimmie,” I said.

Her eyes sparkled, and her cheeks dimpled as she placed her hand in mine to shake it. “The pleasure is mine, dear, I assure you.” Then, she let my hand go as she looked around me toward Garrett. “This is a first in all my years.”

“What’s that, Ms. Jimmie?” he asked with amusement in his tone.

She swung her gaze back to mine. “You bringing home a woman with more than a beautiful face. There is goodness in her eyes. True character. It’s about time.”

I wanted to laugh, but I pressed my lips together to keep from doing so. Apparently, I wasn’t the only person on earth not afraid of Garrett Hughes.

“I knew you’d approve,” Garrett replied, not sounding at all angry by her bluntness.

She patted my arm. “Just don’t go running. Be patient with him,” she said in a whisper loud enough for Garrett to hear.

But he said nothing about it.

I nodded and then turned back to Garrett.

“Shall we?” he asked.

“What?”

“I thought you’d like a tour.”

Oh!

“Yes!” I exclaimed, not realizing he had planned to let me see it all.

He’d said he needed to change clothes and wanted to bring me to see his home. I hadn’t wanted to hope for a full tour.

“Can I bring you anything?” Ms. Jimmie asked.

Garrett slid his hand around my back. “Champagne and perhaps a tray of snacks to my rooms,” he replied, and then he looked down at me. “Is there anything else you’d like? Wine preference? Soda? Juice?”

I was feeling overwhelmed by the choices. “No, that sounds nice.”

He nodded.

“I’ll bring still and sparkling water as well,” Ms. Jimmie replied, then left us there.

When she was gone, I asked, “You said rooms, as in plural. Do you have more than one bedroom?”

His lips twitched. “No. But the entire top floor is mine. The master suite consists of many rooms.”

“So, I’m assuming since you told Ms. Jimmie to take the

items there, I get to see this elaborateness you call a master suite?”

His hand clenched my waist as he began walking us toward the first massive arch. “Yes, since I’m going to fuck you in my bed, it will require you to see my rooms.”

My breathing hitched. “If that’s the case, then could we start the tour there?”

Garrett stopped, and his heated gaze locked on mine. “You want fucked now, pretty baby?” he asked. His voice was deep with a feral edge to it.

“Yes,” I admitted, loving how he wanted me as much as I did him.

He pulled his phone from his pocket and turned me toward a hallway.

“Hold the items until I call you back,” he said simply, then ended the call.

We came to an elevator, and it opened, revealing a small but luxurious space. After we entered, he pressed a code, and the elevator began to move. His thumb rubbed my side as we rode up, but he didn’t look down at me. His focus stayed straight ahead.

When the doors opened, he led me out and into a massive room with a chandelier, a huge fireplace, white velvet sofas, royal-blue high-back chairs, and two walls of bookshelves. Floor to ceiling. My favorite thing was the lingering scent of Garrett’s cigar of choice.

“I’ll fuck you in here later. First my bed,” he informed me as

he led me through the room and into the next room, which wasn't as large.

It had a cozier feel. There was a pool table, a flat screen television that covered most of the far-right wall, and three plush, dark brown leather sofas. The bar looked stocked with several bottles of scotch, and a cherry wood cabinet held bottles of wine on one side of a rack with different wineglasses on the other side and what appeared to be some sort of built-in wine opener. The center had glass cabinets with rows and rows of cigars.

My gaze scanned everything as quickly as it could before he walked me into the next room. This was the bedroom. I wanted to walk around and memorize everything about the place where he slept. His private room. But he didn't slow down until he got me to his bed. We had to step up onto the platform in the center of the room to get to the bed. The deep burgundy bedding was the only thing I saw before he spun me around and grabbed my throat with one hand and clenched my butt with his other before slamming his mouth over mine.

I grabbed the wrist of the hand he had at my throat as I pressed further into him. He wanted to be rough, and the thought of him doing so in his room sparked my own insanity. The idea was thrilling. I longed for it as much as he wanted to treat me that way.

He slapped my ass hard, then squeezed it. His teeth bit down on my lower lip, and his fingers flexed around my neck. The savage look in his eyes as he stared down at me only stirred my desire for more. I glared up at him, daring him to take me.

Grabbing the back of my dress, he unzipped it and yanked the fabric over my head, tossing it aside. I stood there, watching him as my bare chest heaved. His eyes fell to my breasts, and he cupped them almost reverently before pinching and twisting my nipples. I let out a cry, and he slapped each one hard. The pulse between my legs had me pressing my thighs together.

“Fucking perfect tits,” he swore. “Those hard pink nipples taste like candy.” His voice sounded angry, but with the way his eyes roamed over my body, I knew it wasn’t anger.

“Turn around and put your hands on the bed,” he ordered.

Desperate for more, I did it quickly. My butt was on display with the panties he’d paid God knew what for, covering very little. He hooked the strip of silk that was tucked between my butt cheeks under his finger and ran it along my crack.

“Juicy, round ass.” His words sounded like an evil jeer.

Then, the crack of his hand on my flesh caused me to jerk and whimper. It stung. Way more than the other times he’d swatted me. I bit down on my bottom lip, preparing for another hit. It came on the opposite cheek. Just as hard, just as loud, just as painful. I managed not to make a sound that time.

My silence seemed to trigger him because the swats became faster, more powerful. A sob escaped me, followed by a wail as he continued. He stopped then, and his palms ran over my sore bottom.

“My pretty baby has a red ass. Do you know why Daddy spanked you?”

I closed my eyes as the area between my legs clenched at his words. That word. “No,” I croaked, almost ashamed that I was turned on by this.

He ran a hand over my burning globes, and then he slid it between my legs. “Because you weren’t wearing a bra. You keep going without one. Those luscious, full tits are begging men to look at them. To want them.” His fingers crammed into me so tightly that I knew there was more than two. “I don’t like men wanting my pretty baby. I don’t like seeing their gazes looking at your nipples poking through the fabric.”

My arms buckled, and I laid my cheek against the bed as a low keened came from my chest.

“You’re going to make me kill someone, pretty baby. Is that what you want?” It wasn’t a threat. His voice sounded more detached, as if this were a business arrangement.

My eyes watered, and I shook my head.

His fingers eased out of me.

I listened to the slide of his zipper and buried my face in the covers to keep from making a noise. His body moved behind me, and he grabbed my waist, jerking me up from the bed. When he stuck his knee between my thighs to nudge my legs open, I spread them for him. Needing more of his carnal attention.

Garrett rammed inside of me, and I threw my head back and let out a scream as he hit so deep that I felt lightheaded. His fingers wrapped around my throat while his hips began to piston. The bed shook, his breathing was loud and heavy, and

my body was in a state of depraved madness. I wasn't sure what I was saying or if I was even making noises.

“Perfect cunt,” he hissed. “Taking Daddy’s cock and squeezing it so hard.”

I was going to come. It was there. The beginning. I could feel the promise.

“My pussy,” he began to chant. “My sweet pussy.”

The euphoric, unrestrained rapture seized me, and Garrett’s hand tightened on my neck, sending me higher. I felt his cock pulsate inside of me as the first rush of his release broke free.

“FUCK! FAWN! FUCK!” he roared as I spiraled with my own wanton, animalistic behavior that brought him to this level of complete abandon with me.

Gasping, I lay on my stomach with Garrett’s large body covering my back. His cock was still buried inside me. I could feel the dampness from his sweat coating me. He had taken off his shirt when I wasn’t looking. The heat of his skin on mine, his labored breathing as he stayed there, not wanting to slide out of me, gave me a peace I’d never felt. It was deeper than joy or happiness. There was no way to describe it.

The moment he began to move, I started to ask him to stay, but his lips brushed my back, then continued until they reached my butt. So softly that it was barely a touch, he ran kisses over my blistered skin. His fingertips lightly caressed where his lips had been.

I moaned with pleasure from the complete tenderness. Something Garrett didn’t often show.

“I’ll take care of you, pretty baby,” he promised. “You were such a good girl. Taking your spanking.”

Another moan escaped me. I was going to be ready for another round if he didn’t stop that.

“You like that, don’t you?” There was a trace of amusement in his voice. “You like when I take care of you. When I control your pleasure.”

God, yes! I did, and I was just going to have to accept it.

Garrett stood, and then his fingertips trailed over my bottom before he completely discarded his pants and boxers. I watched him step down off the platform his bed sat on and walk naked to the bathroom.

Jesus, that man had a fabulous ass.



NINETEEN

GARRETT

The debased satisfaction I received from rubbing Fawn's naked ass with a cooling lotion after she let me bathe her like a child was unanticipated. Her complete trust in me was downright humbling. The combination of her not wanting my help, demanding nothing of me, yet willing to let me fuck her how I needed, in all its depravity, rocked me.

The women I'd fucked in the past, the ones I'd even married, none of them had allowed this without expecting or requiring a reward after. They would mold to my needs if diamonds, designer purses, or my fucking Amex card was handed over. None of them had done it because they wanted it. They'd faked it. I thought it was just the way a beautiful woman was wired. She gave only to receive.

Not this one.

The only thing I seemed to be able to give her without her fighting me was sexual pleasure. And she wasn't faking. The

way she lost all control, didn't care what sounds she made, how she looked, didn't try and bat her lashes or lick her lips to entice me. She was there in the moment. Immersed in the entire fucking thing. When I came inside her, it was so damn intense that I almost lost consciousness. I couldn't admit that shit to anyone, but it was true. This time, I'd come close to blacking out.

She stretched, and her long legs moved open as I massaged the lotion lower. My baby was getting aroused again. I shouldn't have hit her so many times. Her ass was going to be bruised. But, damn, she'd gotten off on it. Like a trigger in my head, I snapped. I couldn't stop. If I'd done that to any other woman, she'd have threatened me with a damn lawsuit. Not this one. Not my good girl. Instead, she was squirming as I ran my hands close to her damp pussy without touching it.

A grin tugged at my lips. I wanted to keep her. Here. All the time. I wasn't a man who believed in love, but I liked to possess things. Exotic, rare, beautiful things. Nothing was more exotic, rare, or beautiful than Fawn Parker. I was going to possess her. She'd be my most cherished possession. I'd dress her in clothes fit for the queen she was meant to be. Mine.

I just had to convince her of it first.

"Do you want to eat something?" I asked her as my gaze was locked on her cunt that she was displaying for me.

"Do you?" she asked, and the needy sound in her words made my cock throb.

"Yes," I replied, unable to keep from smiling.

“Okay,” she said, sounding disappointed.

“Lift your ass, pretty baby,” I told her.

She opened her eyes and tilted her head so she could look at me. “What?”

I ran my hand down the back of her thigh. “Lift your ass and open your legs so I can eat that sweet pussy.”

Her eyes flared, and then her disappointment was gone. I watched as she moved to balance herself on her elbows and jutted her red bottom up in the air as she bent her knees in a stance that spread her wide open for me.

There had never been a sight this fucking precious. I left a trail of kisses over her ass before running my tongue over her hot, wet pussy lips. The wail she let out as I began to play with her made the devil inside of me yearn to see how dirty I could get my pretty baby to be. Just how deep would she go to fill my salacious appetite?



TWENTY

FAWN

I set the champagne flute down as Garrett walked out of his closet, wearing a tux. My first thought was, *Good Lord, I need a fan or to sit down*. My second was that my crumpled-up dress on the floor was going to be pitiful up against that. I pushed that worry away though. I could iron it, and I'd carry myself like it was designer. It would be fine.

Garrett nodded his head toward the door he hadn't opened yet. I assumed it was another closet of some kind. Perhaps his winter wardrobe.

"Come with me," he said.

I followed him to the door and waited as he opened it. Then, he held his hand out for me to enter. The thought of seeing more of his private rooms was exciting. I walked inside, trying to guess what this one would be when I stopped short.

The room was feminine. Not in a subtle way either. The

walls were white with flecks of gold that shimmered. There was a white L-shaped velvet sofa that looked as if it belonged in the Elizabethan age. A gilded vanity sat against one wall with a plush stool for sitting. The curtains that began at the ceiling to gather at the floor in a pool of expensive fabric were opened to the large windows overlooking the back of the house. I could see more dogwood trees and flower gardens. The chandelier filled the room with light that danced with the end-of-the-day sunlight pouring in. A fluffy white rug covered most of the center of the room while the white marble floor shone around the outer part. I inhaled to realize jasmine and vanilla delicately scented the air.

“What is this?” I asked in awe.

“Yours.”

Mine?

I tore my gaze off the room to look at him. He was watching me. Studying me almost. There was a hopefulness in his expression. No sign of the powerful, commanding man, but one who was almost nervous.

“What do you mean, this is mine?” I asked, slowly realizing that I was being careful with my response. I didn’t want to let him down.

He took a step toward me. “The room and all that is in it are yours. I’ve had the vanity stocked with any and all cosmetics, creams, styling supplies that you could need. The closet”—he pointed at the only door in the room—“has clothing I chose for you, along with lingerie that I expect you to fucking wear, shoes, accessories ... jewelry.”

I held up a hand. “Wait. Stop. I need a minute,” I said as my heart raced.

I turned and walked across the room, needing space. I couldn’t look at him, not when he was being so open, vulnerable. We had been having a wonderful time. If I reacted badly that would end it... but he’d bought me clothes ... jewelry. Dear God, was it real? I covered my face with both hands and tried to gather myself.

“This isn’t the reaction most women have to being given gifts such as these.”

I dropped my hands and spun around to face him. “I think we already went over the fact that I’m not most women,” I said, the frustration clear in my tone. “Garrett, you don’t need to do this. I told you I would accept bags that were delivered to my camper. I thought you meant panties and small things. Not ... not this!”

He took a step in my direction. The look in his eyes was killing me. I hated that I couldn’t just say *thank you* and dive in, but I just couldn’t.

“I want to shower you with beautiful things, Fawn.”

“And I just need you. Not all this.”

He stopped, and his pupils dilated. I waited, ready to stand my ground. I had to. He didn’t realize it, but if women in his past had let him do all this for them or even expected it, then he’d been taken advantage of.

“That,” he said finally. “That right there. The simple fact that you want me. Not my money. Not my power. Just me. You

allow me to spank your ass until it's bruised, and you don't require anything for it. You let me choke you and handle your beautiful, perfect body roughly and ask nothing of me."

"That's not true," I argued. "I want the mind-blowing orgasms and ... and the connection I feel when we are together."

He growled and ran a hand through his hair. "Dammit, Fawn. You're going to fucking kill me."

"I don't want to keep upsetting you." My voice was pleading. I just wished he'd realize that buying me wasn't needed. I wanted to be with him.

His gray eyes almost royal blue now locked on me. "I want you. I want you here. I want to take care of you. Keep you. Fuck, I want to own you."

Own me? Right now probably wasn't the best time to tell him no man or human was ever going to own me. That was unhinged.

"Just ... give me something. Anything. I need something here, Fawn. I can't win with you." The urgency in his voice made my heart ache.

I closed the space I had put between us and placed my palms against his chest and looked up at him. There was a softer side to Garrett Hughes. Under all that dark, terrifying lord persona of his was a man. One that felt. Had emotions.

"What are we doing? I mean ... I thought it was sex and possibly dating some. Do you always go fill this room with things for women you just started having sex with?"

His jaw tightened. “No.”

That was a relief. “Then, why did you do it for me? Because I live in a camper? Is this charity?”

“Fuck, Fawn! No! Goddammit. I’ve been drawn to you since the first moment I laid eyes on you. Then, the more I learned about you, I was around you, I knew you were different. You affect me in ways I’m not familiar with, but I want it. I did this, knowing I was going to bring you here today, take you out, spoil you, and enjoy watching you smile.”

My heart fluttered in my chest. This man and his words. How was I supposed to say no to him? When he said things like that ... he made me feel special. Worthy of his ridiculous gifts. As if he cherished me. This was going fast—too fast—and I feared it was going to burn out just as quickly. If I wasted our time together, always complaining about his outlandish gestures, I would regret it in the end. Even if I knew, one day, my heart would be left with scorch marks on it.

“If you promise not to buy me any more things,” I began, “I will use the things you have here when we go somewhere together. It’s obvious I don’t personally own clothing that would be appropriate when you’re dressed up in fancy tuxedos. But I will not take the things home with me. I will borrow them so as not to embarrass you when we are together.”

His eyes narrowed. “Embarrass me? Nothing you wear would embarrass me. I bought the clothes because I want to see you in them. Because I know you want to wear them. You will never admit it, but you like pretty things. Beautiful,

expensive things.”

Okay, fine. I was a woman. I liked pretty things. But I wasn't keeping it. I would consider it borrowing.

“I'll make sure to hide the price tags, so after I wear them, you can return them.”

Garrett smirked. “The tags have already been disposed of.”

I sighed, crossing my arms over my chest. “Then, you are good with this arrangement?”

He nodded. “For now.”

I rolled my eyes and turned to walk over to the closet. “You might as well tell me what to wear. I don't know where we are going, and you picked the dresses out—” Any other words that I was about to say fell away as I stood, staring into a closet my camper could be parked inside with room to spare.

There wasn't an inch of it uncovered. Dresses of all kinds, a wall of shoes, a full-length mirror in the middle of the room on a freaking stage with a pink velvet bench/sofa thingy that I knew had a name, but I wasn't sure what it was. A section of the right wall was a glass case, and inside was all kinds of stones sparkling with the lighting. Holy freaking hell. There were drawers partially opened, and I could see silky underthings.

“Garrett,” I choked out, “what is this?”

His hand brushed my hair back over my shoulder as he trailed his knuckles along my bare skin. “Your things.”

I couldn't look at him. “This is insane. You realize that?”

His breath tickled my ear. “You promised to use it. Don’t back out of our deal now.”

I closed my eyes and sighed heavily. “I won’t. But please, please don’t spend any more money on me.” *And please, please don’t get bored with me too quickly.* I just wanted him. As long as I could have him.

His deep chuckle vibrated against my neck. “I’ll try.”

Why did I not believe him?

“Now more than before, I really need you to choose what I wear. This is overwhelming,” I told him.

He walked past me and went to the cocktail dresses. He didn’t look through them, but pulled out one, as if he knew exactly what he wanted me to wear. The strapless white dress shimmered under the light, as if silver had been weaved into the fabric. He walked to the center of the room and hung it on a gold stand that stood beside the mirror.

I watched as he then made his way to the shoes and scanned them before picking up a silver pair that looked like they tied around my ankles. He set them down beneath the dress, then went to open a drawer and began taking out a pair of silver satin panties and a strapless bra that made the corner of my mouth quirk in amusement. He turned to me and held it up, then winked before taking them and placing them on the pink lounge-type sofa thingy—I still didn’t know what it was called.

“Your jewelry is there.” He motioned toward the glass case. “I’ll let you enjoy getting to choose what you’d like to wear

from it.”

I stared at the daunting case. “Is it real?” I asked him.

“Depends. If I tell you yes, will you wear it?” he asked.

I swung my gaze back to him, and he was biting back a smile.

“So, it’s real. Like, not just the gold and silver, but those shiny stones aren’t rhinestones or crystal.”

He laughed then and rubbed his bearded chin. “No, pretty baby. I would never buy you costume jewelry. I want to see you iced in diamonds and other precious stones.”

When he put it like that ... okay. Me too.

“Maybe ... just don’t let me know how much what I choose cost. I’ll have a panic attack over the thought of something falling off or getting lost.”

Garrett crossed the room casually with his gaze never leaving mine. When he stopped in front of me, he leaned down to my ear. “If you lose something, I’ll buy you a replacement.”

“That’s not the point,” I replied, shivering from the warmth of his breath on my neck.

“Get dressed, Fawn, before I fuck you again.”

I wanted to tell him I didn’t see that as a threat. But then I also knew we had to get going because I didn’t want Gypsi at home alone too late. She had decided to work the evening shift when she found out she’d have the car tonight. I was worried about her getting home and walking into the camper alone.

Sex would have to wait.



TWENTY-ONE

FAWN

I should have expected a date with Garrett was going to be anything but normal. The helicopter ride to St. Augustine was a treat I hadn't expected. When we arrived at an exclusive resort, the security gate opened the moment the limo pulled up. A man in a black suit tipped his head in greeting to us as we drove through the big iron gate.

Stepping out of the limo and walking into the hotel, I felt as if I belonged on Garrett's arm. I had chosen diamonds because the hint of silver shimmer to the white dress seemed to call for the clear stone. I touched the necklace that I could feel lying flat on my chest to make sure it was still there.

Garrett tucked my hand into the crook of his arm and led me through the luxurious lobby and toward a set of elevators, where two men stood in suits, like the one outside at the gate had been wearing.

"Good evening, Mr. Hughes," the larger of the two men

said. His neck was muscular. He appeared to be made of muscle. A lot of it. Even his suit couldn't camouflage it.

"Hyce," he said in greeting.

"It's been prepared," the man named Hyce replied.

The doors to the elevator opened, and Garrett led me into it. I felt my heartbeat quicken as the elevator began to rise. There were no buttons or numbers to press, yet it knew where it was going.

"How do guests use this elevator with no buttons?" I asked curiously.

"They don't. It's mine."

"The elevator is yours?"

He nodded. "Yes. So is the resort."

"Another hotel," I said, no longer surprised. "Where does this lead?"

He glanced down at me. "To my private floor. We need to stop there before we head to the ballroom, where the gala is we are attending."

Gala? We were going to a gala? I'd never been to one. I wasn't sure what that actually meant. Just a big cocktail party with a fancy name perhaps?

"So ... would you think I was a complete idiot if I asked what a gala is exactly?"

The corners of his lips lifted. "Nothing would ever make me think you were an idiot. A gala can be held for many reasons. Most are to raise funds for charities. They are formal events

typically. This one is being held to raise funds for the children's hospital. I host it every year here and must make an appearance."

"You host it?" I asked.

He shrugged. "It would be better to say I fund it. Supply the location, cover the costs. There is a committee that puts it all together. A friend of mine is the head of the board, and she got me involved several years ago."

I didn't want to seem ungrateful or rush him, but I'd already told him that Gypsi being at the camper alone late at night bothered me. "I, uh ... how late do you think we will be?"

Garrett looked at his watch, then back to me. "Late. But I have Gypsi and the camper being monitored."

"Monitored?" I asked, confused.

"Two of my men are there, watching to make sure she is safe. She won't see them or know they're there."

I let out a short laugh, somehow shocked that he could still manage to surprise me.

"You have *bodyguards* at my camper?" I asked incredulously.

"Yes, Fawn. They've been there since the night I fucked you on the hood of my car."

"Garrett," I said simply, torn between frustration and relief. "You have got to stop with this kind of thing."

The elevator opened, and Garrett motioned for me to step out. "I want you and your daughter safe. Is that a crime?"

No, it was just a lot to accept.

“Thank you,” I finally replied.

I then walked into what appeared to be the penthouse. The windows straight ahead were floor to ceiling and went all the way around the room. The ocean waves crashed onto the shore in the moonlight, making the view completely breathtaking.

I walked over for a better view now that I could relax and enjoy myself, knowing Gypsi was safe. I’d thought I had that kind of peace when we lived at the clubhouse with Micah. Little had I known, the young prospect she’d started dating in the club would end up being an abusive bastard. He’d verbally beat her down. My fists clenched at my sides as I thought about him. I’d failed my baby girl then. I wasn’t sure I would ever forgive myself for that.

Garrett came up behind me, his hand covering one of my fisted ones. He seemed to notice everything. Not one small detail got past this man.

“Does this view upset you, or is there something else I need to rectify?” he asked.

I looked at his reflection in the glass. He was taller than me, even in these heels. His broad shoulders in that tux and the powerful look of his firm jawline, perfect bone structure, and piercing eyes made me shiver. Was he truly as dangerous as Micah and Josephine had suggested? I’d watched men cower and bow their heads in his presence. Why? What was it that made him wield that kind of power?

“I was thinking of something in the past,” I finally admitted.

“This? This is beautiful. You keep introducing me to views that I think can’t get any better, but then they do.”

He lifted a hand and ran it over my bare shoulder, then down my arm as his gaze held mine in the reflection. “I’m expected at the gala, but I’m struggling with the desire to strip this dress off you and fuck you in those heels.”

