

A close-up photograph of a woman's face and neck. Her lips are slightly parted, and there is a prominent red lip stain on her neck and upper chest. The background is blurred, showing what appears to be a white lace bra.

stuffed

He can't get
his fill.

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Stuffed
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CONTENTS

[Stuffed](#)

[Prologue](#)

[Chapter 1](#)

[Chapter 2](#)

[Chapter 3](#)

[Chapter 4](#)

[Chapter 5](#)

[Chapter 6](#)

[Chapter 7](#)

[Chapter 8](#)

[Chapter 9](#)

[Chapter 10](#)

[Chapter 11](#)

[Chapter 12](#)

[Chapter 13](#)

[Chapter 14](#)

[Chapter 15](#)

[Chapter 16](#)

[Chapter 17](#)

[Chapter 18](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Also by MINK](#)

[About the Author](#)

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STUFFED

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Kent

She set me up. This cute little woman with the big eyes and the sweet words framed me. Now I'm serving a jail sentence thanks to her tricks. But I'm no fool. Layla is clearly a highly trained operator who decided to take me out of the equation. My contract to eliminate Graham Tucker—owner of the Fill-A-Friend stuffed animal chain—hangs by a thread, and I have to get this kill before Layla steals it out from under me. The day I'm released is the day I'll take my vengeance on that cunning assassin with the innocent eyes. And then I'll take out Graham Tucker and close my contract with the Brotherhood.

Layla

Pandacorns are my bestsellers. Seriously. I can make a pandacorn, post it on Etsy, and it's gone within an hour. Working at Fill-A-Friend pays the bills so I can work on my real passion—one-of-a-kind stuffies that have my own personal flair. But Fill-A-Friend can be demanding and sometimes intense, especially since I'm accident prone (one time I left the cotton stuffing machine on. Whoops.) Or like that time when I got rid of a bunch of ugly stuffed dogs and some random guy stole them and went to jail over it. Yikes. Anyway, things are going okay until Kent shows up in my life. And then they get so much better. He's kind, caring, and supportive of my stuffie-making. The only issue is that he says weird stuff about "our line of work" when we don't even do the same thing, but he's handsome and amazing, so I don't mind. In fact, I think I'm falling for him.

My stuffie business and my personal life are headed in the right direction

. . . Until Mr. Tucker comes to inspect the store and things go terribly, horribly wrong.

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PROLOGUE

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KENT

It takes a real smooth operator to take down a guy like me. I've trained for years for any situation, but this? I never saw this coming. Whoever set me up is going to pay. But first I need to get out of the police station and back into action. My one phone call will accomplish that in no time.

"Brother Kent?" Sister Jezebel taps her fingers on the other end of the line.

"Get me out of this," I snap.

"Can't do it this time."

"What?" I grip the receiver harder as the cop who busted me--the one I let live when maybe I shouldn't have--gives me a hard look.

"I said I can't clear you on this one. You were caught with the goods in your vehicle after a high-speed chase. You brought far too much attention to the Brotherhood. This isn't the first time you've fucked up. But this time, word has come down from the top that you need to learn a lesson about what happens to witnesses."

"I spared the guy. That's what this is about?"

The cop's brows draw together.

"It is." Sister Jezebel's tone is like a precision blade, as always. "We could easily make this go away, but we won't. You will serve your time, cool off, and learn to stop violating protocol. This is direct from Clevenger."

Clevenger is involved? She wasn't kidding about word coming down from on high. But still, this is taking things too far. "So if I'd popped Officer Dumbshit, then--"

“That’s enough.” Officer Dumbshit reaches out and depresses the lever, ending the call. “Mr. Doe, come with me.”

I hesitate for only a moment, calculating how long it would take me to choke him out, break his neck, then jet through the front of the police station and out to the street where I could easily carjack someone and--

“Mr. Doe, I said it’s time to go.” His voice is warning now, his hand going to his service pistol.

“Scared?” I smirk.

“You wrecked six cruisers, destroyed city property, gave me this”—he points to his black eye--“had a small arsenal of illegal weapons in your vehicle, refused to give us your real name, and stole from children. You’re dangerous.”

“Let’s clear one thing up, Officer Dumbshit.” I step toward him, and even though my hands are cuffed behind me, he flips the strap and frees his weapon. I glare down at him. “I *never* stole from children.”

I rub my eyes to make sure I'm not imagining things. I worked last night and was back here bright and early to open the shop today. When I drop my hand from my eyes, I see that I'm not imagining anything.

It almost looks like pretty snow is coating everything in the store, but I know it's not snow, it's cotton. My mind is still a little foggy from the lack of sleep so I'm having trouble catching up today.

My eyes finally go to the giant contraption that's used to fill each animal with stuffing. It's completely empty. Bingo. I've solved the mystery.

Crap. The whole thing shakes as it still tries to pump more cotton out, but there's nothing left. It rattles, the filling wand banging against the side where the little stuffie hearts are kept.

It's way too early for this.

I run toward it, wanting to shut it off before it explodes or catches fire. As soon as I have that thought, it lets out a loud groan followed by a grinding sound. I bet the motor inside it died. My shoulders drop as I hit the off button on the machine anyway. This is not how I wanted this day to begin.

"What the fuuuuck?" Gia's voice bursts through the store. "Did you murder all the dog stuffed animals or something? I knew you didn't love this job but damn, you didn't have to gut them all Mortal Kombat style."

"No!" I rush to defend myself. "I didn't touch one stuffed dog, I swear." I couldn't hurt anything. It's not in my nature. I won't even step on a spider, because it makes me feel guilty. Now, if they accidentally get sucked into the vacuum cleaner, that's not really my fault. That's how I see it anyway.

She gives me a skeptical look paired with a smile. Her dark hair piled on top of her head, she's in a pair of jeans and our normal uniform shirt. She always wears heels, and today is no different. I've never seen her in regular shoes or sneakers. It doesn't matter what we're doing, she always has heels on her feet. I don't know how she runs around in those things all day.

"I'm no rat, Layla. If you murdered them, it's fine. I'll help you get rid of the bodies." She motions to the cotton stuffing that's spread across the store. Now that I take a good look at it, I see how much of a disaster it really is in here.

"I'm getting fired." I walk over to one of the tables meant for children to sit down at. The chairs are so tiny. This is where they make their little buddies from start to finish. Crafting them exactly how they've imagined them. And now it's ruined. I sigh, knowing that I'm probably at fault here.

"We can clean this up. Don't be dramatic." She walks over and takes the seat across from me. She pushes a cup of coffee at me. "I'm not working in this hellhole without you."

"I hate coffee," I remind her.

She's obsessed with finding a coffee that I'll like. "This is Italian roast with a splash of my mom's secret cream. I'd tell you what the secret is but..." She shrugs with a half-smile.

"You'd have to kill me?" I take the cup.

"I never said nothing about killing anyone." She points at the coffee I'm holding. "Try it."

I give in, taking a sip. It's warm and bitter with a hint of cocoa.

"Hmm," I say with a giant smile on my face. "It's wonderful."

"You're so full of shit. You've got to work on your lying. Your poker face is the worst. What if one day you do kill something more than a stuffed dog? They're going to nail you to the wall with that guilty look on your face." Gia sounds extra Italian today. I can always tell when she's spent the weekend at her parents' place.

"I'm not worried about the fuzz." I have bigger issues at the moment. "Now, Carmen I'm scared of." She's got these freaky long nails that she points at you. Her whole face scrunches and turns a few shades of crimson when she's mad.

"Not for nothing, but that bitch is all talk." Gia rolls her eyes, not the least bit scared of our boss. "What don't you like about the coffee?"

"Bitter."

“Gah!” She stands and snatches the coffee back for herself. She's taking this me not liking coffee thing very seriously. It's never going to happen.

“Why don't you take your anger out on that machine?” I point my thumb to the cotton machine. “I think I left it on last night and killed the engine. I was just in a rush to get home and work on my custom orders.”

“So it wasn't a stuffed dog you killed last night but an entire machine?”

“You got me. Call the fuzz police.” I drop my forehead to the tiny table. “I should go on the run.” That never ends well for people. We had a high-speed chase start here a few months ago. I heard they got the guy, but not until he took out a bunch of cop cars.

“You don't run.” Gia laughs. “I'll call my brother Tony. He'll fix it before Satan Carmen gets here.” I pop my head up and look over to the clock. Carmen never shows up until after we open and is always gone long before we close.

“You think he can do something?” Hope fills me. I can't have another incident, or I'll for sure be fired.

“He can fix anything. Just came back from two years at the vineyards where the family put him to work.” She pulls out her cell phone. “Don't take his number when he tries to give it to you. He's going to hit on you and he's a pig.”

“Your brother?” Why would she call her brother a pig? Not that I can keep her brothers straight. I've never met any, but I swear she's got a handful of them. I can't keep up with all of their names.

“Okay. Maybe he's not a pig, but he is a dog,” she rephrases, knowing my dislike for dogs. Okay, it's not a dislike for them, I just don't see how you can pass up a cute kitty cat to get a dog. It's baffling to me.

I listen as Gia switches over and starts speaking Italian. She talks so fast I can't make anything out, then ends the call a few seconds later.

“He'll be here in ten.”

I jump up from the chair sending it toppling over. “Really?”

“Yeah, really.” She looks around the store. “Let's get this cleaned up. First step, get the cotton back in the machine.” She chugs back the coffee as I look around the store. I'm not even sure where to start.

A tingle runs up my spine. I turn to look out the front windows of the store, swearing I feel eyes on me. The streets are still empty this early in the morning. No one is there. I shake the feeling off. I'm a little on edge from everything that happened today is all.

“What are we looking at?” Gia whispers next to my ear, making me jump and scaring the crap out of me.

“I thought I saw something.” I turn away from the window. Gia starts picking up armfuls of cotton and taking them over to the machine and shoving the white fluff back inside. She moves faster in her heels than I do in my sneakers. I bend over and scoop up an armful of cotton myself while praying for a small miracle.

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She still works at the store. The woman who set me up. The woman posing as a bear-building employee. Why hasn't she moved on to some other assignment? Professionals don't stay in the same cover gigs for this long. She must be pulling some sort of a long game, waiting to make her move.

Working like a cyclone of energy, she moves around the store and collects all of the white stuffing that had somehow poured out of the machine against the right wall with a big heart above it. The other employee--unaware that she's only steps away from some sort of covert operative--works on the machine.

I haven't figured out who she's working for just yet. Could be the Red Dragons or any number of mercenary groups. Hell, she may even be with one of the government agencies for all I know. She's probably after the same target--the elusive Graham Tucker, owner of the entire Fill-a-Friend empire. But one thing's for certain. She's a professional. She already moved against me, getting me out of the way for whatever she has planned. And worse, the Brotherhood let me sit in that tiny jail cell for two months. Two entire months of wasted time for what? To teach me a lesson?

I guess I didn't learn it, because I'm right back where I started. No one took the contract for me while I was otherwise engaged. Probably because the bounty on it is so small, and I suppose some killers have reservations about taking out a toy store owner. I don't. But first, I have a score to settle.

So, instead of doing recon to find the store owner, I walk by the shop and keep an eye on the dark-haired devil inside. At one point, it looks as if she

has a halo of white fluff all around her head. But she's no angel. Not that one. Not after the way she set me up to take the fall. And not with those curves.

In her cutesy little shop outfit, she prances around and shows off her thick thighs, round ass, perfect rack, and a heart-shaped face that's had me obsessed from the moment I saw her. It took me only a day to snag the surveillance video, to see her in all her sexy glory setting me up.

She smiles at her coworker, and I think for only a moment that she can't be some criminal mastermind. Then again, my two months in jail after a hasty guilty plea say otherwise. So when she bounces over to the front doors to open the shop for the day, I duck behind a wide oak on the quaint Main Street. I can feel her looking around, but she doesn't see me. Not yet.

She will, though. Soon. And I'm going to get even. Good thing I already have her address.

Layla Trenholm, you're about to meet your match.



I have to admit it--her cover is good. So good, in fact, that I can almost believe she's a single woman just out of college with a stuffie obsession that verges on insane.

