



TRUE LOVE LASTS A LIFETIME.
OBSESSION LASTS FOREVER.

*Stalker
of Mine*

JAGGER COLE

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Also by Jagger Cole

About the Author

Stalker of Mine

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STALKER OF MINE

True love lasts a lifetime.

But obsession lasts forever.

Mackenzie Shipley has always been mine. She just doesn't know it.

She doesn't know me at all, actually. To her, I'm a ghost or a familiar shadow haunting her dreams. She never saw me the night I first laid eyes on her. She has no idea what I did that night, either. But I've watched from the shadows ever since. I've kept her safe, and kept the wolves from her door.

I've also kept any and every man, worthy or not, from her. With threats, bribery, or worse. You could call it selfish. You could say I've deprived her of a life. But I do not care.

Everything I do, I do for her. My job is to watch her. My life is forfeit to keep her safe. There's never been another woman but her. Mackenzie is my addiction. My obsession.

My true love, and then some.

But a crime was committed that first night I saw her. I've buried my demons deep. But the past is coming for her again, and I'm not sure how invisible I can remain.

They say true love lasts a lifetime. But when it comes to Mackenzie, a lifetime's not good enough. I want her always. I

want her for forever. And nothing is going to stop me.

A SPECIAL PRESENT



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“FUCK, MAN!” The guy startles. He about jumps out of his skin when he feels me behind him. It’s a fair reaction to a guy who looks like me standing about a foot behind you at the men’s room urinals. But fair doesn’t mean shit. Fair doesn’t mean he deserves her.

Nothing in this world would mean he deserves her. He, or any other man.

I’m holding back the fury as it is. I’m restraining myself and biting back the animal inside of me. He touched her, earlier. On their way into this very restaurant, he held the door for her. And then he *touched her* when she walked through. It was only brief; a palm against the small of her back through her dress. But it was enough to enflame me. It was enough to have me bristling and brimming with rage.

He touched what’s mine. If he doesn’t choose his next words and actions carefully, he’ll be losing the use of that hand for some time.

“Dude, can you back the fuck up?” He glares at me over his shoulder. He’s wearing an expensive looking sports coat and slacks, tailor fit along with his dress shirt open at the collar. His hair is stylish and well-groomed. The motherfucker smells like money, and it makes me hate him even more.

I don't hate the rich for being rich. But I sure as fuck hate the ones who deserve it. And this asshole deserves it. Because he touched her. He touched Kenzie.

I stay right where I am, biting back a snarl. I'm not dressed like him; black boots, black jeans, a black hoodie, and a black leather jacket. My clothes are hardly dress code for a restaurant of this caliber. The tattoos that make themselves visible at my wrists and up my neck certainly aren't. But I told the hostess that I was "with the band" before marching past her.

That's how you need to operate in the world of the wealthy. You don't ask, you just take, like they do.

Kenzie's date turns back and tries to keep pissing. I prod him hard in the back, between the shoulder blades. He jumps and half turns. He swears as his piss stream soaks into those ridiculous and pricey looking loafers of his.

"What the *fuck* is your fucking problem, bro?" He roars at me. I smirk as he tucks his sad excuse of a manhood back into his pants. Money can buy you fancy clothes and a reservation at this place. But it can't buy you being more of a man. And it sure as hell won't buy him her.

I smile an insane smile at him and step closer. He sputters and moves back. Then he swears when his ass hits the backsplash of the urinal.

"Dude, are you fucking drunk?" He's acting tough. But he doesn't look it. All it takes is a glance at his eyes to know how close he is to shitting himself. And no, I'm not drunk. I don't drink at all, actually.

"Buddy, I'm not..." he stammers. "I'm not gay, man. If that's what you're looking for."

I start to laugh quietly. “It’s not.”

He looks relieved. “So what the fuck is your prob—”

“Your choice in date,” I snarl. “That’s my fucking problem.”

He looks confused. “My date?”

“Kenzie,” I growl thickly. Even just saying her name out loud makes me feel like she’s mine. Uttering her name over my lips is the closest thing to tasting her I’ve ever had. But I relish it just the same.

Her date frowns. “Kenzie? Mackenzie Shipley?”

When I say it, it’s a balm for the fire inside of me. When he does, it’s gasoline.

“Walk away,” I snarl. I step closer to him, forcing him back against the urinal.

He blinks rapidly and looks terrified. “Look, I don’t want any trouble, man.”

“Then walk away.”

He frowns. “Look, I don’t know who you are to her, but—”

“She’s mine.”

I don’t even snarl it. I say it plain as day. Because it’s not a threat, it’s the truest thing I know.

Her date’s jaw drops. “She’s...” he turns pale. “Oh, fuck. Fuck, man, I... I swear I didn’t know!”

I don’t answer. I just glare right back at him, unblinking.

“Bro, I didn’t know she was married, I swear. Look, nothing’s happened, man,” he blurts. “I know her from school and asked her out today. We’ve never...”

“I know,” I snarl. “If you had, you wouldn’t have a dick still attached to leak into those overpriced pants of yours.”

He makes a choking sound and glances down at his damp slacks. Then he looks back at me. He looks scared. Smart man.

“Your date is over,” I snarl. “You go back out there, tell her thanks but that you’re in love with a man, and it’s just not going to work.”

He blinks quickly, looking worried. I roll my eyes.

“Not *me*, you dumb fuck. But that’s what you tell her.”

“Dude, I’m not...”

“Yes, you are, Brad.”

Brad pales even more. “How do you know me?”

It doesn’t matter. It doesn’t matter that I’ve watched him ever since he first smiled at my Kenzie. It doesn’t matter that I know where he lives, what car he drives, or that a week ago he gave a stripper two hundred bucks for a blowjob.

The motherfucker could be a saint, and he still wouldn’t be good enough for her. No one is good enough for her, because she’s already mine.

When I don’t answer, Brad gets even more nervous. “So, wait, you *are* her husband? Dude, I honestly had no idea—”

“Get the fuck out there,” I growl. “And you tell her what I told you to say. You will not mention me or this conversation. Are we clear?”

He blinks rapidly.

“Are we fucking clear, Brad?”

He nods so eagerly it almost makes me smile. “We’re clear!”

“Good. Then I want you to get back in that Porsche, and drive back to your condo on Pierce Avenue.”

Brad looks at me, terrified.

“And after that, Brad,” I growl. I move closer to him, glaring through him. “After that, you never even look at her again. Do we understand each other?”

Brad’s a trust-fund piece of shit. But at least all that family money bought him some smarts.

“Totally, man,” he nods quickly. “Not gonna be a problem, I swear. I’m gone, okay?”

I repress the urge to smirk at the quiver in his voice. Instead, I just stare him down.

“Um...” he squirms under my gaze. I’ve got him basically pinned to the urinal. I let him twist on the hook another few seconds. Then I step back just enough to let him by.

“I’ll be watching you, Brad,” I grunt.

He gives me one last terrified look. Then he scurries from the bathroom.

“Christ wash your fucking hands,” I growl in disgust. But it doesn’t matter. Brad isn’t touching her. No one is touching her. Because Kenzie Shipley has been mine since the second I laid eyes on her. I’ve watched her, protected her, and shielded her.

I’ve killed for her.

But all from a distance. To her, by necessity, I’m a ghost. I’m a long-lost shadow from her past. All I want is to step out of those shadows for her. But I can’t. Doing so would destroy more than my life, and I won’t let that happen.

So I wait, and I watch. I'd call myself her guardian angel, but that's bullshit. I'm no angel. So let's call me her guardian devil. I might be a sinner, but I've dedicated my life to keeping worse ones from laying their hands on her.

I wait one more minute. It should be just enough time for Brad to turn coward and run out on her. I hate that this may hurt her. But it's what's necessary. I step out of the bathroom and prowl down the hallway. At the end, I glance out just in time to see Brad bolting out the front door. My gaze scans the restaurant. When it lands on her, I tense.

I suck in a breath, and my heart aches in my chest. Parts of me are soft when it comes to her. Other parts are very, very hard.

My worries about her fade though when I see her sigh. She doesn't look broken up, just confused. It looks like Brad's left some cash on the table for the dinner that hasn't even come out of the kitchen yet. I smile. Good boy, Brad, I think. For that, I won't be slashing his tires later. Or maybe just one of them. He *did* touch her, after all.

Kenzie—my Kenzie— sighs and stands. She shoulders her purse and pushes a stray lock of blonde behind her ear. I watch her walk gracefully out of the restaurant. I wait until she's hailed a cab. Of course, I memorize the license plate and car number. She'll get to her apartment before me. But the camera in the tree by her building's front door goes direct to my phone. I'll know when she's home, and safe.

I'll always know.

I'll always watch.

I'll always wait.

They say love lasts a lifetime. But a lifetime isn't good enough for me. I don't want her for a lifetime. I want her for *forever*.

I pull up my hood against the cold October night chill, and I head back into the darkness.

I SLIDE my key into the lock of my front door. It feels like I don't have the strength to actually turn it though. I sigh and let my forehead sink to the door in defeat. I'm not sure what I expected tonight. I mean, certainly not what did end up transpiring. But I can't have had that high an expectation.

I mean this is a date, and me we're talking about. Me and dating and men in general have a horrible track record.

I close my eyes, my head still against the door. I didn't actually eat any dinner on my dinner date. That's because my date was over almost before it started. My stomach and my hunger get the best of me finally. I groan and turn the key. Then I hear the door to the apartment behind me open.

"You're back already?"

I turn and give Elissa, my friend and neighbor, a defeated smile.

"Sure am."

She frowns. "What the hell happened?"

"Another bust."

She looks at me sympathetically. "Fuck, you can really pick 'em, can't you?"

She doesn't know the half of it. She doesn't know all the details of all the failed relationships; all the dates that self-destruct halfway through. And she definitely doesn't know that I'm twenty-four, and I've never even kissed a guy before. Forget any of the parts that I hear come after kissing that seem like a lot of fun.

"So what happened to Brad? Did he trip over his own inflated ego?"

I smile. "Very funny. He was nice."

"He was a rich douchebag," Elissa huffs before shrugging sheepishly. "Oops, sorry. I know you grew up with those people."

I roll my eyes, though Elissa isn't wrong. I did grow up in a world most don't. When your father is a Senator and when your family comes from the kind of money mine does, you grow up differently. I'm not ashamed of my upbringing, but I don't like to brag about it. And it's not me now.

Maids, butlers, cooks; a rich, fancy high school and then an even fancier and more expensive boarding school. Elissa and I have only been friends since I moved in here after college. She doesn't know everything about my upbringing, but she knows enough to tease me about it.

"So are you going to tell me what happened or not?"

"Not."

She pouts. "Oh, come on! Really?"

I grin. "Fine," I give in. "Why not share the misery?"

"So?"

"He said he was in love with a man."

Elissa looks surprised, in an unbelieving way. “Uh, really?”

“That’s what he said.”

“And he picked your first date to mention that?”

I shrug. “People are strange.”

“Rich people are strange,” she mutters. “Well, present company excluded.”

I smile. “Well, I don’t know what I expected.”

“Well I doubt you could have seen that one coming?” She leans against her doorframe and sighs. “You want to come over and watch something? I mean it’s almost Halloween, we could put on *Hocus Pocus* or something scary?”

“Maybe tomorrow?”

She smiles. “Sure. Hey, don’t beat yourself up. I think you could do a lot better than Brad.”

“Thanks,” I mumble. But, I’m not so sure I can. I’m not so sure I’m destined to date anyone, ever. But the longer it goes, the less sense it makes. I mean, I take care of myself. I like to run, and dress well, and I generally do at least something with my hair when I go outside. I’m smart, too. I graduated top of my class from college, and now I’m at Northwestern for their bio-chem grad program, same as Elissa.

I don’t mean for all of that to sound conceited. But it is very weird and confusing to me sometimes to think how I’ve gotten to twenty-four without even a single kiss or relationship.

“Well, if you need anything, you know where to find me,” Elissa smiles.

“Thanks. I think I’m just going to reheat some crap from my fridge, take a bath, and sleep.”

Elissa laughs. “Now that’s my idea of a good night. Alright, well, have fun. Movie tomorrow?”

“Sure,” I smile. She closes her door, and I step into my own apartment. Inside, I sink against the door. Leftovers, bath, and bed doesn’t sound horrible. But a real date, with a real guy does sound pretty great too.

I frown at the floor. This is one of those times I wish I drank. But, of course I don’t. I did once, and that turned into a trauma, or almost-trauma, that I still have nightmares about. I’m sure I could drink. I know what happened—what almost happened—wasn’t something that would happen again if had a glass of wine. But it can still be triggering. And besides, what’s the point?

For a second, I flash back to that night, six years ago. I shiver and push it back to the shadows of my mind. Six years later and it still gives me chills to think what might have happened to me that night, if he hadn’t been there.

I still don’t really know what happened, because I was so out of it. But the cops always told me it was an attempted robber who came across Ken and his disgusting friends before they could... well, before they could hurt me. The stranger might be a failed burglar, but whoever he was and wherever he went, he’s my hero. But I doubt he knows that.

Sometimes, I like to imagine he’s watching me. Maybe that’s a little strange, if not creepy. But I don’t think of him as a creep. I think of him as my guardian angel in a strange way. I obviously never saw his face, but I swear I can remember the tone of his voice, telling me it’s going to be okay. At times, I think I can remember his eyes; gray and stormy. Maybe, at least. I was half unconscious. But maybe my brain remembers a glance through half-opened eyes.

Or else I've created it in my head since then. I've created a lot about him over the years, mostly at night, alone. I'd be mortified to ever admit it to a soul in the world. But my mysterious hero has turned into a bit of a fantasy for me. In my fantasies, I've given him muscled arms, a strong jaw, and perfectly kissable lips. I've given him other anatomy, too, I think with a deep blush.

But not a face. I've purposefully kept that vague. Maybe it's more fun to imagine him as a faceless fantasy.

I've tried at times to give him faces. The few times a boy's flirting has turned to asking me out, for instance. I'd try and put that face on my stranger. Sometimes, a model or a famous actor. But it never felt right.

I end up watching part of *Hocus Pocus* anyways. I feel a little guilty for blowing off Elissa. But I do just want to be alone. It's not even like I was into Brad. Elissa was right, he was kind of a pompous dick. But it still sucks to get walked out on like that.

After a bath, I crawl into bed. I look out the window at the blustery Chicago October night. I imagine those sharp gray eyes looking back at me from the darkness. I try to remember that voice, growling deeply. I tremble beneath the sheets.

I wonder if he's out there. I wonder if he thinks about me, the way I think about him.

Constantly.

Six Years Ago:

“I’M SO SORRY, SON.”

I nod, feeling numb. Part of it is jet lag. The other part is that my dad died thirty-six hours ago. But I shake through the numbness. I look up at Duncan’s face.

“I appreciate the plane ticket, Mr. Shipley.”

“It’s just Duncan, Oren,” he says gently. A heavy hand lands on my shoulder. “Your father was an amazing man. I hope you know that.”

I sort of do. Except I’ve been away from my dad for three years, locked up in juvenile detention down in Florida. I’m out for four fucking days, and a motherfucker with a blood alcohol level three times the legal limit hits him head-on going a hundred and five. I could be glad that the shit-head that took my dad from me is dead, too. But I wish he was alive so I could do it myself.

“I know he worked for me, but your dad was my friend, Oren.” Duncan’s face is grim and haggard. I can smell bullshit a mile away, and I know he’s being genuine here. This man is worth more than anything my father could have ever dreamed

of being worth. But he truly saw my dad, his employee, as a friend. That says a lot about both of them, I think.

My dad was a mechanic his whole life. About six years ago, when I was still living with my mom, Duncan hired him to be his full-time on-site mechanic and garage manager. Duncan, or should I say Senator Shipley, has one of the most coveted classic car collections in North America. And my dad kept them all purring like kittens.

“Fuck, what a goddamn waste,” he hisses.

“Guess you gotta find someone new for your cars, huh?”

It’s dark humor. But that’s kind of my thing. It’s how I cope with a life filled with darkness. Most people are put off by it, and it’s become my shit test. But Duncan grins. He gets it. I grin back.

“You know what Oren?” He sighs “I’d give up the whole goddamn collection to get your dad back. In a heartbeat.”

I know he means it, too.

“Listen, I’m sorry to bring you out here to the house and then leave. But I have a goddamn fundraiser dinner downtown.”

“I understand, sir.”

He smiles. “Just Duncan. But look, my daughter Mackenzie just got back from boarding school this afternoon. She’s your age, you know. Anyways she’s having some people over I think...nothing crazy, just a couple friends. But I’m sure you’d be welcome to join.”

“Parties aren’t my thing.”

Not anymore. Parties *were* my thing, but that’s part of what landed me in juvenile. That and the other shit. I’ve got zero interest in drugs now that I’m out. And with how my dad was

just taken from me, I'm pretty sure I'm never drinking again, either.

"Well, you're welcome to join them." His hand lands heavily on my shoulder. "You're staying here, as long as you want."

I shake my head. "No, Mr. Shipley..."

"I'm not taken no, Oren. You and your mom aren't, uh..."

"We're not close," I hiss. He nods but he doesn't push it further.

"So stay here. For the funeral of course, but after as well. Take all the time you need. We've got the damn room."

I nod, smiling a little. "Thank you."

Senator Shipley sighs heavily. He shakes his head sadly. "I'm so goddamn sorry, son."

Present:

SHE STARES RIGHT AT ME. But she doesn't see me. She never does, but that's sort of the point. It doesn't do a damn thing to dim the fire inside of me. It doesn't quench the hunger I feel when I look right back at her.

I'm hard from having just watched her undress for bed. But that can wait until later. Sometimes it's torturous, watching and agonizing over what I want but can't touch. I've watched her undress, or shower, or other more intimate moments a thousand times.

I don't feel ashamed by this at all. I recognize that from an outside perspective, this could be seen as creepy, or dangerous. If Kenzie were a stranger, or if we didn't have the past we

have, I would probably agree. But she's no stranger to me. Our lives are irrevocably entwined, even if she doesn't know me at all.

She's mine, and mine alone. That's why I feel no shame in watching her when she changes for bed. I'm not sneaking a peek. I'm gazing at the utterly perfect beauty that is *mine*.

She stares out the window in her thin sleep shirt and shorts. She puts a hand on the glass, and her eyes move slowly over the branches of the tree that grows between her brownstone apartment and mine. Our backyards touch separated by a fence and this tree. On my side only, the branches are accessible from the fire escape out my bedroom window. Since she moved here, I've spent almost every night, cold or weather be damned, out here watching her fall asleep.

Her eyes sweep over me. I choose to pretend that they linger on my eyes. I pretend that she smiles at me or beckons me inside from the cool night air. But instead, she finally pulls back from the glass. She slips under her covers and turns over. I imagine moving in behind her and wrapping her in my arms. I close my eyes and conjure the memory of that first time I held her; how she smelled, and how she felt in my arms.

I know I can't go to her. I know revealing myself would destroy many things and hurt her. So I wait and I watch. Just like I've done for years, ever since that night.

When she's sleeping soundly, I retreat back to my apartment. I check the cameras I've set up around her building. I check the camouflaged security systems I've set up on her windows and doors, too. I climb into bed and turn to the iPad on my nightstand. The telephoto lens on the fire escape focuses with my remote touch. It switches to night vision and centers on her window through the tree branches.

“Goodnight, Kenzie,” I growl quietly.

Six years ago:

“I’M SO SORRY! I’m so sorry!!”

“Mackenzie, it’s okay,” my dad says quietly. His voice is choked though, and he pulls me close. “It’s all okay,” he says tensely. “It’s all going to be okay.”

“I—I called three people, and suddenly half the town was there!”

“It’s *fine*, honey,” he says again. He holds me close and rocks me, and I sob against his chest.

I feel like shit. Not just for the party that I never wanted to throw at our house, but I really actually feel like shit. The doctors say I ingested a triple dose of GHB—the drug notorious for being slipped into girls’ drinks at parties by predators.

I shudder against my father. I’m lucky; nothing happened to me. I have almost no memory of the last few hours, but the doctors have assured me that I’m unharmed. I arrived at the hospital with all my clothes intact, without a mark on me. Though it’s unclear how. We know someone called 911 from the party, but no one knows who.

“Honey, I need to tell you something.”

“What is it?”

My dad looks haggard. “Ken Traphagen is dead.”

I stare at him in shock. I don’t know Ken very well, just that he’s an asshole that doesn’t understand what the word no means. His family is extremely well off, and they’re actually all notorious pricks.

“Was he drunk driving?” I gasp. I think Ken is a creep. But I feel horrified at the thought of him crashing drunk after drinking at a party I threw, even accidentally.

“No, Mackenzie,” my dad says quietly. He sighs. “I want you to hear this from me, not the news and before the police come to question you.”

“The police?!” I balk.

My dad squeezes me tight. “They think it was an attempted burglary. Someone broke in hoping the party would be a distraction. But when they came into my office, they found Ken and...”

He trails off, but my stomach turns to knots. I want to throw up. My dad’s office is where the police and EMT found *me*.

“Ken was...” my stomach twists and my head swims. “Ken was in the office?”

My dad looks away. “Yes.”

“With me.”

He nods, and I actually dry heave.

“Oh my God, Ken... he...”

My father looks like he wants to grind his teeth to dust. “Eyewitnesses say there were three of them,” he grunts. “The police that arrived managed to get to a few people before they

scattered. The eyewitnesses the police talked to say Ken and two other boys brought you in there and closed the door.”