I wanted to turn around and beg him to do just that, but one of us had to be responsible. If the gala was at his hotel and for the children’s hospital, he needed to show up.

“If Gypsi is safe tonight, then after the gala, I’d be very interested in that scenario,” I told him.

He chuckled deep in his chest. “You’d be interested, huh?”

I nodded, smiling at him.

He lowered his head and brushed his lips against my ear. “Gypsi is safe. I have two of my best men protecting her,” he promised me. “Let’s go to the gala, where I’m going to have a hard time thinking of anything other than you naked in those heels.”

I turned around to face him, and he took my hand in his, then raised it to his lips and pressed a kiss to my palm before releasing it at my side.

Without another word, he led me back to the elevator.

“What did you need to come here first for?” I asked him, thinking he’d forgotten to get something.

His lips curled at the corners. “I wanted you to see it.”

I raised my eyebrows as I smiled up at him. “You were

showing off then? Trust me, Garrett Hughes, I am already impressed with all you own.”

He cupped my chin in his hand. “It’s not to impress you,” he corrected me. “It’s because you light up like the fucking sun when I show you anything with a stunning view. Just to see you brighten an entire room with your joy, I want to take you all over the world. There are so many views I want you to see.”

I blinked as I reminded myself to breathe. He continued to do and say things that made it hard to believe he was a bad man—or a dangerous one. Perhaps he was dangerous, but he wasn’t when it came to me.

The elevator opened, and Garrett placed my hand in the crook of his arm as we strode into a small area before two more men with small microphone headpieces stepped forward and reached for the double doors in front of us.

Garrett gave one nod, and the men stepped back as they each took a handle. The doors opened, and we stepped into a ballroom filled with men in tuxedos and women in fabulous dresses and draped in jewels while servers walked among them, carrying trays with crystal champagne flutes as well as hors d’oeuvres. A live jazz band was on a far stage.

Unintentionally, my hand tightened its hold on Garrett’s arm. He glanced down at me, and I turned to meet his gaze. I was out of my element. For the first time in my life, I wasn’t so sure I could do this. I loved adventures, but somehow, Garrett had turned this into more for me. I didn’t want to disappoint him. The pressure not to do so in an environment

like this was terrifying.

“You’re the most beautiful woman in this room, Fawn,” he said to me, not even attempting to whisper it in case someone else heard him. “And you’re mine. Relax.”

I wasn’t his. I was my own person. I didn’t correct him though because, right now, I felt like a small fish in a tank of sharks. For this moment, I was going to be his. It was the only way I could survive this. I simply nodded.

He led us into the extravagantly decorated room. People watched us as we approached, and I could see the hopeful looks in their eyes, as if they wanted to be the ones that Garrett chose to speak to first or at all. Awe, respect, fear were all clearly directed at Garrett from the men in the room. The women all held a level of desire and lust as they looked his way. Their gazes flitted over me briefly, as if measuring me up as competition before swinging back to him. Lashes batted flirtatiously. Even from the women with rocks on their hands that clearly stated they were married.

Garrett made his choice as we came up to a group of three men and one woman. I checked to see the woman was indeed married before smiling at her and receiving a smile that did not meet her eyes.

“Garrett.” The heavier, almost-bald man beamed. As if he wanted to make sure the rest of the guests didn’t miss who Garrett had spoken to first.

“Howell,” he replied with a slight nod, and then he turned his focus to me. “Fawn, this is Howell Fernmore. He’s a real estate developer.”

He then flicked his eyes toward the second man, who was younger than Howell and less bulky with brown hair and friendly green eyes. “Mack Barley, an investment banker I do business with.”

Then, his gaze swung to the last man, a middle-aged man who was clearly trying to hold on to his youth. He was attractive in a trying-too-hard way. The woman beside him was younger than me, but not by much. Her dark red hair was pulled up in a twist while tendrils of loose curls framed her face. She didn’t take her eyes off Garrett, and I wondered if her husband noticed the way she was looking at another man. The invitation in her gaze was blatantly obvious.

“Darce Morgan is the CEO of a mobile app development company and last year’s largest contributor to our fundraiser here. Then, of course, his lovely wife, Maya,” Garrett finished, barely glancing her way. He didn’t give them the same introduction as to who I was. I didn’t think it was an insult—at least not by the way he held me so closely to his side.

“It’s nice to meet you all,” I replied, smiling at each one.

“The pleasure is ours,” Mack Barley replied.

The others agreed, except Maya, who smiled tightly at me.

I listened to them talk business and took comfort in Garrett’s hand now resting on my hip. He took a champagne flute from a server and handed it to me, then pressed a kiss to my temple before continuing his conversation. I sipped it slowly as he finished talking to the men, then moved us away from them.

The next group was immediate. Almost as if they’d

positioned themselves there so that Garrett had to see them. It went on like this long enough for me to have two drinks and some deliciousness—I had no idea what it was, but it had been creamy and melted in my mouth. I'd caught Garrett watching me eat it and ignoring the man talking to him. My face had heated, and I'd bitten back a smile as I swallowed.

When the crowd began to move toward the back opening, Garrett leaned down to me. "It's time for the meal. After, we will make our exit."

"Okay," I replied.

"Are you enjoying yourself?" he asked, genuine concern in his eyes.

I nodded. "Yes. It's not as scary as I thought it would be."

His gaze fell to my lips before he turned his attention back to where we were going. "When you're with me, you never have reason to fear, Fawn," he told me.

The table we came to was the closest one to the stage and smaller than the others. The chairs here stood out too. They were more lush than the other tables' chairs. It was as if they'd prepared a table for the king and the rest was for those lucky enough to attend his ball.

Garrett pulled out a chair for me, and I sat down as he pushed it back toward the table. He took the seat beside me. Trying to remember all the etiquette I'd picked up over the years from working at fancy restaurants, I reached for my napkin and placed it in my lap. Garrett's hand, however, bunched the napkin up as he rested his palm on my thigh when

I crossed my legs.

Biting back a smile, I lifted my gaze from my lap to look at the rest of the people at the table. Then, my eyes locked on the woman sitting almost across from me—the same woman from the night Garrett had fired me from the Winchester Parlor. Lydia. The one who had asked questions that made my temper snap.

Why was she here? When I'd asked about her, Garrett had said she was someone he dated occasionally. He hadn't warned me she would be in attendance.

As if reading my thoughts, Garrett gripped my thigh with a gentle pressure. The woman's gaze flashed hate, mixed with disgust. I quickly looked away from her, needing a moment to digest this. The familiar face of Zion Oscar, a casino owner and a regular in the Winchester Parlor, eased me some.

He tilted his head in my direction and held up his drink. "It's nice to see you here, Fawn. You look stunning."

Garrett's hand flexed, squeezing my leg.

"Thank you, Mr. Oscar," I replied.

"Please, it's Zion," he told me.

I blushed from his appreciative gleam and nodded. He didn't mention the club or the fact that Garrett had brought one of the servers with him as his date. I was grateful, but then I doubted anyone who recognized me would say anything, for fear of Garrett's reaction.

"Ah, I thought I knew the beauty on Garrett's arm," Gunther Ford's deep voice boomed as he and an attractive woman took

their seats to the right of Lydia.

“Audrey, dear,” he said to the woman, “this is Fawn Parker. Fawn, this is my wife, Audrey.”

She seemed nicer than the other women I’d met tonight. Although her smile told me she knew I was a server.

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Fawn,” she said as she sat down.

The rock on her hand caught the light and twinkled. I was almost positive Leo had said Gunther Ford owned a large horse racing ranch, almost as big as Garrett’s.

“You too,” I replied.

I did not know the man on the other side of Lydia. He hadn’t spoken, and Garrett hadn’t acknowledged him. Neither had he acknowledged Lydia. The awkwardness of that fact wasn’t going unnoticed by the others at the table.

“You’ve done an excellent job once again, Lydia,” Audrey said, smiling warmly at the woman.

My gaze flickered to Lydia.

She seemed pleased as she looked across the table at Garrett. “Thank you, but as always, I couldn’t have done any of this without Garrett.”

The way she said his name made me tense. The familiarity and affection in her tone caused my stomach to feel funny. She was the friend of his who had organized this function. Why hadn’t he told me that? Had he left out that detail for a reason?

“Everything Garrett touches turns to gold,” Gunther Ford

said jovially. “Unfortunately for me, that includes thoroughbreds.”

The other men chuckled at the table.

“As long as a Hughes horse is in the race, you’re fucked, Gunther,” Zion informed him before taking another drink.

A woman appeared at the empty seat beside him at that moment, and he immediately stood up and pulled out the chair for her.

“Greta, you know everyone,” Zion said to the striking brunette. Then, he turned to me. “Oh, yes, you haven’t met the beauty on Garrett’s arm tonight,” he said. “Fawn, this is Greta. Greta, Fawn.” His hand did a slight wave between us with his basic introduction.

She wasn’t wearing a ring on her left hand, and Zion didn’t appear to want to elaborate on who she was other than his date.

The men began to talk about the Kentucky Derby coming up next week, and I felt Lydia’s gaze on me more than once. Garrett hadn’t spoken to her or even looked her way. His hand left my leg when the first course was served. Feeling as if everyone was watching me, waiting for me to mess up or embarrass myself, I lost my appetite.

“Will you be attending the derby with Garrett again this year, Lydia?” Audrey asked.

The small amount of salad I’d managed to swallow felt like it was now lodged in my throat. I stilled, unsure if it was safe to attempt to take another bite. I reached for my flute, and my

hand brushed against it clumsily, causing it to tilt.

Garrett's hand shot out and steadied it before the drink spilled all over the table. I forced myself to take a breath as my heart raced in my chest. I knew they'd all witnessed this, and it seemed like all eyes were on me—but I didn't dare to look up and check.

My face heated, and I wanted to bolt from the room. Go back to the security of my camper. Take off these ridiculous clothes that I didn't belong in and put on my cutoff sweats.

“We haven't—” Lydia began, but was cut off.

“Fawn will be attending with me this year.” Garrett's words were spoken casually, but there was a warning laced in them.

The table was silent for a moment.

“Have you ever attended the derby before, Fawn?” Zion asked in a kind voice. As if trying to ease the table's sudden uncertainty.

I looked up from my glass to meet his eyes. “No,” I replied with a shake of my head. “This will be a first.” That I have even heard about my attending it. I left that out though.

Garrett hadn't asked me, and he knew I couldn't just leave Gypsi and my job to run off to Kentucky with him. I wouldn't point that out. Not with Lydia sitting across the table, who had clearly gone with him in the past. The idea of him taking her if I didn't go was making me ill.

“You'll never be able to go again after you've experienced it with Garrett. All other trips will fall woefully short,” Gunther said in an amused tone. “This will be the trip of a lifetime.”

What he didn't add was, *For a server like you*. I appreciated that.

"I do hope you're still going, Lydia," Audrey pressed.

Before Lydia could reply and make this even more awkward, Garrett cleared his throat, then turned his attention to Zion and asked him about his upcoming venture with Darce Morgan. It seemed the casino Zion owned was having an app developed with gambling included.

The others at the table seemed to accept the fact that Garrett had ended the conversation and any mention of Lydia. It wasn't until the third course was served that I was able to enjoy my food again.



TWENTY-TWO

FAWN

The champagne had gotten to me, and I'd needed to use the restroom, but more than that, I wanted a break from it all. The meal was over, and I knew Garrett was going to finish speaking to those who desperately wanted his attention before we escaped. I had taken the chance to excuse myself to the ladies' room.

My hand was on the brass handle of the white wooden door of the stall I'd used when I recognized Lydia's voice. I paused, not wanting to go out there and face that woman. I already knew, without Garrett around, she was going to take the opportunity to be nasty.

"She's a server at the club. That's all. In fact, he fired her for being rude to me the last time I was there with him. I have no idea why he has her here as a date," Lydia drawled in an annoyed tone.

"It's his MO. You know that by now. He likes the trashy

ones, but he gets bored quickly and tosses them. You'll more than likely be on his arm at the derby. You are the only female he keeps around," Audrey replied.

"I know. It just gets weary. I'm growing tired of this game of his," Lydia said. "It's always the needy gold diggers that he seems drawn to. He likes showering them with gifts, getting his sexual kinks off with them, and then it's done."

"Has he brought up marriage again?" Audrey asked.

Lydia sighed. "Yes. We were talking about it regularly until lately. I should just tell him he can keep his side cunts when we get married. I'll overlook it."

Audrey giggled. "For that man's money, I'd let him have them and watch if he required it."

Lydia let out a short laugh. "Oh, I have. More than once."

Audrey gasped. "You've watched him have sex?"

"Yes. Garrett likes kinky shit. You have to accept it from him. It's why we work. His former wives didn't want to play his games."

The bile in my throat had risen to the point that I was almost positive I was going to be sick. I gripped the handle tightly and closed my eyes, then breathed in through my nose, trying to fight it back. I had to get out of here. I had to get home. Take the money I had and move me and Gypsi north.

I'd been a fool. Garrett wasn't some knight in shining armor. He was the beautiful devil I'd thought he was the first time I met him. His charm had confused me. Tricked me.

He had made me feel something for him.

The women's voices faded away, and I waited until I heard the door close before I stepped out of the stall. I stared at my reflection in the mirror in horror. Why was it that I always picked the wrong men? I should have stopped after Micah. Before I actually began to feel things. Even knowing the truth about Garrett and where I stood with him, my heart ached.

I wanted to be furious, and later, I would be. Right now, I just needed to hold it together until we could escape this place. There would be no going back to his penthouse. Either he would take me back to Ocala in his helicopter or I'd rent a car and drive myself. Money I really didn't need to spend right now, but I would if he pushed me.

The restroom door swung open, and I turned to get out of there before anyone else could share what they knew about Garrett and his past. However, when steel-gray eyes met mine, I froze. The wrinkle between his brow as he studied me was one of concern.

"What are you doing in here, Garrett?" I asked, shocked.

"Coming to get you," he replied. "You've been in here awhile. Are you feeling okay?"

I wanted to laugh. Was I feeling okay? NO! I was not anywhere close to feeling okay.

"I'm fine. Can I not take my time in the *ladies' room*?" I snapped.

His eyes narrowed. "What is wrong, Fawn?" he asked, closing the distance between us.

I took a step back and shook my head. He was not going to touch me. Ever again.

“Fawn, you’re going to tell me what the fuck is wrong, or I’m going to throw you over my goddamn shoulder and walk out of this place with you,” he warned.

I took another step back. My own anger was beginning to boil as the hurt in my chest continued to remind me the power I’d given this man over me. “I want to leave. I’ll walk out of here with you, but we are leaving. Not going to your penthouse.”

In two long strides, Garrett was in front of me. He wrapped his hand around my upper arm. “What happened?” he demanded.

“Why do you assume something happened?” I shot back at him.

His pupils dilated as he stared down at me. “Because I’m not a fucking idiot. You didn’t leave me angry, but right now, my pretty baby, you are ready to blow smoke from your ears.”

The door started to open behind us, and Garrett barely tilted his head to the side as he shouted, “DON’T!”

The door fell closed.

His eyes snapped back to mine. “Talk now, Fawn. If you don’t, I will go out there and make a scene. Starting with Lydia.”

My eyes flared as her name on his lips soured my stomach. “So, you know what’s wrong.”

His jaw clenched. “I saw her come in here. When she stayed too long and you didn’t come out, I came to get you.”

I sneered at him. “So, you’re keeping tabs on her? Making sure no man touches what’s yours? Watching her while you’re here with me?”

His hand tightened on my arm and jerked me against his chest. “The only woman my eyes have been on *is you*. She just got too close to you, and I saw it. What the fuck did she say to you?”

I shook my head. “Nothing.”

“BULLSHIT!” he roared.

I tried to shove him away, but he held me tightly.

“She didn’t say one word to me. I was in the stall. She said the words to Audrey. They discussed all the trashy women you play with, then toss. How she was willing to accept that when you were married. How you and she had talked about marriage. There was more, but that was the gist of it.”

I couldn’t give him any more details. It was hurting too bad. More than I could have ever imagined. What had I let myself get into? Why this man?

“That’s what they said?” he asked, his tone sounding lethal. His jaw flexed, and his nostrils flared as he inhaled.

I shrugged as if I wasn’t slowly falling apart.

Garrett let go of my arm and grabbed my hand, then began pulling me after him as he made his way to the door. I had to follow him or fall on my face. I managed to keep up as he

stormed out of the restroom and into the ballroom, where couples were dancing and mingling.

I couldn't ask where we were going or even ask him to slow down. If I was going to keep from tripping in these heels as he stalked through guests then I had to focus on walking. I noticed people turning their heads to look at us—or more likely me. I was the one being dragged through the crowd.

When he finally stopped, he pulled me against him, his hand locking down on my hip. My eyes landed on Lydia. She was talking to a group of people, and I could see the smile waver on her face as she glanced from me to Garrett.

“This is over. Enjoy your last night as chairman of the committee. You will no longer be involved with anything that I own or control. If I see you near me, anything I own, or even hear that my name or Fawn's name has come from your mouth”—he paused—“you will regret it.”

The last four words hung in the air. I shivered from the finality they'd held.

“Garrett,” she began, but he didn't let her go any further.

“Apologize to Fawn,” he demanded.

Lydia blinked, as if stunned. “Fo-for what?” she stammered.

“Don't insult me,” he warned.

She swallowed hard, her gaze moving to mine. The terror in her eyes was unmistakable. “I'm sorry, Fawn,” she croaked. The words sounded as if they'd been torn out of her.

“For what?” Garrett ordered.

Her eyes flickered to his, then snapped back to me. The spooked look now on her face was unsettling. “For what I said in the restroom.”

Shocked by her words, I turned to look up at Garrett. The veins in his neck stood out as he barely seemed to control his rage.

When she turned her attention back to him, she looked at him pleadingly. “Can’t you just talk to me?”

“I have no use for you or anything you have to say. Goodbye, Lydia,” he replied, his words loud enough for anyone standing around to hear, even over the music. He pressed his hand on my lower back, then led me to the exit.

The men at the double doors were the same ones who had greeted us. They opened them as we approached. It wasn’t until we were inside the elevator that Garrett looked at me again.

“We are going to my penthouse, and you’re going to tell me every lie that came from that bitch’s mouth,” he informed me.

“Garrett, I just want to go home,” I said.

“No. You’re not going anywhere until I know what was said so I can fix that look on your face. It’s making me want to commit murder. That beautiful face should only be happy, smiling, or full of pleasure.”

God help me. I needed this man to stop saying things like that.

“Tonight was draining,” I began.

But before I could say more, Garrett backed me up against the wall of the elevator and caged me in with his arms. His palms flattened beside each side of my head.

“I will not let anyone hurt you. Lydia did, and it’s my fucking fault. I shouldn’t have allowed the bitch anywhere near you. I won’t make that mistake again.” He lowered his face so that his lips hovered over mine. “She has never meant anything to me, Fawn. She was a fuck. A convenient one.”

“Isn’t that all I am? A fuck?” I asked.

His eyes narrowed. “Never let that shit come out of your pretty lips again. Do you understand me, Fawn? I won’t allow anyone to degrade you, even yourself.”

I sighed, wishing I had the strength to walk away from him before he truly did own me. He’d claimed he did, and I’d balked at it, but it was becoming more of a threat than I’d realized. My head knew better, but the rest of me craved it. Wanted it. Screamed for him to own me.

The elevator doors opened, and Garrett took my arm and led me into his penthouse. Once he had me to the black leather sectional sofa that made a U instead of just an L-shape, overlooking the ocean view, he stopped and backed me up against the edge of it.

“What did she say?” he demanded.

“Don’t make me repeat it,” I begged.

“I can’t fix it if I don’t know what you heard.”

I shook my head. “You don’t have to fix it.”

“Like hell I don’t!” He raised his voice. “I’m hanging on to my rage by a thread, pretty baby. You either talk to me or someone will pay for the fury I need to unleash.”

He was serious. It wasn’t a threat; it was a warning.

“What if you only get angrier when you hear it?” I asked, realizing that was highly probable.

He clenched his jaw again. “Tell me.”

I sighed, knowing he wasn’t going to let this go. I stared up into his eyes, wanting to see the reaction there and gauge just how much was true. For my sanity’s sake. I had to know if I was what Lydia had claimed I was in the restroom.

“I’m the type that you like to lavish with gifts, fuck, then toss when you get bored,” I began.

His nostrils flared as the black of his eyes almost took over the gray completely.

“Continue,” he growled.

“Lydia is the woman you keep around. You plan on marrying her. She keeps you happy with your kinks, including watching you fuck women ... the trashy ones, like me.”

His body was so tense that I trembled.

“Is that all?” he asked.

I nodded. “Except for her telling Audrey about me working at the club and you firing me because I was rude to her.”

“Audrey was involved in this?” His eyes narrowed.

I nodded.

“Did she speak about you the same way? Or just listen?”

“The same,” I whispered, wondering if I should have kept my mouth shut about that.

He cupped my face with one of his hands and looked down at me with so much fierceness that it should frighten me. Instead, my body tingled.

“I’ve fucked a lot of women. I had Lydia watch. I liked an audience. I’ve given women gifts because I knew they expected them. It kept them happy. They did what I wanted.” His voice was hoarse.

My mouth opened slightly as he brushed my bottom lip with the pad of his thumb.

“But not once did I think about them when they weren’t with me. Not one fucking time did I fight the urge to go to them every moment I was awake. Never did I take them to my home, fill the room adjacent to mine with beautiful things. Not even my ex-wives were given that room, Fawn. I didn’t want them that close. I ache to have you beside me all the time. I can’t fucking concentrate when you’re not around. When I can’t see you. This isn’t like the other times. This isn’t even like the times I was married. I’ve never needed a woman ... until you.”

My eyes stung with unshed tears as I stared up at him. His beautiful, formidable, compelling face. How did I walk away from him, forget his words, let this go? Maybe a smarter woman would, but I didn’t want to be smarter. I wanted to be with him. I wanted to believe in this fairy tale he was slowly unraveling before me.

“I am sorry you had to hear her spiteful, jealous words. I can’t promise it won’t happen with another female from my past. What I can promise is, I will handle it. They’ll pay for hurting you. Anyone who hurts you will pay. The only reason Lydia gets to live is because she’s a woman.”

I touched his face, and he rubbed his bearded cheek against my palm as he closed his eyes briefly.

“You aren’t going to kill anyone for hurting me,” I said with a touch of amusement at his passionate exaggeration.

When his eyes opened again and consumed mine, I saw something there that made me question what I’d just said. Would he kill someone?

“The things I’d do for you,” he said in a husky whisper before his mouth slammed down on mine and made me forget any other thoughts.

The taste of his scotch and roughness of his kiss aroused me. I was suddenly frantic to feel more, have more of him. My hands went to his waist, and I began to unfasten his pants.

A low, deep, animalistic sound came from his chest as he grabbed my face with both hands. I continued to soak in his erotic kiss while he sucked on my tongue. Once I had his pants undone, I shoved them down. He pulled back to look at me, and I sank down onto my knees, running my nails down his thighs as I went.

“Pretty baby,” he murmured, “you sure you want me to fuck that mouth?”

I nodded, taking his long, hard shaft in my hands. Pre-cum

glistened at the tip, and I licked it, causing him to back up against the tall pillar behind him.

“Fuck,” he groaned, his eyes locked on my mouth as I slid the head between my lips.



TWENTY-THREE

GARRETT

There was not one ounce of control left in my body. Not when Fawn was looking up at me with those golden eyes, her plump lips wrapped around my cock. I hadn't encouraged this because I knew the moment I had her on her knees, I was going to snap. The impulse and greed clawing at my chest were powerful.

I wrapped her pale blonde hair around my hand and jerked it. Her eyes flared with fear and lust. That was my favorite combination.

"Tug your dress down so I can see those tits," I ordered.

She used her free hand to do as I'd said. The strapless bra was covering them, and she grinned around my cock. I thought I was going to have to punish her, but she tugged it down, too, so that I had a clear view of her breasts. Fuck, that little bit of rebellion on her perfect body made me crazy.