I edge into her third-floor apartment, passing a wall of stuffed animals, each one different and--upon closer inspection--handmade. In the bright afternoon light, the vivid colors are almost too much to take. Dragons, unicorns, animals I can't even name. They form a creative collection. Where did she get them? eBay? She truly is a professional.

Moving farther inside, I find a neat kitchen, a small living room, bedroom, and bathroom. The lock on the front door was far too easy to pick. She's too invested in this cover story, letting her guard down foolishly. But I don't mind. I'll capitalize on it and neutralize her.

Dropping to one knee, I look under her bed and grin when I find a special friend in a nice white case. Her vibrator is pink and cute. There's no dust on the box. She doesn't have a man. My grin grows wider. I don't know why. I came here to kill her, not fuck her.

I place the box back where I found it, then look around the room. She has plenty of photos of friends and family. She's in all of them. I stare at her dark brown eyes, the way her lips make a perfect pout, the swell of her luscious

tits in every outfit she wears. It's a shame she set me up. A real shame I have to hit back.

I'm about to walk back into the living room and wait for her when something brushes my leg. I jump back and draw my blade.

A tuxedo cat stares up at me, its white whiskers poking straight out to the sides.

I should've guessed she had a cat from the photos. This guy is in almost every one of them.

"Watch yourself," I growl.

He stares up at me, his green eyes unblinking. Somehow, I know he's a guy. He seems to be almost fist-bumping me in greeting. I don't like it.

I shake off the feeling of surprise and head to the living room, then sit down on her small couch.

The cat follows, jumping up onto the sofa arm beside me, sitting and curling his tail around himself until it rests on top of his paws.

"What?" I cross my arms.

He just blinks.

"What do you want?"

Nothing.

"I'm not a cat person. You might as well fuck off and do cat things. I'm not going to pet you."

Something in the way he looks at me says, 'Yes, you will.'

"No." I tighten my clenched arms.

He blinks lazily.

It's a standoff. I turn away from him and look at the photos beside the small TV. Layla is smiling in them, her too-innocent face not fooling me in the least. I ignore the cat. It's easy. I mean, I was interrogated for three hours that one time I got caught behind enemy lines during the Ukraine thing. Waterboarded, bamboo under the fingernails, the whole nine yards. I didn't crack. This cat isn't going to get to me.

I'm here to do my job. Taking out the competition is often the very first thing that needs to be done before I get to the proper hit.

I don't tell the cat any of this because I'm a grown man, and I don't talk to animals.

Shaking my head, I settle and ignore the tuxedoed feline.

Silence.

Staring.

Staring in silence.

Silently staring.

After several minutes, I shift. "This isn't me losing."

He doesn't move.

"I didn't lose by speaking. It's not the quiet game." I know Layla should be walking in the door any minute now. I shouldn't be bothering with this stupid cat. "I'm not here for you."

His tail twitches just an iota.

I fight it. I keep fighting it.

He keeps staring.

I sigh and lift my hand. With a tentative stroke, I pet his head.

His purr is instant, and he makes himself at home in my lap without a single word of invitation.

I scratch behind his ears. "Asshole."



For being such a small apartment, her closet is a decent size. I crouch inside. My buddy stands outside the door, and I can see him through the crack. Killing his owner might be hard on him, but it has to be done. I won't take him with me. After all, I'm not a cat person, as I told him over and over again during the past hour he spent in my lap.

A key hits the front door lock, and the cat skitters away toward the living room.

"Home sweet home," she calls, and I hear the sound of keys dropping into the bowl on the small entry table. "Well, hello, Paisley. You seem ... happy." She laughs, and I close my eyes at the sound. It's warm and innocent and oh-so-sweet.

It's a put-on, I remind myself. She's an operative.

Two months out of the game, and it's all because of her. I tighten my grip on my knife.

"You are already purring." She walks into the bedroom with the cat--Paisley--in her arms. "What's turned your frown upside-down? You're always so grumpy when I've been at work all day."

She plops onto the bed and rolls to her side, petting and praising the cat. "It was a long day. So long. First, the fluff machine malfunctioned." She

giggles. “Honestly, I think I left it on. You know me. Always daydreaming or thinking about my next design. I’m pretty sure I forgot to turn it off last night. It went haywire. Fluff everywhere. Gia and I cleaned it up. Then Carmen came in and gave me a hard time. She’s been saying for three months straight that we have to keep the shop in tip-top shape for when Mr. Tucker comes to visit.”

He lets her rub his belly. Why didn’t he let *me* rub his belly? I let that go and refocus on her. If she knows when Tucker’s coming to town, she can lead me straight to him. I can take care of two birds with one stone. I slide my knife back into its sheath. For now.

“He’s supposed to be really mean, I think. Anyone who hires Carmen to run one of his stores has to be terrible.” She stands and stretches, then pulls off her cutesy apron. With another pull she’s stripped off her shirt, and when she reaches behind her back to unhook her bra, I don’t look away. I’ve never been a saint, and now is certainly not the time to start.

When she frees those large, beautiful breasts, I forget all about Tucker, the cat, my stint in jail. All I can see is her. And then she strips her pants off. My mouth waters as I take in the cute lacy panties she’s wearing. When she turns and gives me the perfect view of her round ass, I force myself to take a breath, to close my eyes, to do anything but look at her. But she’s still talking to Paisley, her voice a beautiful melody.

“Let’s stay in tonight.” She laughs. “Who am I kidding? We stay in every night.” She starts humming, a few words coming out here and there. Beautiful.

When I open my eyes, she’s wearing an oversized T-shirt and walking toward the closet.

Shit! I press myself back against the wall and reach to slide some clothes in front of me right when the light flips on and the door opens.

“Oh!” she cries.

I should reach for my knife. I don’t. I freeze.

“Paisley!” She scolds the cat as he winds around her feet. “I trip plenty without your help.” She bends over to pet him, so close to me that I catch the scent of her lotion, vanilla and sugar. “Well, you’re probably right. Let’s go no-pants for the night.”

She flips the light back off and closes the door.

I take a breath.

I hesitated. Me. I *never* hesitate. That’s what makes me good at what I do.

But this time? This *woman*? She's done something to me. Maybe those two months in a jail cell have dulled my senses or something. That *has* to be it. Not the cat and definitely not the woman with the dark hair and soulful eyes with a voice like silk.

The plan is still on. Just maybe not right this second. I need to get more intel on when Mr. Tucker will be in town. If Layla can lead me to him, she's worth more to me alive.

I'll take care of all the loose ends later. For now, I'll just keep my eye on her. Watch her closely. *Very* closely.

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I open one eye when a paw hits my cheek to find Paisley staring at me while sitting on the pillow next to mine. His big green eyes beg me to get up. Who needs an alarm clock when you can have a cat instead?

“It’s our day off.” I yawn, reminding him that we don’t have to be up so early. I snuggle deeper into the bed, not wanting to move. Another tap hits my cheek within seconds of my eyes falling closed. I try to ignore it until he nuzzles his head under my chin, letting out a loud purr. We both know he’s going to win this round. He always does. He’s a persistent little thing.

“Fine,” I huff. I reach out and give him a nice long pet before I sit up. He darts off the bed and out of my room to go pace around the kitchen until I get there. I yawn as I stretch, then throw my legs over the side of the bed. Paisley will have to wait until I at least use the bathroom. Before I can even finish sitting down to pee, he’s poking his head into the bathroom to silently tell me to hurry up.

“I’m coming. Jeez. It’s been two seconds.” He can be so bossy sometimes. I get myself together and head down the hallway. This time Paisley follows behind me to make sure I’m doing what I’m supposed to. I grab him a can of wet cat food and put it in a bowl, then place it on the floor. He sniffs it and turns and walks away.

“What the heck?”

He climbs up his cat contraption thing in front of the window to stare out at the birds in the tree only a few feet away. The sun is barely up.

“Whatever. I’m awake. Are you happy?” Still tired from all of the stress

at work yesterday, I drop onto the sofa. “Just because you’re awake doesn't mean I need to be, too. Some of us work and need our sleep on the days we’re home. We don’t have the luxury of lying around the house all day.”

He flicks his tail like he doesn't understand me. I know he does. I don’t care what Gia says. That cat understands everything. He has from the moment he showed up in my apartment. I’d moved in, and there he was. I didn’t really have a choice in the matter of whether he was going to live here or not.

I thought maybe the previous renters forgot him, but when I asked the owner of the complex to check into it, he said they had no idea what I was talking about. Paisley made himself right at home, or maybe it was me who made myself right at home in his place. Doesn’t matter anyway, now that his little furry butt has stolen a piece of my heart.

“What are we going to do today?” I lie down, resting my head on one of my throw pillows and allowing my eyes to fall closed. I peek one open when I hear Paisley jump down from his tree stand. He goes over to the kitchen to finally eat his breakfast. He’s the world's cutest brat.

I must nod off for a moment. When I come to, the room is filled with sunlight. Paisley is fast asleep in one of his many cat beds.

I should take this chance to slip out. I always hate leaving him. He’ll give me the cold shoulder when I come home, but I need to run a few errands. It might be my day off from my full-time job, but that doesn’t mean I don’t have my own stuffed creations to make. Ones that I craft by hand. They’re all custom and stitched with love. I make sure to create each and every one unique.

I make myself get up and head to my bedroom to get ready. I keep it simple with a pair of yoga pants and a baby sweater. It takes more time than anything to wrangle my hair into one of those cute messy buns people put on their head. I never get it right on the first try. Who knew a messy bun could be so hard to get right? It seems to defeat the purpose. I slip on some warm comfy boots before peeking into the living room to see Paisley still out cold.

Quickly, I grab my bag and phone, then slip out the front door. I’m going to have to stop at the pet store and get him something. I lock up, taking the stairs down to my car.

When I turn the ignition I hear a clicking sound over and over. I groan. This can’t be happening. I have to get to the fabric store today. I’ve gotten three new orders for stuffies that I need to fill. These can’t be late. I’ve just

started to get noticed. My reviews online have been killer so far. I don't want to mess this up. I take pride in all the work I do and getting my product to the buyer on time is important.

I try again, but all I get is the same continuous clicking noise. I drop my head forward onto the steering wheel. This is one of those moments that you call your dad or someone in your family to come and help you out. I sigh, knowing that I don't have that option.

Every time something goes wrong, Gia could whip out her phone and call one of her family members. Her family either comes up with a solution or they know someone who could find one to her problem. It makes me a little sad that I don't have that luxury. I know that if I call Gia, she will get someone to help me but I don't want to do that. She'd already helped me out big time yesterday to get me out of the cotton explosion that occurred.

I jump when my phone rings from inside of my bag. I go for it, knowing it has to be Gia with it being my day off. When I look at the screen I don't recognize the number.

"Hello." I answer.

"Hey, Layla. It's Tony."

"Gia's brother Tony?" Of course it is. His voice isn't that easy to forget. His Italian accent is much thicker than Gia's.

"I might have nabbed your number from her phone. Sorry about that." He doesn't sound the least bit sorry. In fact, I can picture him giving me one of those many smiles he gave me yesterday when he fixed that machine and saved my behind from being fired. He stopped grinning at me so much after Gia smacked him in the back of the head a couple times.

"Oh," is all I can think to say. "Is Gia okay?" The thought suddenly hits me that something might be wrong.

"She's good. She's not why I was calling. I wanted to see if you wanted to hang out."

Oh God. Is he asking me out?

"I can't. My car won't start and--"

"I'll come over and check it out. I'm sure I can fix it. You saw how fast I fixed that machine yesterday." True. "Text me your address, and I'll be right over."

"Thanks," I say, not wanting to turn down the help but also unsure of what agreeing to this might mean.

"See you in a minute. Hold tight." He hangs up. I send him my address

and wonder if I should tell Gia or not. She told me to stay away from her brother, but if she were here right now she'd probably be calling one of her brothers to come help me.

I fiddle with my phone for a minute and get distracted by a coupon from the fabric store. It's only good for today. I have to get there. Every dollar I can save matters and brings me closer to being able to work only for myself.