“They...” I sob suddenly, and the tears stream hot down my cheeks.

“They wanted to hurt you,” my dad snarls. “But they didn’t, honey. They didn’t touch you, and they didn’t hurt you.”

“Does anyone know what happened?”

“The burglar. He surprised them.” My dad frowns. “There was a fight, Mackenzie. He saved you. He fought them, and then they think he actually is the one who called it in from the office phone.”

“Wait, but Ken...”

“Is dead,” he growls.

“The burglar?” My dad looks away and nods curtly.

My memory flashes. I hear a deep, comforting voice. I see cool gray eyes. And then nothing.

“Who... did they find him? The burglar I mean?”

“No,” my dad shakes his head. “We don’t know who he is,” he says quickly. “But you’re safe, that’s all that matters. The police stopped a few kids scattering from the party when they arrived. One of them, Justin Lehman, looked like he’d been in a fight, so the police held him. When he was searched, he had GHB on him. The bruises from the fight and drugs on his person puts him in the room, with intent. But he swears he doesn’t know who the third boy was.”

I tremble. Cold fear grips my heart. My dad’s face darkens. His eyes hold mine. “I’m going to be pressing charges, honey.” I nod. “Unless you don’t want that.”

“I do want that.”

He smiles. “Good.”

“Ken...”

Dad shakes his head. “The Traphagens are trash, but this is beyond anything. Just the same, their youngest son is dead. I can’t even imagine.”

He hugs me tight, and I bury my face in his chest.

“Your campaign...”

“Don’t worry about that, honey.”

“Dad...”

“Don’t worry,” he insists. “And we’re fine. You weren’t involved. You’re a victim here, Mackenzie.”

I smile awkwardly. “Guess that plays well with voters?” I’m trying to be funny, but sometimes my humor is a little dark for my dad.

He scowls in response. “I’m not using it or commenting on it publicly.”

“I know, dad,” I smile. “I’m just teasing.”

I wince at a pain my head. I’ve been having little mini migraines since I came too. The doctors say they’ll fade as the drugs leave my system though.

My dad frowns in concern. “Lay back, honey. Rest, and we can talk more later.”

“They really don’t know who he is? The burglar, I mean. The guy who saved me?”

He looks away.

“No, we don’t.”

“I owe him so much,” I whisper.

My dad turns to me and smiles warmly. “I’m sure he was happy to do it, honey.”

Present:

MY BREATH PUFFS white into the chilly air. The cold sears my lungs as I suck it in, but it energizes me. My legs pump, feet striking the pavement. The city feels surreal around me. Ghouls and skeletons leer at me. Witches, superheroes, and Disney princess’s shriek and run down the sidewalks.

It feels strange to be doing something so normal like going for a run on Halloween. But it also feels great. Besides, I have a hot date later involving Elissa and *Scream*.

As I run towards the lakefront paths, my mind wanders. I start to think back on that so many years ago. I think the steely gray eyes, and the deep dark comforting voice. I think of my dark hero, and I tremble.

I do this a lot after a failed date. And there are so many of them, which means I think of my stranger a lot. This particular night, my thoughts wander to a more tempting place. I blush as I run, and it’s not from the cold air on my cheeks. I wander down the path of a fantasy. In this one, he scoops me into his arm and saves me. But then he carries me to a big downy bed and lays me down.

I breath hard and pound the pavement with my sneakers. Inside my head, my stranger starts to pull my clothes off, piece by piece. He looms over me, pinning me to the bed. His body is hot and hard against mine. He starts to lower himself

between my legs. I tremble with anticipation as I run through a forested part of the path.

The shape comes out of my side vision, and I never see it. My fantasy is ripped away from me when the man slams into me and tackles me to the ground. He grunts and shoves me into the bushes beyond the path. I scream, but his heavy hand covers my mouth. My heart feels like it's in my throat, and I feel like I'm drowning in fear.

"Not this time, bitch," the man snarls. His voice is like ice. His grip is merciless. "This time, you pay for what you did."

I scream into his hand. His weight pins me to the crunchy leaves. I scream again, but I know it's useless. No one's going for a jog on Halloween. We're in a deserted part of the park, and we're hidden from view. I scream once more. I refuse to just give in.

But suddenly, the man grunts in pain. He tumbles away from me and rolls across the leaves. I whip my head around, and I gasp when I see him. The second man is almost standing over me, his body poised and coiled. His face is shadowed, but I can see his teeth gleaming in the light of a streetlight.

He growls, and I gasp. It almost sounds like an animal. The way he's crouched over me feels like an animal too; an animal who's found his meal, scaring off another predator. I tremble and curl into a ball.

But suddenly, the second figure stomps towards the man who tackled me. He pulls a blade out of his belt. I gasp sharply, watching him advance on the first guy. I have a strange urge to scream at him to run, even though he tackled me and clearly meant to hurt me.

He doesn't back down though. He snarls at the second man and picks up a heavy rock. He charges him, but my rescuer is quicker. He dodges, and his blade flashes. The first guy groans in pain and drops the rock. He clutches his side and wheezes. His face is masked, but I can see his eyes. They glare right at me, full of rage and hatred. But then he turns, and he bolts.

The second man turns and storms over towards me. I gasp and kick my heels into the crunchy leaves. But I know there's no getting away from him. He's too big, and clearly too strong. I stop when my back hits a tree, and he keeps coming towards me; silent and hulking.

But suddenly, he steps under the light of the streetlight. The light glints off his eyes under his hood. I gasp sharply. My head swims. Memory is a powerful, powerful drug.

"You?!" I whisper.

The light glints off of his steely gray eyes. They flick over me, and his gaze is so powerful it feels like it's warming my very skin. It feels impossible, but I know him. I've known him in my every waking and sleeping thought since that night six years ago.

It's my protector. But he's not in my head. He's not in my fantasies. He's standing right here, looming over me with his eyes captivating mine.

THE COLD AIR burns my lungs, but it's fine. I'm used to it. In the past six years, I've basically become as trained as a special forces operative. I'm like a goddamn ninja. This is what I do.

I watch her. I protect her. And no one knows.

She's running, which is why I'm out here running. I frown at her, a block ahead of me. She's headed towards the lakeside paths. I get the need to go for a run. But why the fuck does she have to do it at night? And on goddamn Halloween? My senses tingle, my eyes sweep the streets ahead of her. I know it's just masks and make believe. But Halloween brings out the devil in some people.

The mad get madder. The reckless take bigger risks. When the most precious thing in the world to me is running with fucking headphones in through all of that nonsense? It feels like I could explode.

But I run, following her. Chasing her, I suppose you could say. Kenzie runs under a streetlight, and I groan. My eyes fixate on the way her running tights cup and mold around her tight, sculpted ass. It tempts me. I watch the way her blonde ponytail bobs, as if it's daring me to grab it in a fist and guide her pretty mouth to where I want it.

I can't help feeling this way. I can't help the thoughts she brings out in me. I won't pretend this is all innocent hero complex shit. It's not. I want to protect her and keep her safe, but there's another reason.

I want her. I want her, and I'm in love with her. I've been obsessed with her since the moment I saw her that night. And it's never once gone away. It's never tarnished or faded. There's been no one but her since I saw her six years before. Six years, and not a single woman has interested me but her.

But then, no man has taken her from me either. It might be selfish. You could say I've robbed her of "playing the field" while she's young. But fuck that. She doesn't need a field.

She needs me.

I've threatened and scared off the men who would have sought to take her from me. The ones that truly had nefarious intentions, I was worse to: inflicting pain or exposing their rottenness to her and to the world in some cases.

I don't care if there have been some nice ones. I simply don't give a shit. None of them were good enough for her. And you can be damn sure none of them were going to take her from me.

Ahead, Kenzie enters the park by the lake. I growl, the hairs on my neck sticking up. I don't like this. I'd never like this, but it's goddamn Halloween. The air feels like a warning. My senses go haywire as I follow at a distance. I'm torn between staring at her ass when she runs under a streetlight and scanning the trees for danger.

But then, danger makes itself known. It's out of the corner of my eye, but I see the dark shape of a man lunge for her. My muscles spring into action. I bolt across the dark grass. I

almost roar like an animal when he slams into her and knocks her to the ground.

He pins her, a hand over her mouth. He's hurting her. He's hurting what's *mine*.

When I crash into him, I hit with the force of a freight train. There's no second guessing, and there will be no mercy here. I pull out the knife I keep hidden at my back. And I know what I'm doing with it. Like I said, there won't be mercy here. He tried to hurt her, and now he'll pay with his fucking life.

This isn't even the first time I've done this since that night. There was the mugger her sophomore year at college, waiting by the library. To me, it's was a simple equation. He wanted to hurt Kenzie, so I killed him.

There was the creep three years ago: the building manager of the apartment she was renting. The guy claimed he had to do some drywalling while she was out one day. I was suspicious, since he shared a wall with her. So I broke into his place later that night while he was gone and discovered he'd replaced a large mirror on her bedroom wall with one-way glass. Motherfucker had built himself a little peep show room in a closet on his side of the wall. I would have just beaten the shit out of him; maybe made sure the cops found out. But when I saw the video camera, rope, and a knife he had in that peep room too, I knew he had to go. He had an accident involving the ten-story roof of that very building and the sidewalk below. In that order.

The third give me no choice, though I didn't want to. He was a guy she worked with who didn't understand no. He kept asking her out, even showing up at her door to do it. She kept saying no, and he kept at it. And that made me furious.

Finally, I tailed him to a bar to have a chat. When I overheard him bragging to his buddies about what he'd do "whether or not she said yes," I snapped. He died like the piece of shit he was, face first in a toilet bowl in the men's room of that very bar.

I understand that this isn't normal. I get that I'm twisted inside and broken. I know normal society would call this unhealthy, or deranged. But I don't care. My obsession—and it is an obsession—won't be tamed or controlled.

Kenzie's attacker is wearing a Zorro-type mask. He snarls at me and hefts a rock. But I charge and dodge the rock. The blade sinks into him to the hilt. The man roars and shoves me away. My blade come out dripping red, but he turns, and he runs.

I hesitate. He's a hell of a lot faster than I'd have guessed. I still want to chase him and make him bleed for what he tried to do. I want to leave him for cold daylight to find here in the park.

But I turn to her. And I know I won't leave her. I've got my hood pulled up over my head, my eyes shielded. But I take a step and the illumination from a streetlight floods over me. Kenzie looks up at me and freezes. So do I.

She knows me. She doesn't know quite how, but I can see it in her eyes.

"You..." she whispers.

My heart swells and surges. My entire soul blooms.

"Kenzie..."

Her name rolls over my lips like a lover's touch. Then I hear the sirens, and they're definitely heading this way.

A part of me wants to run. I want to take her and run off with her; drag her away like a deranged caveman if need be. But I don't. I step closer to her, and I reach down. She hesitates, but then her hand finds mine. I grip it tight, and I pull her to her feet.

Fuck does it feels good to touch her. It's the first time in six years. Well, that's not true. But it almost is. I pull her close to me. I take her hands, and I actually tremble.

We don't say a word. I don't know what the hell I'd even say to her anyways. But we don't need to speak. My eyes capturing hers say everything that needs saying. I lean into her. One hand comes up to cup her face. Not hard, but possessively. Kenzie trembles. Her lip worries and her big blue eyes are round as saucers.

I've imaged what I'd say to her a trillion times. I've fantasized about what I'd do to her, too. But we don't have time, and I don't have the words. So I do the next best thing. I lean close to her, and I lower my mouth to hers. Then I kiss her. I kiss her like I know she's never been kissed before.

Her lips are so goddamn soft. Her single moan is even softer. I could lose myself here with her. I could die against these lips. But the sirens draw closer. And I'm not done protecting her.

It's painful to pull away from her, but I manage to do it. I hold her eyes fiercely. The look says what my mouth can't right now: "you're mine" it growls.

The red and blue lights flash, and the sirens scream. I back away from her until the shadows envelope me. I watch one more second. Her hand comes up to touch her lips. She looks like she's in shock, or like she's unsure if she's dreaming or awake.

I turn, and I fade into the darkness of night.

“THANK FUCKING GOD.”

I gasp when Elissa throws her arms around me tight. I hug her back, but she just keeps holding me, trembling.

“Elissa,” I smile. “I’m okay, really.”

She doesn’t let up. So I turn to smile at the two police officers and the detective who’ve walked me up to my apartment door. “Thank you for bringing me up. I’m fine.”

“Miss,” Detective Johnson frowns. He’s the one handling my case, and he’s been great ever since they took me in to the station for a statement. “We’re supposed to make sure you make it actually inside of your home.”

We’re still in the hallway, where Elissa’s just ambushed me.

“Um, okay one sec. Elissa?” She lets go of me reluctantly. I take my keys out and unlock my door. “Does that count?” I smile at Detective Johnson.

“That’ll work. If you need anything at all, though, call me.” He passes me a card with his name, badge ID, and cell on it. “If you get any suspicious phone calls, anyone prowling around the building, don’t hesitate.”

I smile weakly. “Thank you for your help tonight, Detective.”

He nods. “We’ll find these guys, Miss Shipley. You can count on that.” He turns to Elissa, seemingly appraising her with a stern look. “You’re right across the hall here?”

“Yeah, and I’m going to be up all night watching out for her.”

He smiles the first smile I’ve seen from him. Then he turns back to me. “You take care, Miss Shipley. And please don’t hesitate to pass my number on to your father if he has any questions.”

I’m not naïve. I know the department was just doing their jobs. But I also know that they’ve gone a bit above and beyond once it was realized who I was. Or whose daughter I was. I’ve already talked to my dad on the phone from the precinct station. He’s in Washington and wanted to send some of his own security detail for me. But I insisted that I was fine.

I’m not sure I am, though. Actually, I’m positive I’m not. The attack was one thing. Being jumped like that still has my very soul shaking. I’m startling at every car horn or door shutting. But the real thing that’s shaking me up is what I saw after. It’s *who* I saw after.

Or at least, who I think I saw. If it wasn’t, I might need to be examined by a shrink, though.

When the cops and Detective Johnson leave, it feels like I finally let out a breath.

“Jesus Christ, Kenzie,” Elissa says tightly. She hugs me hard and pulls back. “Do you want to talk about it, or not at all?”

I shrug. “It’s all a blur, really. This guy just slammed into me on the lakeshore path.”

She trembles. “That’s so fucking scary, holy shit.”

“I was stupid. It’s freaking Halloween. I mean the weirdos are all out. Plus, I had my headphones in, too.”

“Both of them?”

I nod. Elissa shakes her head. “Still, that’s so fucking... hang on.” She frowns. “Did they just say ‘guys’, plural?”

I look down at my hands. “It’s not... I tried explaining. But they want me to come in and talk later about it. They think my memory of what happened is blurry.”

“Well, no shit?”

I smile. “It was just the first one. The second guy was...” I look down. “He was protecting me.”

“Kenzie,” Elissa says gently. “Are you sure you’re remembering it correctly?”

“Yes!” I snap.

She smiles weakly. “Sorry, it’s just that, if he was helping, why did he run? Why didn’t he wait with you until the cops came?”

“I don’t know.”

I do and I don’t. Did he run because he’s worried about the attempted burglary from six damn years ago? Because that’s who I’ve always thought my mysterious protector is: the would-be thief who stopped Ken, Justin, and the unknown third guy who tried to hurt me that night. He ran that night because of the obvious: breaking and entering, and then Ken dying after their fight.

But I don’t know why he’d run tonight. I guess I don’t even know for sure it was the same guy. But my heart tells me it was. My very soul tells me it was him.

And then there's the kiss. I tremble, and I bite my lip. I haven't mentioned it at all to the police. There was blood on the cuff of my running jacket, which they think belongs to the guy who was stabbed. There was also clothing fibers who they think belong to the stabber. My protector.

This tells the cops he at least touched me. I've explained that he helped me up before running away. I haven't mentioned that he kissed me.

My very first kiss.

"What do you need?" Elissa asks with sympathy. She hugs me tight. "Want me to make you dinner? Run a bath or something? Do you just want company?"

I twist my lips. "Is it terrible if I just want to be alone?"

"No, not at all," she frowns determinedly. "I totally get that. But just so you know, I'm going to be camped at my door, looking at yours through the peephole."

I smile and squeeze her hands. "Elissa, I'll be fine. The police are keeping a marked car right downstairs anyways."

"Well, too bad. I'm keeping watch up here."

I grin and hug her tightly. "Thank you. I'm really fine, though. Seriously."

"Go shower or take a bath," she sighs. "You'll feel better."

"Thanks, Elissa."

I smile again and step into my apartment. I close the door and then head right for the bathroom. I strip down and run the water extra hot. It's a war of emotions and feeling inside of me. I feel like I need to scrape myself clean after the first man jumped me like that. But then there's those steel gray eyes of my protector.

Then there's the kiss—my very first one.

I smile to myself. Some might call it stolen, to be just taken like that without warning. But I don't see it that way. I know it might be warped. It might mean I'm fucked in the head. But a piece of me feels like my first kiss was meant for my mysterious protector.

In the shower, I tremble under the hot water. I close my eyes and let myself finally dwell on everything that happened tonight. But it's as if I'm already over the actual attack. I know it sounds bad, but it's the kiss that takes the spotlight in my head. It's all I can think about. It drowns out the bad stuff that came right before it.

A heat throbs in my core. An electric feeling teases over my skin. My lips replay the whole thing, and I squeeze my thighs tightly together under the shower's water. My hand slips lower, down between my legs. I moan softly, and I start to play off of what happened tonight. I pretend his kiss lasted much longer. I wonder what would have happened if there weren't police cars approaching. Would he have stayed? Would he have done more than kiss me? Would his hands be going where mine are?

I moan again, but then I stop myself. God, I really might be fucked up in the head. Here I am doing this, after what happened to me tonight? I frown at myself and turn the water off. I dry quickly and pull on some pajamas and a robe. I slump down on my couch to distract myself with mindless TV. But then there's a knock at the door.

I gasp sharply, and my body clenches. Reason tells me it's probably the officers from downstairs, or Elissa. But I can still taste fear. I tighten my robe and stop by the door.

“Who is it?”

“Mackenzie? Mackenzie Shipley?”

I frown and look through the peephole. I don't recognize the man, but he's dressed impeccably. He's handsome, and he smiles warmly as if he can tell I'm spying on him.

“Mackenzie, I'm a friend of your fathers.”

“Who are you?”

“My name is Gordon,” he says gently.

I frown. But again, I know the cops are right downstairs. If he was someone to worry about, they'd have stopped him. I step back and open the door a little. The very handsome man smiles back at me. But my frown deepens. He looks familiar, though I don't know how.

“Hey, Kenzie,” he smiles.

My brow wrinkles. “How do I...”

He clears his throat and looks down. “Traphagen,” he murmurs. “Gordon Traphagen.”

Suddenly, I feel cold all over. I want to throw up. I've only met Gordon a handful of times. But I sure as hell know his younger brother, Ken. Ken who drugged me, and who pulled me into a room at a party with two friends to try and...

The bile rises in my throat. I might barely know Gordon. But his brother's actions speak volumes. So does his family trying and failing to sue my dad after Ken died trying to hurt me. I move back to slam the door in Gordon's face. But he gently holds a hand up.

“Please, let me speak.”

“Get out,” I choke. My vision swims. All I can remember is Ken being a creep at the party I never wanted to throw. I

remember him trying to get handsy with me and being mad when I told him to fuck off. Then I remember fading out of consciousness after I drank that soda.

The next thing I can remember is my protector picking me up. I can remember his gray eyes, and that deep voice telling me it's going to be okay.

"Mackenzie, please." Gordon looks pained. It makes me pause. "What happened to you back then at the party...I'm so sorry, Mackenzie."

"What do you want?" I say tersely.

"I just wanted to talk. Look, I'm not trying to whitewash what my brother was involved in. I'm not trying to downplay what my parents pulled afterwards. And I'm not looking for you to say you're sorry about my brother or anything. I won't go there."

"Good, because I'm not saying any of that."

He nods. "Mackenzie, I can't prove what he did or didn't do, or what he meant to or didn't mean to do."

"Funny, I can," I hiss. "He and his little fucking buddies drugged me with the intent to assault me."

Gordon looks away. He looks ashy. "Like I said, I can't say yes or no. But I am sorry about what happened to you. Honestly, I really am, Mackenzie."

"Why are you here?"

"Like I said, I can't prove anything about my brother, about if he was really involved or not."

I start to open my mouth to tell him to go fuck himself.

"But I can prove who *did* actually drug you."

I freeze. My stomach twists into a knot. “I... you need to leave,” I choke.

“I know this is painful,” Gordon says gently.

“I think you should leave.”

“Please, Mackenzie.”

“No, please leave!”

“My brother might have been about to do some bad shit that night, Mackenzie,” Gordon grunts. “But he didn’t slip you that drink.”

“Oh yeah?” I say angrily. “Then who did?”

“This is going to be weird to hear.”

“Fine, then let’s skip it and you can leave instead.”

But Gordon stays right where he is, filling my doorway. “You know your dad’s mechanic he had for all his cars?”

I stare at him. “Mitchell?! That’s your theory?!” I laugh coldly. “Get the fuck out of my doorway, asshole. Mitchell was like an uncle to me. Oh, and he was *dead* that night.”