I slammed my cock until it hit the back of her throat, and she gagged. Watching her eyes water made me feel barbaric. Losing the little restraint, I had left, I began fucking her mouth like a man unhinged. With each sound she made, every tear that rolled down her face, the bit of her nails piercing my thighs, I became more manic.

“Good girl,” I chanted. “Such a good fucking girl.”

The pleased glint in her golden gaze let me know she was enjoying this. I might have her hair wrapped around my fist, but she held the power, and she knew it. She had my complete body at her will. Right now, she owned me.

“Suck it, pretty baby,” I panted, so close to shooting my load down her throat. My hips thrust faster as I felt the tingle up my spine. “Swallow for Daddy,” I said hoarsely. “Take it all, pretty baby.”

The lust in her eyes did me in. I grabbed the back of her head with both hands as my body jerked, my release pumping out of me.

“FUUUCK!” I roared as she took it from me. Not pulling away. Letting me hold her there as my cum coated her throat. My knees felt weak, and I wasn’t sure I wouldn’t black out this time.

I eased my hold on her head as I finished and looked down as she let my semi-hard dick fall from her mouth. Her tongue flicked out one last time to clean the head, and then she licked her lips slowly before standing up.

I stared at her in awe. If she hadn’t already fucked me up

with her magical pussy, then this would have been my undoing. I didn't want to think about all the experience she'd had at sucking dicks. There would never be another one in her mouth but mine.

She leaned into me, her piercings brushing against my chest, and I wanted us naked. All these layers of fucking clothes off.

"You enjoyed that," I said to her as she smiled up at me.

"It's a rush," she said, running her nails over my chest. "Knowing for a few minutes, I have you, Mr. Powerful, Intimidating, Often Frightening, in the palm of my hand."

I smirked and ran a finger over her lips. "I was thinking it was more in the depths of these lips, but I'm betting you could own me with your hand too."

A small laugh escaped her, and it was like a balm after the pain I'd seen in her eyes earlier. My pretty baby was only supposed to be happy. I wanted those laughs. I wanted all of them.

"Come back to my house with me. Stay the night," I urged her.

She shook her head. "I can't do that. Gypsi doesn't need to be left alone."

"I have her being guarded."

I didn't like the sad smile that touched her lips.

"She doesn't know that though. She won't sleep good without me there."

"We'll go get her. I have plenty of rooms. I've got one she

will love. It's fit for a princess." I was on the cusp of pleading.

I wanted Fawn in my bed. In my arms.

A soft laugh bubbled out of her. "You do not know my daughter."

I cupped her face. "I want to. I want to know everything about you."

She blinked, and those golden depths tugged at something in my chest. Deep.

"This is moving fast, Garrett. I can't just bring another man in her life when I don't know where this is going with us."

Fuck that. I didn't like the thought of any man other than me in Fawn's life.

"It isn't going to end anytime soon, Fawn. What I said earlier, I want you at the derby with me. Both of you. I'll get her a suite close to ours. She'll love it. So will you."

Her full, plump lower lip was caught between her teeth. I wanted to be the one biting it. I waited as she battled her decision, different emotions playing over her expressive face.

"I've always wanted to go to the Kentucky Derby. Will I get to wear a hat?"

A relieved bark of laughter came from my chest as I grinned down at her. "Yes, pretty baby. I'll buy you as many hats as you want."

She tilted her head to the side. "I just need one."

Shrugging, I lowered my head until my lips hovered over hers. "I'll give you whatever you want if you come. I'll

provide you and Gypsi with a wardrobe for the entire trip. All you have to do is be ready.”

“The massive room you call a closet at your house has plenty of clothes. We wear the same size. Don’t you dare buy anything else. We can take things from there.” The scowl on her face was adorable.

“Whatever you want,” I agreed before covering her lips with mine.



TWENTY-FOUR

FAWN

Convincing Garrett to allow me to choose dresses from the ones he'd already purchased was a little difficult. However, I had won the argument, and he'd come with me into the room of fancy clothes. I refused to refer to this as a closet when my camper could fit in here.

Seeing him standing in the center of the feminine room—his arms crossed over his wide chest, his brown cowboy hat settled on his head, and wearing those jeans that fit him perfectly—was slightly distracting. Managing to focus on my task as I looked through one beautiful dress after another, trying to decide what Gypsi would look best in, got easier the less I looked his way.

I pulled out a lemon-colored dress that would be stunning on Gypsi. I wasn't sure she'd like the bow on one shoulder, but it would be breathtaking on her.

“You'd look incredible in that one at the derby,” Garrett said

behind me. “When I chose it, I could picture you in it.”

In my head, I had assumed he’d had a stylist buy all these and stock this room. Maybe just did a quick appraisal and approval. I hadn’t actually thought he’d hand-picked them all himself. Knowing he’d chosen this dress with me in mind changed things. I turned back to him and walked over to hang the dress on the gold stand by the mirror. I’d find Gypsi something just as lovely, but I would be wearing this one.

His pleased smile made my stomach feel fluttery.

“I was thinking of it for Gypsi,” I admitted.

“She’s your twin. I imagine it would look nice on her too. But I’m glad you’re going to wear it for me,” he replied.

I paused. How did he know what Gypsi looked like? He’d not met her.

“When have you seen her?” I asked, feeling my spine stiffen in an immediate protective stance.

Garrett raised an eyebrow. “Fawn, I have her being followed, guarded at all times, just as I have with you. Do you think I’d expect my men to know what she looks like without knowing myself?”

Followed? All the time?! I’d thought he just had someone watching the camper at night. He’d not mentioned this. I wasn’t sure I liked the idea of men I didn’t know following my daughter. Especially with her knowing nothing of it. My chest felt tight, and I wanted to shout at him for the assumption that he could do such a thing. She was mine to protect. I hadn’t asked him to do this.

“I don’t recall you asking me if I was okay with that,” I snapped.

Garrett sighed and took his hat off, then ran his hand over his dark locks. “Fawn, I’m doing it for you. I don’t see the issue here.”

I pointed a finger at his chest, getting angrier by the minute. “The issue is that she is mine. That is an invasion of her privacy. Just because ... because we are seeing each other doesn’t mean you have the right to put your men, employees, whatever on surveillance of her twenty-four/seven. I appreciate the night security, but that is it! She doesn’t need to be watched all the time. That’s ... that’s controlling, and I don’t like it.”

Garrett grabbed my wrist and pulled my finger from his chest, where I’d jammed it a few times in my tirade. His fingers bit into my skin, and I tensed as the sinister glare in his eyes held me. There was a line with Garrett. One that no one else ever dared to get close to. I seemed to not only get close, but also jump right on over it regularly. He wasn’t going to intimidate me, and he sure as hell wasn’t going to control me or my daughter.

“Careful, pretty baby,” he scolded.

I glowered up at him. I wasn’t backing down just because he got all villainous-looking.

“If you want a woman who will cower when you snap your fingers or squeeze her wrist, then we need to end this now. I am not her!”

A crooked grin curled his lips. “Is that so?” he drawled.

I tried to wrench my hand from his grip, but he held it firmly.

“YES!” I shouted.

He jerked me forward until I was plastered against the front of him. I didn’t show any fear even if there was a stirring of it in my chest, along with something I didn’t want to admit to. Admitting would make me as depraved as he was.

He tossed his hat onto the pink sofa thing and then grabbed my hair in his fist, tugging my head back further. His eyes slowly drifted over my face while I stood there, breathing hard, giving away the fact that he was getting to me. He knew it too, judging by the way his nostrils flared as he inhaled and his jaw tensed.

“I don’t allow anyone to speak to me the way you just did,” he said in a low, deep voice that made me shiver. It was as if the Devil himself had spoken. Cold, hard, and terrifying.

I would not bow down to this man. I was a mom, dammit, and I had Gypsi to think about.

“And I don’t allow anyone to stalk my daughter the way you’ve been doing,” I blurted.

That evil grin touched his lips again. “That’s a reach, pretty baby. Stalking and protecting are not the same.”

I tried to ease the tight hold he had on my hair, but he just pulled harder, making me gasp.

“Tsk-tsk, naughty girl. Don’t make me hurt you.”

I swallowed hard, hating my traitorous body for reacting to that.

He shoved me closer against him and lowered his mouth to my throat, where the roughness of his beard scratched me before he pressed a kiss to the pulse in my neck. “All I want to do is protect you, make you happy, see you smile,” he murmured against my skin. “Why do you have to be so disobedient? Igniting my temper. Making me want to spank your ass until it’s bright red and tender? Hmm?”

Don’t cave, Fawn, I chanted in my head. Do not let him get to you. Stand your ground on this.

“Why do you have to be so domineering?” I choked out. My heart was pounding in my chest.

He ran his nose along my neck until he reached my ear. “Because I take care of what’s mine.” The husky tone of his voice made me shudder.

“You don’t own me,” I argued, but even to my ears, it sounded weak. I was losing this battle. My body was once again becoming his own little personal puppet.

“Are you sure?” he taunted me as his hand released my wrist, and he shoved his hand into the front of my shorts.

I gasped loudly as he slid his middle finger between my folds until it was teasing the entrance that was already damp and achy.

“That’s a wet pussy for someone who doesn’t want me to own them,” he pointed out.

I closed my eyes tightly, fighting for some control. Anything

to get my point across. “Just because I like how you fuck me doesn’t mean I belong to you.”

A deep chuckle vibrated in his chest as he started slowly pumping his finger inside of me. I grabbed his arms to keep myself steady, and my forehead fell against his chest. The whimper that came from my lips was unavoidable. He had me. The man knew how to pleasure me in ways I’d never experienced. I couldn’t push him away. I didn’t want to.

“You want it,” he jeered. “You want me to please this sweet pussy. Make it feel good.”

I couldn’t argue right now. My hips were riding his hand, seeking more.

He let go of his tight hold of my hair, then turned me around, backing me up to the pink sofa-lounger thing. I watched as he knocked his hat onto the floor, then pushed me down onto it. I expected him to unzip his jeans, but instead, he grabbed my throat and continued to fuck me with his finger. I stared up at him, helpless. He controlled me. Something I hated yet craved.

“You’re gonna come hard. Right here in this pretty room. I’m going to show you just how much I own this pussy.”

The urge to slap him and plead with him for more was neck and neck. I couldn’t decide which I wanted more. As if he could read my mind, he ran the pad of his thumb over my clit and massaged it. I became frantic. Begging through the gasps that I was restricted to with the tight hold he had on my neck.

His eyes now a dark gray stared down at me, and the

ruthless flare, mixed with perverse satisfaction, sent me spiraling into the abyss of my orgasm. My body bucked underneath his hold as his hand tightened until I almost couldn't breathe.

"That's it. Squirt all over my hand," he coaxed. "I want that cunt soaking wet."

The rapture sent me flying, and for a moment, I forgot that this was a power play. That Garrett was using my body to make a point. His point.

He released my neck, and I sucked in a deep breath as the euphoria began to ease away. As I stared up into his sinfully handsome, smug face, the dazed fog in my head began to clear. I sat up, shoving him back. I couldn't do this. Let him always be in charge. Always get his way by giving me orgasms. That was weak and just ... pathetic!

"I'm leaving. We aren't going to the derby," I stated angrily and on the verge of tears. "I will not allow you to control my life!"

The thought of him taking some other woman—kissing her, touching her—burned in my chest so much that it was almost impossible for me to speak. But I wasn't any woman. I was a mom. I had responsibilities to Gypsi, and I'd already failed her once because of a man. Put her in danger. No more. I would not ever do that again. She was—and always would be—my number one.

Rushing to the door to get out before he could stop me, I all but ran out of it.

“I don’t chase, Fawn. If you leave, that’s the end.” Garrett’s warning was a cold, brutal truth. There was no emotion in it. He didn’t soften it. He simply stated it.

When I reached the door to his master suite, I paused. I let his warning sink in, and it felt as if my chest was literally breaking in two. The thought of this being done, not having him smile at me or hold me, felt like the world was being snatched away. But this couldn’t be about me. Tears ran down my face as I opened the door and left.

He didn’t follow me. When I stepped into the elevator, there was still no sign of him. I wiped at my face and let out a sob as the doors closed.

I’d let myself care too much. I’d given him a part of myself I hadn’t known was available.

Garrett Hughes had done what no other man had managed to do. Make me want more. Make me want a future. He’d become more than another adventure.

For a moment, I’d thought he would be my greatest and last adventure.



TWENTY-FIVE

FAWN

I was no longer Garrett's exclusive server at work. I wasn't even in the Winchester Parlor. I had been moved to the Monte Cristo Lounge. Silas had given me a pitying look when he informed me of the change. I wanted to tell him I'd been the one to walk away and end things. It had been my decision. But I would be lying. I had been hurt and frustrated because I wanted Garrett to listen to me.

Garrett had chosen to toss me aside. He had done it so easily too. Leaving me to face the fact that I was the only one catching feelings. The irony was not lost on me. How many times had I walked away from a man who claimed to love me or be falling in love with me? This must be fate balancing things out. Letting me see how it felt.

Well, fate, it sucked. It more than sucked.

I was barely managing to hold it together. Smile for Gypsi, smile at work, keep my chin up when all I wanted to do was

curl into a ball and wail from the pain of it all. The one thing I held on to was that I had done right by Gypsi.

A few more weeks at this place, and we'd move north. I was thinking as far as Charleston. If I was careful with money, we might be able to afford to stay there for a while. Maybe through the fall. Focusing on the future and the adventure to come was the only way I managed to get through a shift.

When I heard Garrett's name spoken by anyone, I would catch myself clambering to listen and had to run from it. Shut it out. I needed to kill whatever this was inside of me that wanted him. Keeping up with his life wasn't going to do that for me.

The derby was this coming weekend, and his name was on many lips, making it hard to avoid. Apparently, he had the horse that they all believed would win. Actually, he had several horses they believed would win the races that day, but the name Cohiba kept being dropped among the members as the one they were betting to win the Kentucky Derby.

I wanted him to win. The thought of him being there, watching as his horse took the title, made me feel warm inside. He'd be happy. That smile of his that could bring any female to her knees would break out across his handsome face. Whatever woman was with him would be lavished with it. I placed a hand on my chest. I had to stop that. The slicing pain when I let my imagination go to him and his date wasn't getting easier. It might possibly be getting stronger.

"Fawn? Are you okay?" Silas asked, and I spun around to see him studying me.

I faked a smile. “Yes. Of course.”

He didn’t seem convinced. “You’re pale. Are you feeling unwell?”

I shook my head. “I’m fine. Bit of a migraine, but I took something.”

Silas appeared somewhat appeased by that. “If it doesn’t ease, let me know. I can get a fill-in for you if you need to leave early.”

Leaving early sounded like a relief. Anything to give me distance from Garrett. I nodded. “Okay, I will.” I shouldn’t. I needed the money. But tonight, with all the talk of the derby, I might just leave.

The next hour was smoother. I blocked out all conversation by singing Nickelback’s “Rockstar” in my head. The song was one Gypsi had loved to dance to and sing loudly into our makeshift wooden spoon microphone when we had dance parties in the camper. She’d outgrown that, but my memories of it would always be there. They gave me some peace while I worked.

It wasn’t until an hour before my shift ended that Mack Barley walked into the lounge with another man I didn’t recognize. He’d never been in the Winchester Parlor, and I was finding many new faces while working in the lounge. I hadn’t realized just how exclusive the Winchester Parlor was until I got so much time elsewhere.

Mack sat in my section, but didn’t notice me until I approached their booth. It was a circular brown leather sofa

with a sturdy coffee table in front of it. We called them booths, but they weren't really booths. His friendly green eyes lifted to meet mine, and they widened slightly as he recognized me.

Yep. Here I am, Mr. Barley. The working girl Garrett dressed up fancy and took out like I was something else.

"Fawn," he said with a warm smile I remembered from the gala.

"Good evening, Mr. Barley," I replied, flashing my brightest smile, hoping it didn't look as fake as it felt.

"It's Mack, please," he replied, straightening in his seat. "I wasn't aware you worked here."

Surprise! I thought it, but didn't dare say it.

"Yes, sir," I quipped. "What can I get for you gentlemen this evening?"

He glanced at the man beside him briefly, then back at me. "Have you met Justin?" he asked.

I managed to hold my smile while I shifted my gaze to the other man. "No, I haven't."

The man was in his early thirties at best with brown eyes and dark blond hair. His short beard was neatly kept, and he was attractive. Although the gleam in his eyes was a red flag.

Not interested, buddy.

"I'm surprised Garrett allows you to work here," Mack stated bluntly.

No need to beat around the bush about it there, Mack.

Don't lose the smile, Fawn, I told myself. Give nothing away.

“We aren't seeing each other anymore. Although this is where I met Mr. Hughes.”

Now, there is your gossip. Tell me what you want to effing drink.

“You're the blonde that Garrett dropped to take my sister to the derby?” Justin exclaimed, looking shocked.

While he sat there with his wide eyes, soaking in this newfound knowledge, I felt as if someone had just kicked me in the chest. I winced. I couldn't help it. That blow hurt way more than I'd imagined it would. I wasn't going to be able to wait on them. My vision felt blurry, and then I realized I wasn't breathing. Sucking in some oxygen, I tried the best I could to school my face.

“Lucky girl,” I said as nicely as I could. “Now, may I get either of you something?”

Please, for the love of God, order something and let me go get a moment to compose myself.

“I was thinking more like, *What the fuck was Garrett thinking?*” Justin drawled.

“Easy,” Mack warned the other man as his gaze scanned the room nervously.

What was he afraid of?

Justin shrugged. “What? He's finished with her.”

Mack winced and gave me an apologetic look, then turned

to his friend. “Trust me, you need to shut up,” he warned the man under his breath.

“Ease up, man,” Justin told him. “Garrett is interested in Loxley. I’ve spoken to her. Seen the outfits she’s taking to the derby, which he paid for. Whatever he had with”—he paused and grinned at me—“the stunning Fawn here, it’s over.”

Mack rubbed his temples. “I’m sorry, Fawn. Could you get us each a Glenlivet Twelve Year, please? Mine neat, his three ice cubes.”

Grateful for a reason to bolt, I nodded, but couldn’t manage any words. Hurrying to the bar, I was struggling to catch my breath. The searing pain in my chest wasn’t my only problem. My eyes were stinging, and the lump in my throat was taking over.

Kent, the bartender for the lounge tonight, took one look at me and nodded toward the door. “Tell me their order and go. You look like you’re about to fall apart.”

I didn’t argue. He was right. I was about to crumble. I croaked out their order and hurried out the door and down to the dressing room. If I could just get there before I lost it.

I’d walked out of his house three days ago, and he was already dating another woman and had bought her outfits to wear. While I was struggling to make it through each day, he had just moved on.

God, why did it hurt so bad? Why had that stupid man walked in the lounge tonight and told me? I wanted to unhear it.

I burst into the dressing room as the first wail escaped me. Not checking to see if anyone else was in the room, I sank down onto my knees and let the sobs go.

If only crying made things feel better. Eased some of the hurt. It did neither, but I cried until the tears dried up and my throat was raw. I had to go home. I was done here. Working here was too much. I shouldn't have thought I could stay. Sniffling, I stood up and went to change and pack up all my things. I'd call Silas tomorrow. Right now, I didn't want anyone to see me like this.



TWENTY-SIX

GARRETT

I gripped the stool beside me as I watched the security film in the dressing room. When Silas had met me at the door tonight and asked if I'd follow him, the nervous expression on his face had made me tense up. Waiting to see what it was he needed me to watch was only stirring my foul mood.

The moment Fawn had left my house, I'd fallen into a darkness I didn't see a way out of. No one was safe from my current state, and I doubted it was going to end anytime soon. If someone had messed with Fawn's shit again, I was going to fucking kill them.

Fawn burst into the dressing room, and my entire body went on alert. I hadn't seen her in four days. She'd haunted my thoughts, dreams, every waking moment, but I hadn't laid eyes on her. My heart slammed against my chest as I soaked her in, but she dropped to her knees.

What the fuck was she doing?

“Turn up the volume,” I barked, stepping closer to the screen.

Her shoulders shook, and the sounds of her sobbing filled the room. Death. I was going to brutally murder whoever had caused this. Torture them slowly. Fury clawed at my chest as my pretty girl bent over, dropping her face into her hands, and the cries grew louder.

“Who?” I demanded through clenched teeth.

“Sir?” Silas’s voice trembled.

“WHO DID THIS?!” I roared, grabbing the stool and slamming it into the door so hard that it fell to the floor in pieces.

I felt like a caged lion. I needed a goddamn name.

“I wasn’t there, sir. Kent, the bartender in the lounge last night, informed me that Fawn had looked upset and he’d sent her to the dressing room. She never returned. I was too busy last night and figured she was sick. She’d said she had a migraine earlier. But when there was no word from her, I came in here this afternoon to check the footage. I saw this. I knew you’d want to see it,” he stammered over his words, his eyes flickering to the broken stool back to the screen before looking at me.

“Who was she with before she looked upset?” I barely contained my roar.

Silas nodded anxiously. “Yes, sir. I pulled that up too. I can’t hear well with all the talking. The lounge was full last night. But here.”

He pressed the remote, and there she was again. Walking up to Barley and fucking Justin Hunts. A sick dread washed over me.

She was smiling when she approached them, but that wasn't her real smile. My girl didn't want to be there. I could see Barley recognized her, and I heard her musical voice reply that we were no longer seeing each other. The bastard had had the fucking nerve to ask her about our relationship. Did he think he was going to move in? I was going to kill him. The investment banker would be found in his high-rise office with a bullet in his head.

I focused on Justin's mouth and strained to hear his words. My gaze shifted back to Fawn's face as he spoke, and the way her fake smile fell, leaving the broken expression as her bottom lip quivered, sent a bolt of explosive rage through me. I wanted to pulverize everything in my path. Cause pain. Wage a goddam war on myself.

It was me. I'd done this to her. She'd been crying, so heartbreakingly shattered, on the floor because of me.

"Shut it off!" I shouted.

"Yes, sir," Silas replied, and the screen went dark.

I had to get air. Out of this room. Out of this club. Away from this place that had hurt her ... because of my actions. I jerked the door open and stalked out of the space. I didn't turn around as I headed to the elevator.

"Revoke Justin Hunts's and Mack Barley's membership," I ordered as the elevator doors slid open.

“Yes, sir,” Silas called out.

I had to fix this. Fuck my pride and my ego. All it had done was put me in a hell of my own making and take every ounce of joy in my life from me. But worse than that, it had hurt her. She had sobbed on her goddamn knees. Fuck, I couldn't breathe. My chest felt as if it was going to combust from the tightness.

I had to get to her. See her. Beg her. Whatever it took. I'd been a fool to think I could let her go and move on.

When I had been with her, I had been happy. Truly fucking happy. Not once in my life had I experienced real joy until Fawn Parker walked into my life. She'd made the darkness I dwelled in bearable. I needed her. She was my source of light.

I had already been ready to go to her, pleading for forgiveness, before she completely ruptured my damn soul with the sounds of her crying. Whatever she asked, I'd do.

For the first time since I had taken over as boss, I was willing to allow someone else to demand things from me. Only Fawn though. Only Fawn.



TWENTY-SEVEN

FAWN

I stood at the doorway to the bedroom in our camper, watching Gypsi sleep. The room consisted of the bed only. It took up all the space. There were some cabinets above it, but other than the tiny gaps between the walls and the bed, there was nothing more. Some nights, she slept in the twin bed that the sofa turned into. The nights she got tired before me, she went to the big bed and slept. I typically crawled in beside her if I didn't fall asleep on the sofa, watching the television.

Tomorrow, I had to tell her we were leaving. She'd be ready to go. The farther we got away from Miami, the better for her. I'd spent today counting the money we had in the cookie jar, and I'd gone to the pawnshop and sold the only piece of gold jewelry I owned. It was a necklace that Micah had given me for my last birthday. It had brought in two hundred dollars, which was more than I'd expected.

The rent on the lot was caught up, and I'd let them know we

would be gone in the next few days. The electricity and water were paid. Everything was in order. I had tried to call Silas, but I'd gotten his answering service and left a message for him to call me, but he hadn't done so. I felt guilty, leaving him like this, but my mental health could not stay here any longer.