I scream when a tap sounds on my window. All I can really see is a thick leg and equally impressive crotch. I don't have to see his face to know he's not Tony. This man is big. He leans down, peering into my window. My eyes lock with a pair of bright blue eyes that hold me in a trance. I've never seen eyes so blue in my whole life. I'm lost in them for a few moments.

"Pop the hood," the big man tells me, breaking me from the spell.

"Ah." I look around the inside the car, not sure how to pop the hood. He grabs the door handle and pulls, then reaches in and grabs a lever I've never noticed before. My hood pops open.

"Sounds like your battery." His voice is deep, skimming across my skin. I suck in a breath and nod, because I have no idea what's happening to my body. It's practically humming.

I watch as he moves around the car and opens my hood, which blocks my view of him. I try to get out but am jerked back by the seatbelt, which causes the entire car to jolt. In the blink of an eye, the hulk of a man is back in front of me, those blue eyes once again staring into mine.

"You okay?"

I nod. What is wrong with me? Why can't I speak? He continues looking at me, his eyes roaming all over. For some reason, I feel the need to show my hands.

"Seatbelt got me." I reach down and click the button. He takes a step back so I can get out.

"You're tall." I state the obvious as I lean my head all the way back to look up at him. Maybe I should just stick to not talking at all. "Handsome too." I really need to zip it. I did *not* just say that.

A slow smile pulls at his lips as my face turns a bright red.

"Layla!" I turn at the sound of my name being shouted. The giant shifts, blocking me so that I'm unable to see anything.

"You okay, Layla?"

"Oh, hey, Tony." I peek around the man to see Tony standing there, sizing up the man in front of me.

“She’s fine. You can leave.” Again, the man’s deep voice does something to me.

“I’ll let her tell me that.” Tony tries to sound authoritative, but there is no matching this man’s presence. He has a *don’t mess with me* vibe going on.

“Guys.” I tap the man's arm. I’m not sure what’s going on between them, but I don’t have time for this. I hold up my phone. “I really need to make this sale. Fabric is half off today.”

They both turn to look at me.

I place my hands on my hips, letting them know I’m serious about this. “What?” I shrug. “That's a steal!”

She's taking this deep cover thing to heart a little too much. A fabric sale?

"Can you fix it?" She peers under the hood as the other man approaches.

"Yes." I have a knife ready and waiting for him, but I don't draw it. Not yet. Is he an operative, too?

"I got this, man." Tony steps closer.

"You can go." I turn my back on him and re-attach the cables to the battery. I'd intended to give her some car trouble, then possibly kidnap her for interrogation while she was distracted. But two rows over, an older man was unloading groceries, so I stayed my hand. Then this bozo with the mustache showed up. No way am I letting him take my prize right out from under me. This woman is *mine*. Professionally speaking, of course. Nothing more.

"I'm not going anywhere." His voice is a little higher in challenge. "She called me for help."

"Actually, you called me, but—"

"Doesn't matter."

I stand and turn. "Don't interrupt her."

Tony's eyes narrow. "Get the fuck out of here, man."

A knife is too much in this situation. I realize that. It doesn't mean I don't want to gut him. But I fist my hands instead.

"Will it start?" Layla asks me, her upturned face a magnet for my gaze. She's beautiful, her messy hair piled on her head and her brown eyes a

mystery in the low light of the parking deck. She drips innocence, but it's all part of the show, I remind myself. I spent two months on the inside thanks to her.

"It'll start." I reach back and slam the hood.

Tony jumps a hair.

I smirk.

"Great. Thanks for your help." She spins and hurries back to the driver's side.

"Hey, wait." Tony skitters past. "Want to watch a movie later?"

"Can't." She gets in and fastens her seatbelt. "I have too many stuffies to make."

"You have what?" He shakes his head, then starts to run around her car. "I'll come with you."

I beat him to the passenger door, open it, and slide in.

She looks over at me with big eyes. "What are you--"

"I need to pick up some fabric, too." I slam the door as Tony reaches for it, then hit the lock button so he can't get in the back. "Let's go." I use my other hand to shift the car into drive as Tony yells for me to get the fuck out of the car.

"I should tell you to get out."

"You could, and I'd get out if you ask, but I'll take my time." I lean back, getting comfortable as Tony's face gets even redder. "Got an old knee injury that acts up something fierce when I try to get out of small cars. Takes a while."

She taps the brake, then glances at her phone in the center console. "I *have* to get to the sale. There are doorbusters, and I'm already running late."

"Better step on it, then."

"Layla, you don't even know this guy." Tony yells and knocks on her window.

"I'm Kent." That part's true. I kept my first name when I joined the Brotherhood. Everything else is a smokescreen.

"Kent." She nibbles her lip. "Are you a serial killer or anything?"

"No. I just need some fabric." That part's not so true.

She stares at me as Tony yanks on the back door, then rolls down her window a few inches. "His name is Kent. We're going to get fabric. If Gia doesn't hear from me, she'll know Kent has murdered me."

"I'll come with you." He yanks again.

I hover my finger over the lock button, just in case Layla tries to open up for him.

“Don’t be silly. You don’t need any fabric. Bye, Tony.” She rolls the window up, hits the gas, and sends us up the ramp and out onto the street.

“This is a bad idea.” She speeds along the city street.

“Driving like a maniac? Yes.” I cross my arms.

“No, bringing you with me. Where did you even come from? I’ve never seen you in the building before.”

“I was visiting a friend.”

“Who?” She cuts her eyes over toward me.

“Just a guy I know.”

“What’s his name?”

“Not sure, but he’s got a thing for formal wear.” *Tuxedos in particular.*

“What?” Her eyebrow pops up.

“Why are you so intent on maintaining this cover story?” I have the urge to push her brown hair behind her ear so I can get a better look at her profile. I don’t.

“Cover story?”

“Making stuffed animals. Seems like a lot of work for a one-time job.”

She slows and stops for a red light. “My stuffies are one of a kind, but I wouldn’t say they’re a one-time job. I’ve already got a nice little shop on Etsy and I sell some here and there at trade shows if I can get one of the last-minute bargain booths.” She stares at me, and her mouth drops open just the slightest bit.

When she looks at me like that, a thrill of heat races along my skin.

I swallow hard. “Green.”

“What?” She blinks.

“Green light.”

“Oh.” She whips her head back to the front and gasses it.

“Just seems like you’ve gone to a lot of trouble to get close to Tucker.”

“Tucker? The guy who owns Fill-a-Friend?” She turns into the fabric store parking lot. “I’ve never met him. He’s supposed to be coming to inspect the store soon. Wait.” She parks and turns to me. “How did you know I worked there?”

I humor her and reach up to tap the nametag hanging from her rear view mirror.

“Oh.” She smiles sheepishly. “Obvious.”

“I didn’t know there was another contract out on him.”

She cocks her head to the side. “I’m not a contract worker. They pay me like usual.”

I smirk. “They do, eh? Tell me, when you did that set-up, did you think I wouldn’t find out?”

“What set-up?”

“The one with all the stuffed dogs.” The one I did time for.

She stiffens. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Sure.” I nod. “Sure you don’t, kitten.”

“Okay, you’re strange.” She does that long stare again, her eyes focused on mine as if she can see the real me inside. “And ridiculously handsome.” Her cheeks blush a light pink.

I get the urge to reach for her, pull her across the console, and show her just how angry I am with her. But I’d do it with my tongue, my hands all over her body, and my cock wedged deep inside her.

“Did I say handsome? Pretend I didn’t say that.” She coughs into her hand. “Strange. Yes, you are definitely strange. But even strange people can appreciate a sale. Come on. Let’s load up on some good bargains.”

The handsome man who claims his name is Kent follows me up and down each aisle watching my every move as I go. He never takes his eyes off me. I can feel his stare even when I'm turned away from him. He's making it really hard for me to concentrate. How am I supposed to get the best bargains with this gigantic distraction following me around? I peek over my shoulder at him.

He's still holding the basket I grabbed when we walked in. He'd insisted on carrying it for me.

He's not looking at anything on the shelves. Nope. His eyes are trained only on me.

"Are you looking at my ass?" I've heard people say men like women's butts in yoga pants, but I never gave much thought to what mine looks like in a pair before. I try to look but only turn in a half circle, realizing I'll need a mirror for this.

"Where do you keep your weapons wearing such tight pants?" There he goes again saying weird stuff. He has the weirdest way of phrasing things.

"I wouldn't call my fabric scissors weapons, necessarily." I give him a funny look. This must be his downfall for being so handsome. He's not all there upstairs. "I leave them at home."

"Can you move?" a woman snips at me.

I jump out of her way as she grabs a bolt of ugly orange fabric off the shelf. Because she's rude, I keep my mouth shut and don't bother telling her that the satiny stuff she picked is impossible to work with. I get it. We all have stuff to get and the sale is only today and while supplies last, but sheesh.

Still, there's no need to be rude.

Kent snatches the fabric right out of the woman's hand. *Oh shit.* Maybe he does mean business about this fabric. I guess he really *is* into getting a bargain.

"Give that back!" the dark haired woman snaps at him.

He doesn't bother to look down at her. He dangles the bolt at a height she can't reach. He keeps his gaze on me. "Did you want this, kitten?"

"No. It's not only the color of Cheetos vomit, but the fabric is unworkable."

He goes to hand it back to the woman, but she doesn't take it. Her insistence on having it has suddenly subsided.

"Never mind," she snips again, stomping off. Kent tosses it back on the shelf.

"You can't grab things from people." I try on a scolding tone.

He shrugs like *What are they going to do about it?* He has a point. He's huge, and someone would have to be an idiot to mess with him.

His blue eyes seem to pierce right through me. "You can't let people be rude to you."

"Wait! Don't change the subject. You were looking at my ass." I cross my arms over my chest.

"You changed the subject," he points out.

I had. Damn it. I want to stomp my foot, but I don't.

"Don't you need your own basket?" Mine is still empty. Gah! He's distracting me.

"I haven't seen anything that's caught my eye."

"I beg to differ because your eyes were on my ass." Ha! I got him with that one. I'd high-five someone if they were around, but it's only the two of us.

"Let me rephrase. I haven't seen anything I can use the coupon on."

I stand there staring at him for a second. Does he mean me? He has to mean me, right? I thought he was going to kiss me in the car. Then he didn't. I'd be a liar if I didn't admit that I'd wanted him to. There's something that's pulling me to him. He's a strange bird, but I find myself wanting to spend time with him. And he hasn't serial killed me yet, so there's that.

"You have no idea what I'd do for a good coupon." I try to sound sassy like Gia would, but I'm not sure it comes out right.

He smiles down at me. I think he's trying to fight a laugh. I turn and

wander off. I tell myself I will not give my ass an extra wiggle, but I do.

I pull out my phone, double-checking my orders as I finally get down to what I came here for. I need to make sure I get everything that I need.

Kent follows me around and piles each bolt of fabric into his thick arms as if they weigh nothing. This is why I didn't get a cart. I knew that I'd end up buying more than I could afford. But he seems to be able to hold even more than a cart, which is going to hurt when I get to the checkout. Sure, in the long haul it's a good deal because everything is discounted, but I just don't have that kind of extra money lying around. I need to stick to my budget.

"You don't need anything?" I lift my eyebrow in question. He'd claimed he needed some things from this store, yet he hasn't chosen one bolt of fabric for himself.

"I didn't say that." He puts my high pile of bolts down onto the back counter where the store employees cut it into yards.

While I get busy placing my cutting orders, his eyes dart around the store like he's scoping the place out. He disappears down an aisle, and when I'm almost finished collecting my pile of fabric along with the price tickets, he comes back to me. With an easy scoop, he grabs all my fabrics and ushers me to one of the checkout lines.

"Do you have a rewards card with us?" The girl at checkout twirls a piece of her hair around her finger while smiling at Kent.

"Nope." He continues unloading the basket.

"How about you give me your phone number?" She bats her lashes at him. "To sign you up for a rewards card."

I think I let out an audible gasp at the audacity of this girl, causing her to look at me.

"I have a card."

"Fine." She turns to me, the smile gone.

"We're together," I say before I realize how it sounds. "I mean--"

"You heard her. We're together." Kent winks down at me. You could knock me over with a feather. "Give her your card, kitten."

"Did you call me kitten?" I whisper.