“Not him,” Gordon sighs. “His son, Oren.”

I blink. “Excuse me?” Somewhere in my mind, I’m aware that Mitchell Frey had a son. But I know nothing about him aside from that he lived in Florida or something.

“His son. He was at your house that night, Mackenzie. At the party.”

I shake my head. “That’s impossible...”

“Your dad flew him in for the funeral.”

“Gordon—”

“He drugged you, Mackenzie,” Gordon croaks. “With intent to —”

“Get out!” I yell. Anger and fear swirl inside of me.

“Mackenzie, your dad covered it up, and I don’t know why—”

“Get *out!*” I scream.

The door behind Gordon swings open. “Hey shit bag,” Elissa mutters angrily. “Get the fuck out.”

Gordon glances back my neighbor. “This is a private conversation...”

She lifts her arm up, holding a Cubs baseball bat menacingly. She smiles thinly. “Leave, or I’m going to fuck up that pretty bone structure of yours.”

Gordon seems tense. He takes a deep breath, keeping both eyes on Elissa. Then he turns and hands me a business card.

“This is my card, Mackenzie. I’m in town, staying at The Drake hotel. Please call me if you want to talk and find out the truth. I can help, Mackenzie,” he says sympathetically. “I can help to give us both some solace and closure to all of—”

“Get out!”

Finally, he nods. “Okay, I’m going. I just needed you to know that there’s more to this. I’m sorry to have upset you, Mackenzie. And I really am sorry about that night.”

He turns and walks away. Elissa walks towards me, but I hold a hand up. “I’m fine. Really.” Mercifully, she doesn’t push it.

“Want me to go get the cops downstairs?”

I shake my head. I feel numb. “No, thanks. I’m... I just need to sleep.”

My friend nods. She reaches out and takes my hand. “I’m right here across the hall. You don’t have to keep this to yourself if you don’t want, okay?”

I nod. “Thank you.”

When I’m back inside of my apartment, I get my phone and call my dad.

“Hey, honey,” he says gently. “How are you holding—”

“Who’s Oren Frey?”

When he doesn’t immediately answer, the hairs on my neck stand up.

“What?”

“Oren. Mitchel Frey’s son?”

My dad coughs to clear his throat. “Where is this coming from, Kenzie?”

“Did he... was he at...” I’m sputtering. I can’t form the words I want to say, and it feels like the room is spinning.

“Was it him!?” I finally blurt.

“Was what him, sweetheart?” My dad says gently.

“That night! Did he...” I close my eyes. I swallow back the bile. “Was he part of the guys who....”

“No,” my dad snarls. The strength in his voice takes me aback. I hear him take a calming breath though. “No, Kenzie. Oren is Mitchel’s son. I wanted to help him out after the accident, so I hired him to do some work for me in Colorado helping appraise some cars.”

“And?”

“And he bailed,” my dad grunts. “He took the money I gave him to make the deals and disappeared.”

I walk to the window and look out into the night. “That’s it?”

“That’s it, honey. That’s Oren Frey.”

“He wasn’t at our house that night?”

“No. He was in Colorado, stealing my money.”

“You’re sure?”

My dad takes a breath. “I’m going to get on a plane and come to Chicago. Tonight.”

“No, dad, it’s not that.”

“Honey, you’ve had a seriously traumatic experience. And with what happened before, maybe it’s just bringing up a lot of stuff you buried.”

I close my eyes. “It might be.”

“So, I’m getting a plane. Right now.”

“No, dad,” I smile. “I mean it. Stay there. I’m fine. The police have people outside, and I think Elissa is literally sleeping against my front door.”

He chuckles and then pauses. “Out of curiosity, how did Oren Frey come up?”

“You do not want to know.”

“I think I do, actually.”

I don’t want to tell him about Gordon. My dad has never gotten along with Lance Traphagen, Gordon and Ken’s father. But after he tried to sue my dad for negligence after Ken died, it went nuclear.

“Honey...”

“Gordon Traphagen just came to see me.”

My dad swears viciously into the phone. “What the hell did that little creep want?”

“He actually apologized for his brother.” I frown. “Well, sort of.”

“He was asking about Mitchel’s boy?”

“Yeah. He said...” I shake my head. “Nevermind, it’s stupid.”

“What did he say, honey?”

“Dad, it’s fine. He’s in town, and maybe he was just feeling guilty about Ken.”

“Kenzie, I’d like to know what he said to you. You know how the Traphagens are.”

“Can we actually talk later? I’m exhausted.” It’s not an excuse. I really do feel completely drained.

“Of course, of course.” Dad sighs. “I’m so glad you’re okay, honey. But I wish you’d let me send you some people.”

“I don’t need bodyguards, dad.”

“I would hazard otherwise based on tonight,” he growls.

“Well, I had someone there to help.”

“Who the police say is a second suspect.”

“He helped me, dad.”

“And then he ran away when the cops came? You won’t even know my people are there, Kenzie. I promise.”

“Dad, no.”

“I’m never going to sleep if you keep saying no to this,” he chuckles. But I know he’s only half joking.

“Let me think about it.”

“Thanks, honey. Call me if you need anything at all, okay?”

“I will.”

“Love you, Kenzie.”

“Love you too, dad.”

When I hang up, I put the phone down. I stare out the window into the darkness. I try and imagine those eyes again—from my past, and from tonight. My hand comes up, and my fingers brush my lips.

“Who are you?” I whisper against the glass.

And who the fuck is Oren Frey?

Three Years Ago:

“SURPRISE, MOTHERFUCKER.”

The man gasps when I slip the rope around his neck. He startles so violently that I wonder if I’ve triggered a heart attack. But I’m not that lucky. He twists and tries to reach for me. But I’m much stronger. And I’m fucking mad.

I’ve had creep vibes from Kenzie’s new landlord from the day she saw the apartment. I watched him watching her, lusting after her. His apartment was right next to hers. There were several times the camera I’d set up in the hallway vents caught him trying to peek under her doorway. Other times, he’d have his ear to the door.

When he told her a few days ago that he had to do some minor construction inside her apartment, I knew something was up. “Just some water damage,” he’d claimed. “I’ll have it all patched up before you get back from class.”

Kenzie wants to see the good in people. She’d just smiled and happily signed off on this predator coming into her home while she wasn’t there. But I see the monster in people.

The man sputters, but no sound gets out. I’m making sure of that. We’re in the hallway, after all. I could have done this in

his apartment, but I wanted to make it look... natural, I guess. I drag him kicking and sputtering up the last staircase, to the roof of the building. It's locked, but his keys are on his belt.

It's cold up here, and windy. I drag him to the edge, and he starts to sob. I think the sound I hear is "please," but I don't care. We're past begging. I'm past mercy.

Had it just been the one-way mirror I discovered; he might be alive tomorrow. That's what I found tonight when I broke into his place. In a closet that shares a wall with Kenzie's bedroom, the creep had installed what is basically a peep room. He'd removed a built-in mirror on her bedroom wall and replaced it with a one-way one, like in interrogation rooms. Her side still looked like a mirror. His side was a full view of where she sleeps and changes.

But had it just been that, we wouldn't be here. I'd have beaten the shit out of him, and probably broken some limbs. I may have castrated him too, before handing him over to the cops. But I also found a video camera, rope, and a knife in that peep room. I found disturbing pornography on his computer, too; lots of violence against women type stuff. That's what pushed me over the edge.

Tonight, it's what's getting him pushed over the literal edge.

I don't waste time telling him why this is happening. I don't wax poetic or give him a speech. I drag him to the edge of the roof, take off the rope, and I shove. He hits the alley below with a thud. And that's that. One less piece of shit in the world. One less threat against Kenzie.

Back downstairs, I slip back into his place. I need to wipe my prints and make sure she never finds out how close danger was. I wish I'd been able to make him write a suicide note or something, but whatever. The police will find his disturbing

and possibly illegal pornography collection and assume his self-hatred got the best of him.

I wipe the place down. Then I slip into his peep room. Inside is the sheet of drywall and paint I have ready. No one will learn about his peep room. He never had a chance to use it anyways. But I want to make sure Kenzie never has to lose sleep wondering if he did. I'm going to cover it up. Soon, when she's out, I'll break into her place and replace the one-way with a regular mirror.

I start to get to work. But the light comes on in her bedroom. I look up and suck in a sharp breath. It's Kenzie. I didn't hear her come in, but she's home. She's in her bedroom, not four feet from me. She can't see me of course. But its surreal. I'm right here. I'm closer to her than I've been since the night I first saw her.

She closes the blinds on her windows. She's in her soccer uniform, from the college intramural she plays in. In one second, she pulls her top off. I freeze. She slips her shorts down. My cock thickens.

She turns and walks into her bathroom. I watch every fucking step, my eyes glued to her ass. She's wearing a black thong, and I groan. She leaves the bathroom door open, and soon I see steam from a shower. I know I should stop. Looking at her like this puts me on the same level as the creep who built this room.

But, no. I'm not him. And besides that, Kenzie is mine. I know that on every level.

She walks back into the room suddenly in a towel. It's barely wrapped around her, and I growl. She walks over to the mirror. She walks right over to it. I clench my jaw. Christ, she's a foot from me. It's as if I could lean in and kiss her.

She peers close, like she's checking out her pores. But suddenly, she drops the towel. I groan, and my dick twitches. She steps back and looks at herself. Her hands skim her hips, and up to her tits. She cups them and makes a silly-sultry look in the mirror. Then she laughs.

But I'm not laughing. I'm spellbound. My hand drifts to the front of my jeans. I can't help it. I cup the bulge there. My eyes devour her—every inch of her body, bare for me. She's still cupping her tits. Her fingers rub over her pink, dusky nipples, and her face reddens. She keeps at it, and her breath comes faster. One hand slides down her stomach, down between her legs. My jaw clenches. My belt comes undone.

Kenzie steps back to her bed. She sits on the edge of it and spreads her legs. She's watching herself boldly touching herself. So am I. I pull my throbbing cock free of my jeans. I wrap a hand around it, and I stroke.

Her fingers explore, and my hand moves in time. She moans. I can't hear it, but I can see the pleasure on her face. I stroke faster, pumping harder. Her legs spread wider, and her hand becomes a blur. Her hips grind and she thrusts her tits up. Her mouth forms an O-shape. I know I'm watching her come.

It's too much. My dick pulses thickly in my hand. My balls draw up, and I'm coming with her. My cum spurts against the glass. Thick splatters of it strike the one-way mirror, slowly dripping down as if covering her thighs and her stomach.

Kenzie drops onto the bed. She's grinning lazily. She rolls over and arches her back. God, it's like she's giving me a show. She stands and approaches the mirror. I'm still standing there, cock in hand, staring at her not ten inches from me. Her face is pink from her exertions. She smiles at herself and then

walks back into the bathroom. When she comes out again, she's wearing pajamas. She turns out the light.

I blink, as if I'm not quiet processing what I saw. Numb and yet pulsing with adrenaline, I get to work. I clean the glass quietly. I take one last look at her dark bedroom, then I put up the drywall. I trim and tape the edges flat to the rest of the wall. Then I get painting. I even tack up some shelves for good measure. Tomorrow, I'll replace the built-in mirror on her side with a real one.

When I'm done, I sit back. I can't quite believe what I just saw. Or what I did. I press my forehead to the shelving and murmur a good night to her. I wipe the creep's apartment one more time. Then, I'm gone.

Present:

I SHAKE with rage as I look up at the front of the Drake Hotel. I've just tailed Gordon Traphagen here, after he left Kenzie's apartment. Anger burns through me like fire. I've already gone in and finessed my way into getting his room number from the front desk. I'm not going up there right this instant, though I want to. I want to bang his door down and tell him to stay the fuck away from Kenzie.

But I can't do that. The lines might be blurry in my world, but they exist. Crossing over this one would take away the greatest resource I have with protecting Kenzie: anonymity. Threatening or hurting Gordon would be satisfying in the short term. But disastrous in the long term.

It's not just his family money and influence, either. Gordon's done well for himself. He's pandered his way through DC as

an aide to various politicians. Now, he's a big name with a major lobbying firm. He's a string puller. A palm greaser. He donates to charity and pays his taxes. He smiles like a fucking Kennedy and has all the right friends in Washington. In fact, he's already on speculative short lists for a national office of some kind in the near future.

But I know better. I see through the shiny bullshit. At heart, Gordon is a fucking Traphagen. He's an older version of Ken who learned to disguise his monsters. But I can look right through him.

What's given him away is his obsession with me. He's been looking for me. He's been using his influence, money, and power to seek me out. He's plucked at the strings of my past, looking to unravel something. I want to ignore it, but I know he's getting closer. I'm running out of runway, and out of time.

Somehow, Gordon knows the story of me being in Colorado that night is bullshit. Or at least he suspects it heavily. He's even tracked down my mom. Luckily, she's still the same charming meth-addicted mess she was when I was putting up with her shit. So I know he didn't get anything from her.

But he knows. He has an inkling. He's got a piece of a thread, and he's tugging at it. If we were just everyday people, I wouldn't be worried. What happened six years ago was an accident anyways. Besides that, the evidence is long gone. There's nothing concrete that ties me to being there. Believe me, I've looked myself. I've made sure to erase any ties to that night. Kenzie's father has, too.

But we're not normal people. Gordon Traphagen is too rich and powerful for this to be ignored. If he finds even a useable shred, I know he'll use it. I'm not worried for myself. Prison doesn't scare me. But leaving Kenzie to the wolves that prowl

this world is an unbearable thought. So is implicating Duncan Shipley and ruining his career because of this.

I start the engine up and pull out into the night. I drive back to Kenzie's neighborhood, park a few blocks away as usual, and take the long way back to my apartment. Out on the balcony, I climb into the tree. I move silently to the familiar spot. Her lights are still on, and she's lying in bed. Goddamn she's gorgeous. She never asked for any of this shit, either. She never asked for Ken to try what he tried. She definitely never asked for me to fall in love with her with one glance. But we play the cards we're dealt.

Gordon's playing a game. I need to be stronger. I need to hit him first. But I'm still figuring out what the fuck the game even is.

THE CARD IS thick in my fingers. It screams money and power. I take a deep breath and pull my eyes from it to the door in front of me. I wanted to throw the card away. I'm still not even sure why I'm here, at the Drake Hotel. But I think it's because deep down, I still have so many questions. And Gordon Traphagen might just have some answers.

Finally, I raise my hand and knock. The door opens a few seconds later, and Gordon smiles at me.

"I'm really glad you called, Mackenzie."

I keep my face tense. I eye him warily. "I'm still not convinced I should have. Or if I should even be here."

He nods. "Totally understandable. Our families, regrettably, don't really have the best history, do they?"

"Your father trying to sue mine after your brother tried to assault me probably has a bit to do with that," I snap tersely.

Gordon sighs remorsefully. "If I could change the past, believe me, I would. And again, I can't say enough how sorry I am for what happened that night." He smiles again. "Look, I'd suggest we go downstairs to the bar or something for some place more public, to make you more comfortable..."

"I'd like that, actually" I say quickly.

Gordon frowns. “Well, I would. Except I think you’re in danger, Kenzie. And I’m worried that the danger has been following you. This conversation might be better in private, away from prying or spying eyes.”

I feel a chill crawl over my skin. “Exactly what sort of danger?”

“Oren,” he grunts quietly. He gestures into the room. “Would you like to come in?”

I frown, but I step inside. Gordon closes the door behind me and walks over to some couches, facing each other. He gestures to the one across from the one he sits in. I think about it another second, and then I walk over and sit.

“I talked to my dad.” I frown at Gordon. “Oren wasn’t even in the state that night. He was in Colorado. My dad hired him to go appraise and potentially buy some new cars for his collection.”

“Yeah,” Gordon mutters. “I’ve heard that story too.”

I glare at him. “It’s not a story, it’s the truth.”

Gordon says nothing for a few seconds. Then he looks up at me. “Can I get you anything? Something to drink.”

“I don’t drink, and no.”

He smiles. “I know you don’t. I meant like a soda or something.”

“And how exactly do you know that?”

Gordon smiles again. “Knowing people is sort of what I do, Mackenzie. You sure I can’t get you anything.”

“Positive. You know what? I wasn’t sure why I was here, but I think I know now. It was to tell you that whatever you think

happened that night with Mitchel Frey's son didn't happen. He was in another state."

Gordon smiles thinly. "Like I said, I've heard that story."

"It is *not* a story."

"Let me tell you another one, then," he growls. He picks a piece of folded paper off of the table between us. He hands it to me. "Go ahead. Read this story."

I open it. It's a photocopy of a plane ticket, from Jacksonville Florida to Chicago. The passenger is Oren Frey.

"What is this?"

"Look at the date, Mackenzie," Gordon says gently.

I do, and my skin prickles. It's from the very night of my attack at the party. It has the plane landing maybe six hours before everything happened.

"He was there, Mackenzie," Gordon grunts. "He was at your house that night, at the party."

"He wasn't," I insist. "This is just a ticket. Maybe he was planning on coming to Chicago for his dad's funeral. But instead, he took the job for my dad in Colorado."

Gordon frowns. "He skipped his own father's funeral for a fucking job?"

I shrug. "Maybe they weren't close."

"Your dad bought the ticket, Mackenzie."

I tense. "Oh really."

Gordon silent slides me another piece of paper. When I pick it up, I tremble again. It's a credit card receipt for this very ticket. It's from my dad's card, with his signature and everything.

“So? Gordon, again, maybe Oren decided to skip the funeral. He didn’t live with his dad. It really could be that they just didn’t have a good relationship.”

“Maybe. I thought the same thing, until I found this.”

He passes me another printout. This one makes my stomach tighten. It’s a receipt for a luxury driver service, from Chicago O’Hare Airport to our house outside the city. Again, for that night of the party. And again, it’s from my dad’s credit card.

“So?” I say it offhandedly. But now I’m shook up. “It could be —”

“Anyone?” Gordon frowns. “Yeah, sure, Mackenzie. It could be anyone. It could be a business associate or a friend of his. It could be that Oren Frey never got on the flight to Chicago that night that your dad paid for, too.” His words drip with sarcasm.

“Or,” he growls. “Or the stranger you don’t know at all, with a history of drug abuse and crime, who did time in a juvenile detention facility—”

“Hang on, what?” I gasp.

“Oren,” Gordon’s face hardens. “He’s not just some guy, Kenzie. He’s a criminal. A low-life. So maybe consider the possibility that he *was* at your house that night. And consider that there’s a chance that a guy like that might have tried to do what almost happened that night.”

“With Ken?” I snap.

Gordon frowns. But he nods slowly. “Maybe with my brother. I don’t know, Mackenzie. All I do know is that Ken was a good kid. He was a prick and an asshole, sometimes, I won’t deny that. But he wasn’t that. But Oren? Oren was. He did

time, Kenzie. He's a criminal, who your dad let into your house."

"But... but why would my dad lie about this?" I whisper.

"That's exactly what I've been trying to figure out." He looks at his hands and frowns before he looks up at me. "There's more, Mackenzie. I think Oren might be following you. In fact, I think he's been stalking you for some time."

The room is silent. My thoughts are a whirlwind, and I feel cold. I feel scared. But as messed up as it sounds, I actually feel safer being here with Gordon behind a closed door.

"H-he what?" I whisper.

"I think he tried to hurt you that night and failed. Personally, I'll tell you that I think it was Ken who tried to stop him."

I balk at him. "He had GHB in his pockets, Gordon," I hiss. "And Justin Lehman ratted on him as being involved."

"Justin Lehman was a scumbag," Gordon seethes. "And a drug addict. You know where he is now?"

I shake my head.

"Rehab, for the fourth time. He was fucked up that night. He doesn't know what the hell he saw. And the drugs? Ever think that maybe it was Oren who stuffed them in his pockets after he fucking murdered my brother?!"

Gordon is shaking with rage, his face contorted by anger. It's both terrifying and heartbreaking to watch. But the heartbreak wins out. Even if he's mistaken and it really was his asshole brother who tried to hurt me, he's clearly in pain.

I stand and move to his side of the table. I sit next to him and put a hand on his shoulder. "I'm sorry, Gordon," I say gently.

“For what it’s worth, I know you’re not your brother, or your father.”

“Thank you, Mackenzie.” Gordon turns to flash a small smile at me. “That means a lot. I’m really not trying to mess up your life here. I just want answers, and the truth. I mean no disrespect to your father, either. But he’s covering something, and I want to know what and why.” His gaze holds mine. “And I would think you’d want to know too.”

“I wish I could remember more,” I say gently. “But it’s just a blank. All I can remember are these intense gray eyes—”

The hotel room door slams open, wood splinters breaking from the frame. I gasp, choking on the scream before it can come out. The tall, broad-shouldered figure storms into the room and charges towards us. He’s all in black—black jeans, boots, leather jacket. And he’s got a black hoodie pulled up over his head.

“Get the fuck away from her!!” He thunders. His voice... I tremble and I freeze. I know that voice. I know I know it.

Gordon lunges to his feet. He reaches behind him, and I stare in horror as he pulls out a snub-nosed revolver. But the man in black never falters or slows. He hurdles the couch between us and him. His hood falls back slightly. The light catches his face, and his steely-gray eyes. My mouth falls open in shock.

It’s him. I know without a single reserve that it’s him. It’s my protector from that night, and I know it’s the same man as last night in the park.

“You...”

“Get away from him, Kenzie!” He shouts.

Gordon swears and holds up the gun. “Rot in hell, Oren!”