The window lit up from headlights, and I moved over to watch the vehicle pull in beside mine. Who was that? Micah didn't own a car. The only car that had come here I doubted I would see again. I grabbed the metal baseball bat I kept by the door and waited.

The shadowed outline of a cowboy hat had me squinting. I recognized the sexy saunter as the figure neared.

What was he doing here? I was torn between wanting to see him and hating that I had to see him.

Glancing back at Gypsi, I knew I didn't want her to hear what he had to say.

I set the bat down and opened the door, then stepped out, closing it quickly behind me.

Garrett paused a few feet from the camper as I took the two steps until my bare feet hit the patch of damp grass. I'd not put on shoes. His showing up here had me rattled.

"What do you want?" I asked, glaring at him.

"You," he replied.

A humorless, pained laugh erupted from me. How could he come here and say something like that? He'd had another woman all ready to take my place the moment I walked out.

“What? Don’t tell me that Loxley has dropped you before she got her trip to the derby?” The venom, jealousy, hurt were all there in my voice. I couldn’t mask them, and I didn’t care to.

The agonized shadow that fell over his gaze surprised me.

“Fawn—” he began, and I held up my hand to stop him.

“Garrett, listen, I can’t take this anymore. Whatever you came here to say, don’t. Please. If you ever felt even a tiny emotion toward me, then just turn and leave. I’ll be gone tomorrow, and you can go on with your life, pretending like I never existed.” Somehow, by the grace of God, I had said all that without cracking or bursting into tears. It was what he needed to hear. What I had to say for my own sanity. But it felt as if I were in that lounge again, listening to Justin go on about Loxley.

Garrett stalked toward me with a fierce expression. I stilled as he reached me. My pulse quickened as he stared down at me.

“You aren’t leaving. I’ll fucking follow you. I’ll chain you to my goddamn bed if I have to,” he hissed through his teeth and shook his head. “Dammit, Fawn, I came here to ask for forgiveness. Plead with you for it if I have to. I had it all planned out. I was going to be sweet and charming. Then, you tell me you’re leaving. I can’t—I can’t let you leave me. I need you.”

No, no, no. Shut up, Garrett Hughes.

I fought back tears. He was going to make me break. Forget

how much he'd hurt me. Forget why I'd walked away to begin with.

“You replaced me before the sun went down, it seems. I don't think you need me. In fact, I don't think you need anyone.”

The clear torment in his eyes caused me to pause. That didn't fit with the man I knew. He looked almost as broken as I felt.

“The man I am, the man I was raised to be, doesn't accept the word *no*. He doesn't accept rebellion or disobedience. I demand respect, complete compliance, and even fear. It's who I am. Who I was born to be. But in the four days since you left me, I've realized that I have an exception. You. You make me better, Fawn. You make me happy. I've never fucking known happiness until you. I can't just forget about you. Us. I thought moving on immediately would work, but I'm not even able to be in the same room as the woman I'm supposedly taking to the derby as my date. She's not you. No one will ever be *you*. And all I want in this goddamn world is you.” He let out a long, heavy sigh. His eyes never leaving mine.

I stood there, processing his words, letting them sink in. Make sense. I wasn't sure if I could trust them. But I wanted to. I wanted it all to be real.

“Fawn,” he said in a husky whisper, gently taking my chin in his fingers, “if you'll forgive me, come back to me, you will call the shots. I'll cater to your every whim. You will tell me what to do. Not the other way around. You're right; Gypsi is your daughter. I had no right to make any decisions about her

without discussing it with you and getting your approval. The only excuse I have is that I've always been wired that way. I will need work to fix myself, but I am begging you, please, fix me. Just for you."

I felt a tear roll down my cheek. This wasn't what I'd expected from him. I'd thought he would use my weakness for him against me. I had never imagined that he'd come to me like this. Humble, willing to hand over his ironclad control to me. Not once had I thought Garrett Hughes would beg me for anything. Much less me.

"Please, don't cry. I can't take that. I'm so fucking messed up in the head right now over hurting you," he admitted.

I sniffled and wiped the tear from my cheek. "I'm sorry. I'll try, but you can't unleash all that on a woman and not expect her to be overwhelmed."

He studied me so closely that it was as if he was desperate to read my thoughts. "What do you need me to do? Tell me. I'll do it. Right now."

"What are you asking for exactly?"

He brushed my hair back from my face. "You. I am asking for you."

I wanted to throw myself into his arms and say yes, a thousand times yes. But I couldn't do that. I had learned my lesson with this man. A painful lesson.

"What does that mean? We go back to dating? But this time, you won't have men stalking my daughter, and you won't control my job or any part of my life?"

He nodded, looking down at me, the pleading still there in his dark gray depths. “Whatever you want. However you want it.”

I frowned. “Garrett, I don’t think you can do that.” It was hard to say, but he needed to face the truth.

He held my face in his hands as he looked at me with such fierceness that it took my breath away. “I can do anything I need to do to have you. Keep you. I can’t lose you.”

Perhaps it was the words spoken, so completely raw, or the imploring look in his eyes. Whatever it was, the moment my resistance crashed and burned to the ground at my feet, I knew it.

I nodded, emotion clogging my throat.

“Yes?” he asked with hope flaring in his eyes.

“Yes.”

His mouth slammed down on mine, engulfing me with his spicy scent and taste. I went on my tiptoes and buried my hands into his hair peeking out of the back of his hat. His arms came around me, picking me up and holding me to him as he licked, teased, and consumed me as if he couldn’t get enough.

We went on like that for several minutes until my body was humming with desire for more—which I knew I couldn’t sate tonight. All my anxiety and doubts seemed to dissipate with his desperation for me. I knew when I’d left him, I had pushed him. I had done something no one else dared to do—refuse to give him what he wanted. The fact that he wanted me more than the power that clung to him was impossible to believe.

Yet here he was. Saying just that.

His lips left mine, but he held his mouth so close to mine that our breaths mingled as we looked into each other's eyes.

“Tell me what you are willing to do. Give me something.”

I wasn't ready for this question just yet. I wasn't sure what the options were. “I don't know exactly. You have a date this weekend, and I guess I need time to digest this all. When you get back—”

“Fawn, do you honestly think I am taking another woman to the derby when I just stood here and told you all I want is you?”

I had hoped he wasn't taking her, but then who was I to assume anything?

I shrugged. “I don't know. Yes. You bought her clothes, and it's days away.”

Garrett pressed a kiss to my lips. “She went shopping and sent me the tab. She can keep her clothes. But she already knows she isn't going with me. I called and ended that before I got here.”

I felt guilty for being elated at her being dumped so quickly.

“Don't look concerned, pretty baby. She got plenty out of it with the clothing she'd bought. Unlike you, she had no issue with spending my money.”

That made it a little easier to accept. I didn't like that she'd shopped on his dime, not caring about the cost.

“Do you still want me and Gypsi to go?” I asked with

uncertainty.

A grin curled his lips. “Yes, pretty baby. I want you there. With me. I want to get to know Gypsi. My goal is to have you both under my roof as often as possible. But you get to control that. I won’t push. But I will use every ounce of charm I have to get what I want. You’ve been warned.”

I bit back a smile. “Charm, huh?”

He nodded. “It’s pretty damn powerful.”

I laughed. “Oh, Garrett Hughes, I have no doubt it is.”



TWENTY-EIGHT

FAWN

I decided that the best way to tell Gypsi about Garrett and this weekend was to take the dresses, shoes, and accessories, along with the suitcases Garrett had given me, to the camper. Taking Gypsi to Garrett's first would be too overwhelming. It wasn't that I thought Gypsi would disapprove, but part of me worried that she'd be disappointed in me for getting involved with another man so soon. It wasn't always the case. In her life, I had gone years without dating. I'd put my sole focus on her. Been both mom and dad for her. Also sister, brother, aunt, uncle, grandma, grandpa. I had been it all, and when she had been growing up, that had taken a lot of work.

I wanted to set a good example for her on the kind of men she needed to let into her life. Garrett was the fairy-tale sort, and I didn't think she'd take this seriously. Whatever it was he and I were doing, small doses would be best. Starting with the derby.

Garrett had asked if he could handle Gypsi's work and get her the weekend off. My first reaction had been no. But then if they didn't let her off work, we wouldn't be able to go.

I'd agreed to him using his power, which seemed to reach far and wide. He had dropped me off with all our things, come inside the camper, and fucked me on the edge of the kitchen sink before leaving me to wait on Gypsi's arrival.

The new iPhone—which he'd also convinced me to take by showing me the app that tracked Gypsi's phone—had my complete attention. I watched as she drove the speed limit—my little rule follower. She was almost here. I closed the screen and slipped the phone into the pocket of my linen slacks.

I was dressed in a casual outfit that Garrett had provided for the lunch he took me to at the country club. The white linen pants and sleeveless brown-red-and-black plaid halter top hadn't seemed too expensive, but I'd felt as if I fit in with the way the other women were dressed. I still intended to put this back in that closet at his house. I wasn't keeping the clothes he'd bought me. Even the casual, more affordable ones.

The car door closed outside, and I prepared myself for Gypsi's reaction to the dresses, shoes, and jewelry I had laid out for us. The camper door opened, and her eyes swung to mine, then dropped to the outfit I was wearing. It was not my typical booty shorts and tank top that I wore when at home.

"Mom, what are you wearing?" she asked slowly as she came inside.

"I had lunch with a friend," I explained.

She raised her eyebrows. “So, you just ran out and bought a Burberry top and high-end linen pants for the event?” The sarcasm in her tone wasn’t lost on me.

I glanced down at the top. “This is Burberry?” I asked.

“Uh, yeah, Mom. That’s their signature print. Don’t tell me you found that at a consignment shop or Goodwill. Because we are selling it on Poshmark if you did. We can make at least six hundred on that.”

My mouth dropped open. “This shirt cost six hundred dollars?” There was barely any material to it.

Gypsi shook her head, grinning, clearly amused with my cluelessness. “No, Mom, it probably runs close to a thousand, if not more.”

“Are you serious?!” I gasped.

Gypsi plopped a hand on her hip and leveled me with her gaze. “Where did you get that? You don’t have a clue about its cost.”

I sighed, then put a smile back on my face. I should have been prepared for the fact that anything Garrett had bought was expensive. The man didn’t know how to buy off the sale rack or hit up Target.

“That’s something I want to talk to you about,” I began. “You know what the Kentucky Derby is, right?”

She nodded. “Yeah, horse racing, rich people, and hats.”

I wanted to laugh at her description, but I held it back. “More or less. Anyway, we have been invited to go. All

expenses paid. Even our wardrobe has been provided,” I gushed with excitement, hoping it rubbed off on her. Then, I waved my hand toward the bed, where I had laid out our clothing.

Gypsi narrowed her eyes at it, then shifted them back to me. “Since you said *invited*, I am assuming this isn’t something you won from playing cards or pool.”

I shook my head. “No. I didn’t swindle anyone. This was an invite ... from a friend.”

Gypsi’s gaze went back to my outfit. “The same friend you had lunch with?”

I nodded.

“Mom, how rich is the man you’re dating?” she asked me point-blank.

I lifted my shoulders slightly. “He’s wealthy. He raises horses and races them. You’re going to like him. I promise, Gypsi Lu. I can’t wait to see you in those dresses. You’re going to be the most beautiful female at the derby.”

I waited for her to take it in. She was looking at the clothes again.

“I can’t just get off work with this late of notice, Mom,” she began. “I could stay here, and you could—”

“No. You know I would never leave you here in this camper like that. Besides, your work has been handled. You can call if you’d like, but you are being taken off the schedule for the weekend.”

Her eyes widened. “How did you do that?”

This part I hated. Admitting I’d allowed a man to do it. Handle our business. We’d always handled our lives. Now, I was forcing her to let Garrett take over. Not on everything, but some things.

“Garrett did it. He knows the owner,” I guessed. Truthfully, I wasn’t sure.

“Garrett’s his name? He sounds young. Please tell me he isn’t in his twenties.”

I shook my head, relieved I got to tell her something she wanted to hear. “He is in his forties, I think. Although he looks to be about forty, he has a grown, married son with a kid, so I am going to guess mid to late forties, but aging well.”

“Last name?” Gypsi asked.

“Hughes,” I supplied.

She pulled out her phone.

“What are you doing?” I asked.

“Googling him. If he’s wealthy and he races horses, his name will pop up.”

Rolling my eyes, I walked over and took her phone and tossed it onto the sofa. “You will meet him tomorrow. There is no need to google him. Now, come see these dresses. I think the pink one with the short, fluffy skirt will be perfect for you at the derby. You’ll be a real, live Barbie.”

“Mom,” Gypsi sighed, “are you sure about this?”

I nodded. “Yes, Gypsi Lu. We are going on an adventure.

One unlike any we have ever been on. Stop worrying, and let's play dress-up.”

I could see when she finally caved and gave in. I wanted to hug her for being so agreeable. She had every right to be mad and demand to stay here. She wasn't just my daughter. She was my best friend. Our bond was one that I cherished above all else.



TWENTY-NINE

GARRETT

The flight to Louisville, I realized two things. One, Fawn was a superior parent. Gypsi was a much better kid than Trev, my youngest son who was only a year older than her. She was mature, polite, respectful, and she didn't trust me at all. I could tell from the way she watched me with that warning look in her eyes, as if saying if I did anything to upset her mother, I'd have her to deal with. I liked this kid. Fawn had raised her without any help, and she had managed to produce an impressive product.

Me? Not so much. Trev was difficult. Nothing like the girl sitting across from us.

The second thing I realized was that there could possibly be an issue with Trev. He liked beautiful females. He used his charm and playboy ways to go through them like most men did their underwear. Gypsi was a replica of her mother in looks. Not so much in personality though. That was the only

thing I felt that could save me from Trev causing a problem. I knew my son. Once he got a look at Gypsi, he was going to be like a dog after a damn steak. I had to prepare for that.

Gypsi would be an excellent match for Saxon Houston. She'd be close, within the family so that I could keep her protected, and Saxon had a good head on his shoulders. A hard worker. A little too soft in the ways of our world, but I was going to remedy that. Gypsi seemed like the kind of girl who would sniff out Trev's bullshit and appreciate Saxon's responsible side. I would make sure to put them into contact on this trip. See if something came of that. If not, there were other young men in my circle who I could place in her path. Find her someone that was worthy of her. That Fawn would be pleased with.

"You've had a horse win the derby nine times in the past twenty years," Gypsi said, surprising me.

Had she done some research on me? The girl continued to impress me.

I felt Fawn stiffen beside me, and I began to run my fingertips in a circular motion over her bare arm, where my hand rested. I liked putting my arm around her and having her move in close to me when we were seated. The closer, the better.

"Yes, I have. I'm hoping to make that ten this weekend," I told her.

She gave me a tight smile, then shifted her gaze back toward the window.

“Gypsi, did you google Garrett after I told you not to?” Fawn asked, sounding exasperated.

Those eyes—so similar to her mother’s, but less golden—swung back to Fawn. “Yes. We are traveling to another state with a man you recently met. I was just doing some checking,” the girl admitted.

Damn smart.

Fawn turned her gaze to mine and looked up at me apologetically. “She’s a touch stubborn.”

I grinned and pressed a soft, quick kiss to her lips. “She’s intelligent. It’s admirable. Good job,” I told her.

She laughed softly and glanced over at Gypsi. “Sometimes, I think she raised me.”

“Don’t start that, Mom,” Gypsi replied. “You know that’s not true.”

The kid was special. I needed to find out what she was interested in and get her a job working for me. Fawn would like that, and it would give me more excuses to have Fawn with me.

But first, I had to make sure Trev understood that Gypsi was off-limits.



THIRTY

FAWN

The cheers from the crowd, Garrett's hand squeezing my waist, and the energy in the air while we watched his horse, Shakespeare, hold the lead in the Churchill Downs race—it was intoxicating. I found myself bouncing on the balls of my feet as I clapped, feeling utterly delighted as the roar went up around us the moment Shakespeare crossed the finish line.

Had I ever witnessed anything so exciting?

When I spun around to look up at Garrett, his gaze was already on me.

“Let's go to the winner's circle, pretty baby,” he said huskily, taking my hand and tucking it in the crook of his arm.

We passed several people he'd already introduced me to, and unlike the gala, everyone in this suite was friendly. There were no jealous or haughty glares. Last night, at the party we had gone to, there were a few, but it was such a large event

that it hadn't mattered. It had been a whirlwind.

Kye and a man Garrett had introduced as Levi earlier stood at the exit of the suite. I smiled at both of them as we exited, but Garrett barely gave them a nod. I was getting used to the way he dealt with his bodyguards—or whatever they were. His world of wealth was confusing, and I was trying to understand it without asking a million questions. The time was going to come—and soon—when I needed some clarification as to why he needed so many men working as protection. If that was what they were.

Cameras were going off as we walked to the place where the jockey and Shakespeare were located. Red roses were everywhere, even draped over the horse, like a blanket. A crowd of people congratulated Garrett, shaking his hand while cameras flashed. He kept one hand on my lower back as he smiled and spoke to the others.

While the press got group shots, Garrett scanned the crowd for someone, then glanced down at me. “When we finish here, I need to find Trev.”

When the celebrating ended, we made our way back to the suite. They had more races coming, and one of Garrett's closest friends had a horse in the upcoming one. As we walked back into the suite, my gaze found Gypsi. She'd come down, and she was talking to a handsome young man. Thrilled that she was attempting to enjoy this, I called her name.

Garrett seemed to tense slightly, but he said nothing. I wondered if he was still trying to find his son. He walked with me as I made my way over to Gypsi, wanting to hug her for

joining us down here. Garrett was so complimentary of her, and I wanted her to give him a chance. He was trying to do all he could to ease her mind about us.

“Son, I see you’ve met Gypsi,” Garrett said as we reached Gypsi and the attractive boy.

I studied him closer as he frowned at his father. I could see the resemblance now. Especially in the eyes. This was Trev. I didn’t understand the tension in the air between the two males, but I could feel it.

“Did you see the race? I wish you’d come down here with us. It was incredible!” I gushed, hoping to distract them and silently check on Gypsi. Decide if she was okay or not.

She seemed a little off. It was in her eyes as they darted nervously from me to Garrett.

“I did,” Gypsi replied with a smile that abated my concerns.

“Fawn, this is my youngest son, Trev,” Garrett said to me. “Trev, this is Fawn Parker.”

It was clear on Trev’s face that he didn’t know who I was exactly. It didn’t bother me as much as it made me feel less guilty for keeping Garrett a secret from Gypsi for so long.

“It’s nice to meet you, Trev. Where did you find Gypsi?” I asked him, curious as to if he was the reason she’d come down here. I wouldn’t blame her if she had; the boy seemed to be as charming as his father.

“Uh, yeah, well, we met last night. But”—he paused and glanced at Gypsi briefly before finishing—“we didn’t realize the connection until today. I saw her up in the mansion.”

Interesting. She hadn't mentioned that at all. I wasn't sure if I should be concerned or not. After all, I wanted our children to get along. It would make things much easier if they liked each other.

"Now that you've met, why don't you show her around? Introduce her to people. This is their first derby. I'm sure she'd like to be around some people her own age," Garrett told him.

Trev nodded, looking happy to do so. This would be exactly what Gypsi needed to get her to enjoy our trip.

"Her hotel suite is on the opposite side of the hall as yours. In case we get separated at the end and she needs a way back, make sure you get her there," Garrett added.

"I'll take care of her," Trev assured him and flashed a grin at me too.

I studied Gypsi for a moment to see if this was okay with her. I could read her expressions easily most of the time. But right now, something was bothering her. I just couldn't put my finger on it.

"There're the Houstons. I want to introduce you to Melanie. You'll like her," Garrett said to me before leading me away from our kids and toward a couple that seemed to be Garrett's age, maybe a touch younger.

The woman smiled brightly at me as we approached, and I wanted to sigh in relief. She seemed nice. Garrett had spoken highly of the Houstons and seemed so sure I'd like Melanie.

When she held out her hand to me with genuine interest and a friendly sparkle in her eyes, I relaxed and enjoyed her

company, trying hard not to search out Gypsi. Garrett handed Melanie and me a fancy gold cup with a drink inside.

Melanie laughed and shook her head. “Figures you’d be able to make two of the gold cups appear like magic,” she said to him.

I was clueless as to what she was talking about.

“It’s mint julep, like the one you had last night,” Garrett told me with a wink.

“It’s just in a nicer cup,” Melanie drawled, looking pleased.

I took a sip and enjoyed the tangy taste. It was just as good without the elaborate cup, but Melanie seemed to think the cup was a big deal, so I didn’t point it out.

“Oh my,” Melanie said, looking over at the group of younger people standing closer to the track.

I saw Gypsi among them. Trev was talking and laughing with an attractive redhead. Gypsi seemed to be in conversation with a tall, nice-looking boy with brown hair.

“Is that your daughter?” she asked curiously.

“The blonde is,” I replied.

Melanie’s grin deepened. “She’s a replica,” she said, then leaned over to me. “And she’s talking to my son, Saxon. They seem to be enjoying their conversation.”

I studied them again and noticed the look in Gypsi’s eyes as she glanced at Trev, who I was going to guess was drunk or well on his way. The redhead clinging to him said something as she pawed at his chest, and Gypsi rolled her eyes, then

turned back to Saxon.

Good girl, I thought. The Saxon kid looked mature and well mannered. I wasn't so sure about Trev Hughes.

"I'm glad she's making friends," I said to Melanie. "I was worried about her last night. Afraid she was going to hate this trip, and I want her to appreciate and soak in this experience."

Melanie's smile was pleased. "I don't think she'll have any trouble making friends. From the look on my son's face, he might not let her out of his sight."

I took a drink of my mint julep and tried not to watch Gypsi. She was nineteen, and she didn't need me hovering. It was just really hard not to.

"Oh! This is our race," Melanie said to me. "Come on. Let's get closer."

Garrett seemed to anticipate this and was at my side almost instantly. "Ready to watch Moses Mile's Rig win this race?" he asked, smiling broadly from me to Melanie.

"Yes!" I replied, happy to enjoy watching the Houstons' horse compete.

I glanced down at Gypsi when we reached the edge of the suite to see the track up close. Saxon was near her ear, talking as she nodded her head. She took a drink from the glass in her hand and smiled at him. The redhead was clinging to Trev with a cup that looked like the ones Garrett had brought us.

The announcer interrupted my thoughts, and I focused on the race as my new friend cheered beside her husband. Garrett stood behind me with his hand flat against my stomach,

holding me so that I was pressed against his chest in a protective stance. I would be lying if I said I didn't love the way it felt.



The thrill of victory—the shouts, cheers, excitement—pumped through my system as Garrett opened the door to our suite. Cohiba had done as predicted and won the Kentucky Derby. It had taken much longer to handle the press, get photos taken, for Garrett to speak to those congratulating him. By the time it was over and we were headed back to the room, I was happy to have him alone even if it was for a short time before we were expected at the after-party. Gypsi had left with Saxon, and I knew she was safely back in her suite. I wanted to check on her before we left.

The door closed behind us, and I sighed, slipping off my heels and taking the hat from my head to toss it onto the long dining room table.

“That was fabulous!” I exclaimed as I spun around and smiled at Garrett, who was watching me.

“I’ve never enjoyed a derby like I did today. Seeing the pure delight on your face made it perfect.”

I smiled and tilted my head as I licked my lips. “Are you sure that was me or the fact that every horse you’d brought won their race?”

He raised his eyebrows and stalked toward me. “It was you. This isn’t my first win, pretty baby.”

I loved the way he looked at me. He stopped when he reached me and cupped my face in his hand.

“So fucking beautiful,” he murmured.

His touch was gentle. In fact, his touch was always gentle these days. The way he had once roughly touched me, choked me, spanked me had all stopped. I kept waiting for him to unleash it again, but he hadn't. The last time he'd been rough with me was the day I walked out of his house.

I was starting to think that he was never going to fuck me like that again if I didn't do something. He was too gentle. I liked the gentle. But not all the time. There could be a balance. The debauchery of his savage fucking was something I didn't want to lose.

“Garrett,” I said as he brushed his thumb over my bottom lip.

“Yes, pretty baby?” he asked.