"He did." The cashier rolls her eyes and holds her hand out for my card. I dig it out of my purse and pass it to her. I watch as she rings up everything, and I'm completely unable to look back at Kent even though I can feel him staring right at me. He hovers over me like a giant, and I can't say I mind it

one bit.

“Cash or card?” she asks.

I pull out my phone for her to scan my coupon, especially seeing my bill is a smidge under two hundred bucks. I know as soon as she scans my phone that the discount will slice it in half, maybe even more. I shouldn't get so excited about a coupon, but I can't help myself.

“That doesn't start until tomorrow.” She smirks at me. I turn it around to look down at the date.

“Oh.” My shoulders drop. “Oh, no.”

I jump when Kent smacks down the two hundred dollars.

“I got it, kitten.”

“But-“ I stop talking when he wraps his arm around my shoulder and uses his other to grab the bags. He doesn't wait for the change, and instead, guides me out of the store and toward my car.

“You can't pay for my stuff.”

“I already did.” He opens my passenger side door. In a daze, I get in. He goes around and stuffs his giant self into the driver's seat. He holds his hand out, clearly waiting for me to give him the keys.

“You didn't have to do that.” I hand them over.

My car starts without any trouble this time.

“You're really good at your job.” He shakes his head as he pulls out of the parking lot.

“You've never even seen one of my stuffies.” How would he know if they're good or not? I guess I did get some really good stuff, so maybe that spoke for itself?

“Stop!” I scream.

Kent slams on the brakes. The seatbelt keeps me from flying forward. “I need to go to that pet store.” I point to Pet Heaven. We almost passed it. I *cannot* go back home after slipping out on Paisley without a special surprise.

He looks at me like I'm crazy.

“I can't go home empty-handed. Paisley will give me the cold shoulder all day. Trust me. You don't want his stink eye.”

“I know,” I think he mumbles as he turns into the parking lot.

She opens the door to her apartment and I walk in, my arms full of fabric and cat treats. “You didn’t have to carry all of this for me, but thank you!”

Paisley wakes from his spot on the back of the couch, his green gaze verging on accusatory.

“I’m sorry, but there was a sale, okay?” She hurries over and pets him. “Well, truthfully, the sale isn’t till tomorrow, but that’s not important. What’s important is that I have enough supplies to fulfill all our orders. That means more cat treats for you in the long run, so stop being mad about me ditching you.”

He doesn’t seem inclined to stop being mad, but he switches his attention to me as I set the bags on her small kitchen counter.

With a flick of his tail, he jumps from the sofa to the counter and sits right in front of me, a faint purr in his throat.

“Rude.” She walks over and peers at him. “What are you doing?”

“Not a cat person.” I hold my hands up.

He blinks. It’s the same dance all over again.

This time I do away with the standoff and give in. Holding my hand out, I sigh as he rubs his little head against my fingertips.

“He likes you.” Layla steps back, her eyes open wide. “This is ... wow. He never likes anyone. Whenever Gia comes over, he hides the entire time.”

I scratch under his chin just the way he likes.

“You have a way with him.” She leans over to watch him as he nuzzles against me.

“I have to hand it to you. Getting a cat, buying all these stuffed animal things--” I jerk my chin toward her shelves of dolls. “You really throw yourself into your work.”

“I don’t buy them.” She pats one of the fabric bags. “I make them.”

“That’s what I mean. I was sore at first after that dirty trick you pulled, but the more I see how seriously you take your craft, the more I respect it.”

She cocks her head to the side. “Dirty trick?”

“Right.” I smirk. “You’re nothing more than a ditzy shop employee with a compelling backstory and no ulterior motives.”

“Yes.” She nods. “Wait, you think I’m ditzy?” She puts her hands on her hips.

“The whole stuffing incident you told me about, cotton filling all over the store?”

Her cheeks turn pink. “Okay, maybe that was ditzy. It was just a mistake is all. And everything got straightened out.”

“So what’s your plan for Tucker?” I turn to her, facing her as she looks up at me.

“I guess I want to impress him? I mean, I don’t think he’ll put my creations in his stores or anything, but I do a pretty good business selling them online and at other, smaller specialty shops.”

“That’s how you’re going to get close to him? The stuffed animals?” Clever. She’s far more cunning than I could’ve anticipated. “A sales pitch. That’s perfect. He’ll never see you coming.”

“Of course he will. I’m going to make an appointment.”

“Sure.” I chuckle. She’s something.

“Well, um, thanks?” She glances at the bags, then back at me. “But I kind of need to get to work, so ...”

“Are you kicking me out?”

“I don’t want to. You’re pretty much the most handsome man I’ve ever--” She stops herself and clears her throat. “What I meant to say was that I have a lot of custom stuffies to make, so you should probably go.”

“You’re seriously going to make some of these?” I hitch my thumb at the wall of cute, strange animals.

“I made all those. I’m going to ship most of them out once I get the rest of the others made. Those”—she points to the shelves—“are orders from my shop, premades. What we bought today is for custom commission pieces that are specific.”

“Professional.” I don’t know why, but her attention to detail is a turn-on. Look at what she can make with nothing more than her hands and some fabric. She missed her calling. Doing wet work is a total waste on a woman like this. She’s an artist, and a gorgeous one at that.

“But thank you for everything. I’ll be able to pay you back once I get the orders shipped, so--”

“No need to pay me back.”

“I should, though.”

“You should do whatever you want to do, kitten.” I move closer to her.

Her breath hitches.

“Is there anything in particular you want to do right now?”

“I-I ... I, um ...” Her voice is breathy, adorable. When her tongue darts out to wet her lips, something inside me winds tight. Like a spring waiting to be released.

I take her hand and bring it to my lips. Dropping light kisses on her fingertips, I watch her eyes close, her lips part.

“Why don’t you take a little break before getting to work?” I pull her to me and tilt her chin up.

“What are you--”

I don’t think, don’t hesitate, just kiss her.

She makes a surprised sound, but I hold her close, pressing her against me as I run my tongue along her lips. Her fingers curl in my shirt, clutching me tightly as her mouth opens just a little. I press my advantage, sweeping my tongue against hers.

She pulls a groan from me, my body tightening, my heart beating faster. I’ve never felt this sort of need, this heat of pure desire that stampedes through my veins. Did she dose me? Slip me something? Because I’ve thrown my usual caution out the window and lost myself in her.

When a low moan rises in her throat, I grip her waist and lift her onto the counter. Nudging between her thighs, I slant my mouth over hers, getting a perfect taste of all she has to offer. Paisley jumps down and struts away, but I can’t waste any time on him, not when I have my own kitten purring for me.

Running a hand through her hair, I grip the strands and pull. Breaking the kiss, I move to her throat and suck her sweet skin between my teeth. Her gasp sends goosebumps racing down my back, and I have the urge to strip her right here and fuck her raw on this counter.

Not just an urge—it’s the best idea I’ve had in a long time. With a shove,

I lean over and swipe the bags from the counter.

She yelps.

“What?” I return to her neck, licking up to her ear.

“I have to make my--” She gasps when I cup one of her breasts. “Orders.” She swallows hard as I rub the stiff nipple through her shirt. “And I don’t know you.” She throws her head back when I pinch her tight tip. “Please, Kent.”

I grit my teeth and pull back to look her in the eyes. “Are you really going to make stuffed animals?” I brush her lips with mine. “Instead of letting me fuck you on this counter until you come with my name on those pretty lips?”

Her grip tightens on my shirt. “You are filthy.”

“I think you like it, kitten.” I run my teeth along her jawline.

“I ... I do.” She shakes her head as if trying to wake from a dream. “But I have to do these orders. *I have to.*” She flattens her palms against my chest and pushes.

I groan and glance down at the situation in my pants. Her eyes drift southward, too, and grow wide when she sees the tent I’m pitching.

“Oh.” She licks her lips but shakes her head again. “Nope. Have to work. People are counting on me.”

“I need you, too, kitten.” I take her palm and press it to my cock.

Her eyelashes flutter and she gives me a slow, tentative stroke. “I want to.” She meets my eyes and pulls her hand away. “But I can’t. I mean, I don’t even know you. We just met, and I need to be smart, and there are all these goals I have, and I can’t reach them if I don’t make these--”

“Stuffies?” I rub my jaw and consider her, the thundering pulse at her throat, the hard nipples, and I can just bet her panties are soaked. Fuck, I want all of her right now. But she’s playing the long game. Really getting into character so she can take the kill right out from under me. If I’m not careful, I’ll fall into her honey trap and leave empty-handed.

I need to think with the right head. We have the same target--Tucker. I just need to find a way to get to him first.

“I’m going.” I hate saying those fucking words. But they’re necessary. I’ll be back. I’m beginning to suspect Layla has gotten under my skin, and I honestly don’t know why she hasn’t tried to knife me yet. But maybe she likes the competition.

“Going, right.” She hops down from the counter, but I don’t miss the hint of disappointment in her voice. “I have to work. Yep. You should go.”

“Give me your number.” I pull my phone out. “Please.”

She rattles off her number. I send her a text to check it’s not some burner. A buzz sounds from her bag.

“You got me.” She smiles.

“Not yet. But soon.” I fist her shirt and pull her to me again, giving her one more rough kiss that holds a promise of what’s to come.

She may be the slickest operative I’ve ever met, but I intend to teach her a thing or two about how I like to nail my targets. Hard, rough, and extremely thorough.

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I drop the last box harder than I should, but I feel frustrated with my last order for the day. It took everything in me to concentrate long enough to make all the stuffies properly, and this last one is taxing me.

“Sorry,” I apologize to the pandacorn. The horn gave me more problems than it should have, but I got it done. It’s turned out nicely, and I think the customer will be happy.

With all the boxes finally done, I let myself check my phone. When I first started working, I was obsessively looking at it and getting nothing done. I forced myself to put it away. I made myself a promise that I wouldn’t get it back out until I’d gotten everything done that I needed to.

Not that putting my phone away helped much. All I could think about was that kiss. The way he’d touched me. My body warms all over again just thinking about it. I wanted to let him stay so badly, but I knew I couldn’t. Not if I wanted to get everything done today. Business before pleasure. I need the money. I don’t have the luxury of turning down work or causing the deliveries to be late because I was fooling around. It’s not only for bills, but to pay Kent back, too. He acted as though it was no big deal, but I don’t like being in debt to anyone. I’d rather go without than owe someone.

I open my kitchen drawer and grab my phone. When I tap the screen, it doesn’t light up. I huff and take it over to the charger. I wonder if he texted me. I stare at the phone, willing it to power on faster. Of course the one minute it takes feels like eternity.

My heart jumps when I see a bunch of missed texts. I click them and

Gia's name comes up.

"Oh, crap." I've missed 20 texts from her and three calls. They start off asking me what I'm up to, then morph into her finding out about her brother stopping by and then about my mystery man.

I go to call her back when a banging sound comes from my front door.

"You better be dead in there!" Gia shouts as she keeps on pounding. "Wait. Don't be dead. You better be asleep in there." I walk over to the door as quickly as possible, knowing she's probably so worried. I only hesitate a second before I pull it open.

"No one can sleep through that."

She pushes past me. "What the hell? I've been worried about you." She drops her giant purse before giving me a huge, hard hug, squeezing all the air out of me. For someone so small, she sure is strong.

"Sorry. I didn't mean to worry you. I've been working." She lets me go. I don't mention Kent or the kissing we'd been doing before I started working.

"I know you're not used to someone worrying about you, but you're going to have to get used to it. You can't drop off the map," she half scolds me. At least I think she's trying to be tough with me, but in the sweetest of ways. Her eyes start wandering around my place, and I know she's looking for Paisley.

I'm sure he's under my bed or in some other hiding place I don't know about. Especially since Gia is here. Usually as soon as he hears her voice, he books it and I don't see him until she leaves. He does it with everyone. I've told Gia not to get offended. Yet, he hadn't done it with Kent. He'd warmed up to him instantly, which is odd. Then again, Kent is odd.

"I know. I'm sorry. I wanted to get all of my work finished, and I knew I wouldn't if I was distracted."

She lifts one of her perfect eyebrows at me.