Okay, what the *fuck*?!

The man in black slams into Gordon before he can pull the trigger. He yanks the gun away and throws it across the room. Gordon punches him hard, but the hooded man hits back, harder. He snarls like a wild animal and smashes his fists into Gordon. Gordon reaches for something in the couch cushions. But the man in black is faster. They grapple and fall to the floor. I'm just staring in horror and shock. It's like I want to do something; anything at all. But I can't move. I'm frozen.

Suddenly, the man in black has something in his hands. He growls savagely and jabs it into Gordon's neck. When he pulls his hand away, I realize it's a syringe. Gordon's face is white. He looks horrified when he turns to stare at me.

"Mackenzie..."

His eyes close, and he slumps motionless. The room is totally silent. It's so quiet I can hear my heart beating like a drum inside of me.

"We need to go, now."

I blink. I can't talk. I can't think. I slowly turn towards the man in black. It's him. It's without a doubt the man I remember from that night of the party. The gray eyes and that voice are something I'll never forget. He's also the man from last night, who stabbed my attacker.

But he's also someone else. The man standing in front of me is the same guy Gordon's just told me might be responsible for my attack that night. He's given me extremely damning evidence, too.

The man standing in front of me, with the gray eyes and the familiar deep voice from countless fantasies of mine, is Oren Frey.

“You!” I gasp in horror. “Get—get away!”

“We need to go, Kenzie,” he growls. “Right now!”

“Is he... did you...”

“He’s fine,” he mutters. He glares at Gordon. “Just knocked out.” His steely eyes find mine again. His jaw clenches. “We need to go, right now.”

“No! No, we need to call... someone! We... you...”

The room spins. I see black spots in my vision. Oren frowns and moves towards me. I want to scream, but I can’t. I start to fall over. I know he catches me, but that’s the last thing I know before the room goes dark.

Two years ago:

THIS ONE IS GOING to be hard. Yes, my obsession with Kenzie is bottomless. The measures I'll go to protect her and keep her safe have no limits. But there are times I know I'm crossing a line. I'm playing judge, jury, and executioner with her life and her relationships. I know that's fucked up, and unhealthy.

But I can't help it. I can't help myself at all when it comes to her.

Sometimes, getting rid of a man who's getting close to her is easy. A few months ago, some jackass at a coffee shop chatted her up and managed to get her number. They even made dinner plans for the next night. But again, Kenzie sees the good in people. I just see their monsters lurking beneath the surface.

That man, Jack, was easy. A simple internet deep dive courtesy of a contact of mine revealed his bullshit. His was a wife and three kids in Virginia. He'd told Kenzie that he lived in Chicago. But he was just in town for a three-day business conference.

Getting rid of him took three seconds. I just walked up to him on the street, showed him a picture of his family, and told him

to walk away from the girl from the coffee shop. Yes, he stood her up. Yes, she was pissed and hurt. But not as hurt as she could have been. And selfishly, I kept yet another man from trying to lay hands on what's mine.

I know there's something wrong with me. I know it's fucked up how I toy and meddle with her life. But love makes us do crazy things. Obsession only makes it worse.

Yes, Jack was easy. So were others before. Some were harder. Some took more digging, but most people have skeletons in their closet, and I always find them. I find them, and I use them to make sure they walk away from Mackenzie Shipley.

But Aaron is going to be hard. He may actually be one of the good guys. He's got no skeletons, and I've fucking dug for them. No wife and kids in another state. No drug habits. No sketchy past. He dates women long term, and parts amicably with them when it ends. He comes from a great, stable family. He walks his elderly landlady's dogs for fucks sake. He's a Boy Scout motherfucking saint.

He's still going down in flames, though. When I can't find something as a carrot threat, I use the stick. It makes no difference to me. But Aaron is different. I've looked at him from every damn angle. Objectively, there is nothing wrong with him; nothing that should worry someone who's looking out for Kenzie. In fact, he might be the healthiest thing to happen to her in a long time.

But fuck that. If this was just love, I may even have let this play out. It would have hurt me to my core. But making her happy would have been the silver lining. But this is more than love. This is obsession. Obsession is possessive. Obsession grants no quarter and yields nothing.

I raise my hand and knock on his door.

“One sec!”

There are footsteps. The door unlocks and swings open. A good, wholesome looking guy in khakis and a tucked in dress shirt smiles at me. Behind him are stacks of legal binders and documents. Aaron is a lawyer. A mutual friend of his and Kenzie’s put them together. They’ve been on one date, where they held hands afterwards. No kissing. Since then, they’ve spoken four times on the phone, totaling an hour and ten minutes. They’ve texted each other three-hundred and forty-eight times.

This ends tonight.

“Hey, can I help you?”

“You have a date tomorrow,” I growl.

Aaron frowns uncomfortably. “I’m sorry, do I know you? Are you from the state’s attorney’s office? I was expecting some of the trial briefs from yesterday—”

“No, I’m not.” My jaw is tense. My eyes don’t blink as they hold his. “Tomorrow, you’re going out to dinner with Mackenzie Shipley.”

He smiles nervously. “I... yes, I am. Sorry, who are you?”

“A friend, Aaron.” I smile. But it ain’t a nice smile. “I could be a friend, at least. Or I could be something else.”

His face says he wants to be a tough guy. His eyes say otherwise. Aaron is not a confrontational guy. He’s a house cat. I do get why Kenzie might like him. I even understand that he’d probably be really good for her. He’d be healthy for her. He’s not a cheater. He’s not an abuser. And Kenzie is way out of his damn league. The guy would probably worship the ground she walks on.

But it doesn't matter. Not to me. He's after what's mine, and I won't have it.

"What the hell is this about?"

"Just a courtesy visit, Aaron. I'm afraid the situation has changed. So you're going to need to cancel on Mackenzie tomorrow. After that, I'm going to need you to delete her number and not contact her again."

I never claimed to be a saint. I never even claimed to be normal. I'm fucked in the head. But it is what it is. There's no cure for this obsession.

Aaron stares at me. "Excuse me?"

"I think you heard me."

"I did, but I'm not doing that. Who the hell are you?"

"You don't want to know."

He frowns. "What are you, an ex-boyfriend or something?"

"No," I answer truthfully. "Like I said, I'm a friend."

"Friends don't show up at people's doors threatening with insane requests."

"I'm not threatening you," I smile thinly. *Yet*, I think to myself.

"Is this from Mackenzie?" He frowns. "Did she ask you to talk to me? Did I do something?"

This guy is going to make a really great doormat for some girl someday. But it won't be Kenzie.

"I just need you to listen to what I'm saying. Forget Kenzie and walk away."

"And if I don't?" He's acting tough, but he can't hide the quiver in his voice.

“I would.”

“Is that why you’re here?” Now there’s some fear in his voice. “You’re going to hurt me or something if I don’t do what you’re asking?”

I smile and raise my open palms. “I’m not going to hurt you, Aaron. But I think you should do what I’m asking.”

“Why.”

“You’ve got a great job at Kerner and Polk, don’t you?”

I’ve obviously looked into Aaron. He’s a second-year litigator at one of the best law firms in the city. He’s actually on a partner track. Hell, the guy is even pulling more pro bono hours than anyone else there.

“I-I do,” he says nervously.

“Partner track, I hear.”

Aaron nods timidly. “Yes.”

“You’ve worked pretty hard to get there, I bet.”

“I have... look, where is this going?”

“Here. I’m going to make it very simple for you, Aaron. You either keep the job you’ve worked your ass off for and drop the passing thing with a girl you don’t even really know. Or, you continue down a path I’ve warned you to stay off of.”

“And if I do that?”

“You’re going to be looking for another career.”

Aaron stares at me. “Dude, what?”

“You’re on the Halstead account, right?”

He looks pale. “That’s right. But how do you—”

“Taking money from a client’s account is pretty bad, isn’t it?”

He frowns. “Well, yes, obviously.”

“Grounds for disbarment, I’m told.”

He swallows nervously. “What are you threatening to do here?”

“Me?” I smile innocently. “I’m not doing anything, Aaron. I’m just worried about what you might do. Well, or what you already did.”

Aaron’s face pales. “What have you done?”

“I just told you, I didn’t do anything. You did. But I can help. Aaron, you’ve just taken \$100,000 from the Halstead account, and placed it in a bank account under your own name.”

“What?!” he gasps. “I have not! That’s an absurd accusation!”

Of course it is. But an acquaintance of mine is very good with computers, and with covering his own tracks.

“Would you care to see the receipt?”

He blinks quickly. Aaron looks like he might throw up. “What the hell have you done?”

“Now, again, it’s what *you’ve* done. But I’m here to help. I have friends who are good at this sort of thing. Putting things back where they belong, that is, before anyone else finds out. My friends can be your friends, Aaron.”

He looks horrible. He’s angry, but the fear is what’s taking over. “If I walk away from Mackenzie, you mean.”

“Aaron, I knew you were a smart guy,” I growl. “It’s that easy. You don’t know her. There are other fish in the sea, as they say. So walk the fuck away. Delete her number. Forget her fucking name. If you do this, the money will be back in the

Halstead account before Monday morning. Your firm will never know it was even gone.”

“And if...”

“Don’t even finish the sentence,” I growl. “If you don’t, you’ll be fired, disbarred, and probably put in jail for fraud and embezzlement. I’m curious how you plan to go on a date with Kenzie then.”

Aaron looks awful. He shakes his head slowly at me. “Fine,” he whispers. “Okay, fine. I’m gone, okay? Here, look.” He holds up his phone, letting me see him delete her contact info. “It’s gone, alright?”

“I knew you’d make the right choice. Oh, and Aaron?”

“What,” he grumbles.

“It goes without saying that this little conversation of ours never happened. Ever. If she or anyone hears otherwise, that money is going right back into that secret account of yours. And me and my friends will not be available to bail you out again. Is that clear?”

“Very,” he says quietly. “I understand. And you don’t have to worry.”

“I knew I could count on you, buddy,” I smile. I turn and pull my hood up.

“Dude, who the fuck are you? An ex? Do you like her or something?”

I “like” Kenzie like the sun is “kind of hot.”

“I’m just a friend.”

He laughs coldly. “Christ do I feel bad for her then, if a psycho like you calls himself her friend.”

“Enjoy your free night tomorrow, Aaron,” I growl thickly. “And don’t worry, I’ll be watching.” I start to walk away.

“You’re fucking insane!” He yells after me. “You’re fucked up, buddy! You know that?!”

“Yep,” I growl to myself. More than you’ll ever know, Aaron.

AFTER AARON’S PLACE, I head over to Kenzie’s. She’s out at a library study session with a few other people in her major. But that’s a good thing. I let myself in with the copy of her key I made when she left her bag unattended at another study session.

Inside, I breathe in the scent of her. It recharges me. It makes me whole in a fucked up way. I resist the urge to clean up a little. It’s not messy. But there are some dishes in the sink, some dirty towels on the floor near her washing machine in the closet. But I can’t, I know that.

Instead, I do what I came here to do. I duck under her dripping kitchen sink with my tools. Kenzie’s too nice. She’s called the same plumber four times about this. But the dumb fuck keeps giving her bullshit excuses and rescheduling. I know it’s because it’s not a very lucrative job. The guy is doing install work at a new condo building a few streets away. He doesn’t want to take billable time from that for a hundred-dollar sink fix.

But enough is enough. She’s too nice to call someone else. He’s too greedy to tell her to. So, the problem is going to “fix itself” tonight. I tighten the lug nut. The dripping stops.

After that, I re-align her bathroom door hinges. It's been loosening recently. Any day now, it's going to lose a hinge pin and fall off. But not after I'm done with it. After that, I nail down the creaky floorboard by her bedroom window. It's been playing havoc with some of my hidden alarm systems when she steps on it.

An hour later, I'm satisfied. Mostly. I walk back into her bedroom. I move to her dresser, and I open the drawer I'm after. Inside, my eyes slide over the rows of folded up panties and bras. Once again, I never claimed to be a saint.

I run my finger over the lace and satin. I growl deeply, and my cock thickens. I cup my bulge through my jeans and squeeze. I grunt, my fingers exploring her lingerie. But then I remember myself. I glance at the time and swear.

Fuck, she'll be back any minute now. I want to stay and continue this. But I need to get out, now. I hesitate. My fingers close around the lacy blue thong under them. I pull it from the drawer and stick into my pocket. Growling, I close the drawer and collect my tools. I wipe down any signs of my being there. Then I'm gone, locking the door behind me.

KENZIE

I TREMBLE. I blink, like a little lightning storm behind my eyelids. But then suddenly, I'm awake. I gasp and open my eyes quickly. I'm lying on a bed. Terror grips me, and I lurch up.

"Help!" I want to scream it. But it comes out as a haggard croak. "Help!" I choke again. Suddenly warm, strong hands touch my arms. I blink wildly. I whip my head around, and I gasp when I see him.

It's Oren.

"You..."

"Take a breath," he growls quietly. "You fainted. I tried to catch you, but you hit your head on the table on the way down."

I frown and realize my head hurts. I reach up and wince when I touch a bruise near my temple. I blink again, focusing on him. The first thing I see are those eyes. They're exactly as I remember them from that night—piercing, steely, and gray. But after tonight, I'm questioning how I've been thinking about those eyes and the man behind them all these years. I've always thought those eyes belonged to a protector—someone who saved me.

But I've just learned that might be wrong. It might actually be the opposite. I tremble in fear. My stomach clenches and my heart races.

"I need you to follow this light, Kenzie," he says. His voice is dark and rough. But it's gentle at the same time. It's almost soothing. He holds up a pen light. But I wince.

"My throat," I croak.

"Hang on, here." He holds up a glass. "Drink this."

I look at him sharply. He frowns and nods, as if understanding. "It's just water, I promise. Here." He brings the glass to his lips and takes a heavy sip. "Does that help?"

I don't answer. But I reach for the glass and take a tentative sip. While I swallow, my eyes drink him in. For the very first time, the mysterious man from that night has a real, actual face. And it's more handsome than I ever could have imagined.

His hair is a little shaggy. But it's in that sexy bed-head way. His eyes are piercing and silvery. His lips are soft but firm and masculine. Regal, chiseled cheekbones, and a strong jaw covered in a shortish, scruffy beard.

Instantly, the memory from that night comes back to me. I can suddenly remember so much more than the eyes and the voice. And I know without question that it really was Oren there that night. My stranger has a name, and it's Oren Frey.

The only question—the terrifying question—is what was he doing there that night? Is he my protector, or the man who almost hurt me horribly?

"Look at the light and try and follow it with your eyes without moving your head."

I frown, glaring at him past the light. His brow wrinkles.

“It’s to make sure you don’t have a concussion, Kenzie,” he says gently.

I nod. He moves the light, and my eyes follow it. After a few back and forths and up and downs, he nods and turns it off.

“Good. You’re okay.”

I suck my teeth and glance around. We’re in a nice-ish looking apartment that actually looks similar to mine. There are pictures, some framed and some not, covering so many of the walls. I would have thought that the man in all black who stormed into a hotel room would live in a cave or something. Or under a bridge. But this apartment is actually really nice, and comforting. The pictures everywhere help.

But suddenly, I pause. I frown, and I look closer at what I’m looking at. Without thinking, I slide off the bed. Oren doesn’t stop me. I brush past him towards a wall covered in photographs. As I get closer, my core wrenches into a knot. My face pales.

The whole wall is pictures of me.

I turn, feeling my heart lurching in my chest. My lungs feel too heavy to breathe right. My eyes sweep the wall of pictures. I look at another wall, and it’s the same thing: pictures of me. Most of them are candid, shot from a distance through leaves or around a corner of a building.

I gasp, whirling and feeling dizzy. Fear grips me, and I stumble. It’s too much. It’s overwhelming, and I feel my head spinning again.

“What... what is this?” I croak.

“Kenzie, I—”

“What the *fuck* is this?!”

“Kenzie,” Oren growls. He stands from the bed and moves towards me. But I back away. My legs are wobbly, and I shake my head.

“Don’t you come near me!”

“Someone had to protect you, Kenzie,” he growls.

“I can protect myself!”

“No, you can’t,” Oren snarls. His eyes are so intense, holding mine captivated. “You don’t know how dark the world is out there. It’s full of wolves and people who’d want to hurt you.”

“Or turn their apartments into shrines of me?!” I yell back. “Yeah, I think I’m fine without your help, Oren!”

“And how do you think tonight might have played out?!” he snaps.

I stare back at him. “Until you came in and stabbed Gordon in the neck with whatever you injected him with? Fine!”

“GHB,” he growls. “That’s what was in that.”

“Yeah I hear you’re a real expert,” I sneer. I back away from him. He doesn’t follow. But it’s not like there’s very far for me to go.

“Whatever he told you is bullshit,” Oren grunts. “I hope you know that.”

“Oh, I’ll just take your word on that should I?”

He scowls. “The syringe was his, Kenzie. That was his and it was meant for you.”

I tremble and hug myself tightly. My eyes scan the apartment. Wall after wall, it’s all pictures of me.

“So, what. You’re like obsessed with me or something?”

“Yes.” Oren says it without hesitation and without any apologies.

“Do you have like a sex doll of me with locks of my hair for some creepy shit like that?!”

“Not anymore.” I stare at him in blank horror. But he grins. “I’m joking. That was a joke.”

I turn slowly. My eyes scan the walls, drinking it all in. There’s more than pictures, too. There’s an article from my undergraduate college paper, about my being Valedictorian. There are calendars, and I can see they’re all about my schedule. It’s even marked where I’ll be each hour of each day.

My head swims again. I can feel myself losing control.

“I’d like to leave now,” I say quietly. I turn to look at him. Oren stares back at me. His cool gray eyes seem to captivate me. But he shakes his head.

“You can’t.”

Anger rises inside of me, taking over the fear. “Yeah? Watch me,” I hiss.

The apartment is almost exactly like mine. I turn, and sure enough, there’s the door in the same place. I march towards it. But suddenly, his powerful hands grab me. I yell and turn violently. My hand whips across his face, slapping him hard. I gasp in horror. But Oren just smiles a thin smile. He grabs both of my wrists tightly. Those eyes hold me just as firmly.

“You *can’t* leave, Kenzie,” he growls.

“I can’t or you won’t let me?”

“It’s not safe for you out there.”

I laugh coldly. My eyes move purposefully around the room at the collages of photographs, maps, and calendars, all about me. “I don’t think it’s safe for me in *here*.”

“Kenzie...”

“Let go of me!”

I shove him back and whirl. I get to the door, when he grabs me again. This time, he spins me fast. I gasp as he pushes me back, pinning me to the door. One big hand has both my wrists pinned above my head. The other is firmly on my hip. He leans close, looming over me. His eyes pierce mine, and I tremble. My pulse races. Adrenaline floods my system, taking my breath away.

“You asked if I meant you can’t or I won’t let you,” he growls.

I jut my chin out defiantly. “And?”

“It’s the second,” he hisses.

Suddenly, it just clicks. The combination of the adrenaline, and the rush. It’s the sound of his voice, and those eyes that have haunted my dreams for years. It all rushes over me like a vortex. And it triggers the fantasies I’ve lived about this man for years. They hit me in a rush; a heat that blooms through my very core.

“That night...” I whisper. “Did you... I mean.”

“Ask,” he growls.

I swallow. “Did you drug me?”

His face winces, like I’ve struck him.

“Gordon thinks—”

“No, Kenzie,” he hisses thinly. “No.”

“But you were there.”

“I was.”

I worry my lip. “You stopped them, didn’t you?”

Oren nods. His silvery-gray eyes shimmer. “Yes.”

I have no memory of that night. All I have is two men telling me two different things. One is rich, powerful, and open. He tells me this man in front of me is the villain of this story. The “villain” standing in front of me is dressed in all black. He looks rough and dangerous, and he literally lives in what might be called a shrine to me.

It could be that I’ve hit my head harder than I think. But there’s a voice I can’t ignore inside my head. And it tells me that Oren isn’t the villain here. It tells me to believe him. For reasons I’m not sure I understand, I decide to listen to that voice.

“And Ken?” I whisper. “Did you...”

“It was an accident,” he growls. “But I regret nothing.”

“You... you told me it was going to be okay.”

Oren nods. His eyes sweep across my face. His hands tighten on my wrists and my hips. His body surges, as if he’s barely keeping his composure.

“I didn’t make any of it up, did I?” I whisper.

He doesn’t say a word.

“All these years... the reason I’ve sometimes felt eyes on me or felt like someone was with me. Whenever it felt like someone was watching me and protecting me? It’s all been because...”

Oren growls.

“Because it’s been you, hasn’t it?”

“Yes,” he hisses.

“Why?”

Oren’s jaw grinds. He’s still staring into my very soul. He’s still trembling like he’s barely controlling himself.

“Why, Oren?”

“Kenzie...”

“No, *why?!*” I scream. It feels like there are walls crumbling down inside of me. It feels like I’m breaking free of the very past that’s kept me running in place for years.

“*Kenzie,*” Oren growls deeply.

“No, tell me fucking *why*, Oren!”

“Because I’ve loved you from the fucking second I laid eyes on you!” he roars.

I gasp when his grip tightens almost painfully on me. His hard, muscled body presses against me tightly, utterly pinning me to the door.

“Because you’ve been mine and mine alone since that night.”

He lowers his mouth to mine. His lips feel like fire when they kiss mine. After that, I’m lost.