I took a nip at his thumb, biting down hard enough to see the flare in his eyes before letting go. “Do I need to be a bad girl to get spanked and choked?” I asked.

The heat in his gaze felt as if it could scorch me by just a look alone.

“Are you asking me to fuck you rough, pretty baby?” His voice dropped to a deep timbre.

I nodded. “If I need to be disobedient first, I can go without a bra tonight. The silky fabric of my dress won't hide the bars in my nipples.”

It was a dark temptation, the way Garrett's trigger snapped and he bared his teeth.

"You will wear a fucking bra," he warned me.

I pouted up at him. "What if I don't want to? What if I want men and women to look at my breasts? See my nipples through the fabric."

Garrett backed me up against the edge of the table. The gleam in his eyes was full of lust, making me pant with what that meant.

"Turn around, Fawn," he growled.

I happily gave him my back, and his hands went to the back, unzipping my dress, then letting it pool at my feet. He unhooked my bra, and it, too, fell from my body.

"Bend over and put your hands on the table. Naughty girls get their asses spanked."

Smiling, I placed my palms flat on the cool, hard surface and stuck my bottom out to him. "Go ahead, Daddy," I purred, glancing at him over my shoulder.

"Fucking hell," he groaned before the first smack landed on my right cheek.

The sting went straight to my clit. The next crack of his hand was harder on the left side. I wiggled it at him, and he made a low sound in his chest. Then, he unleashed. His hand coming down hard over and over.

"Naughty girl gets off on her ass getting spanked. Is this what you want? Hmm? You want me to hurt you? Scold you

for teasing me?”

I whimpered as my eyes watered.

“Yes,” I stammered.

“It hurts, doesn’t it? My pretty baby has a sore ass,” he crooned, and then he stopped.

I could hear the rustle of clothes, then the sound of his zipper.

“You’ve got me throbbing. This bright red ass.”

His hands gripped my thighs as he pulled them open wider. “You’re dripping wet, pretty baby. All pink and swollen. You need my dick?”

“Please,” I begged, pushing back, only to get another hard slap across my bottom.

“NO! Stop waving it at me. I’ll fuck this pussy when I am ready.”

My fingers curled, and I nodded, waiting for him to ease this ache. Fill me.

Finally, his hands clutched my hips, and he thrust inside of me. “FUCK! That’s my pussy,” he shouted.

He reached up and grabbed my throat with one hand and squeezed a breast with the other, pulling me up as his hips started to piston. It was hard and wild while animalistic sounds came from his chest. The feverish ravishment held me in its grasp. He kept me teetering on the edge of bliss while continuing to keep it just out of my reach.

“You’re milking my cock like such a good girl,” he cooed in

my ear.

I could feel the thrum of my heart against my chest. I wanted his filthy words. They sent me to the pinnacle of this wild ride.

“Listen to that wet pussy as it takes me,” he groaned. “Sucking me in like your hot little mouth.”

I cried out, and his hold on my throat and breast was the only thing keeping me standing. My body was a trembling wreck, craving all he could give me like an addict.

“That’s my pretty baby,” he said as he rocked harder into me. “Come on my cock NOW!”

His shout sent me falling apart. My body spasmed as he tightened his hold on me.

“GOOD. GIRL!” he groaned loudly as he pumped one more time, and thick, warm ropes of cum released deep inside me as I wailed while the pleasure consumed me.

He released my neck and breast, and his arms moved to circle my waist and hold me to him, his length still buried in me. His damp skin pressed against mine, and I panted as a smile stole over my face. This was what I had been missing.

“I thought you didn’t want to be owned.” His voice was hoarse.

“I should have clarified. When we fuck, I want you to own me.”

His hands tightened. “So, you want me depraved?”

I nodded. “Yes.”

“Damn, Fawn,” he whispered, pressing a kiss to my neck.

“What?”

“I crave that. Fucking you hard, controlling your pleasure, adding pain to it,” he said. “But there are times I’m going to want to worship you. Take my time kissing you, licking your pussy, playing with it. Sucking on those naughty nipples.”

I shivered. “Oh, you can do that too,” I assured him. “Just so you fuck me like a bad girl sometimes too.”

He ran his knuckles down my arm. “You keep talking like that, and we’re going to have a round two.”

His dick jerked inside me. He lifted my arms and reached back to wrap them around his neck. My breasts thrust out.

“Do we have time?” I asked, already wanting more.

He pressed further into me, and I felt as he thickened and lengthened inside me.

“For me to fuck this needy little cunt?” he grunted. “Absolutely.”



THIRTY-ONE

FAWN

The party was in full swing when we arrived. Garrett kept looking down at me at times, completely ignoring those around us trying to get his attention or speak to him. I felt my cheeks warm at the appreciative gleam every time I caught him staring.

“Why do you keep looking at me?” I whispered.

His nostrils flared. “Because I’ve never seen a woman more beautiful in my life. Red is your color.”

My body flushed, and I lowered my lashes, loving the way he spoke to me. The red dress was mostly satin at the top. It was strapless, and the skirt stopped mid-thigh, but the long chiffon train brushed the floor behind me, even with the stilettos on my feet.

“Garrett! What an excellent day for Hughes Farm. But then when is it not?” a large, round man said loudly as he

approached us.

Garrett met his gaze and nodded. “Thank you, Rich,” he replied. “Mandate did excellent as well.” Then, he looked down at me. “Fawn, this is Rich Molony. He owns a ranch outside of Nashville. Rich, this is Fawn Parker, my girlfriend.”

He hadn’t introduced me as anything but Fawn before. I glanced up at him, and his eyes swung back to me. The affection there made my stomach flutter.

Rich chuckled jovially. He reminded me of Santa Claus without the red suit. “Always the luckiest man in the room. I can understand why Loxley Hunts has been speaking poorly of her now.”

The moment the words left the man’s mouth, he tensed, as if realizing what he’d just said. Garrett’s hand tightened on my hip, almost as a reflex. I tried to think of something to say to lighten the mood, but I was at a loss. I hadn’t known Loxley was here, but then I had no idea what she looked like. It wasn’t as if Garrett was planning on pointing her out to me.

“If you’ll excuse us,” Garrett said tightly and was moving me through the crowd toward Levi, who stood near the door in a serious stance with his hands behind his back.

I started to ask Garrett what we were doing, but I couldn’t think of the right way to ask it. He seemed to be on a mission.

“Boss,” Levi said, his brows drawn into a frown.

“Loxley Hunts needs to be escorted off the property,” he ordered.

Levi didn’t ask questions, but spoke in a low voice into the

thing he was wearing over his ear. Garrett waited until Levi confirmed it was being handled. There was a sudden ease in his body when he looked down at me.

“I should have done that earlier. I was unaware she had spoken your name. It won’t happen again.”

I glanced around to see if anyone other than Levi could hear us. “How can you just order her to leave? It’s a public place.”

Garrett’s lips twitched. “If I want something done, it’s not questioned.”

I was starting to realize that this went much farther than Ocala, Florida. His power.

“Why is that, Garrett?” I asked with a niggling feeling in my gut that had been there since we’d arrived. The way people treated him as if he had the authority to allow them to breathe. It was odd.

He studied me for a moment. “Tonight, after the party, I’ll answer any and all questions. It’s time you knew everything about me.”

That led my thoughts spinning in all directions. What did he mean by that?

“Right now, I want to dance with you.”

I nodded and went happily into his arms.

After two dances, Garrett took me over to introduce me to an older couple who had a racing farm in Kentucky. Others came up to us and began talking, looking curious about me and seeking Garrett’s attention. The more of them that came,

the closer he held me to his side. I had noticed Gypsi's arrival with Saxon and Trev, then the fact that it had become just her and Saxon. Trev had found two new females. The redhead from earlier was forgotten.

Gypsi's eyes met mine, and she said something to Saxon. Then, they began making their way in our direction. I wanted to check on her, and I was thankful they were coming to see us. I was about ready to go seek her out myself.

The moment they reached us, I pulled Gypsi over to the corner, away from the crowd around us.

"Having fun?" I asked her hopefully, glancing back at Saxon, who was talking to Garrett. "He's cute," I told her, making sure she knew I approved.

She shrugged. "Yeah. But it's a friends thing. I'm not ready to even think about dating yet."

Seeing that flash of fear in her eyes, which she tried to mask, bothered me.

"Gypsi, you can't go the rest of your life scared of guys and dating. Don't give Tyde that kind of power," I urged.

She had never been frightened before. Not until she'd met that awful Tyde when I moved us into the clubhouse. My stupidity had caused this.

"I'm not. It's just that I missed the red flags with him and I realized it too late. I'm not giving him power. I am playing it safe."

I reached over and tucked a wayward curl behind her ear. "Sweetie, he was mentally unstable. It was my fault you even

met Tyde. I was the one who made the poor choices, and I will never forgive myself for putting you in danger.” If only I could get her to understand that and live again. I just didn’t know how to do that.

She held up her hand. “Stop. We’ve gone over this a million times. None of it was your fault. I was eighteen years old and perfectly aware of the choices I was making. Now, forget this. I don’t want to talk about it anymore. Go back to your billionaire boyfriend and have a fantastic night.”

Glancing over at Garrett, I caught his steady gaze on me. It did a slow sweep of my body. I took a deep, steadying breath, turning back to my daughter.

“He makes me feel like a princess,” I said softly. “I’ve never been treated the way he treats me, and I’m not talking about the money. It’s how he acts ... as if I’m ... special. I mean something to him. He wants to protect me.” Feeling ridiculous at my own admission, I rolled my eyes. “I sound silly.”

Gypsi reached over and grabbed my hand. “No, Mom, you don’t. You sound like you’ve finally found a guy who is worthy of you. Maybe.”

She looked truly happy for me. Perhaps Garrett was winning her over.

I laughed and kissed her cheek. “I love you, Gypsi Lu. I want you to be able to enjoy life, boys, dating, sex.”

The smirk on her face told me that she wasn’t interested in that right now. The guilt returned.

“I will. Just probably not with Saxon. Especially since he’s

Trev's best friend and ... well, there's the chance that Trev might end up being my stepbrother."

I let out a laugh that was more forced than anything. I didn't dare consider if that was something Garrett would want. He wanted me. He wasn't in love with me.

"Don't get carried away. We are just getting to know each other. That man could have any woman he wanted. I don't think he'd give a woman like me his last name. But for now, I'm gonna live it up and have the best time. Make memories —"

"Of the best times so you can daydream during the bad," she said, finishing my favorite motto.

I winked at her, then squeezed her hand. "I'd better get back to my hot date, and you try and enjoy the cutie you're with."

She smiled, but I didn't see real enjoyment in her eyes. Maybe Saxon could heal her. Draw her out again.

I glanced over at Trev, glad that she seemed to be keeping him at arm's length.

"That Trev gets around, doesn't he? There was a redhead with him in the winner's circle, who he was kissing and groping. Now, he's got a blonde pressed up beside him, and I think that other girl is trying to get his attention too." I was testing her. Seeing her reaction.

The slightest disappointment was there—same as what I thought I had seen earlier when she was looking at him with the other girls.

Don't pick the bad boys, like your momma, baby girl. Saxon

is the good guy. Pick him. I didn't say it though.

"Yeah, he is a player. He and Saxon couldn't be more different," she admitted.

At least she realized it.

I felt like she was saying what I wanted to hear. My responsible girl.

"Yeah, but then it's the bad boys who can be irresistible," I told her and watched her reaction.

"Maybe to some, but not me. At least not anymore," she informed me, but the glint in her eyes told me she wasn't being honest. Not with me or herself.

I led her back over to Garrett and Saxon. Garrett asked Gypsi if she was enjoying herself and made sure that Saxon was being a good escort. When he seemed appeased by my daughter's half-truths, they walked away, leaving the party.

"They appear to be hitting it off," Garrett said. "Saxon seems very taken with her."

I sighed. "Gypsi has some pain in her very recent past. I'm not sure even Saxon's charm can get past that protective wall she's put up. But I can hope."



THIRTY-TWO

FAWN

When we walked back into our suite, my curiosity was at an all-time high. Garrett's promise to answer any questions I had was too tempting. I wanted to ask things that, deep down, I wasn't sure I wanted to know the answers to. Especially after tonight. I'd heard things, little small comments that, if said by themselves, wouldn't cause any concern. However, hearing them spread out in one evening among different people, they did. Where my imagination was going with it, was starting to turn into something comical. I'd somehow managed to turn Garrett's life into one worthy of Hollywood.

"Saxon assured me that he took Gypsi to her suite, made sure she was locked in and safe before leaving her this evening," Garrett informed me.

I appreciated how he considered my worries about Gypsi and made sure I was aware of her safety. He'd done it so thoroughly on this trip that I was able to enjoy myself. I

assumed that was the purpose, but it also felt as if he was taking care of me by doing so.

“She seemed to be having a good time,” I told him.

I had known when we first arrived that she’d be unimpressed and distant with Garrett. I had hoped she’d realize he wasn’t some man I’d decided to have a wild adventure with, then toss.

“Saxon is a good boy. Trustworthy, levelheaded, a talented horseman. I couldn’t be more pleased that the two of them seem to have made a connection,” Garrett replied.

I hoped he was right. I wanted that to be the case, but the glances she’d made toward Trev concerned me. Trev was not the relationship type. He was the *love ’em and leave ’em* kind. He reminded me of a young Micah. Beautiful, charming, and unable to love one woman. He would love them all.

“Yes, he impressed me. I think Gypsi needs that kind of friendship. She’s had very few in her life. We moved around so much. She is my best friend, and I’m hers. We’ve had each other, and we didn’t seem to need others. Until the past year or so. She’s growing up. I want her to have the life I didn’t.” I smiled at Garrett. “Don’t misunderstand. I wouldn’t go back and do things differently. Being Gypsi’s mom is my greatest gift in this world. But it wasn’t easy to raise her alone. I loved chasing the adventure, but it’s growing weary. I think mostly because she doesn’t have that need to see something new in her blood. She wants roots. I want her to have that.”

Garrett shrugged off his tuxedo jacket and laid it over the sofa. “Move in with me. Both of you. Let me put Gypsi

through college. Give her a start.”

I shook my head. “I can’t do that. It’s not right. You’re too generous, Garrett Hughes. I will not take advantage of your big heart.”

He chuckled deeply and took several long strides over to stand in front of me. “No breathing being has ever accused me of having a big heart, Fawn.”

The twinkle of amusement in his eyes held a darkness. One I needed to understand.

“And why is that?” I asked him.

He studied me for a moment, and I could see the flicker of unease in his expression.

“I promised you answers. I intend to give them to you. First, let’s change out of these clothes. This is likely to take a while, and as stunning as you are in that dress, it can’t be comfortable.”

I nodded, realizing the seriousness of this and wondering just how much he was really going to share with me. What if it was more than I could accept? I had Gypsi to think of and her safety. But then had she ever been more protected since Garrett had come into my life? That answer was a solid no.

“Okay,” I agreed, and he placed a soft kiss on my lips before heading to the bedroom.

I waited for a few moments before following him. I pulled out my phone to see that Gypsi was safely in the suite, like Garrett had promised. Once I was sure he’d had time to change, I made my way into the bedroom.

“Are we giving each other privacy now?” Garrett teased.

I shrugged as my lips tugged at the corners. “We need to talk. I wasn’t sure us changing together would be beneficial.”

Garrett arched an eyebrow. “Are you saying you wouldn’t have been able to control your carnal urges?”

I licked my bottom lip, then pulled it between my teeth briefly before replying, “I’m saying you wouldn’t have, Mr. Hughes.”

A rumble of deep laughter came from his chest. “You’re a smart woman. Do you need help with the buttons on the back of the dress?”

I nodded. “If you can keep from doing more than just helping me.”

His eyes seemed to darken. “We need to talk. I’ll behave myself.”

Garrett made quick work of unfastening my dress before leaving me alone in the room. His rushed exit made my body warm, as I knew he’d left quickly because he wanted to touch me. Seeing that I affected him as strongly as he did me was powerful and gave me hope that there was more for us. My heart was heading in that direction, and as foreign as this was to me, it still felt as if I had been searching for this my entire life. The emotion, as terrifying as it could be, could also be the most exquisite experience in the world.

After I slipped one of the silky nightgowns Garrett had bought for me over my head, I took the hotel’s thick, fluffy white robe and put it on. The expensive lingerie that he had

given me to sleep in was meant to entice. That wouldn't benefit our need to talk.

Garrett was standing at the bar, pouring a glass of his scotch. He glanced back at me and smirked. "Can I get you a drink?" he asked.

"No thank you. The amount of mint juleps I consumed today was shocking. At least for me."

He turned with his glass in hand. "Yet you didn't even seem tipsy," he remarked.

"Water in between each one. A big, tall glass," I replied.

I sank down onto the plush sofa, the excess fabric from the oversize robe pooling around me. Pulling my feet up underneath me, I sat and waited for Garrett to get comfortable. He took a seat on the sofa, too, but not as close as we normally sat. There was enough space between us that another person could have sat there comfortably.

His gray gaze held mine. "Ask what you will," he prodded.

Where to start? I fidgeted with my hands for a moment, then decided to just start with the big questions. "Why do you have security detail all the time, everywhere?"

He didn't look away from me as he replied, "I'm a powerful man. I have enemies."

Enemies? Okay, that led to a host of new questions.

"Tell me about these enemies."

Garrett took a drink. His shoulders were tense, and I could see he was struggling some with telling me things. He

stretched his free hand out on the back of the sofa and appeared to relax. His clenched jaw was the only thing that gave away that he wasn't.

"I've done business with those who tried to undermine me. Steal from me. I handled the situation often—no, every time—in a way that left the other party with a level of hate toward me. I protect what is mine at all costs."

He was talking in riddles. That didn't tell me much at all.

I tried another angle. "What is it you do? Other than race horses and own hotels and other things. Why are you respected, almost frighteningly so? Not just in Ocala. I've seen it here too. People move out of the way for you."

He lowered his head and stared down at the glass in his hand. His chest rose and fell with a deep sigh. "Fawn," he began, "there are things that I want you to know, but I am equally tormented with the idea that you can't handle it." He lifted his gaze and looked at me. "I don't want to lose you."

I didn't understand the pleading in his eyes, but it was so intense that my chest ached. I longed to go over to him and touch his face. Assure him that nothing he said would send me running. That reaction surprised me as it sank in. It was the truth. I would accept anything that he told me because my feelings were deep and had gone there so quickly.

"Trust me," I coaxed. "How I feel for you is ... it's more than I've ever experienced. More than I thought I could feel. Tell me and trust that, short of you being a human trafficker, I can handle it."

His mouth quirked. “Rest assured, that is one thing I will never be ... but I’ve killed men who are. I’ve had many killed. My daughter-in-law was almost sold into the sex trade. My son and men saved her. We’ve sought out others since then that were attached to the men who had tried to take her, and they’ve all paid with their lives. That also creates enemies. Dangerous ones.”

He’d mentioned killing before, so I’d already started to accept that he’d killed. Knowing he’d killed men who had bought and sold human lives didn’t scare me. It made me proud.

“So, you have your own group of vigilantes, and you’re their leader,” I said.

He grinned into his glass as he took a drink. The crinkle at the corners of his eyes when he smiled always made me want to kiss that spot.

“No, pretty baby. I’m not a vigilante.” He turned his gaze to me. “Although I do have many police forces along the Southeast in my back pocket.”

“And why is that?” I pressed. “That’s the power thing I don’t quite understand.”

Garrett leaned forward and set his now-empty glass on the coffee table before turning back to me. “I was born into a family. Not one of just blood, but one of trust. One that goes back over a hundred years. It was built by men as close as brothers. Men who wanted more for their lives, their children’s lives, for the generations to come. That family grew over the years and became more structured, took more risks, and

morphed into the powerhouse it is today.”

He paused, and I said nothing. I waited. I knew there was more. Much more.

“My birthright placed me in the role as leader. Just as my great-great-grandfather had been the founder and first leader. The oldest Hughes son will always take the title of boss when the day comes for his father to step down. Our sons grow up within the family, knowing what is to come. They aren’t spared the truth of what or who we are.

“The two men standing outside our suite door were also born into the family. Their fathers handle deeper roles within and are spread out in different cities and states, controlling and managing things I can’t keep my focus on. It’s an empire. One that we would all die to protect.”

I let out a long, shaky breath. “That sounds an awful lot like the Mafia,” I said with a laugh that didn’t mask my unease.

Garrett held my gaze. “Because it is.”

I felt like the air had just been knocked out of me. I stared at him in disbelief. The more he talked, the more I knew that every question I had led up to answers that I didn’t think could possibly be true. But small things, big things, they all began racing through my head, starting with the way Micah had reacted to Garrett. It had been so strange, but ... now, it all made sense.

“Say something,” Garrett urged.

I blinked several times and opened and closed my mouth. He’d just told me he was a ... Mafia boss. Just thinking that

sounded ludicrous. What did I say?

He moved, closing the distance between us. His hand cupped my face. “I’m still me, Fawn. The man you know. That hasn’t changed.”

I understood that. All of it. I should have seen it before ... there had been times I considered something like this and laughed it off. This wasn’t my imagination though. It was real.

“I’m just processing,” I explained.

He brushed back some of my hair from my forehead. “Tell me what you’re thinking.”

I let out a shaky laugh. “A million things at once.”

The corner of his mouth tugged up into a crooked grin. “Share some of those with me. Please. I need to know where your head is right now.”

I took a deep breath. “The main thing that I am struggling with is the fact that you are always in danger. That’s hard for me to accept. I don’t like it.”

His expression turned serious. “You and Gypsi are safe. I swear to you, I’ll keep you both protected.”

I smiled. “Thank you, but that is not what I meant. I know you are making sure we are safe. I am talking about you. YOU are always in danger. Your life. I can’t—” I winced at the idea of something happening to him. It literally felt like a knife slicing my chest. “I hate thinking that something could happen to you.”

Garrett’s thumb, which had been lightly brushing my cheek,

stilled. His eyes narrowed. “Your main concern is my safety?” he asked incredulously. “I just told you I am the leader of an organized crime family, and that’s what is upsetting you?”

I swallowed hard against the sudden lump that had formed in my throat. “Yes.”

“Fuck,” he muttered, then pulled me to his chest, holding me there as he wrapped his arms around me.

The sound of his heart pounding in his chest was against my ear. It was beating fast.

“I wanted to own you,” he said against my hair. “Collect you because I enjoy owning beautiful things. Yet you’ve managed to own me.”

Tears stung my eyes as I fisted my hand in the T-shirt he was wearing. Maybe we owned each other. Because this man had marked a claim on my heart. There was no use in pretending like he hadn’t. I loved him.

After all these years, my heart had finally been touched by someone other than my daughter. I was in love with Garrett Hughes, and I knew that I couldn’t walk away from him. If and when he tired of me, my heart would be beyond repair.



THIRTY-THREE

GARRETT

Leaving Gypsi with Trev and his friends concerned me, but Saxon had informed me he would be there. Now that we were back in Ocala, I wasn't ready to let Fawn return to that fucking camper. Finding a way to keep her with me was all I could think about.

Tonight, Fawn had given in to staying the night after Gypsi agreed to stay too. Knowing Fawn was going to sleep in my bed with me tonight for the first time had me so damn happy that I didn't recognize myself.

Fawn slid into the limo, and I admired her legs as she did so. Dinner had been exceptional, but not because of the food. Fawn's laughter, funny stories about her past—raising Gypsi, the many times she'd swindled men over a game of pool or cards—and her questions that she asked me, made this night unique. She was interested in things no one else ever had seemed to care about.

Talking about my childhood, losing Etta, bad marriage decisions was easy with those golden eyes soaking up everything I said, as if it mattered. She wanted to know. It was clear on her face that my life was important to her. I was important to her. There were no hints at things I could give her or requests for extravagant trips.

I sat down beside Fawn, and Levi closed the door behind me before going back to the driver's seat. Placing my hand on Fawn's thigh, I slid up the rest of her dress until the black satin crotch of her panties was visible. Her chest began to rise and fall quicker as her breathing picked up.

“Open your legs,” I told her.