"So you're going to make me pull it out of you. Aren't you?" She squints her eyes at me. "You sure this is how you want to play it?"

"What?" I know exactly what she's talking about.

"So you didn't meet some strange guy, allow him to give your battery a charge, and then drive off with him?"

"You're always telling me I should date." I turn, heading for the fridge to get a Coke.

"Not strange men who just hop in your car!"

"I think your brother wants to date me."

Gia makes a gagging sound. “Don’t.” She holds her hand up. “You’re not even his type.”

I look down at myself. I was Kent’s type. Or at least his penis thought so. That had been crystal clear. A shiver shoots through me at what he felt like in my hand. I did that. It’s kind of a rush.

“Tony has a type?” I thought he slept with everyone.

“For his dick? No.” She steals my Coke from my hand. “Now for dating, yes. His type is bitch that I want to punch.” She shrugs.

“So you didn’t want to punch me when I didn’t answer my phone today?” I tease her.

“I can’t believe he stole your number from my phone.” She grits her teeth.

I’m sure Tony took a punch for that. Gia doesn’t mind throwing hands when necessary.

“I got all my orders done.” I point to the boxes by the door, doing my best to steer her away from asking me any more questions for the moment.

She stares at me. Hard. For way too long.

I crack. “He went to the fabric store with me and then to the pet store.” Gia never lets anything go.

“What else?” She takes a sip of her Coke knowing there’s more. Am I that easy to read?

“We might have made out some.”

A wicked smile pulls at her lips. “Tony said he was ugly.”

“Is not!” I say way too quickly.

“I know. He was pissed. So pissed he ratted on himself to me so I’d come over here and find out who the guy was.”

Not just a guy. *Kent*. “Can someone be too handsome?” I still don’t even know where he came from. I would have noticed him if he lived around here. He isn’t only handsome, but he’s massive in size. There’s no way I could’ve missed him before.

“Too handsome? No.” She drops into one of my chairs. I use the scratched and dented table to work most of the time. One day I’ll have a giant workspace to create in. At least, I hope so.

“Well, he is.” I grab my phone and drink to sit down with her. “But he says weird stuff.”

“What kind of weird stuff? Like he wants to tie you to the bed?”

“No,” I hiss. My face heats. Not because I’m embarrassed, but because

my body is liking her idea. I've never thought about being tied down. Lovely, now another thing my mind won't be able to stop thinking about. I'll likely blurt it out the next time I see Kent, because that seems to be a problem of mine when I'm around him.

"Nothing wrong with being tied down." She takes the words right out of my head.

I keep my mouth shut this time. I might have thought about it but I didn't say it. This time at least.

"So. Give me the details."

"I don't know. He helped me with my car and then sort of muscled his way into tagging along with me. But the way he words stuff is just weird. Him going with me to the store and then paying for all of my stuff was strange, too. He even bought Paisley's treats and toys."

Her nose wrinkles. "You should tell him bribery doesn't work on Paisley." I look anywhere but at Gia. She gasps. "Oh my God. Paisley likes him, doesn't he?"

"Maybe." I wince.

"I don't know if I like this guy or not." She shakes her head.

"It was cute. Watching them together."

"You're so smitten already. Fine. I guess I like him." She reaches for my phone, but I beat her to it. "What? Is he texting you dick pics or something?"

"I don't know, because you got here before I could check my messages."

She leans back, a self-satisfied look on her face. "I notice you didn't seem turned off by the idea of him sending you dick pics."

"No comment." I look down at my phone and open my texts. I see I have one other missed message. It's from Kent! But just one. He could be waiting for a reply from me before texting more. Not everyone is as impatient as Gia, but for some reason I find I want him to be that way with me.

"Did he ask you out? What did he say?" Gia fires off the questions faster than I can read.

Kent: Be back later with dinner.

"He's coming over!" I pop up from my chair. I am a *mess* right now. He hasn't given me a solid time of when he'll arrive and since I hadn't checked my messages sooner, it could mean that he'll be here any second. Crap.

"Right now?" Gia pops up with me. She grabs the phone out of my hand and looks at the text.

"This man doesn't mess around. He didn't even ask. Look at the period at

the end of that sentence.” She hands the phone back to me.

I stupidly look at the period. “Is that bad?” I was enjoying how forward he was.

“Nah. He knows what he wants. I can respect that.”

I smile down at the phone. Me. He wants me.

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*M*y phone rings. I want to ignore it. But I can't. Not when the skull and crossbones appear on the screen.

"Kent," I answer.

"Brother Kent. Glad you're out of the clink."

"You could've gotten me out earlier." I pick a bottle of wine from the not-too-shabby selection at the local grocery store.

"You needed to be taught a lesson." Sister Jezebel sighs. "We've been over this."

"A lesson? I'm an excellent member of the Brotherhood, one who's--"

"Botched more than a few jobs," she finishes for me.

I grip the wine bottle tighter. "I didn't botch anything."

"Your attention to detail needs some fine-tuning."

"I pay attention to detail." I could tell her that right now I'm on the trail of a top-level operative, someone that would be a great asset for the Brotherhood. But I don't. They want to punish me? Fine. I'll keep that bit of information to myself.

"Why is Tucker still alive?" Her tone is back to business. "That contract is due to expire in a week."

"Since when do contracts expire?"

"Since the client failed to make the final payment. She has one more week to cough up the money or the contract on Tucker will be canceled and a new one put out on her."

"We take credit?"

"No." She bristles. "But her financials were solid. Or, at least they

seemed that way.”

“Sounds like I’m not the only one who doesn’t catch all the details, eh, Sister Jezebel?”

“Dust Tucker in seven days or forfeit the pay-out.”

“I’ll get him.” I swallow the bitter pill that I’ll have to take him out from under Layla. “Hey, are you aware the client put out a contract with other outfits?”

“She hasn’t. The Brotherhood requires exclusivity. You know the rules.”

I shake my head, but I don’t bother arguing.

She clears her throat. “Get it done. If you don’t, the board might take action against you, given your past performance.”

“Is that a threat?”

“Just a warning.” Her clipped tone is starting to chafe. “Goodbye, Brother Kent.” The line goes silent.

“Fuck you very much, too, Sister Jezebel.” I know what “action by the board” entails. A bullet in my skull and an unmarked grave. I’m not going out like that.

I shove the phone into my pocket and turn to find a store employee gawking at me, her wide eyes on the now-broken bottle of wine in my grip. Fuck.



I use my knee to knock on her door since my hands are full. She opens it quickly and smiles. I would scold her for not checking to see who it is first, but of course she’s likely more deadly than anyone who comes knocking. Except me.

“I got it all done.” She closes the door behind me as I carry the food into her kitchen. The small table is covered in boxes, and the ones on top are open.

“You made this?” I pluck a stuffie from the topmost box. “What is it?” I peer at its rainbow horn and the rest of it.

“Pandacorn.” She scoots next to me, her arm grazing mine. “The horn took me longer than I intended, but it’s done. I’m surprised my sewing machine didn’t combust with all the stuff I’ve made today.”

A pandacorn. Okay. “It’s really ... cute.” I don’t know how else to

describe its big anime eyes and soft exterior.

“Thanks.” She gently takes it from me and puts it back in the box, then wraps tissue paper around it. “I need to get these to the post office first thing tomorrow, then I have a shift at the toy store.”

I can't seem to stop watching her, the way her wavy hair tickles the edge of her face, the glint of her eyes, the cute little freckle high up on her right cheek, and the way her loose T-shirt falls just short of covering her round ass in her leggings. That ass could bring me to my knees. I want to drop down right now, turn her around, rip a hole in the fabric, and tongue her clit while I grip that fine, fine ass.

“Kent?”

“Yes?” I snap back to the present.

“Whatever you brought smells amazing.” Her nimble fingers work with careful precision as she finishes adding the shipping material around the pandacorn and closes the box.

I force myself to quiet my filthy thoughts. After all, she's a professional, one who puts in time and effort to make her cover story as real as possible. Just look at all these boxes and the explosion of fabric bits and stuffing all over the place. She doesn't hold back, and I have to admit, the things she's made--I lift my gaze to the now-empty shelves--are works of art. Ones that people happily pay for.

“You sold all your stuffies?” I point to the shelves.

“Yep. They all found their forever homes.” She turns to the food bags and starts searching around in them. “Oh my God, I love Italian!”

“I figured.” I'd done a little recon on that dick Tony. Turns out his sister is Layla's best friend, and their family owns an Italian restaurant that Layla has frequented quite a few times.

“You went to Carnelli's.” She pulls out a breadstick and offers it to me. “It is so, so good. Here.”

“You have it. I got it for you.” I look at the cabinets. “Plates?”

She points to the cabinet behind me. I carefully scoop the boxes into my arms, her eyes wide as I maneuver them into the living room and place them in the same neat pile close to the door. Paisley appears from the hall and immediately begins inspecting the stack. I give him a quick pet, though I silently inform him that I'm not a cat person. He rubs his head against my fingers and his knowing expression silently informs me I'm full of shit.

“Those have to weigh ... I don't even know. You're strong.” She's

stopped mid-chew as I grab the plates and quickly lay everything out on the table.

“Sit.” I gesture and open a couple drawers before finding a corkscrew.

“I’m starving. I know this is so rude of me to dig into your food and eat when--”

“Eat. I brought the food for you, kitten. I want you to eat. You’ve been working hard.” I pull out the cork, find nothing but coffee cups, and use those when Layla informs me she doesn’t have any wine glasses.

“I don’t like coffee, but coffee cups are the cheapest sort of glasses you can get at the Goodwill.” She shrugs, her wine glass declaring her “Husband of the Year,” and cuts a tiny piece of lasagna.

I cut a bigger piece and scoop it onto her plate, then do the same with the spaghetti, cheese manicotti, and the chicken parmesan. She doesn’t refuse, and as she digs in, I do, too. Turns out, she was right. The Italian food is good, only slightly Americanized.

“Not a caffeine addict, huh?” I’m more of Red Bull man, myself.

“I should be. But it’s always bitter to me. It would probably help me when I have to work a shift at the store, then stay up late and do orders. Sometimes I get a rush order for a birthday or something.” Her eyes light up. “And I stop everything and make it.” She leans across the table. “And sometimes, the parent sends me a photo of their child with the stuffie *I* made for them, and ...” She leans back and fans her watery eyes. “It really makes it all worth it.”

“Wow, that’s kind of amazing.” My heart seems to boom, each beat louder and fuller than the last. But only I can hear it, and I’m the only one who can feel the strange, warm sensation suffusing every cell in my body. I know what’s causing it. Layla. Her excitement. The undeniable *goodness* in what she’s saying. How did she ever wind up as an assassin?

We eat as Paisley sits perched on top of the boxes, his green eyes relaxed but still alert.

“You never told me what outfit you’re with.” I sip my coffee cup wine.

“Outfit?”

“Red Dragons?” I spear a piece of manicotti and savor the slightly al dente pasta and the salty bite of cheese.

“I’ve made a few red dragons. One was actually super cute. I did this pretty silver thread along its back with shimmery sequins.” She looks up as if trying to remember it. “The other one was scarier, but they’re all cute in their

own way.” She gives me a curious look. “So, what do you do? I suppose lurking around in parking garages and carrying shopping bags isn’t very lucrative.”

I suppose I should stick to my cover story since she’s so deeply engaged in hers. “I’m a ribbon salesman.”

“Ribbon?”

“Yep. I was at the store a couple of months ago to sell my premium ribbon for use on the stuffed animals. Mr. Tucker was supposed to be in town so I could meet with him, but I was ... detained ... at the last minute.”

She sips her wine as if it’s hot coffee, her innocent tone utterly beguiling. “I’m sorry you missed your meeting. What happened?”

She knows exactly what happened. After all, she’s the one who filled my black Range Rover to the brim with stuffed animals. All of them dogs. All of them bearing her store’s logo. That’s what got me two months on the inside.

“Things got in the way.” I shrug but hold her gaze.

“Oh, well I hope it’s all cleared up now. But I know how you feel. He never showed. I wanted a meeting with Mr. Tucker, too.” She polishes off her lasagna, and I open the tiramisu and cut her off a large piece.