OREN

TIME HAS no meaning when I kiss her. It's as if everything else gets the pause button pushed on it. But then suddenly, she pulls back. I open my eyes just in time to see hers narrowing. Her hand strikes hard across my cheek, slapping the absolute shit out of me.

Fucking hell. I see stars, and I growl. I pull back, blinking.

“You can't just kiss people!” Kenzie hisses. She sounds furious. But I can read her like a book. I've spent my entire adult life studying her like a doctoral thesis. She's trying so hard to look and sound incensed. But she's not. Scared? Maybe. Confused? A little. Turned on? Definitely.

“Don't you know how this works?” she mutters.

Not really at all, actually. But I know she doesn't really either. Kenzie's never been in this position with a man before. I know that, because I've literally made it my life's work to make sure she hasn't. I know I just stole the first kiss. But it was always mine to steal. Her lips were mine to possess. All of her has always been mine to steal.

“You've really been watching me this entire time? All these years?”

“Yes.” I won't lie to her. I won't fudge the truth either.

“Why now?” Kenzie says tensely. Her eyes search mine.
“Why reveal yourself now?”

“Gordon,” I hiss. “He’s been using his money and influence to dig into the past.”

“Into you killing his brother, you mean.”

I grit my teeth. Kenzie looks down.

“Sorry, that wasn’t fair.”

“It’s fairly accurate.”

She trembles under my hands. I guessed when I saw her go into the Drake Hotel that Gordon would tell her it was me. Again, I could claim it wasn’t me. But I won’t lie to her.

“There was a burglar that night...”

I don’t say anything. But my silence says volumes. Her face turns dark. Her lips purse tightly.

“There wasn’t, was there?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“So my dad fucking lied to me, is that what you’re saying?”

“Your father protected you,” I grunt.

“Me, or his campaign?” she says bitterly.

My eyes find hers. “Kenzie, your dad is an amazing man.”

“And is that why he lied to me about that night?” Her voice is bitter. I don’t blame her. But she needs to know why she’s been lied to.

“He wanted to protect you,” I growl. “And me, actually.”

“Yeah, and himself.”

“No,” I grunt and shake my head. “No, I brought that down on his house. There was no way I was letting him wreck his career over it.”

“Oren...” she looks up at me. God, she’s so beautiful. Her blonde hair frames her pretty blue eyes. And her plump lips are still swollen from my kiss. Her first. Mine too.

“What happened that night?”

“Kenzie—”

“Just tell me! Please! Oren, I just want to know what fucking happened, okay?”

I take a deep breath. I vowed a long time ago to keep her safe. I’ve devoted my life since that night to keeping her away from darkness and pain. I know I’ve caused some along the way. I know I’ve been selfish. But it was the only path for me. The only path I’ve ever had was the one that leads me back to her, one way or another.

“You were drugged when I forced my way into the office. You were out cold.”

She pales, and she trembles.

“Did my dad fly you to Chicago? For your dad’s funeral?”

I nod. “Yes. He invited me to your get-together that night, though he didn’t know what it would become, obviously. I was looking for you, and I found you in that office with Ken and this other asshole.”

“Justin Lehman.”

I nod. I know who he is. At some point or another, I’d planned on destroying him for his part in what almost happened. But he’s destroyed his life enough all on his own. He was a drugged-up asshole back then. Now, he’s just a lost cause. I

know his type. He'll be in rehab four more times before he ODs on something or other. It's a given at this point. I don't need to seek vengeance on him. He's found his own.

Kenzie frowns. "I... I always heard there were three of them. No one at the party could or would identify them all. But lots of people saw three guys pull me into that office."

The hairs on the back of my neck stand up. This is news to me. But I don't want to scare her. Ken is dead. Justin is slowly killing himself. The idea that there's a third fucker out there who wanted to hurt her running free makes my blood boil. But I hide it away. If there is a third one, I'll find him, whoever he is. And he'll pay dearly.

"And you called 911?" I nod. Kenzie frowns and looks away. "I don't understand why all the lies?"

"Because accident or not, I was responsible for Ken Traphagen's death." Kenzie pales. But I can't hide this from her. She needs to know. "He came at me. I flipped him, and he landed wrong against the side of your father's desk. Snapped his neck."

It was quick for Ken. He deserved a lot more suffering.

"So in thanks, my dad made up a story about you stealing his money in fucking Colorado?" she seethes. "He wrecked your life as a thank you for helping me!? How the hell is that fair?!"

My head shakes slowly. "No. He didn't wreck my life. This was my choice, Kenzie. I was not going to let my actions destroy his career. Or your life. We told the story that needed to be told."

"And since then?" She spits. "What have you been doing? Just watching me?"

"Yes."

She blushes at my instant answer. “That isn’t...”

“What.”

“That isn’t healthy,” she says softly.

“I feel very healthy.”

“But to obsess over... sorry, that sounds vain.”

“It sounds accurate.” She blushes shyly. “Kenzie, some people lose themselves in celebrity gossip, or alcohol, or chemicals. I lose myself in *you*,” I growl.

“I’m your addiction?” She smirks.

“Yes.”

“Your drug, huh?”

“I’ve tried drugs. You’re better.”

Her blush grows deeper. “Okay but what do you do for work? I don’t think spying on me pays very well.”

“The benefits are nice.”

She smiles shyly.

“I do commodities options trading online.”

Kenzie looks surprised. “Wait, really?”

I nod.

“And you live here in your little shrine to me?”

“Yes.” Again, I see no reason to sugar coat it.

Kenzie slowly looks around the room. Her eyes drink in the photos and calendars and other notes that detail her entire life.

“I’m guessing you don’t date much?”

She’s being sarcastic. But I answer anyways.

“No. There are no other girls.” Her eyes pull back to mine, and I hold them fiercely with my gaze. “There never have been, Kenzie.”

Her cheeks redden, and she smiles. “Yeah, I... I don’t do so well with guys.”

I know. But I say nothing. Everything I’ve done, I’ve done to protect her. But even I’m aware that some of the things I’ve done go well past that. I know I’ve crossed major lines. I’ve been selfish with her.

I apologize for none of it.

My eyes drag across her face. My muscles clench. My desire swells raw inside. I need to keep busy or do something. Or else I’m not sure how I’ll stop myself from shredding her clothes off and tasting every goddamn inch of her skin.

“Sit down,” I grunt. “I’ll make us some dinner. Cavatelli with hot sausage sound good?”

She smiles. “Yeah. That’s actually my fav...” Her smile fades. She glares at me. “But of course, you know that.”

“Yeah, I do.”

“Because all you do is spy on me?”

“Everything I do is for you,” I growl.

She trembles. Her eyes narrow, like she’s trying to read the inside of my mind. “Is this supposed to be wooing me?”

“No. It’s just the truth.”

“Trying to win me over?” she asks sarcastically. “Trying to make me yours or something?”

“I don’t have to make you mine,” I growl.

I'm losing control. I need to keep my hands busy. I need to find something else to do besides stare into her. But this is the first conversation we've ever had. This is the first time I've been with her, for real, face-to-face. And it's all too much. It's making me realize how fucking weak I am with her. I thought I could control myself around her. I thought I could keep it all in check when I brought her here.

I was wrong.

"No?"

"No," I hiss. My self-control quakes and buckles. I storm over to her, and I grab her into my arms. Kenzie gasps, and I groan. I'm touching her. She's in my fucking hands, exactly where she's always belonged.

"Because you already are mine," I snarl. I might be scaring her. But I can't help myself anymore. Being this close to her is wrecking the control I've kept for years. Touching her with my bare hands is destroying my resolve. But it's those lips that are the finishing stroke. Inches away from her mouth, I can look at them and know what they taste like now. And that's my undoing.

"I *belong* to you?" she hisses back. But she's not pulling away. And hell, she isn't slapping me.

"That first kiss was mine, Kenzie," I growl.

"Is that what you think?" she snaps.

"It's what I know."

She trembles. Her eyes grow wider, and her face turns pink. She knows I'm right. Even if she's never known it before, she knows now.

“So what else is yours to take?” She tries to play it off sarcastically. But I hear the real, forbidden curiosity in her voice.

“Everything,” I growl thickly. She gasps quietly. “Everything, Kenzie,” I groan.

I lean into her lips, and I kiss her deeply. I kiss her with everything I’ve ever had for her, bottled up inside for years. It pours out like a tsunami, sweeping us both up in the current and washing us both away.

KENZIE

WHEN HE KISSED me for the first time, it was like my whole world getting turned upside down. It was like getting hit by a truck. But I didn't realize how much I was craving a second one until the second one comes.

I moan against his lips. I gasp at the intensity of the kiss; the crushing bruising heat of his mouth on mine.

Oren whirls me. His lips never pull away as he pushes me backwards until my ass comes up against a table. His strong hands grip my waist tight, squeezing my ribs enough to thrill me. He lifts me up and slides my ass onto the table.

Reason shakes me. I go to pull my mouth from his, and to push him away. But when he doesn't let go, I grip him tighter. I kiss him back harder. It's like a fight I want to lose.

Eventually, we pull away to gasp for air. His eyes are full of heat as they bore into mine fiercely. His lips pull back in an animal snarl. I tremble, half from fear, half from excitement.

“You...”

“What,” he growls. “I can't just kiss people? Is that what you were going to say again?”

I swallow, trembling. “I could scream,” I whisper.

“Will you?”

“I haven’t decided yet.”

“Well when you figure it out,” he growls. He leans close. I whimper when I feel the heat of his body pressing into me. His lips brush over mine. “You go ahead and let me know.”

His lips press to mine again, tightly. I moan and willingly open my mouth to him. The kiss sends the floor spinning away from me. His hands slide over me, like he’s memorizing my body. Like I’m his. And maybe I am. Maybe I always have been. And maybe, that excites me more than it should.

He groans into my lips. His body slides between my legs, and I realize I’m opening them for him. But I can’t, and I don’t want to stop this. He slips between my legs. I can feel how hard he is, pressing against my center. I tremble, moaning into his lips.

This is new to me. I’m twenty-freaking-four years old, and I’ve never made out with a guy like this. Or at all. But I’m thrilled by it, and I want more. I know I might be insane. Oren might be magnetically dark and gorgeous. But he also might be a psychopath. I mean there are photo collages of me on the goddamn walls. That’s not a crush, that’s insanity.

So why can’t I stop kissing him?

Oren’s hands tighten their grip on me. He suddenly picks me up, and I gasp. I moan into his lips, and my legs wrap tight around his waist. He strides across the apartment, carrying me to wherever he wants. I know I could probably scream. I could cry for help, and pray the neighbors hear me before he hurts me. But I know he won’t. I know in some part of my very soul that he’s not going to hurt me. Just like I know I’m not going to scream. Because I want this too much for it to stop.

I gasp when Oren throws me away from him. But when I land across the bed, I tremble. Heat blooms in my core, and my panties grow wet. Oren's face is a mask of lust and heat. He moves to the edge of the bed, looming over me. My heart races. But I'm not scared anymore. I just want him.

Oren trembles visibly. His hands clench as tight as his jaw is. His broad shoulders flex. He moves slowly onto the bed, and I whimper. His hands slide up my thighs, over my yoga pants. He grips my hips and suddenly flips me, face down. I moan when I feel him pull me back, my ass up in the air.

His hands slide over me. His masculine growl fills my ears. His fingers slip under the waist of my yoga pants. They tease over my panties, and I moan.

"I-I've never done this," I pant. "But I have a feeling you know that, don't you?"

He nods. "Yes. But neither have I."

I frown in confusion. I turn to look at him over my shoulder.

"There's never been another girl, Kenzie," he growls. His eyes are fierce but gentle. "It's always only been you."

"You... you never..."

"No."

He leans over me, enveloping me. His lips find mine, and he kisses me. I moan deeply. I feel so claimed by him, with him pinning me to the bed like this. I can feel the thickness in his jeans throbbing so hard against my ass. It makes me tremble. It makes me want him, desperately.

He pulls back. He pushes my hair away from my neck and kisses me there. It's so intimate feeling, and it makes me whimper for more. He kisses down my back, over my shirt.

When he gets to the small of my back, his fingers slide under my yoga pants again. They slip under the waist of my panties, too. He grips them both tight, and he pulls.

I moan when Oren pulls my pants and my panties down over my ass. I whimper when I feel my panties peel away from my dripping wet pussy. He slides both down to my knees, and I blush deeply. I'm on my knees, with my ass shamelessly up in the air. And a man's eyes on me for the very first time.

Not just any man, either. Something deep inside knows he's always been the only man. My mysterious protector. My shadowy guardian. Oren.

My pulse races. My body trembles. His hands slide over me, and I feel his breath on the back of my thighs. I can feel his gaze over my bare pussy. I whimper quietly, desperate for more.

"Christ, Kenzie," Oren hisses.

"What?"

"You're fucking perfect," he growls. His breath teases over me. But then I feel his tongue for the first time. I gasp when he drags it over my pussy. He licks me slowly, making me writhe in pleasure. His tongue opens me up, parting my folds. He drags it up and down my lips, from my opening down to my throbbing clit. He sucks at my button, making me squeal shamelessly.

I'm moving too fast. My breathing is too rushed. My heart is racing. Oren tongues my pussy slow and teasingly, and it's too much. I shudder, and I bite down on the sheets. Suddenly, I'm screaming into them, and I start to come, hard.

His mouth has been on me for less than three minutes. But I'm coming harder than I've ever come in my life.

It's a blur. I'm still gasping for air when he turns me over. Oren kisses my neck. His teeth drag over my skin as he peels the rest of my clothes away. I reach for him. I know this is crazy. I know it's rushed. But at the same time, it's been six years in the making.

I've fantasized about him a million times. My mysterious protector has made me come more times than I could ever remember. But now he has a name, and more than just eyes. The made-up physique I gave him in my fantasies doesn't hold a candle to the real him.

Oren sits up and peels his shirt off. I purr softly as I drink him in. Goddamn, it's like he's carved out of stone. Hard, lean, chiseled muscles draw my eyes all over him. Tattoo ink swirling down his arms and across his chest makes me tremble. His grooved abs pull my eyes down to where they point into his jeans.

He leans over to kiss me again. Then he's up and undoing his belt. I watch, panting. I'm utterly naked in front of him. But I'm not hiding myself like I'd have imagined I would. It's like he's so familiar from my dreams and fantasies that this is all natural.

Oren pulls his jeans open. His thumbs slide into his waist, and he pushes them down. I stare, my face hot and red, at the thick bulge in his boxers. In one motion, he pushes them down, and I gasp loudly. His cock springs out so thick and big. My jaw drops as I stare at him. Even without past experiences to compare it to, I know what I'm looking at is enormous.

I swallow. My gaze slides up his body to his eyes, where they hold fast. Oren growls thickly and moves onto the bed. He's almost trembling, and his cock visibly throbs and twitches.

“I—I can’t wait another minute,” he groans. His muscles clench, like he’s trying to stop himself. But he can’t. And I know in my very core that I don’t want him to stop himself.

“I can’t, Kenzie,” he groans. He moves over me. His knees spread my legs shamelessly open. His hand slides over my hip, and up my ribs. He squeezes, moving higher. His hand palms one of my tits, bringing a moan to my lips. His thumb brushes the nipple, and I gasp.

Oren’s other hand moves up my arm. He pushes it above my head, then brings the other one up. A growl rumbles in his throat as he pins my arms above my head. I moan eagerly. Half of me is scared. The other half is desperate for him to have me.

His grip tightens on my wrists, and I whimper. He’s taking control, and he’s going to take all of me. And I can’t wait for him to. I’ve wanted this for years, without even realizing it. Without knowing it, I’ve waited my whole adult life for him. Unconsciously, I’ve been saving myself for Oren Frey. And tonight, he’s going to take it all.

I look up into his eyes. They burn right back at me, full of lust and desire. But they’re also tender and warm. I know, just by looking into his eyes, that I could stop him. If I said stop, I know he would. I think he would, at least. But I’m not saying it. I don’t want him to stop.

I want him to have me, and I want this. Everything about this feels right. The years of never seeming to make it happen? They all seem worth it now.

My brow furrows. I rake my eyes over this perfect man hovering above me—utterly gorgeous, dark, and built. With those eyes, and these muscles? Not to mention... I blush and

glance at his cock hovering above my pussy. Not to mention that?

“How?” I blurt.

“How what?”

“You’ve really never...there’s never been other girls?”

Oren’s jaw tightens. “There’s never been anyone for me but you. Not ever.”

“Not... not ever?”

“No,” he groans.

“Not since six years ago?”

“Or before,” he growls. He leans so close that his lips physically brush against my ear. “My cock is for your little pussy and your pussy only, Kenzie.”

I blush, and I moan. “You waited...”

“I did.” He reaches down, and his hand wraps around his thickness. I watch, breathing fast as he strokes himself. Something clearish-white beads at his head and drips onto my tummy. It’s warm, and sticky. Oren pushes the head of his cock lower. He brushes it over my clit, and I gasp sharply.

“Oh my God...” I whimper.

“I’ve waited my whole life for this,” he groans. “To part these perfect lips with my cock.”

He does exactly that. He slides his head lower, parting my lips around it. It feels like I’m floating. This feels like a dream. But when I feel the electricity between us, I know it’s real. I feel his cock stroking my clit for real, not in a dream, and I know I’m wide awake.

“I’ve waited so long to push inside this pretty pussy,” Oren growls deeply. He looks up into my eyes. I nod, without any hesitation. Oren’s eyes hold mine, and he pushes. His thick head sinks inside, and I gasp. My hands are still pinned above my head, but they claw at the sheets.

Oren grips me tightly. He pushes again, and I gasp. His big head pushes into me, opening me up. I’m expecting pain, but there’s none. All I feel is pure pleasure and heat. I feel him sliding into me for the very first time, and it feels perfect. It feels like we were made for this; like I was made for him, and he was made for me.

He groans, pushing slowly. More of his thickness sinks into my pussy. I moan, and my legs wrap around his waist on their own. He leans down. His lips brush mine, teasing me; making me ache for him. I lean up and capture his mouth with mine. His lips are soft but firm, and he growls against the kiss.

Slowly, Oren pushes the rest of the way in. I gasp at the last thrust, feeling all of him inside of me. My God, he’s so big that I have no idea how he’s fitting. But he damn well is, and it’s the best feeling I’ve ever felt.

Oren kisses me slowly. He grinds his cock into me. Slowly, he slides out. But just when I think he’s going to slide out entirely, he thrusts back in. I cry out. My thighs tighten around his hips. He slides out again. But this time, he pushes into me harder, with a deep masculine grunt.

Pleasure overtakes me. I feel lost in him, wanting more of him. His hands pin mine fast to the bed. His hips roll, thrusting into me. He starts to move faster, and I urge him on. My hips rise to meet him, my legs draw him in deeper. I kiss him madly, never wanting this to stop.

“I’ve wanted you for so long, beautiful,” he growls into my lips.

“I wanted you too,” I gasp. “Even if I didn’t know you.”

“You’re mine,” he groans. He thrusts into me. His thick cock stretches me open, but it feels utterly perfect. He plunges into me, taking all of me; claiming me. His fingers slide into mine, still pinning my hands above my head. But I grip his hands tightly. My body undulates against him, my legs pull him into me harder, deeper.

“*Mine*,” Oren snarls. His muscles clench. His cock seems to throb and grow thicker inside of me. His steel-gray eyes sizzle into mine, full of an animal lust. The way he thrusts into me makes me ache for more. The way he growls “mine” is so possessive and hot that it makes me want to scream.

“Yours!” I gasp. He’s making me feel something I’ve never come close to feeling on my own. I know I’m going to come soon, and hard.

“Oren, I’m not…”

“You’re not on the pill,” he growls against my lips. “I know.” But he doesn’t slow. He doesn’t stop thrusting his thick cock into me, bare. And I don’t want him to, either.

“But I’m going to come inside of you, Kenzie,” he growls. His hips thrust harder, and I squeal in pleasure. “But I’m going to spill my cum deep inside, where it belongs. Fuck, Kenzie, you’re going to make me come.”

“I—I’m coming!” I cry out. I mash my lips to his. My eyes want to squeeze shut, but I don’t want them to. I want to look him in the eye when he makes me come. I try so hard. But when it hits me, they close tight as the orgasm wracks through me.

Oren groans. His fingers grip mine tight. He thrusts deep into me, and I feel his muscles clench. His cock pulses. I gasp when I feel his hot cum spilling into me. He holds himself there, both of us trembling. His hands slowly let go of mine. They slide down my arms and his arms wrap around me. Mine do the same to him. And I never want him to let me go.

OREN

THERE ARE a lot of things about Kenzie that I dreamed about for all of these years. Having her, of course. Easing my cock into her and feeling her come for me. I've dreamt of tasting her on my tongue and inhaling the scent of her. Or spilling my cum deep inside of her perfect pussy.

But I've also dreamt of this part more times than I can remember. The part that comes after, just like we are now. I'm in bed, and Kenzie is in my arms. It's exactly where she's always belonged.

I'm sitting up in the bed. Her back is against my chest, and my arms are around her. My lips leave small kisses up and down her neck. My hands wander over her, teasing her skin and cupping her tits. My nuzzling has turned to teasing, and we both know it. Hell, my cock hasn't gone down at all since we came together.

Yes, I want her again. But I'm also simply relishing this moment. There's no barrier between her and I now. I'm not imagining this or watching her on a screen or through a window. She's mine, for real.