She did, and I inhaled deeply, hoping to smell her arousal. The dark material of her panties hid the dampness, but I felt it the moment my fingertips brushed over them.

“Take them off,” I demanded, loving the way she trembled when I took on an authoritative tone.

With only a sassy curl to her lips, she lifted her ass off the seat and obeyed like a good girl. The black satin thong hung from her finger as she held it out to me. “Are you wanting a souvenir?”

Damn, that mouth.

I snatched the panties from her and stuck them in my pocket. “What I want, pretty baby, is for you to straddle my lap and ride me,” I informed her while unbuttoning my pants.

Her gaze dropped to my crotch, and she licked her plump pink lips as she watched me free my cock. I stroked it while

she took in the length and width of my hard dick. It was tempting to take her head and slam it down, forcing her to take me inside that sweet mouth.

“Free those naughty, pierced tits and get on me before I shove my cock down your throat.”

Fawn’s gaze shot back up to mine. Her eyes flashing with the same hungry desire I felt. She raised her hands and untied the shiny string holding her halter-style dress up, then let it fall down before she had to tug the fabric to get it over her big tits. The moment those nipples—decorated with the fourteen-karat gold barbells that had diamonds on each end—were bare, I reached for her breasts. Needing to feel their weight in my hand. I loved the fact that she wore the barbells. When I had given them to her, I had feared she’d refuse.

Telling her that the diamonds on her nipples were for me and a selfish purchase was the only reason she had taken them.

“I didn’t think these perfect pink nipples could get any more beautiful,” I said, running my finger over the hard pebble. “I was wrong.”

Fawn tugged her skirt up to her waist and lifted her long leg over my lap while I continued to play with her breasts. “Diamonds tend to have that effect,” she teased, then lowered herself, brushing the hot, slick folds of her pussy over the head of my cock.

I pinched both nipples hard, and she threw back her head as she sank down on me. My length wasn’t what stretched her so intensely. It was always the girth of my dick that brought pleasure. The low moan as she took all eight inches made my

cock pulse. She was a fucking siren. Everything about her was sexy.

I placed my hands on her hips and urged her to move. I wanted to feel the tight walls of her cunt milking me. “Ride me hard,” I urged.

Those insane eyes locked on mine, her mouth slightly open, cheeks flushed as she started to bounce up and down on my dick. I was torn between watching her face or tits. Both had me ready to blow like a damn teenager.

“Garrett,” she whimpered as her eyes glazed over.

“Fuck me, pretty baby. Soak my cock with that hot pussy,” I coaxed.

“Oh God,” she cried out as her nails dug into my shoulders.

“He’s not the one taking this tight cunt,” I growled. “I am.”

A wicked smile curled her lips as she let out another sexy sound.

I grabbed her ass with both hands and squeezed before slapping the right cheek. The flicker of pleasure that crossed her face had me doing the same to the other side.

“Only Daddy fucks this pussy.”

My twisted taunting sent her shouting out my name as her cunt began to throb and pulse. I grabbed a handful of her hair and yanked it back, then bit the curve of her neck as my own release burst out of me. I pumped my hips as my cum marked her as thoroughly as my teeth did.

When we both came down from the sheer rapture our

fucking seemed to always take us to, I wrapped my arms around her and held her against my chest.

Never had I felt like this. It was unique, addictive, intoxicating, and I knew there wouldn't be a day in this life I wouldn't want this woman. Not just for the scorching hot sex we had, but also for the way she gave me a reason to enjoy life. She opened my eyes to the things I'd been overlooking. Taking for granted. Everyone needed a foundation, a center, something in life to hold them when the rest of the world took off in a million directions.

Fawn was that for me. I'd already lived almost fifty years without her. I wasn't going to waste the rest of what I had left.

"I love you," I said, realizing that I had never once spoken those words. Not to my past wives. Not even to my own sons. The guilt from that shocked me. It had taken this woman to teach me to accept that emotion.

She leaned back until her eyes found me. I watched as she searched my face with disbelief.

"You do?" she whispered.

I cupped her chin in my hand. "I love you. I adore you. I need you. I never want to be without you."

Her eyes began to fill with tears, and she let out a shaky laugh. "I love you too," she said softly. Then laughed again. "I thought I couldn't love anyone but Gypsi. I thought I was broken in that way. But ... but I love you. You found a way to remove the pain from my past and opened my heart up."

Hearing her tell me she loved me and admitting she'd never

loved another man had me wanting to pound on my fucking chest. However, what pain was she talking about from her past? The darkness that had flashed in her eyes when she said it triggered something in my chest. What was in my girl's past? And who the fuck did I need to kill?



THIRTY-FOUR

FAWN

TWENTY YEARS AGO

The double-wide trailer was quiet when I stepped inside. That wasn't normal. It was after four, and by now, Dave, Matt, and Tilly—the other kids that Billy and Carla Day fostered. Not that they did a good job at it. We were a monthly paycheck to them. Nothing more. But we knew to be thankful to have a roof over our heads. Kids our age weren't what couples were looking to adopt.

I had been in the system for three years now.

My grandmother had raised me, and when she passed, there was no one else. My mother—her daughter—had overdosed on prescription drugs that she mixed with heroin and shot up her arm before I was six months old. Granny always told me that my mom had suffered from postpartum depression, but I knew the truth. She'd been an addict. The only reason I had been born a healthy baby was because Granny had kept her

daughter clean and under her roof throughout the pregnancy. Once I was born, my mom had been free to live life again, only to turn right back to drugs.

I didn't dwell on that though. Granny had been a good caregiver. We hadn't had much, and she wasn't always active in my life, but she took care of things. She was also old and tired. Raising me had been a lot to take on for her.

Besides, compared to the other kids in foster care, I'd had a great life. They'd all spent most of their lives bouncing around from home to home. I was the oldest, but they weren't much younger. Dave was fourteen, Matt thirteen, and Tilly was ten.

I closed the door to the trailer and listened for any sound that someone else was home. Nothing. It was odd, and I considered going back outside to go look for the younger kids. They rode the school bus, unlike me, since their schools were farther away. I had to walk the three miles home, so they always beat me here.

Footsteps caught my attention, and I turned toward the sound as Billy came from the hallway. He gave me a creepy smile that he'd been doing since the day I had been placed here almost a year ago. I tried to keep my distance and never be alone with him. The cigarette hanging between his yellow teeth almost fell out before he could grab it. I cringed.

" 'Bout time you got here," he snapped. "Ain't got no time for you staying out later than necessary. Spreading them pretty legs for a dick already?"

I swallowed and backed up a step as he walked in my direction. I shook my head. "No. This is the same time I get

here every day. Where is everyone?"

He stalked toward me, his greasy hair slicked back and a determined look on his face. "Got tired of all the mouths to feed. Don't need the money the state gives us for all them damn kids. Not when I got a moneymaker like you," he said, and an evil chuckle followed.

He wanted me to get a job? I wasn't sure I could get anything to pay me as much as they got for keeping the other kids from the state.

I backed up again, but he reached out and grabbed my arm forcefully.

"Stop trying to escape. You owe us. We gave your ass a place to live. Let you have your freedom. All because we knew this day was coming. The day those tits of yours developed. All we needed to go with that pretty face of yours was a body. Now, we got it, and there are men lined up, willing to pay me real good for a tight young cunt."

Bile rose up in my throat as the panic that had started to stir in me escalated to a full-blown attack. I fought against his grip on me.

"NO! Let me GO!" I shouted.

He laughed manically. "Or what?" he asked, then began to pull me as I fought him.

His strength overpowered me, but I kicked and screamed. I dropped to the floor to stop his ability to drag me.

Billy turned his awful face to me, now curled up in a snarl. His palm connected hard with my cheek. "GET UP, BITCH!"

he roared.

I shook my head, scrambling to get up and run. I was sure I could outrun him if I could just get to my feet fast enough. He moved to grab me, and I kicked him hard between the legs, then turned and sprang up while he cursed and grabbed his crotch.

My heart slammed frantically in my chest, and hope surged as the door to the trailer opened and Carla walked inside, carrying a grocery bag in her arms. She looked at me, then over my shoulder back at Billy.

“Help me!” I pleaded.

Carla set the bag down by the door, then closed it and locked it with the key and bolt before turning her overly tanned, wrinkled face toward me.

“Help you?” she asked, then grinned, showing her two missing teeth. One on top and another on the bottom.

“Do I have to do everything around here?” she shouted, then shook her head with disgust. She made her way to me and shoved me so hard in the chest that I fell down on my butt. “Get him in here. If she’s going to be difficult, we will hold her down while he fucks her. He can look at it as a bonus.”

No!

I started to get up when Carla straddled me and sat on my chest. Her hand slapped down over my mouth, and I kicked and tried to buck her off me, but she outweighed me by at least a hundred pounds. Billy walked over and grabbed my ankles, then pinned them to the floor.

“She’s ready for you to take,” Billy said.

I turned my head to see a man who didn’t appear to belong in this trailer park. For one, he was clean, and his clothes were nice. At least, I thought they were. He looked to be in his twenties and had blond hair not much darker than my own.

Then, he smiled at me. The depravity that shone in his eyes made me whimper against the hand still covering my mouth. There was a scar on his right cheek, but otherwise, that was his only flaw—other than the evil that clearly lived in his soul.

“She’s as lovely as you promised. But you will only get the full amount if she’s a virgin. I only fuck virgins.”

Tears ran down the sides of my face as I stared up at him, begging him with my eyes to please not do this.

“Go ahead and stick your fingers up her and check. I am positive her hymen is still there. Go on,” Carla told him with a smug smile on her face.

He winked at me, and I felt sure I was going to throw up. Billy jerked my legs open wide, and the man walked over to stand beside me. He dropped to his haunches, and the moment I felt his hand reach inside my panties, I closed my eyes. I couldn’t watch. I searched for an escape. Maybe I could stop breathing and die.

The painful thrust of his fingers hurt, and I wailed against Carla’s hand.

“It’s there. Nice, tight, untouched little cunt,” the man said. “Take her to the room. I want her tied down so I can fuck her without the two of you holding her.”

Carla moved off me, and I gasped for air and started to scream in hopes that someone would hear me. The blond man appeared in my face and covered my mouth with a rag. I inhaled, and then the world went to black.



THIRTY-FIVE

FAWN

PRESENT DAY

Staying at the camper this week had been hard. I didn't want to be away from Garrett, but I also felt bad, asking Gypsi to go over there. She'd enjoyed staying the other night, and when we had found her and Trev watching *The Godfather* in the theater, I had been relieved to see them getting along as friends. Still, I couldn't just ask her to go over there every night for my sake. We had managed to keep our normal schedule with work. Although Garrett spent the entire evening at Morii with me as his personal server. Working there seemed pointless.

He wasn't going to allow me to serve anyone else. His possessiveness had only gotten worse this week. We needed to discuss me getting another job, which I already knew was going to be a battle. I glanced over at Gypsi as she stared out the window of the Bentley Garrett had sent for us.

She had suggested we stay here tonight, which was odd, but I'd been so thrilled about seeing Garrett that I didn't question it. I was wondering if I should or if this was my daughter knowing I missed being with Garrett. My phone lit up, and I looked down to see Garrett's name.

I slid my finger over it to read the text.

I'm waiting, pretty baby.

I smiled down at his words. When I had told him about Gypsi's suggestion, he'd offered to give her his Amex so she could go shopping as a thank-you. I'd laughed and assured him she would never accept that.

"Garrett?" Gypsi asked.

I nodded, still smiling from his text. "Thanks for staying tonight. I miss him."

The car pulled through the entrance to Hughes Farm, and I turned to look out the window for a glimpse of Garrett. I'd seen him last night at work, but every moment I was away from him was starting to become more difficult.

When Six stopped the car, I didn't wait for him to open my door. I swung it open and climbed out, anxious to get to Garrett. Hurrying up the stairs, I left my overnight bag in the Bentley, figuring I'd go get it later, when the door opened up and Garrett stepped out. His brown cowboy hat sat on his head, and I smiled at the cowboy version I was greeted with today.

His gaze met mine, and a smile spread slowly across his face. Just as I reached him, he pulled his hat off and tugged me

closer before pressing his lips against mine.

“Lolli—Gypsi,” Trev called out, and I felt slightly guilty for kissing Garrett so openly in front of our kids, but unable to stop it.

Garrett released my mouth, but his hands stayed on my waist as he turned his head to look at Trev. “Things handled?” Garrett asked.

Trev gave his father a nod, then turned his attention back to Gypsi. “I was thinking pizza. I can get some ordered before I get a shower,” he said to her.

Happy that Trev had plans to entertain Gypsi, I turned to Garrett.

“Could we go to your rooms?” I whispered, placing a hand on his chest.

“I was planning to charm you with food and wine first,” he replied near my ear. “But if you want to do that privately in my suites, then I’m happy to. Whatever you want.”

I glanced briefly at Trev and Gypsi walking away. “They seem to be getting along well. I’d like to have you all to myself.”

Garrett chuckled. “Then, you shall.”

He pressed his hand to my back and led me into the house, then directly to the elevator. Gypsi and Trev were already gone off to wherever they were headed.

I knew the boy was clearly attracted to Gypsi. That was to be expected. What boy wouldn’t be? But it was Gypsi I

watched. She treated him like a friend, but there was something in her eyes that I hadn't seen before. I didn't need to worry. She was a smart girl. Sometimes, I worried she was too careful. Adventures only happened when you were open enough to jump in blind, not sure what the outcome would be.

I snuggled against Garrett's side as the elevator climbed to the fourth floor.

He pressed his nose to the top of my head and inhaled. "I missed you."

Smiling, I kissed his chest. "I missed you too."

The doors slid open, and I stepped into the first of Garrett's elaborate rooms. I loved the scent of his cigar in the air.

My gaze went to the fireplace. "Do you use that in the winter, the few days that it actually gets cold enough to use?" I asked him, thinking how cozy it would be to have a fire roaring while we were curled up on the sofa together.

"Not often," he replied. "But if you want a fire, then we will have one. I'll even have the air-conditioning turned down to make the rooms cold so that we can use it whenever you want. Fuck the weather. I can control that too."

Grinning, I turned to look back at him. "That sounds a little like you might have a God complex," I teased.

His lips twitched. "I have a Mafia boss complex. That's more aligned with Satan, wouldn't you say?"

I bit my lower lip and let my gaze slowly trail down his body. Tight shirt, jeans hanging on his hips, boots.

“There are many things I like about your Mafia boss persona,” I admitted.

His long legs brought him over to stand in front of me. “Those many things all have to do with when I’m fucking you,” he pointed out. “That’s the only time I get to boss you around and control you.”

I reached up and touched a button on his shirt. “I don’t know. I’m getting better at some things. I accepted the ridiculously expensive piece of luggage you gave me. It’s in the car with my stuff in it.”

“You have everything you need here. You never need to bring anything when you come. But I’m glad you’re using the Louis Vuitton duffel bag. I intend to add to it until you have a proper set of luggage.”

I tilted my head and narrowed my eyes. “Don’t get carried away.”

He smirked. “There’s my stubborn girl.”

I realized he’d been making a point, and a laugh bubbled out of me. “Okay, fine. Maybe I just like the bossy, controlling Garrett during sex.”

Garrett brushed my hair back over my shoulder, and his gaze fell to the last bite mark he’d left on me. “I might need to save my gifts for when I’m buried deep in that hot little cunt.”

I shivered. “That would be unfair.”

“Hmm,” he replied as his eyes lifted to meet mine. “A Mafia boss rarely plays fair. Especially when he wants something.”

I leaned into him and pressed a kiss against the veins in his neck. “What is it that you want?” I asked, trailing kisses against his warm, sun-kissed skin.

“Other than you?” His voice was husky.

I was affecting him. I loved that.

“Yes,” I probed.

He moved his hand from my waist to cup my butt. “I want you to go to Paris with me. Tomorrow. Spend the week.”

I stilled. Paris? He wanted to take me to Paris?

My eyes shot up to look at his. “You said it was a tourist trap.”

He shrugged. “You said it was the number one thing on your bucket list.”

I let out a small, disbelieving laugh and studied his face. He was serious. Did he think I was expecting a trip like that? I wasn't.

“You don't have to take me places,” I told him. “I love you. I just want you.”

His pupils dilated, and his gaze darkened. “That's gonna get you bent over the closest piece of furniture and fucked.”

“That's not a threat,” I pointed out.

A smile touched his lips. “It's not meant as one. I'm just not used to a woman who doesn't take what I give and demand more.”

When he said things like that, it broke my heart. I hated

every woman who had taken advantage of him in the past. I'd never allow it again. I wasn't leaving his side.

“Get used to it. I'm not going to be easy to get rid of.”

He reached up and grabbed my face, cupping it with both hands as he looked down at me. “Please, Fawn. Please let me take you to Paris. For me. I'm a selfish bastard, and I want to see your face the first time you see that damn tower and taste your first Parisian macaron. I want to be the one to walk you through the Louvre and show you the *Mona Lisa*. I want to take you shopping and dress you in the finest fabrics. Let me have this,” he begged.

My chest felt as if it would explode. My eyes watered, and I took a deep breath. “When you say it like that, it is impossible to tell you no,” I admitted.

His eyes bored into mine. “You'll go with me then?”

I nodded, unable not to smile at the hopeful, boyish gleam in his eyes. “I need to talk to Gypsi first.”

“She can stay here. Enjoy the pool. Saxon can take her horseback riding. She'll be safe and entertained. I'll make sure Trev doesn't have any of his wild parties. It will give her a chance to see that living here isn't so bad.”

I knew he thought that was an easy fix, but there was a lot he was going to learn about my daughter. The only thing that I thought might convince her was that it was Paris and she knew how much I had always dreamed of going there.

“I'll talk to her.”

He beamed at me before his mouth covered mine.



THIRTY-SIX

FAWN

The Louvre had been amazing. Everything since the moment we had stepped off the plane was like a fairy tale. We had immediately gotten into the limo that was waiting. Inside, there was expensive champagne in a fancy gold bucket with ice and a tiered tray of pastries that looked like tiny pies, elaborate cookies, and tarts.

Today had been just magical.

I sat out on our balcony that had a perfect view of the Eiffel Tower. That had been the most exciting thing so far. Garrett's smug grin as I'd squealed and run out to see it when we arrived was obvious. He should be smug. He'd given me so much more than my dreams could have ever come up with.

He had left me out on the lounge with my favorite macarons. Yes, I already had a favorite. He'd taken me on a tasting tour so I could decide which ones I liked best and from what bakery. The champagne he had poured me sat beside me

on the table.

I glanced to look at him inside as he spoke on the phone. He had closed the door so I couldn't hear him, but the scowl on his face as he spoke and started to pace back and forth concerned me. I began to worry something had happened at home.

I picked up my phone and texted Gypsi to check on her.

Are you okay?

I sent it while chewing on my bottom lip nervously. Maybe I should have told Garrett about Tyde. The specifics so he could be prepared if the punk showed up.

Yes, I'm fine. Going to sit by the pool to read a book.

I let out a sigh of relief. Thank goodness. It was my imagination working overtime. But I was going to talk to Garrett. He needed to know everything.

I'm so glad you're doing something relaxing. You never do that anymore. We went to the Louvre today! I'll send pics.

Then, I sent several of the pics we had taken. A few that Huck—the bodyguard Garrett had brought along—had taken of us together.

The door opened, and Garrett walked outside. His concerned frown hadn't gone away, and he wasn't trying to mask it. I sat up straight and waited for him to say something. He walked over and took a chair from the small table for two and turned it to face me before sitting down.

“Tell me what you know about a former prospect of The Judgment MC that goes by Tyde,” he said.

I shot up off the lounge, my heart slamming against my chest in panic. “Why? Oh God. I have to leave. I have to get to Gypsi,” I stammered, feeling completely lost and helpless. Why had I left her like that? I was so far away. Tears filled my eyes, and I covered my mouth as a sob broke free. “Garrett, she’s in danger. Please, I have to get to her. She needs protection. She doesn’t know!”

Garrett grabbed me. His big hands taking me by the arms and holding me still. “Gypsi is safe. Tyde is currently in my underground caves, chained up by his hands, while three of my best men, including Blaise, are with him. Now, take a deep breath. Calm down. I swore to you I’d keep you both safe, and I meant it. Gypsi is by the pool right now. Trev is with her. She is fine.”

Another sob fell from me as relief washed over me. She was okay. The bastard wasn’t going to get to her.

“They have him,” I repeated more for my own sanity than anything.

“They do,” he reassured me. “But I need you to tell me everything. All your secrets, Fawn. Even the ones that darken your eyes when you mention the past. I need to know it all. If I know, then I can protect you properly. Tyde got onto our land. We hadn’t known to expect him, but Blaise caught him and locked him up.”

Tyde had come onto the farm? He’d gotten that close? Why hadn’t I considered that he might do that? I had trusted Micah

to handle him, and that had been a mistake. One that could have hurt my daughter.

I stared up at Garrett and nodded. He was right. I had to keep Gypsi safe. Garrett was clearly the only person I could trust to do that.

“Okay, yes, I’ll tell you everything. I should have. I’m sorry,” I stammered.

He took my chin in his hand. “Don’t apologize. I’m not mad at you. I should have asked this already. I knew there were things you weren’t telling me. I let you have your secrets. I wanted to respect them. But you belong to me now. I protect what is mine.”

I wasn’t arguing with him about my being his thing. Not anymore. If being his meant my daughter was protected, then I’d agree to it. The truth was, I did belong to him. He’d claimed a piece of me I hadn’t known was there.

“Tyde was at the clubhouse when I moved in with Micah. He pursued Gypsi hard, and he was charming. In the beginning, they had fun. She laughed a lot, and I was glad to see her happy. Actually dating someone. She’d never really done that before. But then things changed. I knew they started sleeping together. I got her on birth control and made sure she had plenty of protection.

“Her smiles came less and less. I would talk to her, and she’d assure me she was fine. I moved us out of the clubhouse when I overheard Micah getting a blow job in Tex’s room. Gypsi didn’t break up with Tyde though, so we stayed in the camper in Miami.

“It only took a week before I noticed the bruising appearing on her arm. She made an excuse, and I knew then. In my gut, I knew, and I hated myself for missing it. I demanded she take off her clothes and—” I stopped as the pain of that day replayed in my head. “She was black and blue. Her ribs—” I sucked in a deep breath. “It was awful. I had failed her.”

Tears were running down my face again. I couldn't stop it.

“I called Micah and told him. He swore he'd handle Tyde. I trusted him. We left, but we didn't have enough saved to go far. We only made it to Ocala. I could tell Gypsi was worried. She asked if I thought Micah could really control Tyde. She didn't look like she believed it. She said Tyde had been possessive and controlling. That when other guys looked at her, he'd blame her and hurt her. It was awful.”

Garrett wrapped his arms around me and pulled me against him. “You didn't know. You can't blame yourself for something you didn't know. When you found out, you immediately handled it. You did what a great mom does. You protected your daughter. Stop blaming yourself.”

I sniffled against his chest, but said nothing.

“Gypsi knows Tyde came to the house. She knows they stopped him. She told Trev what happened. It seems Tyde has been stalking her. Leaving toy rings in places to let her know he was there. She's been keeping it from you so you wouldn't worry. She chose to quit her job because he'd left one on the counter while she was in the restroom.”

I pulled back and stared up at Garrett in shock. He had been stalking her! That creep had been traumatizing her, and I

didn't know! She'd been protecting me!

Dammit, Gypsi, that is my job. I am the mom.

"He was stalking her." I let out a cry of fury. "I just texted her. She said she was good. Reading a book by the pool."

A flash of admiration flickered in his eyes. "I see. That tells me a lot about Gypsi. She doesn't blame you either. She didn't want you to come running back. I've said it before, but you've raised an impressive kid."

I battled with what to do now. "We should leave. Go back."

Garrett shook his head. "No. Gypsi doesn't want you to come back. She will blame herself if you do. She's safe. Tyde will never bother her again."

"You can't know that. He is clearly unhinged. Even if he is arrested, he will eventually get out. Gypsi isn't going to want to go to court." I started to feel frantic. This was a nightmare.

Garrett's jaw tensed. I could see something in his eyes that he was battling with. I waited, knowing he had more to tell me. My stomach knotted. I was almost afraid to hear it.