“Of course you did.” I smirk.

“I’m stuffed.” She waves me away, but I won’t be denied.

“I saw you eyeing the container.”

She smiles, mischief in her eyes. “Okay, maybe I saved a little room after all.”

“Good.” The dessert is sweet, the lady fingers melting in my mouth. As I watch her lick her fork, I can think of plenty more things I’d like to taste tonight.

Looking up, her cheeks redden. “Sorry. It was just so good.”

“I’m glad you liked it.” I swipe our cleaned plates and place them in the sink.

“You don’t have to do that.” She follows.

I turn and pull her into my arms. Her little surprised squeal is goddamn adorable.

“Now, where were we?” I take her mouth, sampling the utter sweetness on her tongue.

I moan into his mouth as I push my body into his. Or maybe he pulled me into him? It doesn't matter. It's where I want to be. I part my lips, granting his tongue entrance.

He lifts me. His hands go to my ass as my feet leave the ground. I'm still shocked that he's here. I shouldn't be. In the short time I've come to know Kent, I've quickly learned if he wants something, he goes for it. Nothing stands in his path. It makes me feel a bit out of sorts I'm something he wants.

Kent is so new, so much, but somehow just right. He's beyond handsome. I find him to be sweet too, even with how overwhelming he can be. The fact that he took the time to bring me my favorite foods says a lot about him. I don't know how he knew it was my favorite, but I'm choosing to believe that he picked it because of fate. It was the same with him being in the parking lot today when I needed him, also fate.

He sits me down on the kitchen counter and deepens our kiss. I enjoy the moment and memorize the feel of his kiss to store it away. I know more than anyone that moments can be fleeting. I want to remember this. I could wake up tomorrow, and he could be gone just as quickly as he came. Nothing in life is promised. Even though I don't really know Kent, the connection I feel to him has me wanting him. I can't turn my back on it. What if it really *is* fate?

"Kiss me back, kitten," he demands against my mouth before taking my lips in another kiss.

I do. Tasting him again. I was sure he wasn't as sweet as I remembered, but he is. He doesn't look as though he'd taste that way, but he does. It's

mixed in with something else I can't place. Whatever it is, I'm enjoying it. I can't get enough of him. I never want him to stop kissing me.

"I need more, kitten."

I nod in agreement even though I have no clue what I'm doing or what he's asking for. He has me all worked up already from only kissing me.

"I need more, too." I let my hands that are wrapped around his neck drop down to his chest.

"How much more?" He nibbles at my lip.

My tongue darts out and licks the spot.

"Lots?" I push my hands up his shirt and feel his hard stomach. I suck in a breath when my fingers are greeted by what I'm sure is the outline of a perfect set of abs.

"I'll give you lots." His mouth drifts over to my neck and feathers kisses down it, causing the ache between my thighs to grow.

"I don't have abs," I blurt. But I want him to be well aware of what lies beneath these clothes. And, a part of me is terrified he'll be disappointed.

"No, you're soft all over." He pushes his hands up my shirt. The roughness of his fingers feels good on my skin. "Silky perfection."

"Pretty sure you're the perfection here."

His hands stop roaming for a moment. His mouth leaves my neck where he's been nibbling at me. I had no idea that someone kissing you there could feel so good.

"I'll show you perfection." Before I know what he's doing, he's got my shirt off over my head and my bra tossed away.

"I can't even get my bra off that fast."

"I'm quick with my hands." He cups my breast as his thumb drags across my nipple. "Perfection."

My nipple puckers under his touch. I barely have time to register the pleasure before he takes the hard tip into his mouth. He works me until I'm writhing in pleasure. Little moans escape me as his warm mouth continues to lick and suck me.

"I need—" I stop mid-sentence and close my eyes as he sucks me harder. He somehow manages to pull my pants off.

"I'm going to give you everything you need, kitten."

I let out a gasp when he lifts me and cling to him as he carries me down the hallway into my bedroom. He lays me down in the middle of my bed, his eyes raking over my body.

“Take your shirt off.” I’m almost naked, and he’s still completely clothed.

“All right.” He smirks as he pulls his shirt up and over his head, then tosses it away. I let my head fall back onto the bed and put my hand on my cheek. It’s burning hot.

“What’s the matter?” He comes down over me, caging me below him.

“You’re really hot,” I admit. “And I don’t even know what I’m doing.”

“Trust me. This innocent act is fucking killing me.” He grabs my panties and gives them a hard tug, putting all of those muscles he has to use. Act? I’m not acting, but any thoughts I’m having leave my head when he moves down my body, that mouth of his licking and kissing as he trails further down my stomach.

“Kent.” I whimper.

“I got you.” His broad shoulders spread my legs wide for him. I watch as he reaches down, fumbling with his pants as his tongue circles my clit for the first time. I jerk my hips, trying to come off the bed, but his other hand reaches up, pinning me to it.

“More,” I tell him, needing him to take away the low ache he’s caused.

“I’ve got you, kitten. I promise. You have to learn to trust me.” His words make my heart do a little flip. Trusting someone doesn’t come easy to me. It may not seem that way with how quickly I’ve allowed Kent into my life, but something about him is different.

I’ve learned from past experience that I can only ever count on myself. It was something I learned way too young in life. I know if I want something, I’m the only one who’s going to make it happen. No one else. But the idea that I could depend on someone else now does funny things to my insides.

He sucks my clit into his mouth. My head falls back onto the bed as the orgasm that’s been simmering since our first kiss this afternoon comes pushing down on me. I cry out his name as it rolls through my body. My thighs try to close from the overwhelming pleasure. His broad shoulders keep them spread wide. His hand on my hip goes to my thigh to keep me open as he continues to lick and suck me to another orgasm. I close my eyes, the bliss so intense and wonderful it almost hurts. Yet I somehow want more.

“Kent.” I dig my fingers into his hair. He pulls his mouth away. “I don’t think I can take any more.”

He gives my clit a kiss before sitting up. I fight to keep my eyes open, but I catch him putting his cock back into his pants. Cum covers his stomach. He stands, grabbing his shirt from off the floor to wipe it up. He looks even more

sexy with the evidence of his pleasure on his stomach and mine glistening on his perfect lips.

“Don’t go,” I rush to say. Is this the weird part where we say goodbye? I don’t want to say goodbye yet. I want him to stay. To never leave. Oh God, I’m a wet blanket! I know how to deal with cats and imaginary stuffed creatures, but I have no clue how to navigate a man.

“Just turning off the light.” He goes and flips it off. I scoot over, making room for him. He grabs the blanket at the end of the bed and pulls it over us before he tugs me into his arms. I lay my head on his chest.

“Sleep, kitten,” he demands.

I close my eyes and let it take me.



Slowly I stretch and smile at the most wonderful dream I had. This time it wasn’t about getting some big stuffed animal deal that let me design a new line for a store, but about a man that could only come from the dream world. My eyes spring open as I fly up from my bed.

“It wasn’t a dream.” I look around my room. No sign of Kent. Maybe it was. I reach up to touch my sore lips. It definitely wasn’t, but he’s not here now. I swallow the lump that’s quickly formed in my throat. Was that it? He just left? No goodbye?

“Kent.” I call his name. Paisley jumps up on the bed and gives me a look that makes me think his kitty eyes might have seen too much of what happened last night. “Where is he?” I ask my cat as I hop out of bed. I grab a shirt from my closet and head out of the bedroom.

“Kent,” I shout again. When I get close to the front door I stop when I see a note on the table.

Kitten,

I took your boxes to the post office. Be back in a little while with food. Don’t miss me too much until then.

I bite my lip and smile at the note. He is so freaking sweet. I don’t even care that he says weird stuff. I bring the note to my nose like a dork and smell it, but don’t smell anything. My phone dings, snagging my attention. I walk over and see that I have a text from Gia asking me for details. I’ll tell her some later. I’m not ready to share yet.

“Work!” I shout when I see the time. I don’t have time for food. I run to my room and get ready as fast as I can, then shoot Kent a text telling him that I have to leave as I fly out the front door.

Stupid job. I should call in sick, spend the day with Kent, but it would be my luck that Carmen would fire me, or worse, tell Mr. Tucker I wasn’t a good employee. I can’t risk that happening. I’m so close to getting what I’ve been working toward. I can’t ruin it now.

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KENT

Camping out across the street from the Fill-a-Friend store gives me a good view of Layla as she goes about her day. Children seem to gravitate toward her when they walk into the shop, and she's always so happy to help them create the stuffie of their dreams.

I've led a solitary life, one that didn't have room for anyone else. Travel and adventure sound great, but no one wants to follow an assassin around, not really. It's a lonely line of work, but I was thrust into it almost a decade ago. I don't look back. There's no point. I'm bound to commit the sins of the Brotherhood.

Letting Tucker go isn't an option. It won't be pretty when I take the kill out from under Layla, but I have to do it. Either I take him, or the Brotherhood takes my head.

A black BMW pulls up, and I narrow my eyes as Tony gets out and strides into the store. His sister Gia is off for the day, so he has no business being here.

I adjust my glasses so I can get an even better view of what's going on across the street. That douche is leaning on the counter, his mustache twirled at the tips like a goddamn hipster as he eyes my girl.

"My girl." I say the words to myself. They sound right. Because that's what Layla is. When this job is done--and when she forgives me for stealing her kill--I'm going to ask her to come with me. Maybe she can jump factions or get out of the game entirely. There's always freelancing.

Tony leans farther, clearly flirting, and Layla looks uncomfortable even at this distance.

I didn't intend to set foot in the store, not until I had my target in my sight. But things are different now. I toss my glasses into the passenger seat and stand, then stride across the street and into the store.

"... that's what Gia said, anyway. Single. So I figured you wouldn't mind going out with me this weekend? We can get some coffee or--"

"She hates coffee." I stride up, and my heart does a hard thump when her brown eyes light up.

"I do." She walks around the counter and hurries toward me. "Hi."

"Ready for lunch?"

"Hey, man." Tony straightens, finally out of Layla's personal space. "You're the guy from yesterday." He crosses his arms. "What are you doing here?"

I glance around at the wide assortment of empty stuffie hides available, the outfits, and the toys to go along with them, then turn my gaze pointedly back to Layla. "I'm here to fill a friend. Obviously."

"Real cute," he sneers.

"What are you feeling? Burgers?" I draw Layla away from him.

"I can't go to lunch. Gia's off today, and I have no idea where Carmen is. I never do. She just sort of comes and goes."

"She must be the manager."

Layla laughs. "Yes."

"How's it running?" Tony won't be ignored. He's walked over to the stuffing machine and opened the top. "I fixed it just for you, Layla."

"It's great. I already filled six stuffies this morning."

"Happy to help." Tony pats the side of it. "You need me. I'm there."

"She doesn't need you."

"What the hell is your problem, bro?" His Italian accent is even thicker as he puffs out his chest and struts over. "I'm in here talking to Layla, and you butt in. That's the second time you've needed to mind your own business."

"Layla is my business." I honestly don't know why she hasn't knifed this imbecile yet. Maybe she's trying to keep a low profile, or perhaps she likes Gia enough to let this greasy sack of hipster garbage live. I have no idea.

"Guys." Layla holds up her hands. "Don't fight. Not in here. I'm already on thin ice for what happened a few months ago, and--"

Tony snorts.

"What?" Her cheeks redden.

"Sorry, it's just Gia told me what you did."

“She did?” Layla puts a hand to her mouth. “She said it was our secret.”
He shrugs. “You get enough amaretto in her, she spills.”

“What happened a few months ago?” I have an inkling. Maybe more than an inkling.

She swipes her hair from her forehead in an exasperated motion.
“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Tony laughs. “You took every stuffed dog that got delivered, took them out of the store, and stashed them somewhere. They were only recovered because some idiot tried to steal them but got busted.”

She holds a finger up. “Those dogs were defective! They had dangling eyes. A toddler could choke! And they were ugly on top of that. They were all so... so--” She makes a pffft sound. “They were so dog-like! Not cats. The cats were perfect when they arrived. But the dogs? Just a mess. I couldn’t accept them, so I took them out the rear door and put them in the back of what I thought was the delivery van to send them back. How was I supposed to know a thief would take that van and do all that damage?”