I pull away from her neck. She's holding my arms around herself, like a blanket. But I can see her eyes moving over the walls. She's taking it all in, and I know it's a lot to take in.

“It’s a lot, I know.”

She smiles and turns her head. “Oh, no, it’s...”

I grin. “It’s a lot.”

Kenzie smiles back. “It’s different.”

“I won’t apologize for being obsessed with you.” I don’t mean for it to blurt out that way. But it does. I frown. “What I mean is...” I frown deeper. “No, that’s what I mean. I’m obsessed with you, Kenzie. I have been ever since... well, always.”

She looks up into my eyes. “I’ve thought about you all the time since that night, you know. Well, I didn’t know it was *you*. But I had a version of you in my head.”

“I’m guessing that version didn’t have all of this?” I nod at the walls—at the pictures of her covering my living space.

She blushes. “Maybe not.”

“Does this scare you?”

“No.”

I frown. “Do *I* scare you?”

Kenzie smiles. She shakes her head. “No, you don’t. Should I be scared?”

“Never with me,” I growl. I lean down and capture her mouth with mine. But suddenly, her phone rings from across the room. I took her purse with me when I pulled her out of Gordon’s hotel room.

“Oh, I think that’s me.” She slides from the bed. She goes to pull a blanket with her. But I yank it back with a grin. Kenzie turns and gives me a look. She’s blushing. But fuck is she cute wearing just those pink cheeks. I let my eyes wander her shamelessly while her phone rings.

“Give me that!” she giggles, tugging at the blanket.

I shake my head. “Nope. Your phone’s ringing.”

She glares at me. She’s trying to look mad. But she’s failing at it. “And I thought you were a gentleman.”

I laugh. “What in the hell would give you that impression?” Her phone rings again and again. I just grin and stare at her. “You’re going to miss your call.”

She rolls her eyes. Her cheeks burn hot. “Fine,” she purrs. She turns and skips across the room, stark naked. I watch her hungrily. I let my eyes wander every curve, and every inch of her skin. I watch the way her ass moves, and when she bends over for her purse, I groan. My cock thickens, and I cup it shamelessly.

“Hello?” Kenzie freezes across the room. I frown and go to stand. But she turns.

“It’s my dad,” she hisses with a hand covering the phone. “Um, one sec.” She walks quickly to my bathroom and steps inside, closing the door behind her. I slink from the bed and head over to my computer. I update some trades and skim a few stock-related articles. I check in with a few brokers, and then I take a glance at the security system at Kenzie’s place.

No one’s tried to get in. No one’s even rung her doorbell. That mean’s Gordon’s smart enough to slink the fuck away. I’m at least ninety percent sure the syringe Gordon had ready in that hotel room was GHB. If I’m right, it knocked him out and gave him a motherfucker of a headache when he woke up. If I’m wrong and whatever was in there killed him? Good fucking riddance.

The bathroom door opens. I turn to see Kenzie stepping out, wrapped in a bath towel.

“Everything okay?”

She blinks rapidly. She looks at me furtively but looks away quickly. “Yep, great,” she answers. She walks quickly to the bed and starts picking up her clothes.

I frown. “What’s up?”

“Nothing,” Kenzie says quickly. “I just need to go outside and call my dad back.”

My frown deepens. “You can stay here and talk to him.”

“It’s sort of private and sensitive.”

I shrug. “Okay, then I’ll leave, and you can stay here...”

“It’s fine, Oren,” Kenzie snaps. She dresses quickly, yanking on her clothes. I’m well aware that she’s avoiding looking at me. But I try not to dwell on it. It very well could be that her dad has something important to talk to her about. And I won’t be that guy hovering over her. Though, I smile at the irony in thinking that.

“I’m just stepping out for this call, okay?”

I nod. “If you need anything...”

“Thanks.”

She opens my front door, walks out, and shuts it behind her. I frown, staring at the door. I want to go to it and follow her out. I want to attach myself to her... handcuff my wrist to hers and never leave her damn side.

But I take a breath. I need to tone it down. I know this is just the adrenaline of having finally made her mine. I’ve spent years obsessing over her and craving her. Now, I have her. I’ve tasted her skin and felt her coming for me. I’ve taken her all for myself. I’ve made it. I can rest and calm down.

So, why can't I?

I go back to my computer and scan some more of my trades. But I'm antsy. I glare at the clock, then at the door. I get up and pace. My pacing takes me closer and closer to the door, but I resist putting an ear to it. Or opening it. But finally, my patience runs out.

I pull on some jeans and a t-shirt. I go to the door and look through the keyhole. My heart stops. Kenzie isn't out in the hallway. I yank the door wide open and dash out. My eyes hurt at the speed at which I look both ways. But she's not there either. I run for the stairs and rush down them. She's not in the entryway either. I slam the door to the building open and stumble outside. But she's not there, either.

She's not down the street. She's not around the corner. She's just fucking gone.

KENZIE

“DON’T SAY ANYTHING, and please don’t hang up.”

I freeze. My blood chills when I realize who the unknown number on my phone is, based on his voice. It’s Gordon Traphagen.

“Mackenzie, wait. Before you yell for him, before you hang up. Please, just listen to me. You’re in danger. You have to trust me on this. Are you able to talk freely right now?”

I pause. I want to hang up. I want to throw my phone at the wall. But something makes me hesitate.

“If you can’t speak right now because he’s there, clear your throat.” I do. Gordon growls. “Are you at his place? If you are, get somewhere where you can talk. Tell him it’s your father, Mackenzie.”

I want to scream at Gordon. I want to run back into bed with Oren. But there’s a feeling I can’t ignore. It’s like a small voice in my head that won’t let me do those things. I turn to look at Oren. He’s lying in bed still, looking gorgeous. He looks at me with those smoky gray eyes, and it makes me warm inside. But something in what Gordon is saying is making me anxious. And it makes me blurt it out.

“It’s my dad,” I lie. “One sec.” I turn and walk quickly to his bathroom. I shut the door and sit on the closed toilet seat. “What,” I hiss at Gordon. “You have ten seconds to tell me what the hell you mean.”

“He’s not what you think, Mackenzie. He’s a psychopath, and he’s a master at making you think what he wants.”

“Six more seconds,” I mutter. “And then I’m calling the cops about what you tried to fucking pull in your hotel room.”

“What I tried to pull?”

I roll my eyes furiously. “The needle, Gordon?” I hiss.

“The needle? Kenzie, that was his!”

“I’m hanging up to call the police now.”

“Where are you at his place? The bathroom, I’m guessing? It’s the only private room.”

I worry my lip. “I am.”

“Go look under the sink.”

“Gordon...”

“Just look, okay?”

I kneel down and open the hutch under the bathroom sink. My heart instantly grows cold. I’m staring at a little plastic bin with four sealed medical syringes, and a vial of something clear. I pick it up with trembling fingers. But I think I already know what it is.

Gamma-hydroxybutyrate, the label says. My skin crawls. GHB. Exactly the same drug I was given at that party years ago. It’s the same drug that creeps spike girls’ drinks with when they’re trying to hurt them. And it’s under Oren’s bathroom sink.

“Still think I’m making this all up?” Gordon says quietly. “You think he’s your savior. But he’s not. He’s your stalker, Mackenzie. He’s a master manipulator. It’s all lies... all of it, whatever he told you. This isn’t some fantasy. He’s psychotic.”

I shiver, suddenly cold. I grab a bath-towel from the shelf above the toilet and wrap myself in it. “And why should I take your word, Gordon?”

“Don’t,” he fires back. “Take my proof. I’ve got a shitload of it, Mackenzie. His background, his police records...”

I tremble. “His what?”

“Look, can we meet? I can show you everything.”

I pause. “I... I don’t think that’s a good idea.”

“I do,” Gordon grunts. “You’re not safe if you’re with him. Mackenzie, the attacker from the other night? When you were jogging?”

I frown. “How do you know about that?”

“I have powerful friends, Mackenzie. It was a setup, orchestrated by Oren.”

“Oh please, how the hell...”

“The attacker magically disappears when Oren takes a swing at him? You really believe that?”

“He stabbed him, actually.”

Gordon sighs. “But Oren just happened to be right there to save you? You don’t think that’s at all too convenient to be real?”

I take a beat. I look at the door between Oren and I, and I pull the towel tight.

“He’s manipulating you, Mackenzie. Because he’s obsessed with you. Please come meet me, and I can help you stop all of this.”

“THANKS FOR COMING.”

“Don’t thank me, just tell me,” I say coldly. I feel like shit even being here. I hate that I’m even entertaining Gordon on any of this. I hate that I lied to Oren’s face. And I mostly hate that Gordon put enough doubt in me for me to be scared of Oren. One minute, I was in his arms after giving him everything. The next, I was lying and slinking out the door in fear.

I don’t want to believe Gordon. But there’s too much stacked up. Too much of what he’s saying is making sense.

“You wanted proof?”

“I do,” I mutter.

Gordon steps into the hotel room and ushers me inside. “I’ve got all the proof you could want, Mackenzie.” When I hesitate in the doorway, Gordon shrugs. “I’ve already told you, I’m not the bad guy here. He is. You saw the shit under his sink.”

I take a breath and nod. “Fine.” I step into Gordon’s hotel room once again, and I shut the door behind me.

“So explain to me how Oren fakes stabbing someone to stop a fake mugging?”

Gordon leans against the couch. “Do you really think he stabbed that guy in the ribs?”

“I saw him.”

He shrugs. “You saw him, in the dark, after you’d been knocked to the ground. What did you really see?”

“I saw...” I frown.

“A guy tackled you but didn’t really hurt you. Then Oren comes out of nowhere, instantly. He fends the man off, spills some blood he’s got in a vial up his sleeve, and saves the day. The man runs off, Oren’s the hero.”

“Gordon, this sounds insane.”

“I promised you proof.” He gestures to a stack of files on the coffee table. “It’s all here. Drugs, assault, battery. He did fucking time, Mackenzie.”

My head swims. None of this feels real. But maybe it’s that I don’t want any of it to be real. I walk over and pick up one of the files. My eyes skim it. I gasp quietly, and my skin crawls. It’s an arrest record for Oren Frey, from when he was fifteen.

“I can paraphrase,” Gordon mutters. “Cocaine, possession with intent to sell. Oxy, possession with intent to sell. Assault with a deadly weapon. Assaulting an officer. Resisting arrest. Operating a vehicle without a license. Driving under the influence.”

My heart sinks. My stomach knots, and I want to throw up. Gordon isn’t making any of it up, either. My eyes scan the pages, reading everything.

“How...”

“Three years in juvenile detention for that shit. And your dad goes and invites him into your house,” Gordon sneers. “Then he tries to cover up what happened, and I have no damn idea why.” His face is red with anger. His shoulders heave.

“Here, this one is a fun read.”

He tosses me another file. Inside, I can see it's a psychiatric evaluation of Oren from when he was detained.

"Antisocial behavior. Prone to violence. Psychotic tendencies," Gordon rattles off. "Seems just like the hero type to save you from assaults, huh?" He sneers sarcastically. "Oh, but you haven't even gotten to the good stuff. Here."

He hands me a thick file folder. He frowns. "I'm sorry you have to read this. For what it's worth."

I nod. I feel numb all over. I sit on the couch and open the file folder. Instantly, my stomach churns in nausea. The whole thing is filled with pictures and dossiers of men I recognize from my past. More specifically, they're all men who I either went on a date with, or who at least asked me out before flaking on me."

"What the hell is this?" I whisper.

"This," Gordon mutters. "Is Oren at work. Here, you might recognize this guy. Aaron Golding. Remember him?"

I nod. Aaron and I were almost a thing, years ago. We knew each other through some mutual friends and went on one date. He was a gentleman, and really sweet. We even texted and called a bunch after. But then he flaked and went total radio silence. Just like all of them.

"Aaron found himself in some real hot water after he made the mistake of taking you out."

I frown. "What?"

"It was discovered that he'd taken \$100,000 from a client's account that he was working on. He put it back the next day. He even did a pretty good job of covering his tracks. But the firm had a forensic computer whiz monitoring transactions, and caught it. Poor Aaron found himself in some pretty deep

shit after that. Took him six months and his own money to prove it was someone else. Turns out, he was right. It was some hacker in Russia who they never caught. Pretty weird that someone would just target him like that, huh?”

I blink quickly. I turn back to look at Aaron’s file.

“And right before that all goes down, Aaron just stops calling and texting. Right out of the blue.” Gordon’s face is grim. “Pretty strange, huh?”

“Gordon, what does this have to do with Oren...”

“I bet you recognize this guy, too.” Gordon points to the next file. I open it and stare in disbelief. “Sean Jackson. Remember him? Freshman year at college?”

I nod, frowning. “Yeah. We were flirting and went on a date. Then someone slid photos under my dorm door of him in bed with another girl.”

I’d come close to really taking things deep with Sean. We hit it off well and liked the same things. He was also a virgin too, so there was no weirdness there. He told me he’d go slow and that he wanted it to be with me. We were moving fast, but it was college. But then those pictures showed up, and it really threw me. He stopped calling me, too, which sealed the deal.

“Here,” Gordon passes me a legal letter. “This is a sworn statement, under oath, by a guy named Lee Kim. He went to college with you. A real nerdy computer type. He’s a graphic designer now. A real whiz with photoshop.” Gordon looks at me pointedly. “This statement says a guy who looks exactly like Oren gave him three-hundred bucks to photoshop Sean’s face onto the guy’s face in those photos you saw. They weren’t of Sean and another girl. I’m guessing Oren paid them too. Or

he was just was a creep and filmed them through the blinds or something.”

I want to throw up. I want to disbelieve all of this. But it’s too much.

“Read this.”

“No,” I whisper. “No more.”

Gordon’s right. Oren might actually be a psychopath. He’s deranged, if all of this is true. And looking at his criminal history? I tremble, feeling nauseas. I just slept with him, too.

I just lost my virginity to my own psychotic stalker.

“Mackenzie, you have to,” Gordon says gently. “I’m sorry, but I need you to see all of this. Here. This man you didn’t date.”

He passes me a photo of an older, balding man with a mustache. I frown, trying to place him.

“He was your landlord, a few years ago.”

I start. “Oh my God, yeah. He jumped off the roof.” I look up at Gordon. His face is hard, and it makes me sick.

“Please no...”

“Oren,” he says gently. “Mr. Skadinsky here had a little crush on you, Mackenzie. Maybe a little gross, considering how old he is. But it was too much for Oren. Jeff Skandinsky’s obituary says suicide. But his case with the police is listed as ongoing.”

I drop the files. I fall back into the couch, feeling horrified.

“I’m so sorry, Mackenzie.” Gordon sighs and kneels in front of me. “I really didn’t want to be the one to tell you this. But it was Oren that night, at the party. My brother, I— ” Gordon closes his eyes. He shakes his head sadly. “I can’t say for sure. I know Ken was easily manipulated and had some asshole

tendencies. But I knew my brother, Mackenzie.” He waves at the files on Oren. “And he wasn’t anything like this.”

“Do you really think...”

“I know, Mackenzie,” Gordon sighs. “Oren just wanted to screw you...” his eyes move to my neck. My hand darts up instantly. I blush when I realize I can feel a bruise there. It’s a hickey, from Oren’s lips. Earlier, it felt sinfully hot. Now, it just feels like the mark of a horrible sin or a crime.

“Well, I guess he finally succeeded,” Gordon growls.

I blush vividly. “No, it’s not...”

“He’s a monster, Mackenzie,” he grunts. “You need to stay away from him. You need to run from him.”

Gordon stands. I feel utterly defeated. I sit back on the couch, trying to keep myself from falling apart. “Thank you for telling me this,” I whisper. But my words feel muffled.

“I just want to make sure he doesn’t hurt anyone else. Or you, ever again.”

Gordon walks across the room to the kitchen area of the lavish suite. He reaches into the fridge and pulls out two beers. He opens them both and turns. “Here.”

“Oh, I don’t drink.”

He frowns. “Shit, I’m sorry. I knew that.”

“It’s okay,” I smile.

“You want a soda or something?”

I nod. “Yeah, sure.”

Gordon turns back to the fridge. I look back at the files, feeling horrified. I hear Gordon pop open the can. A second later, he’s standing in front of me with a glass of cola and ice.

“Thanks,” I smile weakly and take the glass.

“Are you okay?” Gordon frowns and sips his beer. “I know this is a lot to process, Mackenzie.”

I drink some of the soda. I nod. “I... yes. I think. I don’t know.”

“It might take some time,” Gordon growls. “The important thing is, don’t feel like you did anything. You’re not at fault here, Mackenzie. You’re a victim. One of many that this fucker has preyed on.”

I nod, drinking more of the soda. It’s taking everything I can muster to not dwell on what happened earlier. I can’t think that I’ve just slept with Oren. I can’t. I can’t begin to process giving my virginity to my fucking *stalker*.

“I know this is crazy.”

“Yeah, crazy,” I murmur. I take another sip of soda. I sit back on the couch. It’s been a lot, but it’s like seeing it all laid out is already making me feel calmer. Much calmer.

My heart suddenly clenches. I’m calm. I’m way, way too calm. In fact, I feel lightheaded. I blink rapidly. Fear grips me. I look up at Gordon in confusion, but the room starts to spin and fade.

“Gordon, why is the room...”

Gordon says nothing. He looks at me with a fearsome, dark look and sets his beer down. He keeps looking at me as he undoes his tie and starts to unbutton his shirt.

“Gordon,” I whisper. Fear cuts into me, and the room is still spinning. “Gordon, why is your shirt off?” I murmur sleepily.

“Because,” he smiles. “I’ve waited a long fucking time for this you little fucking tease.”

He shrugs his shirt off. As sleepy as I am, my eyes still slide to the big bandage over his ribs. It's exactly where I saw Oren stab a knife into my attacker the other night. My eyes drag slowly up to Gordon's face in horror.

"Oh God..."

"It was supposed to be me, you little slut," Gordon sneers. He loosens his belt. "But I'll take mine now. You have no idea how long I've wanted to fuck—"

The hotel room door breaks open with a splintering sound. I turn my head slowly. But it's just in time to see Oren barreling across the room. He slams into Gordon, body-checking him into the wall. My vision starts to fade. I start to fall. But Oren rushes for me. I can feel his arms catch me as I fall into blackness.

Six Years Ago:

“SO STAY HERE. For the funeral of course, but after as well. Take all the time you need. We’ve got the damn room.”

I nod, smiling a little. “Thank you, sir.”

Senator Shipley sighs heavily. He shakes his head sadly. “I’m so goddamn sorry, son.”

THE STAFF HAS SET me up in a guest room. Yes, there’s a staff, of five people, nonetheless. A guy at the front gate, a cook, two maids, and a butler. They’re all in the staff house off the main mansion now. Which is good, because hopefully, they can’t hear the noise.

I frown up at the ceiling. I reach for the pack of cigarettes and pull one free. I slip one between my lips, but I don’t light it. I know this is walking the edge of temptation. I know that’s dangerous, given my background. But this is how I keep myself sane. I know it sounds reckless as fuck, but it works for me. I mean I’m not going to stick cocaine under my nose and hope for the best. But the nicotine is just as dangerous for me.

And yet, I resist.

The music at Senator Shipley's daughter's party thunders downstairs. I frown again and toss the cigarette away. Who the fuck is this girl? I'm sure as nice as Duncan is, his daughter is just another rich trust fund brat. I met enough of them in the rehab that was part of my sentencing. The rich kids went home to house arrest after group though, of course. I went back to lockup at the juvenile detention center.

I pull on my boots and go back downstairs. Fuck, there's like two hundred people here. So much for a small gathering. I get looks left and right, but I don't give a shit. I know I stick out here. A mansion full of preppy pretty people with money. And I'm the brooding guy with the leather jacket and the tattoos.

"Hey, do you know Mackenzie?" The girl I walk up to looks scared that I'm even talking to her. "Mackenzie Shipley," I say loudly again over the music.

I want to find her to tell her to shut this shit down. Her dad's a good man. He flew me out, he's paying for the funeral, and he's putting me up here. He doesn't have to do any of that. I'm his mechanic's son, for fucks sake. He owes me nothing. But he's doing it anyways. And she disrespects his house like this?

"Mackenzie?" I yell.

"Freak," the girl hisses. She darts away from me. Her and her friends give me dirty looks and fade into the party.

"Okay, whatever," I mutter. I prowl through the party. A guy in a letterman jacket standing at a keg tries to give me a beer. But I shake my head. "Makenzie?"

"Kenzie Shipley?"

I nod and he grins.

“The ice queen?” He laughs. “Hiding, probably.”

I frown. “What? Why?”

“Look around you, bro!” He chuckles. “Word got out about her little party. I doubt she was expecting all this. That girl? Parties?” He laughs again. “Yeah, right. Little miss goody two-shoes probably went to go give out food to homeless bums tonight or some shit.”

I frown. That changes things slightly.

“Do you know where she is?”

“Nope.” He walks off, but someone taps my shoulder.

“What?” I growl when I turn. The guy smirks at me.

“Lookin’ for the ice queen?”

I frown at him. “What?”

“Kenzie,” he grins. “Man, how does a chick who looks like her manage to get all the way through school without losing her cherry? Crazy, huh?”

I roll my eyes. “Know where she is?”

“Oh, are you lookin’ for a turn?”

My body stiffens. “What did you say?”