"Tyde won't see tomorrow," he said firmly. "His coming onto my property, armed, isn't something I can accept. That in itself means death. But you should know that Blaise informed me that Trev didn't handle the abuse that Tyde had inflicted on Gypsi well. In fact, he acted out of character, losing his temper. He is my laid-back son. This surprised both his brother and me. Trev has asked—make that, demanded—to be the one to kill Tyde. Gypsi won't know. I think it's best that this part of our world is kept from her."

I had no words. This wasn't how normal people dealt with crimes. He spoke of killing someone as if it was business. Something expected. Tyde had come onto his property without being invited, so he was going to die. Simple as that. It was wrong. It was illegal and twisted. It was completely fucked up.

And I didn't care. Because that son of a bitch had hurt my daughter. If I were there, I couldn't promise I wouldn't kill him myself.

“Good.” The word fell from my lips, and I meant it.

Garrett's eyes widened in surprise. “You're not going to go on a tirade about this being illegal and that murder is a crime?”

I shook my head. “No, I'm not. That bastard hurt my kid. He traumatized her. Stalked her.” I seethed. “Kill him.”

A deep chuckle vibrated from Garrett's chest. “Never underestimate a protective momma.”



THIRTY-SEVEN

FAWN

Last night, Garrett had seemed to know I needed comfort more than sex. He bathed me in the shower, shampooed and conditioned my hair, then thoroughly dried me, taking a brush to my damp strands before tucking me into bed. He placed a kiss on my temple and promised he would be back. I knew he was going out onto the balcony to make a call to Blaise. He was keeping up with things at the house and trying to keep me out of it.

I had fallen asleep before he returned because when my eyes opened again, the sunlight was streaming into the room, and his warm, hard body was pressed against my back with his arm thrown over my waist. I snuggled back against him and wrapped my arm over his.

“Mmm.” His deep voice vibrated in my ear.

I softly ran my nails over his forearm back and forth.

He moved his hand up and under my camisole to cup one of my breasts. “Waking up with you is the only way I ever want to wake up again,” he said, the raspy sound from sleep.

I rolled over onto my back so I could see his handsome face. He grabbed me and turned me until our chests were touching.

“That’s better,” he murmured.

I ran my hand down his muscular arm. “I get a view this way,” I replied.

Garrett groaned. “I get my hard cock pressed against your pussy.”

I laughed, and he looked down at me with a slow grin tugging on his lips.

“Be a good girl and drape your leg over my hip so I can get a more direct connection.”

Wanting that myself, I did as he’d suggested. The moment his erection rubbed against my clit, I whimpered. That was good. I wanted more. I rocked against him, seeking my own pleasure.

Garrett let out a deep growl, then had me flipped over onto my back with my hands above my head and my wrists in his hand, pinning them there. He applied more pressure as he ran his hard length over my already-wet lips.

“Do you need my cock, pretty baby?” he asked.

I nodded. “Yes,” I panted, eager for him to slip inside me.

He reached down and grabbed my thigh, opening me up further. Then, with one hard thrust, he slammed into me,

causing me to cry out. He let go of my thigh and wrapped his strong, thick fingers around my throat as his hips pumped into me.

“That’s a good girl. Taking my dick, letting me fuck you hard,” he praised.

I arched my back, needy, wanting more of his twisted dirty talk while he stretched me. “AH!”

His cock jerked inside of me while my vaginal walls clamped down on him.

“Fuck, pretty baby. That’s incredible,” he swore, then began to piston his hips faster. Driving into me like a man possessed. His eyes went dark and his expression savage. “My fucking pussy,” he snarled. “Spread those legs wider. Take me deep. Needy little cunt.”

I was going to come. His dirty talk and that look in his eyes were too much.

“I can hear your soaking wet pussy. Coating my dick. You want me to fuck you hard, don’t you? I told you to be a good girl, but you’re naughty.” He was breathing hard. The veins on his neck stood out. His hand tightened on my throat. “But you’re just a horny slut for Daddy.”

My body clenched up, then burst free with extreme satisfaction as my release hit.

“FUCK! FUCK!” Garrett roared as he pounded into me, and then his entire body went rigid as the warmth from his release filled me.

His hand left my throat, and he fell down onto his elbows.

He hung his head over my shoulder as he gasped for air. I ran my hands up his sides, smiling as my body still hummed.

“I love you,” he said, then pressed a kiss to my cheek.

“I love you,” I replied, happy. Content.

We stayed that way for a few moments while our heart rates slowed. When Garrett sat up enough to pull out of me, I pouted up at him.

“Don’t look at me like that. I’ll keep you in bed all day, fucking us both to death. And I have our day planned out.”

As much as I wanted to stay in bed, attempting to fuck ourselves to death, I also wanted to see more of Paris. Experience whatever plans he had for us.

“Okay. If you insist,” I teased.

The way he stared down at me, as if I was the most important thing in his life, made my heart flutter.

“It’s our last full day in Paris. I want it to be the most memorable.”

That sounded promising.

“You sold me. Let’s get up.”

He chuckled as he climbed off me and got out of bed. I sat up and watched his naked ass walk to the bathroom. I wanted to bite it. The cheeks were so hard and flexed when he walked. It made me want to sink my teeth into one of those perfect, sculpted cheeks.

“What are you still doing in bed?” he called out from the bathroom.

“Thinking about how much I want to bite your ass,” I replied.

He filled the doorway almost immediately. The warning look in his eyes made me laugh. “Get out of bed and stop talking with that filthy mouth. We have plans, dammit.”

I sighed dramatically and tossed the covers off before swinging around and putting my feet on the ground. We could play later. He had things for us to do, and I wanted to do them.



The day was a whirlwind. We went shopping some more, although I protested that he'd already bought me too much. He said I needed something for tonight, so I caved and let him have his fun. We ate on the roof of a restaurant that he'd rented out so we were the only ones out there. We could see all the sights, and the weather was clear and felt perfect. After lunch, he took me on a private yacht along the Seine River. Then, we went back to the apartment to get ready for the opera. Nothing had prepared me for the overwhelming beauty of the opera. I'd been mesmerized throughout the entire thing.

Garrett had assured me all was taken care of at home, and Gypsi had been laughing in the background when he spoke to Trev earlier. They were out at the pool, and he had taken her to the stables earlier. She wasn't texting me, so I tried to give her space. I didn't want to hover.

When we made it to the door of our suite after the Opera, Garrett opened the door and stood back for me to go inside. Still reeling from the adventures we'd experienced today, I

entered the suite and went to turn on the lights when I paused.

The doors leading onto the balcony caught my attention. White lights twinkled on every limb, branch, railing; they covered everything. Candles were lit on the small table, and the closer I got to the doors, I could see gold-coated white roses scattered all over the surfaces. A glass stand with four tiers of macarons sat in the middle of the table. I paused and looked back at Garrett, a smile tugging at my lips.

He nodded his head for me to continue.

I opened the doors and left them standing open wide as I stepped out onto the balcony. The Eiffel Tower was lit up, and standing there, in this magical setting, I felt like there was no other dream of mine that could compete with the gift of Paris that Garrett had given me.

“It’s all so breathtaking,” I said, turning back to him. “You sure know how to end a trip.”

Garrett smiled as he joined me outside. “I wouldn’t look at it as the ending of our trip. Just the one experience I hope I will get to hold as the most important moment of my life.”

I smiled, unsure of what he meant by that, when he slowly went down on one knee in front of me. My breathing stopped as our eyes stayed locked. He was on a knee. I finally sucked in air, and he grinned as he reached into his pocket. The lights danced off the diamond he held out in his hand. It was the largest diamond I had ever seen, nestled in royal-blue velvet. I stared at it.

Was that real? They didn’t make diamonds this size, did

they?

“You have been nothing but firsts for me. Firsts that have changed me. Made me a better man. Shown me that having love and being loved is worth more than anything my money can buy. Just as I have never loved a woman until you, I’ve never even said the words until you. I have never gotten down on one knee. I’ve never wanted to get on one knee. But I couldn’t get down here quick enough. I’ve fought it all night, wanting the moment to be perfect.

“Fawn Parker, will you marry me? I don’t want to spend another day of my life without you.”

I let out a choked sob as I nodded my head. “Yes!”

As he slid the massive diamond onto my finger, the broad smile that stretched across his face as he stood up made me agree to anything to see him that happy. I’d even wear this completely over-the-top ring that sparkled beautifully with all the twinkling lights.

As his lips lowered to meet mine, he whispered, “Thank you.”

I grabbed his face and pressed my mouth against his.

Garrett Hughes was not something I had ever dreamed of for my future. But he outshone all the fantasies I’d once had, making them pale in comparison.



THIRTY-EIGHT

FAWN

We had been home for over a week, and I felt as if things had been moving so fast that it was hard to keep up. Tonight, we had attended a gala. Not just Garrett and me, but Trev and Gypsi went with us. Turned out that my suspicions had been correct. Since coming home, I had noticed there was something off with Gypsi, and it wasn't the sudden life change. It was Trev.

Garrett walked toward the bed in his boxers, which was odd. He normally slept naked. I knew he was concerned with tonight's events. He had to learn he couldn't control everything and everyone. Our kids had their own lives, and it would be unfair of us to butt in. They were adults.

"You know they're fucking, right?" he asked as he reached the bed.

I shrugged. "I didn't ask for details. I just saw two people unable to stop looking at each other, like they were in pain and

longing. Let them make their own decisions. It's not like they will be related by blood. They didn't grow up together. They will be adult stepchildren. There is nothing wrong with them having a relationship."

Garrett sighed and sat down on the edge of the bed. "Fawn, he calls her Lollipop." The disgust in his tone made me giggle.

"You call me pretty baby. Maybe pet names are something the Hughes men like to do."

Garrett didn't look amused. "You don't know Trev. He's going to hurt her."

I leaned forward and touched his arm. "I wouldn't be so sure of that. You should watch your son closer. See the way he watches her. The possessive look in his gaze is awfully familiar."

Garrett grunted, then reached over and covered my hand with his. "I just don't want anything to happen that makes you leave me."

I scooted closer to him. "You need to worry more about the fact that you're stuck with me. I refuse to go away."

He grinned then, but only briefly.

"There's something I want to ask you," he said somberly. "I wanted to give you time to settle in, but it's gnawing at me."

I sat up on my knees and stared at him as he turned his body toward me.

"What?" I asked, not knowing what could have him so serious.

“Who is Gypsi’s father?”

I froze. Memories I fought hard to keep locked away, untouched, never to be thought of again, began to pound in my skull.

I winced, then shook my head. “I can’t talk about that.”

Garrett reached for my hand and held it firmly in his. “You’re trembling,” he said, scowling. “Fawn, does Gypsi know who her father is?”

I shook my head and snatched my hand out of his, then scrambled to get out of the bed. I needed air. I couldn’t breathe.

“Baby, this reaction is not fucking okay. Something happened to you. Something that is still affecting you twenty years later. I need to know what it is.” Garrett’s tone was fierce.

I wrapped my hands around my waist and began to pace. “No, no, you don’t. Gypsi doesn’t want to know. I don’t want to talk about it.”

Garrett was in front of me then, taking me in his hands and stopping me. His eyes bored down on me. “This is fucking with my head, Fawn. I don’t like it. I know there is a darkness in those beautiful eyes that I see on occasion, but I let you have your secrets. I wanted you to tell me when you felt comfortable. But we’re getting married, and you haven’t said a word.”

I stared up at him, panic clawing at my chest, remembering the events that had led to my pregnancy. The horror I never

wanted to think about again. I never wanted anyone else to know.

“Did Billy and Carla Day have anything to do with this?” he asked.

I paled, and my stomach twisted in a knot. “How do you know those names?” I whispered.

Flashes of their faces came back to me. I struggled to shove them back in the box I kept them in.

“I did some research. You weren’t talking about anything besides your life once you had Gypsi. The few times I mentioned it, your mood shifted. You looked haunted, and I hated it. I wanted to know why.”

I shook my head and shoved at his chest, trying to get him to back away from me. “You had no right.”

“You are going to be my wife,” he argued. “I have a right to know why there are demons that you don’t talk about. That you hold in and pretend like they’re not there.”

“NO!” I shouted. “I DON’T—” I broke off into a sob and covered my face as the truth of my past rained down on me for the first time since I’d managed to mentally shut it away. Pretend it hadn’t happened.

I’d been given my Gypsi Lu. The most precious gift. My daughter, my best friend. The reason I survived and found joy again. She’d saved me. How could I ever let the terrible things that had happened to me, that brought her into this world, affect me?

“They don’t exist,” I chanted to myself. “They don’t exist.”

“Fuck, Fawn.” Garrett’s voice sounded as if he was in pain as he pulled me into his arms.

I needed the comfort that came from him.

He ran his hand over my head as he soothed me. “I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have pushed. I love you.” Every word that fell from his lips held a twinge of anguish he couldn’t mask.

He did love me, and I trusted him.

It had been twenty years. Maybe it was time I told someone. Faced my demons and accepted that I’d survived it. I hadn’t just survived, but I lived fully. I was the mom I’d never had. I was better than my past. I had beaten the demons that tried to destroy me.

“They took money from men. Two different men. Then, they held me down, tied me up, and let the men rape me.” The words had never once crossed my lips. I’d never been able to admit it. To accept that I’d been violated. That my virginity had been taken from me in such a horrid way.

Garrett’s arms tightened as he held me. “Who?”

That one word made me shiver. His voice had taken on an edge I had never heard before.

“I don’t know the names of the men,” I admitted.

“Who sold you?” he asked.

“Billy and Carla,” I whispered. “They drugged me. I wasn’t always conscious when it happened. I fought against it so hard that they had to sedate me.”

The words were coming out now, and I realized I couldn’t

stop them. I needed to say it. I had started this, and I had to finish.

“I woke up one morning after being drugged. Billy and Carla were passed out with needles of whatever they were shooting up littering the living room floor. I knew I had to go. That I would have no other chance. I went to their room and found the stash of cash I knew Carla hid under the mattress, and then I ran. I took a bus to the next state, then got off and took a different one.

“I was living in a run-down motel room that I paid for weekly while working at a Laundromat when I started getting sick. The owner told me I was pregnant. I hadn’t even realized it. I was a kid, and I had to be told—” I let out a small wail at the memory. Because for one brief moment in my life, I hadn’t wanted my daughter. I had been terrified.

Gathering myself together to finish, I clung to Garrett as he held me closer to him.

“Juanita Gilfry—that was my boss’s name. She owned the Laundromat. She bought me a pregnancy test, and it was positive. She took me in to live in her two-bedroom apartment with her six kids, mother, and elderly aunt. I slept on the sofa. She helped me get Medicaid. Took me to doctor’s appointments.”

I smiled through my tears as I thought of the day I’d heard my baby’s heartbeat for the first time. I loved her so much in that moment. I wanted to give her everything I never had.

“I lived there until Gypsi turned one. I saved enough to get a small studio apartment in the same complex. We stayed there

until I swindled the men in poker. You know the rest.”

Garrett pressed a kiss to my head, and I wrapped my arms around him. There was a lighter feeling in my chest. Sharing my worst nightmares with someone else, someone I could trust and who loved me, it helped.

“Come to bed. Let me hold you,” Garrett said in a husky whisper.

I went willingly. Letting him lead me, pick me up, and tuck me in against his chest.

When I closed my eyes that night, I didn't fear the nightmares that slipped in sometimes. I knew I had a protector. Someone who would never let the evil touch me again.



THIRTY-NINE

GARRETT

Kenneth Houston took one last pull from his cigar before dropping it onto the overgrown yard at the run-down trailer we'd pulled up to. Gage stood with his usual amused smirk on his face as he waited for me to explain why I'd brought them to a trailer park in West Virginia.

“I'm looking for two people. Billy and Carla Day. Neither dies until I have what I want from them. Then, I want their deaths to be brutal, and I want to do it myself. I need their blood, agony, and death done by my hands.” That was the only information I'd given them when I called both men and told them to meet me at the plane before five this morning.

Kenneth studied the trailer, then turned back to me. “This must be personal. I can't remember the last time you and I handled this kind of thing.”

I nodded once, then headed toward the door.

“Should Gage stay with the vehicle?” Kenneth asked.

“No. You’re here because you’re one of my closest friends. Gage is here because he’s a psychopath. He’s needed inside.”

Gage chuckled, as if my description wasn’t accurate.

I didn’t bother knocking, but stepped back, and with trained precision, I kicked the cheap-ass door in. A loud female shriek, followed by a man’s cursing, was instant. I stepped inside the doorway, taking in the scene. It was fucking disgusting. Empty bottles of cheap liquor, needles, and garbage littered the kitchen and living room area.

I immediately recognized the tall, skinny man with greasy hair and circles under his eyes, wearing a pair of dingy underwear. He was the man in the photos Levi had given me. Billy Day. He stood there, gaping at me before he reached for whatever weapon he had tucked under the cushions of his faded brown sofa.

“That would be a real bad idea,” Gage drawled, walking in with his gun already drawn and pointed at the man. “My finger’s itching to pretty up this place with some bright red blood.”

The man froze, his shifty gaze going from me to Gage.

“We didn’t take nothing from Johnny. He’s lying. We bought our lot nice and square and wasn’t from the likes of him. He’s lying, saying we owe him shit. We don’t,” the woman shrieked.

I turned to look at her for the first time. She was younger than Carla. Too young for Billy, but she did look legal.

Gage raised his eyebrows as he looked at me. He was clearly amused.

“You moved on from Carla, I see,” I said, turning my gaze back to Billy.

He narrowed his eyes at me. “What you know about Carla?” he asked.

“Who the fuck is Carla?!” the other woman shouted.

His beady eyes didn’t leave the gun that was trained on him. “My dead wife,” he said to her.

Dead? That hadn’t come up in the background report.

“When did she die?” I asked him.

The nervous tic in his eyes didn’t go unnoticed. “A week ago. Meth house she was living in blew up.”

“We’ve been together fourteen months, Billy! You never said nothing ’bout no wife.”

He scowled. “There’s a man pointing a gun at me, Bridge. We can talk ’bout that shit later.”

I turned back to Bridge. “I don’t know. I’m with Bridge here. I’d like to know about Carla myself.”

Bridge’s expression softened, and she gave me a flirtatious smile.

Gage coughed to cover up his laughter.

I turned back to Billy, looking at the son of a bitch. Rage pounded in my head. The sound of Fawn’s voice, her cries, the way she had trembled in my arms, recalling all he’d done to

her. I wasn't sure hell would be enough for him. The suffering I wanted to inflict on this man was worse than anything the fucking Devil could deliver.

“Where was Carla living when she died?” I asked him.

He shifted his feet nervously. “Two towns over with her new man.”

“I'll need an address,” I told him.

He looked frustrated. “I got the proof. It made the news, if you care so damn much. Bridge, get that paper I folded up and put on top of the fridge.”

The woman went over and took down a paper. “This one?”

Billy waved his hand at me. “Give it to him!” he barked.

The woman rolled her eyes, then walked over to me after she shoved her boobs up further in her tight top and shook them a little. Annoyed, I cut my eyes toward Kenneth, who was pressing his lips together. Amusement danced in his eyes.

When she got close enough, I took the paper and turned my back to her.

“It's right there. See? She's dead.”

I read over the article, and her name was listed as one of those found in the meth house that had exploded. She'd been identified before the others because she was farther from the explosion. Her body hadn't been as destroyed.

I hoped she'd felt it, suffered, screamed in agony. Crumpling the paper in my hand, I let the fury that I'd not been there to make sure she died a horrid, drawn-out death

seep through me.

“Is that all you needed? Did Carla do something?” Billy asked.

I glared at him. “Do you remember Fawn Parker?” I asked slowly.

Billy frowned, confused for a moment. The fact that he didn’t remember the girl he’d abused or that he was pretending not to made me snap. The cool I had been trying to remain was gone.

I stalked over to the man as he backed up until his back hit the wall.

He held up both hands, shaking his head. “I didn’t do nothing to her. Except feed her and give her a roof over her ungrateful head,” he stammered. “She ran off—”

My fist connected with the side of his face, hard enough to snap it back, and then he sank to the floor, unconscious.

Bridge screamed as I turned around.

“Tie him up. Get him in the vehicle,” I ordered.

Gage slipped his gun back into its holster and started toward Billy. I nodded at Kenneth to go on outside, then swung my gaze to Bridge.

“He won’t be returning. Get a good job, clean yourself up, and find a life out of this place.”

“What are you doing with him?” she cried.

I ignored her and headed for the door.

“The police will come looking for him,” she called out.

I had to give her credit for the balls to threaten me. I kept going. She wasn't my concern.

“Be a waste of time, calling the cops,” Gage told her. “But you can try.”

I smirked at his response.

“I understand now,” Kenneth said, falling into step beside me.

“Yeah. This never is to be spoken of. I won't betray her trust, but I can't let those who hurt her live.”

Kenneth nodded. “Understood.”

Gage came out with the man thrown over his shoulder. His feet were bound at the ankles. I knew his wrists would also be tied and a gag would be put into his mouth. The only things that could be seen were his feet since Gage had wrapped him in a blanket before hauling him out like a sack of potatoes.

Bridge came bounding out of the house, swinging a gun. Her eyes were wild as she stood on the stoop. “I'll shoot you all! Put him down!” she yelled.

Kenneth's swift reaction reminded me of a time before the younger men had taken over this part. Back when it had been us handling the dirty work. His gun was pointed at the crazed woman and cocked, ready to fire. I knew he would pull the trigger without blinking an eye.

“You can drop the gun, go back inside, and live. *Or* I can put a bullet in your head.” Kenneth's cool, unemotional threats

were always powerful. He always delivered them as if the idea of killing someone didn't affect him in the least. He could have just asked her about the weather with the way he stood, looking bored.

She lowered the gun and didn't say anything as Gage tossed Billy in the back of the SUV.

"Go on. Drop it," Kenneth told her. "I'm growing annoyed." Although his tone didn't have any inflection to show that fact.

She stared at him, and then the gun slipped from her fingers and landed on the ground at her feet.

Kenneth tucked his gun away and turned to walk to the SUV.

We climbed in, and Gage waved goodbye as if we had just shared a friendly visit before we drove away.



FORTY

GARRETT

Standing under the fall of water from the ceiling of my shower, I washed away the filth that felt as if it'd clung to me from standing in that trailer. Knowing that Fawn had lived there once, that she'd been a helpless girl with no one to protect her, had ripped me open inside. Once we were done here, I was sending Gage back, possibly Huck with him, to contain the situation and burn that shithole to the ground. It wasn't going to be possible for me to accept that it still existed. It had to be taken out too.

The door to the shower opened behind me, and I turned to see Fawn step inside.

She smiled, lifting her face to the water. "I love this shower. It feels like you're standing outside in a warm downpour."

My eyes devoured her wet body. "I love you in this shower," I replied.

She blinked as she looked at me. Her lashes had droplets of water clinging to them. “Hmm,” she purred, then closed the space between us. “That’s good. I was hurt when you decided to take one without me.”

I wrapped my arms around her and gazed into her eyes. I couldn’t tell her I had come in here to calm my rage over seeing the place where she’d been forced to live. Looking into the eyes of the bastard who had abused her. Some things I would never be able to tell her, and this was one of them. I hated keeping secrets from her, but it was to shelter her. Another form of protection.

Soon, I would be handing this title over to Blaise. He was ready. He had become exactly what I had known he could be. Perhaps he’d even be a better boss of the family. He had a center that I hadn’t. Madeline kept him focused, whereas I’d never had that—until now.

“You were at the pool with Gypsi,” I said, pressing a kiss to the corner of her mouth.

“Are you sure that’s the reason? Nothing is wrong, is it? You were gone before I woke up. Did business get ... difficult?”

I brushed back the hair stuck to her forehead from the steady downpour of the shower. There was nothing about this woman that I didn’t worship. “It wasn’t pleasant, but it had to be done.”

She didn’t push for more. Instead, she laid her head on my chest and let me hold her. It had become so easy for her to read my emotions. Right now, this was exactly what I needed. To have her here, knowing she was safe—and I would keep her

that way. Always.