“Who puts merchandise into an unmarked van?” Tony laughs.

I want to punch him. But worse than that, I’m starting to get the feeling I’ve screwed up. Again. Was Sister Jezebel right? Am I a monumental fuck-up? I swallow, my mouth suddenly going dry as I stare at Layla. At her innocent eyes, the pout of her lips, the way she seems genuinely distressed about what she’d done with the stuffed dogs. The dogs *I* got busted for.

Have I been wrong this whole time?

“Layla.”

She’s still explaining to a smirking Tony why the dogs were dangerous.

“Layla,” I say louder this time.

“Hmm?” She looks over at me.

“Can we talk in private?”

“Private? Um, sure. We can go to the storeroom.”

“Layla, how about this weekend?” Tony steps toward her.

Not in the mood, I fist the front of his shirt and yank him up. “She isn’t dating you. Not now. Not ever. Beat it or I’ll mop the floor with your fucking mustache.”

“Kent!” Layla grips my arm. “Let him go.”

Tony makes the mistake of trying to swing at me. I shove him backward, and he knocks over an entire display of Fill-a-Friend bears, their pelts flying everywhere.

I follow him, grab him, and rear back to clean his idiot clock.

“Kent, don’t!” Layla presses a hand to her mouth.

Not an operative. She never was. I’m the fool Sister Jezebel said I am. Fuck. Tony’s punch blindsides me, and I knock into the stuffing machine, which starts up with a whir, white fluff pouring out of its chute like popcorn at the movies.

“Motherfucker, you’re going down.” Tony comes for me, and I dodge his next strike. Then his next. When he tries a haymaker, I duck and go for his body, pummeling him and knocking him into a display called “Kitty Cat and Friends.” The rainbow stuffie at the top goes flying and lands in the open top of the stuffing machine, then is quickly pulled down into its innards.

Tony scrambles up and runs at me. I hit the floor, skidding a little ways before flipping him over and slamming my fist into his cheek. That stops him. He wheezes as I climb off him.

The stuffing machine makes a horrible, screeching sound, and rainbow fluff starts pouring out of the hose. Layla stands transfixed, both hands on her cheeks as she looks around at the store.

The back door opens, and a woman with long fingernails strides in, then stops.

“What the hell is going on in here?” She stomps forward in her high heels.

“Carmen, I’m so sorry. I don’t--”

“That’s it. You’re fired.” The woman waves a hand at her. “Should’ve done this two months ago.”

“Carmen, please. I didn’t do any of this. I prom--”

“Just go. And forget a meeting with Mr. Tucker. I’ll have to get all this cleaned up before he arrives tomorrow.” Carmen pulls the plug on the stuffing machine as I step over Tony and rush to Layla.

“I’m sorry.” I can’t believe I just wrecked her store. “I’m so sorry, Layla.”

“Just go.” She turns and removes her apron, laying it on the counter.

“Layla--”

“Go.” Her shoulders shake, and I know tears are welling in her beautiful eyes.

Shit. Shit!

“She wants you to leave, asshole.” Tony staggers to his feet.

“Both of you, leave me alone!” She runs to the stock room and slams the

door.

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LAYLA

I should have called in sick. Knowing it would have been the same result either way, I sit in the stock room. Carmen would have fired me if I missed this shift. Especially when there was no one else to pick it up for me. Gia could care less about this job. If Carmen called her on her day off she'd laugh at her and hang up. The only reason she even continues working at Fill-a-Friend is to prove to her mom and dad she can handle a job from an employer that isn't related to her.

I rub my eyes and will myself not to cry. The store is a mess. Everything seemed as though it was happening in slow motion. I'm not sure how I can be both mad at Kent and slightly turned on at the same time, but I am. He'd come into the store as though he were a jealous lover, like it was his duty to save me from Tony.

I'd initially welcomed Kent's presence, because Tony was beginning to make me a bit uncomfortable with how forward he was being. Kent's alpha male thing was cute at first, and then everything went to shit. Not only am I out of a job, but I won't get to pitch my stuffie line to Mr. Tucker now. I saw a note from Carmen to keep the store in tip-top shape because he's going to be here tomorrow. Finally. It's just my luck that I screw everything up right before he arrives.

Maybe if I give Carmen a second to cool down, she'll change her mind. It's a long shot, but she could grow a heart in a matter of moments. I don't know why that woman dislikes me so much. It might not be personal. I think she dislikes everyone.

The stockroom door flies open a moment later. I jump to my feet and find

Carmen standing just inside the doorway.

“You’re unfired.” She points one of her long nails at me.

“What?” Why the heck is she changing her mind?

“Get this store cleaned up or I’ll fire you again.” There it is. She has no one else to run this place but herself. She hates kids more than anything else. “And get that giant man out of my store.”

I peek over her shoulder to see Kent picking up a display that he’d knocked over. Next, he puts the stuffed animals back where they belong. My anger starts to fade as I watch him clean up the place.

“I’ll get everything fixed. The shop will look perfect for tomorrow. I promise,” I tell Carmen as I slip by her in the doorway.

“It better be perfect. Mr. Tucker will accept nothing less,” she snaps at me and heads toward the register. I pick my way over to Kent, who has his arms filled with stuffed animals. I see Tony, bruised face notwithstanding, is messing with the cotton machine. It looks like he’s making progress.

“Tucker is coming tomorrow?” Kent’s gaze snaps to Carmen.

“Who are you anyway?” Carmen tosses her hair. “Doesn’t matter. Yes, Mr. Tucker is coming tomorrow.” She turns to me. “It’s the only reason you still have a job. Get the store right or you’ll be on the curb in the morning.”

“Told him if he doesn’t fix it that I’ll manually stuff him with cotton,” Kent growls.

“Fuck off. I’m fixing it for her, not you.” Tony gives me a wink.

Kent drops all the stuffed animals in his arms and heads straight for Tony, but I jump into his path. I only got my job back moments ago, and I can’t risk losing it again.

“Behave.” I try and sound stern. Kent only smiles down at me.

“Sorry, kitten.” He turns and picks up the stuffed animals and puts them back as they had been before he and Tony did their best bull-in-a-china-shop routine.

A little girl comes in asking to make a kitten while her mom shops at the store next door. By the time we get one picked out, Tony has the cotton machine back in working order.

“Thank you.” I make sure not to get too close, because I feel Kent watching us out of the corner of his eye. I don’t need him body slamming Tony into the cotton machine. Or making good on his promise to stuff him with cotton. Yikes.

“So this weekend?” Tony’s swollen eye tries to wink again.

“You mother--”

“Kids!” I cut Kent off and cover the sweet little girl’s ears. “I’ll talk to you later, Tony,” I tell him.

He looks down at the little girl in front of me.

“I’ll call you.” He gives me a small wave.

Kent squeezes the poor stuffed animal in his hand. Tony mouths something to Kent that I don’t catch. Kent clenches his jaw to keep from saying anything as Tony exits the store. He doesn’t move, and I’m glad he’s respecting both me and the little girl by showing restraint.

“I’ll drive you home after work.” He puts the stuffed animal back on the shelf.

“I have my car,” I remind him.

“I’m taking you home.”

“Fine,” I agree, partly because I don’t want to fight in the store with him and partly because his bossy tone does things to my insides. Plus, I’d probably be less mad at him if he used that mouth of his on me again. That thing has superpowers. He walks over and kisses me on my cheek.

“I’m sorry, kitten,” he whispers into my ear before giving me another kiss right below it, then exiting out of the shop. I watch him go and wish I could go with him. I know I’m supposed to be mad at him still, but how can I be mad at him for something that gave me a small thrill? I can, but not for long.

Kent was ready to fight over me. I was enjoying his jealousy far too much. I think it’s because I’m not used to being fought over. Having someone that wants to fight over you is sort of endearing to me, even if it’s wrong.

“Can we fill it now?” the little girl asks me.

“Of course.” I get back to work and help the little girl stuff her kitten, then decorate it with cute bows until her mom returns. Carmen steps out of the way for me to ring them up, too busy on her phone to do it herself. I should have known she couldn’t really fire me. Not without a replacement first. That would require her to have to do some real work.

The rest of the day goes as usual. Carmen is out the door an hour before closing time as she usually is, so she doesn’t have to help shut down the store. She never does any of the closing paperwork. She only signs her name to it the next day so it seems as though she did her part.

As much as I want to hurry out to see Kent, I know that I need to make sure this place is in perfect order before I leave. I have no idea what time Mr.

Tucker will be here tomorrow. I think about which stuffies I should bring in so that I can show him my ideas.

When I get everything done, I grab my purse and cell phone. I'm shocked I don't have a bunch of missed texts from Gia. I'm guessing her brother didn't tell her what went down earlier today. She's going to rip him a new one as soon as she finds out. I hope I get to be there for that, or at least listen in on it.

She's going to get an earful when I see her next. I can't believe she told her brother about the stuffed dog incident. I made a mistake, sure. But I truly don't know who would steal a bunch of dog stuffed animals. They were ugly. Whoever did it clearly has terrible taste.

When I exit, I see Kent leaning up against a black SUV. In one of his hands he has a handful of flowers and in the other a cat toy. I have to bite my lip to keep from laughing, because I'm supposed to be mad at him.

"You're going to have to do more than bring flowers." I walk toward him.

He meets me halfway and leans down to kiss me. I let him, because who am I kidding? I still want him. Everything turned out fine so there's really no reason to push him away. The man clearly wants me all to himself and I want to give myself to him. So I don't see the point in letting this linger.

That magic mouth of his has me leaning into him and deepening the kiss.

"I got dinner too. I know you skipped lunch." He gives me a sheepish look. He was the reason I missed lunch. I often do when Gia isn't there and I'm running the store alone.

"Dessert?"

"For you? Yeah. You're my dessert."

I lick my lips, liking that idea. "What if I want you for dessert?" I didn't get to do much exploring of Kent yesterday. I want more. I let out a small squeal when he somehow manages to lift me with all the stuff still in his arms and carries me over to the passenger side of the car. I grab the handle and open the door for him before he deposits me inside.

"I really am sorry, kitten."

"I know. That's why I'm willing to let you make it up to me." I could see his guilt when he thought he'd gotten me fired. The man has been nothing but sweet to me from the moment I met him. He goes out of his way for me and can't seem to stay too far from me.

"I'll make it up to you. Promise." He gives me another one of those kisses that leaves me breathless. I have no doubt he's going to more than make up

for it.

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KENT

“*Y*ou want to tell me about the dogs?” I scoop some Mexican rice onto her plate, the food still hot.

She shrugs innocently. “What dogs?”

The ones you stuffed into a van I then accidentally stole and went to jail for. “Kitten.” I add a big spoonful of sour cream to the top of her burrito. “You know which dogs I’m talking about.”

“Tony can’t keep his mouth shut.” She stabs her fork through the end of her enchilada. “Neither can Gia. Must be a family thing.”

“You can tell me.” I try not to smile, but I can’t help it. This whole time I’d believed she’d been setting me up. But really, she’s just as sweet as she seems. I’ve watched her with the children that come into the shop. Every bit of joy she’s shown with them has been real. Though I wouldn’t have minded if she turned out to be a cold-blooded killer, I love her just the way she is. I blink.

“What?” She lifts her eyebrows.

“Nothing.” I cover my surprise by stuffing a queso-coated chip into my mouth. I chew slowly, my mind going back to that last thought. I *love* her. Do I? Was my brain just misfiring or something?

“Okay, fine.” She puts her fork down, my silence apparently bothering her into fessing up. “These dogs came in. Several boxes of them. They were hideous. Like, nightmare dogs. No child would want one, and they had dangly eyes that were a definite choking hazard and it was just all bad, so I stuffed them into a van and what happened after was not my fault.” She shrugs.

“And it wasn’t just because you’re a cat person?” I shoot a glance at Paisley, who’s dozing on the empty stuffie shelf.

“Of course not!” She shakes her head with vehemence. “I didn’t like them, but I would have stocked them if there hadn’t been a safety issue.”

I sip my water from the “Hoes Before Bros” coffee cup. “I believe you.”

“And I would never try and--wait. You do?”