He grins at me. “Dude, she’s down there,” he nods down a hallway. “Yeah, we all knew her from a few years ago, before her dad sent her to boarding school. “Man, she was such a fucking cock tease. But what goes around comes around, right?”

“What the fuck are you saying?” I snarl at him.

He doesn’t seem to understand how angry I am, and laughs.

“Relax, bro! You’ll get a turn! They just slipped her a drink

twenty minutes ago. She's probably *out* now. But dude, there's a line, okay—hey what the fuck!"

I slam him into a wall. Rage explodes inside of me. I turn and shove him into the keg. He falls over it, and I turn. I storm down the hall. There's a closed door with two guys grouped outside of it. I go for the knob, but one shoves me back.

"Whoa! Hey, there's a line, bro!"

"I need to get in there," I hiss.

Another guy laughs. "Yeah, me too." He grabs his crotch, and I snarl.

"I'm going inside."

"Dude," the first guy frowns. "Did we even go to school with you?"

"Nope."

I hit him in the face, hard. He staggers back, and the second guy comes at me. I dodge and shove him into the wall face-fist. The both of them instantly run off. I turn and push the door open.

It's an office, probably Duncan's. One guy with dark hair is standing in the middle of the room. Over by a couch, another blond guy is tugging at his belt, standing over a figure draped motionless on the sofa. I slam the door shut and lock it. The two of them gasp and whirl to glare at me.

"Bro, what the fuck!" The guy with his belt undone yells. "We got first—"

I walk up to him and hit him harder than anything I've ever hit in my life. The asshole goes down hard, instantly. The other dark-haired guy comes at me. But he's a rich pretty boy. I've been fighting every day for the last three years in juvenile.

He's also obviously on something, and I'm stone cold sober. I dodge his lame punch and hit him in the face. He staggers, and I use the momentum to send him crashing into the wall.

He falls to the ground, but I hear a grunt behind me. I turn to see the blond kid up and rushing me. He's got what looks like a trophy or an award in his hand. Whatever it is, it looks heavy as hell. But I duck and he misses me. My shoulder catches him in the chest, and I flip him over me. He slams head-first into the desk and crumples. I turn back to the couch and walk over to the motionless figure. Suddenly, I'm stunned.

I look down at the most beautiful, angelic girl I've ever seen. It's almost too much to look at her. It's like it hurts my heart somehow, just seeing her. Her blonde hair tumbles around her pretty face. Her plump lips glisten with gloss. Her cheeks are pink, and her chest rises slowly with her shallow breath. I lean down and sniff. I can't smell alcohol. She's not drunk. And I think I know what's going on here. These fucking animals slipped her GHB or something.

But right now, we're safe. In here, she's my sleeping beauty. I've never believed in fairytales. But in one second, I know I'm in love.

"Bro! Bro! Yo, Ken! Wake the fuck up, man!"

I turn. The dark-haired guy I slammed into the wall is kneeling over the blond guy who hit the desk—the guy who had his belt open standing above Kenzie. I look at the dark-haired guy's face, and then down at the kid on the ground. I frown. My heart stops for a second.

He's not getting up, and he's not moving. The dark-haired guy is shaking him. He's clearly fucked up, but he manages to get two fingers on the blond guy's neck.

“Oh fuck...” he chokes. “Oh fuck, man!”

I frown. My heart is racing. “What?”

He looks up at me with terror in his eyes. “He’s dead, man.”

I blink. “What?”

“He’s dead! Dude you fucking killed him!”

“Get the fuck out of the way,” I snarl. I march over. The blubbering guy runs to the door, yanks it open, and runs out. I kneel by the blond guy and feel for a pulse. Mine drops.

Holy shit. He’s not breathing. There’s no pulse. Outside in the hallway, I hear the music stop and people screaming.

“It’s Ken! This guy just killed Ken Traphagen! Yo! Someone find Gordon! Someone call the cops! This fucking guy just fucking killed Gordon’s brother!!”

I don’t think, I just move. I run over, slam the door shut, and lock it. I pick up the phone on the Senator’s desk and dial 911.

“This is the Shipley Estate,” I mumble through my shirt to mask my voice. “Someone’s hurt. He’s not breathing. There’s a girl here who needs medical help. She’s been roofied.”

I hang up. I turn and run to her. I lean over her, feeling for a pulse. Thank God, she’s breathing. I don’t know how bad it is. But for now, she’s breathing. Her eyes flutter, and they half open. The most beautiful blue eyes I’ve ever seen look up at me. My whole fucking world stops turning.

“Who...” she murmurs. “What...” She winces. “What’s happening?”

“You’re safe,” I growl. “You’re safe. You’re safe.” I keep saying it, looking her in the eyes and holding her hand. Soon enough, I hear muted sirens. Through the windows, I can see

kids from the party scattering as the red and blue lights pull up to the house. I ease Kenzie down and go to the door. I open it.

“In here!” I yell. “The office down the hall!”

I go back to her. I hold her in my arms on the couch, telling her it’s going to be okay. Soon, two cops and an EMT barge into the room.

“Him,” I growl, pointing at the kid on the gourd. “But she needs help, too.”

The EMT runs to Kenzie and me first. “What’s she on?” he grunts.

“GHB, I think.”

He glares at me.

“*Not* from me,” I hiss.

He leans over her, feeling her pulse.

“What’s going on?” Kenzie murmurs. Her eyes are closed.

“It’s okay,” I whisper. “You’re going to be okay.”

The EMT swears and pulls a syringe out of his bag. He fills it with something out of a vial and quickly finds a vein on Kenzie’s wrist.

“We’ve got a DOA over here,” one of the cops grunts. I turn. He’s kneeling over the blond kid on the floor. He looks grimly at the other cop. “It’s Lance Traphagen’s kid.”

“Fuck me,” the other cop hisses. They both look at me.

“What the fuck happened here?” The first cop growls.

“I don’t know.”

“Well, we’re going to find the fuck out, aren’t we,” he mutters. I know what’s coming. The cuffs come on and they start to

pull me away from her.

“Is she going to be okay?” I yell.

The EMT holds up a hand to the cops. He turns to me. “Yeah, man, she is.” He frowns. “You the caller?”

I nod.

“You saved her life, kid. If it’s GHB, she’s on a huge dose. Her heart might’ve stopped.” He glances at the cops. “Make sure that gets in the report. He saved her damn life.”

Present:

SHE LOOKS like an angel when she sleeps. I lean close, touching the stethoscope to her chest. Her heart rate is slow, but it’s evening. The dose Gordon gave her was small. Or she just didn’t drink enough of the spiked soda.

I close my eyes for a minute. I’m shaking. Part of it is rage, but the other half is pure fear. I almost lost her. Just when our paths could finally cross again, I almost lost her. The thought is almost too much to bear for me.

We’re back at my place. Gordon is bound and gagged in his hotel suite. I lied to the front desk and told them I was his personal assistant. I told them he was in preparation for a business meeting and wasn’t to be disturbed until further notice. I’ve taken his cell, and he’s definitely not getting out of those binds. I’ll figure out what to do with him soon. First though was getting Kenzie back here and making sure she’s okay.

She is, so I can breathe. I lean over her and kiss her forehead. I know her head is full of bullshit about me. It’s full of the truth,

too. I saw the files Gordon had on that coffee table. When she wakes, I'll be telling her everything. I'll tell her the truth and let her decide if she wants me in her life.

It'll potentially be the hardest thing I've ever done. But if she wants me to back the fuck away, I know I'll have to. Fuck, there's no "potentially" there at all. Walking away from her if she asks me to will be the single hardest moment of my life.

With Kenzie sleeping, I assess how things got here. I skim through Gordon's phone, and that helps. He's been slipping. Through texts, I learn about him hiring someone off the dark web to break into my place the other day. I've been so caught up with watching Kenzie and making sure she was safe. I never thought to anticipate someone coming for *me*.

When I scan the apartment, I quickly find the drugs under the sink. I find a gun that isn't mine behind a bookshelf, too. God only knows what crime it's connected to.

My phone buzzes. I duck into the bathroom to answer. "Yeah?"

"Da, it's me."

I recognize the voice. Vlad is a hacker I met through someone I knew from juvenile detention. He's Russian-based, and damn good. Over the years, he's helped me with a couple things; all Kenzie-related. He's hacked, moved money around, and acted as a second set of cyber eyes on more than a few occasions. Recently, I've had him looking hard at Gordon Traphagen. So far, there hasn't been much that I can use.

"I have something for you."

I freeze. "On him?"

"Check your email. I'll take the usual amount to the bitcoin address we used last time."

Vlad hangs up. He's not one for words. This is probably why we get along. I step out of the bathroom and go to my computer. In the encrypted email account, there's a new email with a document attached. When I scan and open it, my pulse skips.

"What the fuck is this," I whisper.

Vlad and I have protocols. But I have to break it this time and call him back. He sounds pissed when he answers.

"You know the rules—"

"Where the fuck did you find this?"

I haven't played the video yet. But I'm looking at a paused frame of the most pivotal day of my life. I'm looking at the very moment I fell in love with Kenzie.

"Answer me," I growl. My voice feels thick. My eyes can't focus.

"Him," Vlad grunts. "Your target. You know he has his own people doing what you pay me to do. He was looking for this. His person found it on the personal computer of a detective."

"How..." I shake my head. "How the hell did you get it?"

Vlad chuckles. But it's more of a sandpaper sound. "You always pay. Your target does not, or he gets cheap."

I frown. "You? Do you work for him too?"

Vlad chuckles again. "Nyet. No. But my roommate does."

I blink in shock. "You're joking."

"I don't joke."

"What is this?"

"You will see. You will like it."

I frown. “How much is this piece going to cost me?”

“Nothing,” Vlad grunts. “I don’t like cheapskates. Fuck him.”

He hangs up. I put my phone down and turn to the video on my computer screen. The still image it’s paused on is Senator Shipley’s office. It’s from that night, the night of the party. In the frame, a six-years-younger me is kneeling over an out-cold Kenzie. I push play.

There’s no sound. The video looks like it’s from a nanny-cam, or a security camera of some kind up on the Senator’s bookshelf. I’m leaning over Kenzie. Behind me, Justin Lehman crawls over to Ken Traphagen’s body. He’s feeling for a pulse and shaking him. The me on screen turns as Justin runs out the door.

The rest I know. I lock the door, I call 911. I hold Kenzie until the cops and the EMT arrive. I watch through the part where they handcuff me and pull me from the room. More cops come in and start to photograph the room and Ken’s body. The EMT radios something, and a second paramedic runs in. They load Kenzie onto a stretcher with an IV in her arm and bring her out.

I fast forward a little. I’m not sure what I’m looking for. But there’s a reason Vlad’s sent this to me. The police and detectives finish up in the office. By now, I’m at the local precinct. Kenzie’s in the hospital, and Senator Shipley is on a plane coming for her.

The coroners come in and zip up Ken’s body. But then, the room is empty. There’s still nothing, so I fast forward some more. But then suddenly, there it is. Senator Shipley’s office had a private bathroom. The cops obviously poked their heads in during the crime scene examination. But it looks like they missed something. Or *someone*.

The bathroom door slowly opens a crack. A face appears I can't make out. The door opens wider. Suddenly, a figure walks out. My heart seizes.

"I'm going to kill you," I whisper.

The figure stepping out of the bathroom is Gordon Traphagen. Witnesses that night claim there was a third guy who was part of the attempted assault on Kenzie. He was never found, and Justin never said a thing. So the cops gave up on it as anything real. But I've just found the third man. I've just found the final motherfucker who tried to hurt her that night.

It's Gordon Traphagen. And I'm going to kill him with my bare hands for this.

KENZIE

MY HEAD SWIMS as consciousness wakes me. I wince a little. I feel groggy and confused. With a sickening feeling, I realize I've felt this way before. Six year ago, after the incident with Ken and Justin. That time was way worse, though. I spent two days in the hospital after that night, waiting for the overdose of the drug to leave my system.

That time, my dad was by my side the whole time. When I finally open my eyes this time, it's another face I know. Oren is sitting right next to the bed I'm lying in. His eyes snap to mine when they open. I smile.

"Hey," I whisper.

"Kenzie," Oren growls. He rises and leans over me looking concerned. "How are you..."

"I'm fine," I say softly. "My head's a little foggy, but I'm fine." I frown, remembering everything up until I don't. "Gordon..."

"Drugged you," Oren hisses. There's fury lingering in his voice. But I can tell he's trying to keep a calm face for me. "He slipped you something in that soda. GHB I'm guessing. But you only got a small dose."

"Not like last time."

His jaw clenches. His eyes search mine, looking truly scared. “No,” he whispers. His hand strokes my hair. It’s such a tender move, and my heart surges. “Not like last time,” he growls.

I lean up. I know what I saw in Gordon’s hotel room. I haven’t forgot then the files and the evidence stacked against Oren. But I also know what I feel. I know seeing him when I just woke is the best sight I could have seen. I know I felt a surge of something in my chest when I saw it was him by my side.

My hand cups his face. Then I lean closer and kiss him softly. It’s not a big movie kiss with tongues or anything. We just press our lips together and hold them there for a long time. Slowly I pull away from him.

“Oren...”

“There’s a lot you need to know,” he growls.

“You don’t have to...”

“Yes, I do.” He looks away. “Gordon’s reports aren’t bullshit, Kenzie. I went to jail. Well, juvie.”

“Oren, it doesn’t matter...”

“Yes, it does,” he whispers. “The truth matters.” He takes a breath. “I did do all the things they charged me with. It’s just...” he frowns. But he doesn’t look away. He looks me right in the eyes. “I was a mess when I was young. I never had what you had growing up. All I had was a single-wide trailer and a junky mom. The courts were a lot more stacked against dads back then. Mine was...” he shakes his head. “My dad was a good guy. I should have lived with him. But my mom dropped a sob story to the courts and got me when he finally left her.”

I reach over and take his hand in mine. I squeeze tightly.

“I started dealing when I was twelve. I mean, I had to eat. And my mom wasn’t helping much there. She was down a deep junky hole, barely working. I’d skim from her stash and sell it on the side. When I made a little extra cash, I started buying bulk on my own to sell to other junkies in the trailer park. But then my mom started dating Pete.”

Something really dark crosses Oren’s face. His jaw tenses, and his lip trembles like he’s holding back a scream.

“Pete was a real piece of shit. He was a dealer... way bigger than what I was doing. He took my mom from junky status to full-blown addict. Then he started pimping her out, too. I stayed away as much as I could. Slept on neighbor’s couches or back porches sometimes. But Pete always found a way to push my buttons. Between him, the drugs, and my mom?”

Oren shakes his head. “One day, I just snapped. I came home and found my mom half dead with a needle in her arm. Pete was trying to negotiate with this real sleazy guy, trying to get him to pay to hook up with my mom while she was blacked out. And that was it for me.”

“Oren... Jesus Christ...”

“I was high, Kenzie.” He looks at me without blinking. “I mean I was pretty fucked up. But when I saw that shit, I lost it. I started hitting Pete with everything I had. The client dipped out, but I just kept at it with Pete. I hit until I couldn’t feel my hands. Until his face didn’t look like a face anymore. Pete kept a gun above the fridge. I grabbed that.”

He looks at me, his face white. “I meant to kill him, Kenzie. I was going to, but he was out of bullets. So I just started pistol-whipping him. When I heard the sirens, I ran. I took Pete’s keys and got into his car out front. The cops pulled up and told me to get out. But I was so fucked up. I just had to run. I tried

to drive off, but I almost hit one of the cops. I didn't actually hit him," he growls. "But he had to jump aside. Then I crashed into the squad car and it was all over."

"Oren..." my voice breaks as I reach for him. I take his hands in mine, and my heart pulls in two.

"I had shit on me when they arrested me. And when you almost run over a cop..." Oren sighs. "Yeah, they fuck you for that. Possession on the coke and the oxy I had in my pockets. Pete had a fucking box of ziplock baggies and a scale in the car. So they got me on intent to sell, too." He ticks his fingers. "Assault with a deadly weapon..."

"Oren, I've seen it," I say gently. But he keeps going.

"I want you to hear this from me, Kenzie," he says tensely. "Assaulting an officer. Resisting arrest. Operating a vehicle without a license. Driving under the influence. I got seven years in juvie, knocked down to three."

I swallow. I hold his hands tightly. "Did Pete..."

"He lived," Oren grunts. "He doesn't see so good or chew food very well, I've heard."

I tremble. "And your mom?"

He laughs coldly. "You don't want to know, trust me."

"And if I do?"

He looks at me. His jaw tenses. "She tried to press charges on me."

I stare at him. My heart wrenches. "Oren..."

"I was supposed to come up here to Chicago to live with my dad after I got out. But then... yeah."

I literally crawl into his lap. I slide from the bed and literally move onto him. It's like my body desperately needs the feel of him. It's like I need to comfort him and be comforted by him. I kiss him hard. My arms wrap around him. At first, it's the comfort and closeness. But quickly, it changes. I kiss him deeper, with more urgency. My body needs him. My core pulses. A wet heat throbs between my legs.

"Kenzie," he groans. "Wait, you need to hear all of it."

"I just need you," I whisper.

Oren shakes his head, looking pained. "I need to tell you everything," he says hoarsely. "I need you to know all of it."

BY THE TIME he's done, I'm in tears. I knew a lot of what he's just told me. But only from other people telling me about it. And obscured with half-truths. Oren tells me everything though; from him coming to look for me in the party, to finding Ken and Justin, and everything that follows. He looks enraged, and my skin crawls when he tells me what he's just learned about Gordon. It hurts like hell to hear about what happened with Oren and my dad that night. It breaks my heart, actually.

When he's done though, all I want is him. I sink into his lap. My arms wrap around his neck, and I kiss him deeply.

"I'm yours," I gasp. "I've dreamed about you ever since that night. Before I even knew who you were."

"You're all I've thought about," he chokes. "*All*, Kenzie."

I kiss him again, but he pulls back. "I've stalked you, Kenzie. I've... I've pushed men away. I've beaten them away at times.

I've kept you in a tower you didn't even know you were in."

"You protected me," I whisper.

"I caged you," he groans.

"Because you were obsessed with me?"

"Because I was in love with you."

My heart races. I sit on his lap, staring into his eyes. "And now?" I whisper.

"There won't ever be a day when I'm not obsessed with you," Oren says quietly. "And there won't ever be a minute of my life where I'm not completely in love with you."

My mouth slams to his. I kiss him feverishly. It's with a passion I never knew I had inside.

"I love you," I moan. "I love you, Oren."

I reach between us and tear at his belt. He growls. His hands slide over me, pulling aggressively at my clothes. I raise my hands and he pulls my shirt off. I stand and slide my pants and panties down. Oren groans, and his hands grab my hips. He pulls me into him. I moan when his mouth slides between my legs. His tongue drags over my pussy, and I cry out.

I gasp in pleasure, and my fingers slide into his hair. Oren groans into me. His tongue drags up and down my slit. He sucks my clit gently, and then harder. His tongue is merciless. His fingers dig into my hips, keeping me pinned to his mouth. My legs buckle and my knees shake. His hands slide around to grab my ass, pulling me tighter to him.

His tongue pushes in and out of me. He groans eagerly and sucks my lips gently into his mouth. He parts them again with his tongue and drags it all the way up to my throbbing clit. He attacks it without mercy, and I moan with pleasure.

“Oren!”

But he doesn't let up. He doesn't slow and give me an inch. He tongues my clit and grips my ass possessively. My hands tighten in his hair. I pull him shamelessly against my pussy. The pleasure builds, until suddenly I'm crashing. I scream his name when I come against his mouth. I shake, and it feels like I might fall. But his hands are so strong. They're so powerful, and so gentle at the same time. I know he'd never let me fall.

I'm shaking when he pulls back. His lips are wet from me; his eyes wild and hungry. He yanks his shirt off and shoves his jeans down. His cock springs free to slap his abs. I moan softly when my eyes take him in. His cock is so fucking thick, and so hard. It's so big, too. But I'm not worried. I know how amazing he felt before. And I know this time, I want him even more.

I pull him closer. I hold his eyes and take his big cock in my hand. I stroke him and slowly lower myself. His swollen crown brushes my lips and parts them. Oren hisses in pleasure; I whimper.

“Come here,” he whispers. He cups my face and holds my hip with the other hand. He pulls me gently, and I let him. I slide further down over his swollen cock. I gasp at the first penetration. But I'm so wet, and so ready for him. I want him all.

I lower myself more. Inch by inch, he sinks into me. I moan and press my lips to his. I can taste my wetness in his kiss, but I don't mind. It feels so real, and so intimate. I kiss him hungrily and push the rest of the way down. Oren growls into my mouth when his cock sinks all the way to the base inside of my dripping wet pussy.

“I'm all yours,” I gasp.

“You were always mine,” Oren growls. He kisses me hard. His cock flexes and throbs inside. I rise up, whimpering eagerly. I slide up to his head and then back down. I glide up and down his glistening, thick shaft. I move slowly, and he lets me. But then I start to move faster. I start to want more of him, and I know I can take it.

I begin to ride Oren’s thick dick with a passion. My hips rock, and my ass slides up and down. My lips cling to him eagerly. My wetness drips down him, coating us both in the slipperiness. Oren snarls into my mouth. His hand slides into my hair, tangling it in a fist. His mouth drops to my neck. His teeth rake my skin, taking me.

He thrusts harder, and I bounce faster. His mouth wraps around one of my nipples. I cry out and ride him harder. I start to tense and shake.