“Christmas Day,” I said.

She tilted her head back and looked up at me. “What about Christmas Day?” The curious expression on her face was adorable.

“Marry me. Here, at this house, on Christmas Day.”

A smile spread across her lips. “Really?”

I nodded. “The moment you become Mrs. Garrett Hughes, Blaise will take over as head of the family. I want more time to spend with you. I want to travel the world and show you every beautiful sight there is to see.”

Her eyes widened in surprise. “You’re serious?”

I grinned and bent my head to kiss her lips softly. “Completely.”

She reached up and grabbed my face with both her hands. “Yes!” she exclaimed with sheer joy shining in her golden eyes.

When her mouth claimed mine, I pulled her up into my arms and soaked in the taste of the woman I would love until I took my last breath.



I could hear talking and maniacal laughter as I stepped down into the underground cellars. Gage was in full psycho mode, it seemed. I was almost to the door that they had hung up Billy on when I heard Blaise’s voice. It was low and deadly. He

knew how to command power. His mother had been a mistake, but not Blaise. He was the one thing I cherished that had come from that horrid marriage. I was proud of him. The man he'd become from the reckless youth he had once been.

When I stepped into the room, my eyes went to Billy. Blood was already dripping from his nose and looked like his ear too. He'd said something to piss off Blaise. If it had been Gage, a piece of his body would be lying at his feet, along with a pool of blood.

"I didn't do anything!" Billy cried as I walked over to stand in front of him.

I glanced back at Blaise. "Seems he's annoyed you in some way."

Blaise lit a cigarette and inhaled, then nodded. "He said something about Fawn."

My spine stiffened, and I felt the violence surge through my body as my pulse quickened. I swung my attention back to the man I was going to slowly torture.

"You don't know her. She was a foster kid. Messed up. She stole from us. She was wild, acted out. Whatever lies she told you aren't true. We did our best by her!"

Billy's desperate words only ignited the depth of my hatred for him.

I backhanded him so hard that blood shot out of his mouth, and he began to cry and gurgle on blood.

"Ma ton'," he moaned. "I bit oot ma ton'."

Gage let out an unhinged cackle behind me.

“I’ll cut the rest of it out soon,” I assured him.

“Pwea! Baweve me,” he pleaded.

The terror in his eyes wasn’t enough. I needed more. He had to suffer.

“Bring me the belt,” I told Gage, my eyes not leaving the man I ached to see wail in pain.

“You want me to put it on him, boss?” he asked.

“Yes.” I wasn’t sure I could touch him and not snap his neck in a moment of uncontrolled rage. That would be too good for him. A quick death he would not get.

Blaise handed me the remote as Gage placed the stun belt on Billy, who seemed to panic, unsure of what it was. This was one of my favorite forms of torture. Sure, I enjoyed watching them bleed, but slicing didn’t give me the satisfaction it did Gage and, apparently, my youngest son.

When Gage stepped back, I released the first electric shock. Seeing Billy jerk and spasm sent a thrill of twisted ease through me.

While he was moaning from the release of the first shock, I grinned, pleased to see the horror of understanding in his eyes. His death would be horrible and long.

“You didn’t destroy her. Fawn got pregnant from one of the men you’d let rape her,” I told him.

“Fuck,” Blaise muttered behind me.

I had only allowed him and Gage down here because what I

was going to say to this man, I didn't want anyone else to hear. It was Fawn's story. Not mine to share.

“She took your hidden cash, ran, got a job several states away, and was taken in by the owner of the Laundromat where she was working. That woman helped Fawn, gave her shelter, was there when she had her baby girl.”

The man tried to speak, but he only made a low whine. I hit the button again and watched him convulse with the pain of the electrocution.

While he was still shivering from the aftershock, I continued, “Like I did with you, I located that woman. She was living in the same run-down apartment complex. One of her kids lived with her, along with three grandchildren. They now live in a four-thousand-square-foot home with a pool and five acres of land. She has enough money in her bank account to live comfortably for the rest of her life.” I ran my thumb over my lower lip and smirked. “You see, I'm not a complete devil. I hand out payment where it is due. She deserved a reward. You deserve to die an agonizing death.”

I clicked the remote and soaked in the visual of Billy Day's torture. It would give me a high whenever I remembered this moment. Knowing he'd paid for what he'd done to my girl. That I'd taken that payment myself.

“Fawn raised that baby girl alone. She has become as intelligent, kind, honest, and charming as her mother. She's Fawn's best friend. The girl you'd abused beat the past and found joy in life. You didn't ruin her. Your filth left no mark.”

I took a step closer to him, wanting him to see the monster

beneath the surface. The one he had triggered and woken up. He shuddered and tried to move, but there was no strength left in him.

“Fawn is mine. She’ll be my wife within a few months. She will want for nothing; she will be treated like a goddamn queen. I will shower her with all my wealth and all the love I can give her. She will live a long life, filled with the joys you will never know.”

His breathing was shallow and fast. I hit the remote one last time, then turned to Blaise.

“It’s time to rope him up,” I told him, handing over the remote.

Gage went to Billy and removed the belt. Blaise took his bound hands, where he hung from the ceiling. Billy began to fall to his knees, unable to stand alone. Blaise jerked hard on him, forcing him to stumble as he led him from the room.

I followed behind the three into the room across from this one. Inside was a device I hadn’t used in some time. It had once been my go-to form of torture. I’d softened over the years, and bullets to the head had become easier. Less work.

The strappado would be where Billy hung until he took his last breath. His hands were tied behind his back, and then he was suspended from a bar as Gage cranked the wheel that lifted him. Moans and wails tore from the man, and I smiled, satisfied. His arms would be slowly wrenched from the shoulder sockets by the weight of his body. It could last for days, but with the heavy electrocution I’d given him, I doubted he would last more than a day. Forty-eight hours, tops.

Staring up at his bent body as it hung there, I thought of the decades when the family had used this form of torture. It was one of the first ones built down here. These days, we left it for those we wanted to torture for information and not necessarily kill. They would be held this way for long amounts of time, then released. If they didn't talk, we would do it again while they were in agony, deciding if they could continue with the pain or talk.

They always talked. The severity of the torture was too much. There were plenty who had died from it, but that wasn't the usual case. However, Billy Day wouldn't be getting a break from the pain. It would never ease or let up until his heart stopped beating.

No one would ever lay a hand on my pretty baby again. Including the two men who had raped her. They were next.

Ashes Teaser...



PROLOGUE

OAKLEY

My granny had said this was the first of many heartbreaks that life would deal me. It was best for me to face it young, toughen up, and learn to love the moment because tomorrow could always bring a pain we weren't expecting. That was quite possibly the saddest thing I'd ever heard.

But as I stood there, in the back of the church, I knew there was truth to it. Besides, you didn't live seventy-six years and not know what you were talking about. Granny had to be wise. I just wished she were as senile as my stepmother claimed. Then, at least there might be hope for my future just yet.

The guests had started to arrive, and I was expected to have a bright smile, happy for my stepsister, Sylvia, but I knew I couldn't manage that right now. I also wasn't sure I could stomach watching her get ready to walk down the aisle. With my dad giving her away when it should be me he was giving away. Sylvia had her own dad. It wasn't my fault she had

chosen to ignore him. It felt as if she was taking everything from me. But then hadn't that always been what she wanted to do? She wanted my life, and it seemed she was getting her wish. Taking it all.

Trying my best to flatten the layers of chiffon on the skirt of the most hideous bridesmaid dress there ever was, in order not to brush past people and draw attention to myself, I hurried to the back door of my granddad's church. Okay, fine, technically, it was the Lord's house, but my granddad had built it with his own hands and preached here for over fifty years. I felt as if he had a claim on it. I was sure the Lord would agree.

Pressing my hand on the smooth, aged wood, I pushed hard and bolted from the building that would soon witness my worst nightmare. The cool, early spring breeze hit me, and I inhaled, wishing it didn't burn my chest to take a deep breath.

How was I going to make it through the ceremony? If it hurt this bad right now, without even seeing ... him ...

I pressed a hand to my chest and winced. God, how was I going to survive it?

Wrapping my hands around my waist, I bent over and fought back the tears. I thought I had cried enough over the past two months. Since the moment they'd announced their engagement.

"Oakley." The familiar, deep voice startled me. He wasn't supposed to be out here.

Tightening my hold on my stomach, I straightened and turned to see the only man I had ever truly loved standing

beside the oak tree that shaded the memorial gardens behind the church. I'd never seen him in a tux, and, oh God, he was beautiful.

Why? What had I done to deserve this?

I stared at him. Those brown eyes that seemed to read into my soul.

Before him, I had been happy. Enjoying my life, my first real boyfriend, being a normal teenager. Then, I met him, and ... he made me love him. He became the center of my world. He had been everything ... and in less than an hour, he would be my brother-in-law.

“Why are you doing this?” I cried, unable to pretend this wasn't destroying me.

How had it all changed in such a short amount of time? When I had gone off to college, Wilder had been proud of me. He texted me daily, checking on me. We talked on the phone at least once a week. He had promised to wait for me. He'd loved me. Lies. All lies!

His jaw clenched as he jerked his gaze from mine. “Go inside, Oakley,” he said with a hard edge to his voice. One he had never spoken to me with.

That only added to the agony this was causing me. That he and my stepsister were inflicting on me.

“You said you loved me,” I spit out. Anger tangled with the anguish inside my chest.

I hadn't made him explain. I never asked questions. The betrayal had been so fierce and overwhelming that I ignored

him. Sylvia was a little harder to ignore. She had never allowed anyone to overlook her. If Sylvia wasn't the center of attention, she did whatever must be done to change that. Granny had said it was because she was jealous of me. But right now, I would do anything to trade places with her.

Once, I had hoped Sylvia and I would be as close as real sisters. Losing my mother to uterine cancer when I was six years old had been hard, and the years following, it felt as if I had lost my dad too. He withdrew from life, drinking too much, forgetting things like picking me up from school and my birthday. Then, he met Cleo, my stepmother. She had a daughter a couple of years older than me. He slowly became my dad again. Smiling, laughing, being there for the everyday life. I believed we would become a real family. To think I'd once believed there was a chance at that. Those days were gone now. Never to return.

"Go inside, Oakley," he repeated.

His refusal to even give me a reason, an explanation, even an apology ignited the burn building in me. I needed to scream and cry. To demand to know why.

Was I that easy to toss aside? To forget?

My hands dropped to my sides and fisted as I glared at him. No. He was getting what he wanted, and so was Sylvia. They were getting their happily ever after. While they stepped over my broken pieces without a thought. He was going to say something. Give me a reason. I deserved that much.

When I began stalking toward him, his eyes swung back to me, and his brows drew together in a scowl. I didn't care! He

could be pissed. I was far beyond that emotion.

Stopping a few feet from him, I tilted my head back and glared up at him. His angular face, wide mouth, thick lashes, and those deep chocolate eyes that appeared black at times, but at other times, when he was happy, it was as if there were golden highlights trying to break free. It all made my heart race and my knees weak. I hated that. I wished I could rip him from my heart, my head, forget how I felt for him. Go back and stay with Wells, his cousin. Why had I thought Wilder was better? Wells was good to me. He had told me he loved me. He wouldn't have done this to me.

“Not until you tell me why! Give me a reason, Wilder! I deserve to understand how it happened. How—” I swallowed hard and refused to break down. Not in front of him. “How you could stop loving me so easily and fall in love with her.”

He winced and closed his eyes briefly before leveling me with them. “I can't do this with you. Not when I have to get through this fucking day.”

I shoved him in the chest, surprising myself. He didn't budge, but the veins on his neck stood out. He was clenching his teeth. Needing to push him more, make him feel a little of the fury inside me, I took both hands and shoved him again. Still, he stood there, doing nothing.

Why wasn't it making me feel any better? Why didn't anything give me relief?

“PLEASE!” I shouted as my eyes stung. “Just tell me how! Or when ... when did you stop loving me?” Those words sliced through my soul.

The day he'd told me he loved me, I had thought it would always be the happiest day of my life. Thinking of it now was pure torture.

I balled my hands into fists and began pounding his chest. He should know how this felt! This complete wreckage he'd made of my heart. It wasn't fair. If he was going to love her, why ... why had he ever let me think I had a chance? That he would be mine one day?

A sob tore through me just as his hands covered mine forcefully. I tried to jerk free of his hold. I didn't want him to touch me. Not like this. Not when the last time he had touched me, it had been perfect.

“Sylvia is pregnant.”

Those three words spoken from his mouth in a hoarse whisper caused whatever fight I'd had in me to evaporate. I blinked at the tears that broke free and ran down my cheeks, my eyes locked on his chest, unable to meet his gaze.

Her mom didn't know. She couldn't. Not with all the praising she had been doing over Sylvia. How pure and good girls got the reward. There was no way my dad knew. No one knew. They had to be keeping it a secret until after the wedding. My perfect stepsister—who helped her mom in the church, sang in the choir, volunteered at the food bank—had not only taken the man I loved from me, but she'd also had sex before marriage. It felt as if he had taken my throat in both his large palms and was squeezing it so hard that I couldn't inhale.

“Yours?” I choked out, unable to believe that *my* Wilder had done this.

Every time I thought it couldn't get any worse, fate seemed to show me that it indeed could.

“Yes.” His reply was so quiet that I almost didn't hear him.

I pulled my hands free of his and stepped back, finally lifting my eyes to meet his. There were no other words I could say. Nothing else that could be done. The reality was, Wilder had wanted her in a way he hadn't wanted me. I had thrown myself at him that night before I left for college, and all he'd wanted to do was hold me.

A life with Wilder was all that I had hoped for and dreamed of, but facing the truth that he hadn't wanted it, too, destroyed me.

The girl I had been was gone. I would never be the same.



ONE

WILDER

NINE YEARS LATER

Through the doorway, I could see my daughter packing the last of her things in a cardboard box. It was physically killing me not to go in there and help her. But she'd asked if she could do it herself. Alone.

My plan had been to stay a week here, give her time after her mother's funeral to mourn, adjust—hell, I didn't know. What was an eight-year-old little girl supposed to do after she saw her mother's casket being lowered into the ground? I was so fucking lost in what it was she needed and what I should be doing.

My daughter wasn't a normal eight-year-old. She had seen too much over the past five years. I hadn't seen the signs, and by the time I caught on to what was happening in this house, the damage had been done. Too much darkness, and I blamed myself. I should have known. Sarah was with me every other

weekend, two months every summer, and most holidays. But when she was at my place, she was happy. Or I had been too fucking blind to see the darkness she hid in her eyes.

Rubbing my hand over my chest didn't ease the pain or regret. All I could do was make damn sure her life was picture-fucking-perfect from now on. No more leaving her with someone else. I wanted her with me. If she was with me, I could keep her safe.

Turning, I headed back down the stairs. There was little I wanted from this house. I had lived here the first two years of Sarah's life with Sylvia, her mother. Our marriage had never been good. The only happiness that had happened here was after Sarah was born.

As my foot hit the bottom step, I glanced over at the hunter-green recliner, worn and faded, sitting in the corner of the living room. I remembered the first night Sarah had come home.

Sylvia had refused to nurse, and I'd offered to get up and do the nighttime feedings. Holding that tiny little baby in my arms, I stared at her in awe. It was a surreal moment. Seeing that face peering up at me, knowing that, only eight months ago, I had thought she was destroying my life.

I hadn't wanted anything to do with Sylvia's pregnancy. I stayed gone as much as possible. Worked hours that I didn't need to. Anything to pretend that I wasn't about to be a father.

Then, when the day had come and Sarah was placed in my arms, she had become my reason for living. All my joy revolved around her.

The slamming of the screen door jolted me out of my thoughts, and I headed to the kitchen to see who had come into the house. I expected to see Sylvia's mother before we left. I'd called and spoken to her stepfather about Sarah's desire to leave today. He had been more understanding than his wife was going to be. Preparing to deal with my ex-mother-in-law, I braced myself for her forthcoming lecture on why Sarah was better off staying with her. That would be a cold day in hell. My daughter was living with me.

When my body had barely made it through the doorway, my eyes locked on a pair that, to this fucking day, still haunted me. Granted, they no longer sparkled with excitement at the sight of me. It was more of a detached expression, and I hated that it even bothered me.

"Wilder," Oakley said before walking over to the refrigerator and opening it.

I tried like hell not to look at her ass, but, damn, it was hard.

Oakley had been breathtakingly beautiful at sixteen, when I shouldn't have been looking at her. At eighteen, when she was still too entirely young for me, she owned me. She could walk in a room and become the center of attention without saying a word. The way she could smile and make a man believe he'd fallen in love instantly was a weapon I knew she had used more than once over the years. There was a time that I would have died just to hold her and have her look at me again as if I were the only man she wanted. God, I had lived for that look. To see that smile.

She wasn't a kid anymore. She was a twenty-seven-year-old

woman and a complete stunner. The kind that turned heads, made men stumble when they caught a glimpse of her. The unreal kind of beauty that was unfair to the female population. She was also Sarah's only aunt and, unfortunately for me, one of Sarah's favorite people.

Oakley despised me, and she made no attempt to hide the fact. Except around Sarah. My daughter was the only mutual ground between us. Otherwise, she acted as if I were invisible, and I did the same. The best I could at least. Ignoring Oakley Leola Watson was just about fucking impossible for any straight man.

"I was expecting Cleo," I said when she turned around with a can of soda in her hand.

She smirked, but there was no amusement in her eyes. "That's why I'm here," she said, then popped the can open. "I figured you'd need my help."

My eyebrows shot up in surprise. It had been so long since Oakley had spoken to me. Much less wanted to help me.

A bark at the screen door interrupted what I was going to say. Oakley walked over to open it and let Belladonna—Sarah's reddish-brown labradoodle—into the house. I had assumed that we'd be forced to leave Belladonna behind. Sylvia had refused to keep her, so for Sarah, Cleo had taken her when she was a puppy. I hadn't expected Cleo to allow me to take Belladonna.

The dog had looked like a stuffed teddy bear the one and only time I'd seen it. Sarah had run out to the truck to show me her new puppy when I came to pick her up. That was two

years ago. Belladonna was huge now. I only recognized her from pictures that Sarah had texted me of her.

“Sarah hadn’t mentioned the dog,” I said, trying to decide if this was a good thing. Letting her tell the dog bye might be more painful for her. “It might do more harm than good, having it here when we leave.”

Belladonna walked inside, and her eyes locked on me as she fell into step at Oakley’s side.

“It’s a she, not an it. Do you have a thing against dogs?” she asked me with an annoyed gleam in her eyes.

“No. I’m worried about Sarah’s emotions,” I replied through my clenched teeth.

I hated that Oakley always assumed the worst about me.

“Belladonna belongs to Sarah. I brought her, assuming you’d want to take her with you. Sarah could use the comfort.”

“Not something I expected,” I said slowly, trying to decide if she had an angle here that I was missing.

Her dislike for me wasn’t one-sided. It was mutual. She’d made damn sure any feelings I had for her were slaughtered years ago. When I had divorced Sylvia, Oakley was one of the reasons I hadn’t been granted fifty-fifty custody. Her testimony in court had swayed the judge’s ruling. I was positive of it. Had I been able to have Sarah fifty percent of the time, then I would have seen what Sylvia was putting her through. That Sylvia was spiraling. And where the fuck had Oakley been when her stepsister wasn’t fit to raise my child?

She took a long drink, then locked those baby-blue eyes on

me. “Why?”

Suddenly having someone here to unleash my anger on, I glared at her. “Oh, I don’t know, Oakley. Maybe the fact that you made sure Sarah only saw me every other fucking weekend and didn’t seem to think I needed to know that Sylvia was in a bad mental place. One that was creating an unsafe home for my daughter,” I snapped.

She didn’t need more of an explanation than that. She knew what the fuck she’d done. How she had failed Sarah.

“You now helping me move Sarah to live with me seems odd, considering.”

Oakley took another drink from her can, never taking her eyes off me. Her eyes lit up with her own pent-up fury. I could see it there, shining as she held my glare. A low growl came from Belladonna. Oakley reached down and ran her hand over the dog’s back, whispering something that made the dog ease.

“Make no mistake, this is about Sarah. You’re her father. She wants to live with you, and that’s where she belongs. As for the past, it’s done. I can’t go back and change it.”

It was done. That was her excuse. It was the past, and her actions had harmed my daughter. Maybe not physically, but emotionally. If she thought her coming here to help with Cleo and bringing Belladonna were enough to fix it, she was wrong. So fucking wrong.

“Where is Sarah?” Oakley asked, looking past me.

I wanted to tell her to leave. We didn’t need her. Sarah had me, and she didn’t need anyone else. Especially someone from

this family. But I knew sending her away would hurt Sarah. I had to find a way to balance Sarah's love for Oakley and my hate for her. How the hell I was supposed to do that, I didn't know. It had been years since I'd had to speak to Oakley. Now, I was Sarah's only parent that would change.

"In her room, packing," I replied grudgingly.

"What are you going to do with this place?" she asked me, as if she had a right to know.

I had no answer for her, but even if I did, why should I tell her? It wasn't her business. I had never signed the house over to Sylvia because I hadn't trusted her. I wanted Oakley to have a home, a house, a yard, a fucking dog. Even if she couldn't have two parents under one roof, I wanted to give her everything else I could. I paid all their bills, including the mortgage.

"I don't know. I guess sell it. My life isn't here. I can't move back here," I replied, wishing those damn eyes of hers didn't make me talk. Say shit I didn't have to.

Oakley placed the can down on the bar and stared out the window over the kitchen sink. "Not real sure her memories of this house, at least in the last few years, are some she wants to remember," Oakley said solemnly. Then, she turned to meet my gaze. "Sell it. Move her to Florida, give her a fresh start. Help erase all ... all the bad."

The bad that I should have been told about. The bad that she wouldn't have lived through if she had been with me. My hands fisted at my sides.

Belladonna let out another low growl.

“It’s best you stop with the pent-up anger at me. If you want Belladonna to like you, that is,” Oakley said.

I wasn’t going to be threatened by a dog that looked like an overgrown stuffed bear. Ignoring her warning, I scowled. “I didn’t know it had gotten bad. That Sylvia had stopped taking her meds. Sarah never told me anything. I can’t—” I paused and hissed at the ache in my chest. “I failed her.”

I wanted to shout that she had failed her too. But I didn’t. For Sarah’s sake.

For a brief moment, just a tiny fraction, there was a flicker of something other than indifference. As if she might care deep down or simply remember when she had. I missed the girl I had destroyed. She still haunted my dreams. The first time I had seen her, the first time she’d turned those blue eyes on me and smiled. I wasn’t sure I’d ever truly be able to let her go. At least not in my memories. The woman she had become, her actions, that person I would never love. I would tolerate her for my daughter.

“We did everything we could to get Sylvia help. She chose not to take her medication. She chose not to go to the therapist. This was her choice. This wasn’t your fault. You didn’t know. We didn’t tell you. Cleo was afraid you’d take Sarah from Sylvia if you knew. If you want to blame someone, blame us. You deserved to know. It was me who failed Sarah. I was the one who should have told you. Instead, I came to get Sarah and keep her with me, or I stayed here. But I couldn’t always be there for her. I have a job, and it interfered some. She ...

she should have been with you. I'm the one who has to live with that. Me. Not you.”

I stood there, staring at the girl who had been my sole obsession years ago. I'd have done anything to have her, and I had. She was a light in my darkness. She'd given me fucking joy. Made me want to be a better man. Watching the anguish on her face while she blamed herself for all that Sarah had lived through took some of that hatred in my chest from me. It was hard to listen to her blame herself even if I had.

The man I had been before Sylvia, the guy who had fallen in love with Oakley at first sight, wanted to go pull her into my arms and assure her that this shit was on me. Sarah was my daughter. I had known Sylvia battled with bipolar disorder, but I had thought that she was taking her medication and seeing her therapist. When I asked, she told me she was, and I believed her.

Oakley had known, and she was right. She was to blame. Sarah had suffered, and Oakley could have stopped it. If she'd done something, then Sylvia might not have taken her own life. If she had told me, I could have come back and forced Sylvia to get help. But Oakley had done none of those things, and my daughter's mother was dead.

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