“Oren! Oh fuck, Oren...”

“Come,” he demands. “Come for me, Kenzie. Come for me now. Come with me, love.”

I push down to the base of him. My eyes squeeze shut. He growls into my neck, and I lose control. The orgasm sweeps over me. I cry out, but Oren’s mouth is there to swallow it. He groans into my lips. His cock swells rock hard inside of me, and he starts to come with me. His cum spills hot and thick into me. I kiss him feverishly. My legs tighten around him. We slow until we’re still, lip-to-lip.

Without warning, I suddenly yawn. I groan in embarrassment, but Oren just chuckles deeply. He leans into me and kisses me softly.

“Did I tire you out?” He grins.

“Yeah, but...” I yawn again. “Damnit!”

He chuckles. “What?”

“I don’t want to fall asleep.”

“You should,” he whispers. “It’s late. And this has been...” he smiles. “It’s been a day.”

“But if I go to sleep, we have to stop this,” I pout.

He grins. “Then dream about me until we do this again.”

I shake my head. “I’ve been dreaming about you for six years, Oren Frey,” I whisper. I squeeze him with my inner muscles. He’s still so hard inside of me. “I don’t want to dream about it anymore.”

“Now that you mention it,” he grunts. His steel-gray eyes hold mine fast. “I’m not at all tired.”

He kisses me deeply. I start to ride him slowly. Sleep can wait.

OREN

Six Years Ago:

“I KILLED HIM.”

“I know, son.”

We’re in a private conference room at the precinct. But it’s not an interrogation room, or a cell. My mind is firing on all pistons. My head feels like it’s unattached to my body. None of this seems real. “No, I killed—”

“*I know*,” Senator Shipley growls.

“Kenzie...”

“She’s fine, Oren.” He grinds his teeth. “She’s more than fine, actually. Those little fuckers...”

He hisses, turning away. He wipes his eyes, and my own jaw clenches. I think about what almost happened, and I realize that I have zero remorse for the fucker who hit the desk. I do have remorse for what it means though.

“You saved my little girl, Oren,” Duncan grunts. “You have my eternal gratitude for that.”

“Anyone would have, sir.”

“No, they wouldn’t have.”

“Sir, your re-election campaign...”

“It’s fine, Oren,” he growls. “I don’t give a shit about the campaign right now.”

“But your career. If any of this...”

“You saved Kenzie,” he says thickly. “That’s all that matters.”

There’s a knock at the door. Duncan looks at me. “Come in,” he calls. The door opens and a lean man with a shaved head and thick glasses steps inside.

“Oren, this is Robert, my campaign manager. He... well, he knows what happened tonight.”

Robert looks at me sharply. “Oren, I need to know what you said to the police.”

I frown. “What?”

“What did you say, Oren. When they arrived at the house. Or here at the station before the Senator here and his lawyers arrived. Specifically, about the Traphagen boy.”

“I said I didn’t know what happened. I just said I was at the party and came in to help Kenzie.”

Robert glances at Duncan and nods. He turns back to me. “Okay, good. That’s good, Oren. You’re sure that’s all you said? Nothing else about your involvement in the fight?”

“I’m sure.”

He glances at Senator Shipley again. Warily this time.

“I’ve got it, Rob,” Duncan says quietly. Robert nods at me again and steps outside.

“What’s going on?”

Duncan sighs heavily. “I need you to listen to me carefully, son. Oren, you have my eternal gratitude.”

“It’s fine, sir, I don’t need to be thanked.”

He gives me a hard look. There’s pain in his eyes.

“Sir?”

“We’re sending you way, son.”

“What?”

“I wanted another way, but Robert’s a master of playing through scenarios. And this one gives the best odds. But goddamnit, I don’t like it. I need you to know that.”

“Best odds of... what?”

“Of you not going to jail, Oren.”

I clench my jaw. “I’m not afraid.”

“I know that. But I’m not letting Mitchel Frey’s kid go to prison for protecting my daughter. I’ll be damned if I let that happen. This isn’t about my campaign, Oren. This is about making sure you have a life.”

“I don’t understand...”

“You were in Colorado tonight.”

I frown in confusion. “I don’t understand.”

“I’m flying you there in half an hour on a private jet, as soon as this conversation is over. You were in Colorado, Oren. Because I was setting you up for a job, in appreciation for your father’s friendship. You were there to appraise some cars for me, for my collection. You had money from me, too. To make the sale. But...” he frowns.

“But what?”

“I hate this part. Goddamnit,” he hisses. “I really hate this part, Oren. And I’m so sorry.”

“Just tell me,” I growl.

“So be it,” he sighs. “You skipped on the job. You took the money and disappeared.” He scowls. He looks pained and furious. “I don’t want this scenario, Oren. I’m so damn sorry.”

I stare blankly at the table. But I get it. I understand that this is how this needs to play out.

“It’s fine,” I growl.

“It’s not,” Duncan hisses.

“It’s to distance us, right? It creates an alibi, but also deniability of us working together to cover anything.”

He smiles thinly. “You’re a smart kid, Oren.”

I want to ask about Kenzie. It’s all I want to ask about. It’s all I want to think about. Part of me doesn’t even care if I go to jail. I just want to make sure she’s okay; that she’s safe.

“We’re going to say it was a burglary attempt. A burglar broke into my office and surprised those little fucking punks. There was a fight, someone hit the desk wrong. The burglar took off.” Duncan scowls. “That’s it. The whole party was drunk or on drugs. No one there knows who you are or even got a good look at you. Even the Lehman kid—that’s the boy you beat up with Ken. He was high as a kite when they arrested him with GHB in his pockets. He can’t even describe a picture of you.”

“Sir...”

“There’s no negotiating this, son.”

“Sir, I killed Ken.”

“No,” he growls. “No, you didn’t.”

I stare at him with a hard look. “Yeah, I did.”

But Duncan looks right back at me. “While protecting my daughter. While defending her when she was helpless. Oren, this is it. This is how this plays out. End of discussion.”

I nod and look away. “What are you going to tell her?” When he doesn’t answer, I turn back. Senator Shipley looks at his hands. He looks torn and sad.

“You’re going to tell her it was a burglar too,” I answer for him.

He nods. “I have to.”

“I know.”

She won’t know who I am, and that’s fine. Well, that sucks. But it keeps her out of culpability. It keeps her safe, and that’s what matters.

“Sir, what about the cops? The EMT?”

“The investigating detective is a friend,” he mutters. “The EMT is going to go back to school for a nursing degree, if you get what I’m saying.”

I do get what he’s saying. He’s pulling strings for me. Big ones, too. Strings that could land him in serious hot water.

“Why?” I ask. “Sir, why are you helping me? Kenzie aside, you’re putting your neck out hugely here.” I stare at him. “Why?”

“Because your dad was a great man. And I know you’re a good kid. And you saved Kenzie.” His clenches his jaw. “You saved her, Oren.”

Present:

I HAVEN'T BEEN HERE in forever. Six years, actually. Almost exactly. I look up at the house. A smile spreads over my face. He's expecting us. Kenzie wanted to surprise him and catch him off guard. But I didn't want that.

When I tell Duncan Shipley that I've been in love with his daughter since the moment I laid eyes on her, I want to do it on a level playing field.

Kenzie pushes the doorbell. But then she turns to me. "Wait, does he know you've been..."

"Stalking you?"

She rolls her eyes. "I thought we were going to stick with 'watching out for me?'"

I grin. "You're right. And no, he doesn't."

That was part of the arrangement with her father. His bullshit story about me in Colorado distanced me from the events of that night. It kept me out of jail for Ken's death. But part of it was that I had to actually keep away. He and I haven't spoken in six years. But today I'm going to tell him that I didn't quite keep up my end of things. I was supposed to stay away. Obviously, I didn't do that.

The door opens. I turn to see Duncan arching a brow. His gaze darts between us, then down to our hands entwined.

"Well," he smiles. "I guess we need to have a conversation."

"YOU'RE good at what you do, Oren."

Ten minutes later, we're sitting in the huge living room of the house. Kenzie and I are on one sofa, next to each other. Duncan sits across from us.

"What's that, sir?"

His brow arches. "Protecting my daughter. Watching her. Keeping her safe."

I frown. He just smirks.

"I know all about it, Oren. I know you've been her shadow for the last six years."

I'm honestly blindsided by it. "You... you knew?"

"Of course, I knew," he chuckles. "Oren, you were so focused on her, you never focused on yourself. I knew I couldn't stop you, anyways. But I was also glad to know you were there for her, all these years."

"Dad!" Kenzie says angrily. "You just let him live his life like that?!"

He turns to me. "Could I have stopped you?"

I grin. "No."

"Dad, you could have! You could have helped him out!"

Duncan sits back on the couch. "I did."

That's another one that blindsides me.

"I've saved Oren from jail a few times over the years." He turns to me. "The landlord? Son, that wasn't the smoothest move."

"Sir," I growl, and I tense. "He was..."

"Oh I'm sure you had a good reason. I'm not going to begrudge you that. But the police came closer to fingering you

than you think, Oren.”

I smile. “Then thank you.”

“You don’t have to thank me. I owe you a whole lot, Oren. In fact, I think I owe you even more, now.”

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve been trying to find a way to finally end this bullshit with the Traphagens. You know Lance has never let up with his attacks. He’s trying to bring another civil suit my way. He’s been donating heavily to my opponent, too. I feel for him. I know he lost a son, and I can’t imagine that. But...”

“But his son was a piece of shit,” Kenzie mutters before I can.

Duncan smiles thinly at his daughter. “Pretty much. But I think it’s just been cleared up.”

“Oh?”

“Yes,” he muses. “It seems there was a disturbance called in to the concierge at the Drake Hotel an hour ago. Someone in one of the suites heard a lot of muffled thumping and banging. The police were called and apparently found Gordon Traphagen hogtied inside.”

He looks at me sternly. But there’s a smile hidden in his lips.

“You wouldn’t know anything about that, now would you?”

“Not in the slightest,” I grin.

Duncan chuckles. “Well, his embarrassing situation got worse when they found GHB, cocaine, and ecstasy in his room too. So now he’s been arrested on possession charges.” He sighs. “Now, if only someone had something on his past indiscretions? Perhaps the illegal payoffs to squeal on, or

assault charges? Or a certain video I hear that's made an appearance recently?"

I smile. "Your people are good, sir."

"Not as good as you, but they're decent," he chuckles. "Now if only the police could see that evidence."

My smiles widens. "If only."

"It would be too bad for Gordon if all of that evidence were to be emailed to them from an untraceable account..." the Senator muses. "But, far be it for me to know anyone with access to one of those...."

He looks right at me and grins. I grin back.

"I'll see what I can do."

"I have the utmost confidence that you will."

I PUT everything together in a nice little email and send it off to the Chicago Police Department. I even get some nice extra charges thrown in there, courtesy of Vlad. It seems his hacker roommate who Gordon neglected to pay has a pretty big axe to grind. He's nice enough to send over a bunch of damning evidence with his own contact details left out. It's a nice cherry on top of the shit sandwich Gordon's about to eat.

Kenzie is standing next to me when I click "send." I turn, and she sinks onto my lap.

"Chapter closed," she murmurs.

"All wrapped up."

"How fucked is Gordon?"

“Extremely,” I chuckle. “They’re going to roast his ass for this shit. The new State’s Attorney has it out for trust fund kids who think they can buy their way out of justice. Lance is going to try and throw money at this, and it’s just going to piss the department off even more.”

I frown. “Kenzie...”

“I know,” she whispers. We haven’t talked about it openly. But we both know what the video evidence means. It means Kenzie can press charges on Gordon if she wants to.

“I don’t think I want to,” she frowns. “To me, this is all over.”

“Then it’s over,” I nod. And I mean it. From this moment, that whole chapter of my life is closed.

“So, what now?”

I grin and shrug. “I actually have no idea.”

“Guess you’ll have to find someone else to stalk,” she teases.

“Aw, but I only want to stalk you.”

She laughs and kisses me. “I’m pretty curious to hear about some of the details I haven’t heard yet.”

“Such as?”

She thinks on that, looking adorable. “How many creeps did you chase off?”

“A *lot*,” I groan. “You attract a lot of creeps.”

She laughs and kisses me again.

“Did you ever...” she blushes. “Never mind.”

“Ask.”

“Did you ever spy on me? I mean when I was...”

I just grin. Her face grows red. “Oh my God, really?!”

“I plead the fifth.”

“I mean what did you get up to? Spy cameras?”

“Here and there.”

She grins. “Watching me shower?”

“When I could.”

She laughs. “Stealing my underwear?”

“Only a few times.”

She giggles and presses her lips to mine. “Well I take it back. You can’t stalk anyone else.”

“I’m only gonna stalk you,” I grin.

“Because you’re obsessed with me or because you love me?”

“Both.”

She smiles. “I’ll take both.”

She leans in and kisses me again. We’re still kissing when Duncan calls out that dinner is ready. Then we sit down, the three of us together.

My old life is over. I know that. My past is going to stay there, finally. But the future is wide open. My new life is just beginning.

EPILOGUE

“DON’T YOU DARE ANSWER THAT!”

Oren groans. “It’s Robert. You know I have to.”

I sigh. “Alright, fine,” I grump. I’m not actually mad. I’m just frustrated. Sexually, I mean. Because I’m currently tied to our bed; naked, face down, ass up in the air. And my equally naked fiancé is answering his damn phone.

But I know he has to. Oren’s talents have been put to good use by my dad and his campaign manager Robert. Oren is currently their chief investigator for all things campaign related. This is the big leagues, too. US Senate races get ugly. The people involved get nasty. Oren is there to see the attacks coming before they hit. And he’s really freaking good at what he does. Having six solid years of experience in doing what he does certainly doesn’t hurt.

He’s already gotten offers from a dozen other political campaigns across the country. He’s obviously going to finish up with my dad’s first. But he might have his pick of the litter afterwards with jobs.

My dad is all but guaranteed to win his reelection, too. He already had the support. But with the Traphagen’s scrambling,

Lance stopped bankrolling my dad's opponent. And they're in a pretty serious free-fall.

Gordon's arrest was the start of an avalanche. When the State's Attorney ripped into him, he found that most of these "hush contracts" of Gordon's weren't legally binding. He'd committed crimes by assaulting woman and then forcing them to sign NDAs and agreements to physical acts after the fact. When that dropped, Gordon was well and truly fucked.

So far, thirty women have come forward with some seriously damning evidence. There's a very good chance Gordon will be looking at the inside of a cell for the rest of his life, even without the video from that night.

The video is some really damning evidence against Gordon. It puts him in the room and hiding from the police that night. It seems to have jogged Justin Lehman's memory, too. He's in his fourth or fifth stint of rehab right now. But the word is, he's writing a book about his drug-filled past. And it names Gordon as the guy who's idea it was to hurt me that night.

But I'd worried about Oren sending it to the police. It might hurt Gordon, but it also could have hurt Oren; my dad, too. It's video evidence of Oren being here in Illinois that night. Not Colorado. But both Oren and my dad were set on it getting to the police.

My fears went away when Oren emailed the collected evidence to the same detective who'd handled the case six years ago. I know he's a friend of my dad's. I know that's kind of a blurred line and pulling the strings of justice. But I also don't care. Oren didn't do anything wrong that night. He protected me.

In the case they opened against Gordon, the video only starts after Oren is out of the room. A "technology glitch," I think

the investigating detective put it as.

“Robert, hey.” Oren rolls his eyes. “No, not too late.” It’s eleven o’clock at night. But still, I know this work is important. And he loves it, too. Maybe not as much as he loves me naked and face down on our bed. But that’s different.

Oren grabs a notepad and a pen. “He’s the union president of which district? Got it. Phone records from... yep. I’ll get on it tomorrow. Yep. Night, Robert.”

He hangs up. I’m sighing, preparing myself for a quieter night than planned. Work is work, after all. But Oren just throws the pad and pen away. He reaches for his phone and turns it off entirely. His eyes slide tantalizingly over me. I tremble with heat and purr softly.

“Don’t you have to work?”

He slowly shakes his head. His eyes are still all over me, centering between my thighs. “Hell no,” Oren growls. “Nothing is pulling me away from this.”

He moves towards the bed from the side. I turn, and my eyes drop to his big, thick, rock-hard cock. I moan softly, feeling myself get even wetter. He climbs onto the bed. His muscles ripple, and his eyes burn deeply. He moves behind me. I tremble feeling his hands slide over my ass.

“Goddamn,” he groans. I blush deeply.

“What?”

“You have the prettiest little pussy in the whole world, Kenzie,” he growls.

“I have it on good authority that mine is the only pussy you’ve ever seen like this.”

It's old fashioned that he and I came together as virgins, without anyone else in our pasts. But I like that. I like being old fashioned in that sense.

“Well there's no damn way there's one out there prettier than this,” he groans. He lowers his mouth between my legs. Behind me, I feel his breath on my thighs. I tremble, gasping. His hands stroke my skin. His lips kiss my ass, down to my inner thigh. His hands take a firmer hold. He spreads me open, and I blush.

“Oren...” I gasp. But then my words fall apart. His tongue licks my slit, and I moan. He groans, licking me deeper. His tongue drags over my lips. He parts them with it and pushes against my center. I cry out in pleasure. Oren's tongue moves over my clit. He sucks it between his lips. My moans grow louder. My body arches and strains against the silk ropes binding my ankles and wrists to the bed.

“Christ you taste so fucking sweet, baby,” he growls. He tongues me harder. His mouth devours me, until I'm trembling all over. I'm dying to come, and I'm so close. But Oren pulls away. I groan. He's a master of this; of teasing me to the breaking point and then backing away to start over.

“Oh my God, you asshole,” I groan in frustration. But I'm grinning. I do love when he does this.

“Oh where did you want my tongue?” he growls. “Naughty girl.”

I gasp sharply when his tongue slides up to my ass. He teases me there while his thumb strokes my clit. It pushes me from “getting close” to “almost there” in seconds. I moan loudly into the bedsheets. I writhe beneath his tongue and fingers, my eyes squeezed shut in ecstasy.

But yet again, my fiancé teases. He pulls back. His mouth and his hands fall away from me, leaving me shaking I'm so close.

“Oh my God, what are... oh fuck, Oren!”

He kneels behind me. His thick cock head drags up and down my lips. He groans and pushes, and the head slides into me. He's so perfectly thick and big. It's a stretch every time, but I love it. I crave it when he's not inside of me. I went six years dreaming of him. Now that he's more than a dream, I can't get enough of him.

Oren pushes all the way into me with one thrust. I gasp in pleasure. He groans lowly and slides his hands over my ass. He grabs my hips as he slides out. His head teases my clit, bumping over it until I'm whimpering. Then he sinks back inside, all the way.

His hands grip my waist. He pulls back, then thrusts back in. His pace increases. My body trembles and arches for him, craving all of it. His masculine growls make me ache for more. His firm touch makes me melt. His thick cock plunging into me makes me want to scream and explode.

His abs press against my ass with each thrust. His fingers grip my skin possessively. I start to lose control. My moans become one long one. My body clenches, ready to explode. The pleasure centered between my legs overtakes me, and I cry out.

“Oren!”

“Come with me,” he growls thickly. He hammers into me, fucking me hard and deep. It's just what I want, and he knows it. “Come, Kenzie,” he groans. “Come for me.”

I can't hold back. I never can with him. I scream into the sheets and start to come hard. Oren groans. He keeps fucking

me relentlessly as I come all over his cock. With a deep growl, he slides deep into me. I moan when I feel him coming with me. His cum spills into me, hot and thick. His hands grip me tightly. He leans over me to kiss my neck while his arms wrap around to hold me tight.

Gently, he unties the silk ties from my wrists and ankles. He does it without sliding out of me, too. We roll onto our sides. I'm in his arms, and he's still so hard inside of me. I know there's more to come. We're not through here by a long shot, and I can't wait.

But first, we catch our breaths. I turn to look at him over my shoulder. "Thank you," I whisper.

He chuckles. "For making you come?"

I blush and giggle. "Well, obviously for that. But I meant for never going away. For never blinking or letting me out of your sight."

"You never need to thank me," he groans. "It was never a choice I could make. It was just... all I knew. It's all I wanted to know."

He leans into me and kisses me softly.

"I love you, Kenzie," he growls.

"Yeah, I got that." I giggle loudly when he rolls his eyes. "And I love you too. I love you so much."

I kiss him again. His arms hold me tight, and the kiss turns heavier. I know we're headed for round two. But we have all night. After tonight, we have the rest of our lives. What we have is deeper than love. Maybe it's obsession.

But I think it's both.

Looking for more from Oren and Kenzie? Sign up for my newsletter and read a steamy extra scene! This isn't an epilogue or continuation to *Stalker of Mine*. But this extra hot "follow-up" story is guaranteed to fog up your Kindle! You'll also get a free full-length book when you join!

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR



A reader first and foremost, Jagger Cole cut his romance writing teeth penning various steamy fan-fiction stories years ago. After deciding to hang up his writing boots, Jagger worked in advertising pretending to be Don Draper. It worked enough to convince a woman way out of his league to marry him, though, which is a total win.

Now, Dad to two little princesses and King to a Queen, Jagger is thrilled to be back at the keyboard.

When not writing or reading romance books, he can be found woodworking, enjoying good whiskey, and grilling outside - rain or shine.

You can find all of his books at

www.jaggercolewrites.com