“Of course.” I shrug. “Safety reasons are good reasons.” I reach across the table and take her hand. “You did the right thing.”

“I thought I did at first, but then this crazy guy wound up stealing the van and there was this whole high-speed chase and police cars ruined, the municipal baseball field destroyed, plus more. I don’t think any of that would’ve happened if I hadn’t stashed the dogs. Because then Carmen called the cops and told them the stuffies had been stolen. The guy pled guilty, apparently, and I didn’t have to testify or anything. He’s probably still in jail.” She frowns a little. “But I like to think that’s because he did all that other stuff, not because of the ugly dogs.”

It all connects. I got nabbed because Carmen called the cops, not because Layla set me up. How did I not see this from the get-go?

“I am a fool.”

She cocks her head to the side. “What?”

“Nothing.” I gesture toward her food and release her hand. “Tell me about your family.” I hadn’t asked before since I wasn’t interested in her cover story. But now that I know it’s real, I want to know everything about her.

“Abrupt.” She laughs. “Um, okay. They’re still married. Shouldn’t be. He can be nice when he’s not drinking. She’s an enabler who’s afraid he’ll leave. I was happy to move away, and they seemed happy to be rid of me, too. I have a brother who lives in LA, but he’s eight years older and we didn’t really ever click, you know? He was in high school when I was still in pigtails.”

“You still chat with any of them?” I take another chip.

“Sometimes. Not often. I call my brother maybe once every few months. Sometimes he sends me a funny meme. My parents sort of faded out of my life once I wasn’t at home anymore. It’s kind of weird how someone can be in your life and then, poof, gone. Just because I moved out.”

“They wanted you to stay?”

She shrugs. “I think so. I think maybe they wanted me to hang around

town. When I didn't, they just cut the cord. No calls. They don't really do holidays, either."

"I'm sorry, kitten."

"It's okay." She smiles, though it's a little sad. "I've made new friends here, and Gia always has me over to her place for the holidays. I mostly hide in the corner and sneak food. What about you?"

"Finish that burrito, and I'll tell you."

She forks a big chunk of it and barely gets it in her mouth.

I laugh a little. "Foster kid. I don't know my parents. Don't want to know them. They gave me up, and it was probably for a good reason. I was trouble when I was younger, bounced around a lot, then aged out and did my own thing for a while before joining up with the Brother--" I cough. "The Ribbon Brothers."

"Ribbon Brothers?"

"Yeah, it's the company I work for. Selling ribbon all over the world."

"Right." She nods. "That's why you want to see Mr. Tucker."

"Exactly." *Not quite.*

That's enough talk about me. I don't like lying to her, so I point at her plate. "Eat up. I'm ready for dessert."



Pulling her from the table once she's finished her flan, I look down into her warm brown eyes. "Are you ready?"

She licks her lips, the last of the caramel disappearing on her tongue. "Ready? I think I'm ready."

"I need to know, kitten. Because the things I want to do to you--I need you to tell me yes or no."

Her fingers clutch my shirt. "That sounds so ... hot."

I cup her cheek and lean down to brush my lips against hers. "I can't go two seconds without thinking about you, imagining you, wondering what you're doing." Running my hands down her sides, I feel her rounded curves.

"I think about you, too. All the time." She lifts onto her tiptoes and tries to capture my lips.

"I want to give you everything, kitten. Every last bit of me. Tell me I can." I hover just beyond her reach, every nerve in my body electrified and

waiting for the answer I desperately need.

She sighs, her mouth so close to mine. “Yes.”

I lift her with ease, and she wraps her legs around my waist as I carry her to bed. The few stuffies in her room look on with part trepidation, part interest as I grip her round ass with one purpose in mind.

“I’m new to this, so I hope you don’t--”

I still her worries with a kiss, my tongue caressing hers as I lay her down and cover her body with mine. There’s something about her, something that wraps around the deepest part of me until we’re twisted together perfectly. Like a fucking candy cane that’s her sweet and my bitter.

When my hips settle between her legs, I can feel her heat through my pants. My cock is already rock hard as I kiss her throat, sucking and licking my way down to the neckline of her shirt. Too many clothes. “I need these gone.” I sit back and strip her shirt away, then reach behind her and pop her bra free. When her breasts spill out, I stare down at her perfect tits, the way they pancake just a little, the nipples hard and begging for my mouth.

“I want to see you.” She tugs at my shirt.

I reach behind my head and pull the shirt off, tossing it aside as she leans up and runs her tongue along my abs, then up to one of my nipples. When she licks me there, her tongue soft and tentative, I groan and push her down, then give her the same treatment. Her tits are a handful, and I knead them as I suck her, her small fingernails digging into my shoulders as I give them both equal attention.

“Kent,” she gasps when I reach down and pull her leggings and panties away, then toss them aside. I shuck my pants as she lies spread before me, her body soft and warm and round as I fist my hard cock.

Her eyes widen and linger on my hand, on the way I stroke myself. When she sits up and reaches for me, my hips jerk. I let go, and her small hand replaces mine.

“Like this?”

“Any way you want, kitten.” I run my fingers into her hair and pull, a moan rising from her as she leans forward and licks my head.

“Fuck.” I want to throw her down and fuck her hard, to make her mine and leave her sore so she remembers who owns her pink pussy. But then she takes me all the way into her hot mouth, and I tense.

Stroking along my shaft with her tongue, she feels me out, then runs a hand to my balls.

I can't think when she sucks my head like a lollipop then takes me deep, gags a little, then tries again. When she makes an 'mmm' noise, I break.

Pulling her away, I lift her and position her in the center of the bed, my cock resting against her wet slit.

"I need to be inside you, kitten. I need to make you mine."

"Please." She arches, her tits pressing against me as her legs spread even wider.

I don't need any more urging. My cock finds her hot entrance and squeezes inside. More pleasure than a man like me should ever have courses through my blood, and I push deeper as she wraps her arms around my neck and holds tight.

"I'm going to make it so good, kitten. So good. Let me in. All the way." I thrust forward slowly, her slick walls ushering me deeper until I'm all the way in.

"Kent," she whimpers.

"Are you okay?" My muscles shake as I hold myself above her, force myself to stay still and not ram home.

"I want more." She lifts her hips.

Something cracks in my mind, and I can't do anything except give her what she wants. All of me, again and again until her nails rake down my back and her pussy squeezes me so tight I think I might lose it.

I claim her mouth as I keep thrusting, my body owning hers as she comes back down. "That's one, kitten. I want two more before I fill that sweet pussy with every last bit of come I have."

Her erotic moan is a symphony as I fuck her and mark her as mine, all mine.

LAYLA

I wrap my legs around him as he thrusts in and out of me. The first orgasm was so quick I didn't even know it was coming until it was pushing down on me and exploding out. My whole body shudders from the feeling. It's a different one than when he had his mouth between my thighs last night. This seems so much deeper. I swear I can feel him down to my soul. It's a connection I've never felt with anyone else. I never knew you could feel so close to someone, but I do now.

"Kent," I moan as I wrap my arms around him, needing to hold on to him a little tighter. My nails dig into his back as a second orgasm starts to rush through me. I cry out his name, clinging to him.

The pleasure is so good that it almost hurts, but I don't want to stop. I want to keep this connection as long as I can. I don't know where he begins and where I end.

"I want another one, kitten." His jaw clenches, and I can tell he is fighting off his own orgasm.

I was hoping to have him in my mouth again, but more than anything, I want to feel him come in me. The thought should scare me because I hardly know this man, but it doesn't. I've allowed him to be inside me without protection.

There's nothing stopping him from getting me pregnant. He might not have even noticed. We were both lost in the heat of the moment, but in the back of my mind I pretend he knows what he's doing. That he is taking me raw because he wants something more with me. I want that to be the truth. Whether it is or not, only time will tell, but right now, in this moment, it feels

right.

“I don’t know if I can come again.” I can barely get the words out.

He continues to hit that spot that has my toes curling and my fingers digging into him.

“You don’t have to do anything, kitten. I’m going to do it for you.” His hand slips between us, his fingers going to my clit. He continues thrusting into me as he rubs that sensitive spot.

“I, I, I--” Oh God, I can’t talk. I can’t form any words. It’s too much. It’s all too much.

“You’re going to come. Give it to me, kitten.”

“Yes!” I cry out as another orgasm rocks my body. My back bows off the bed as I wrap around Kent as tightly as I possibly can. He jerks, letting out a loud groan that rumbles through my chest as his warm release spills deep inside of me. I don’t let go of him as he rolls over on the bed. My body goes limp, sprawled out on top of his. His cock is still hard inside me. I can feel his cum start to slide out. His hands roam my back as my eyes drift closed.

“I had no idea sex would be like that.” I turn my head and kiss his chest. I’m having a hard time hiding my smile.

“Me either, kitten.”

I nuzzle closer to him, enjoying the warmth of his body against mine.

“Promise me you won’t hurt me.”

His body stills at my request. He takes a deep breath in before his hand comes down, lifting my chin to look up at him.

“You think I’d hurt a hair on your beautiful head?”

Somehow knowing he’s telling the truth, I shake my head no.

“I meant my heart. I don’t get close to people easily. You slipped right in on me. Don’t break my heart.”

“I promise I won’t break your heart. You already have mine.”

I lay my head back down on his chest and smile. I have his heart. Maybe soon, I’ll have all of him.



“That feels so good.” I let out a small moan as Kent washes my hair. My whole body is relaxed. Thank God he has one arm wrapped around my waist or I’d fall over. This man is too good to be true.

“If you let me shower with you, I’ll wash your hair every time.”

“Let you?” I laugh.

When my alarm went off this morning, he picked me up and carried me into the shower. I didn’t have much of a choice in the matter. Not that I put up much of a protest.

“You giggling and naked in the shower isn't helping my situation right now, kitten.” I turn in his arms as he washes the rest of the conditioner out of my hair. His fingers work their magic once again, bringing me a different type of pleasure.

“Maybe I want to help with it.” I reach down and wrap my hand around his cock, then give him a couple of pumps. I start to drop to my knees in front of him, but he stops me.

“Not on the shower floor. I don’t want you to hurt your knees.”

That’s incredibly sweet, but I still want him in my mouth.

“You said you can’t be late,” he reminds me.

I let out a huff. He kind of has a point.

“What about a quickie? Isn't that like a thing? Can’t we have one of those?” I look up at him through my eyelashes. “You had your hands all over me. Rubbing on me. You can’t leave me like this.” I think he’s turned me into a sex fiend.

“Don’t beg, kitten.” He lifts me off my feet and pins me to the shower wall. “If you want me inside you, I’ll be inside you. It’s that easy. You only have to say the word.” I gasp as he thrusts all the way into me. There is a small sting, but it’s gone as soon as he starts moving, the pleasure overriding everything else.

“Kent.” I offer my mouth to him.

He gives me what I want by kissing me deeply. My heart pounds so loud I swear I can hear it. I feel so full and complete. How did I ever go without this man? For the first time in my life, I know what it is to feel loved and happy.

“You gotta come for me, kitten. Let me feel that sweet cunt of yours squeeze my dick,” he grits out. I release his mouth, my eyes locking with his. The emotion behind them has my breath catching as the orgasm hits me hard. I cry out his name and cling to him as I bury my face in his neck. I hold him close as his cum shoots deep inside me again. It’s such a turn-on, a perfect chaser to the shot of my orgasm.

I press lazy kisses to his neck as he turns off the water and we get out of

the shower. I reluctantly let my legs fall as he pulls me off his cock and sets me on my feet. It's bittersweet. I know that I need to get ready for work. Today is a big day for me, but now all I want to do is crawl back into bed with Kent and never leave. I hate this stupid job. But I have to go if I want a chance at having my own line in one of Mr. Tucker's stores.

Kent dries me off before wrapping a towel around his waist. "I'll get you something to eat while you get ready." I nod in agreement, then tilt my head back, wanting another kiss before he goes. I need one more taste of him, I tell myself, and then I'll get ready.

It doesn't take me long to dress. I put on my uniform and blow dry my hair in record time. I don't wear makeup often, but today I want to look extra nice and professional, so I put on a little. I give myself one last look over before heading into the kitchen. I smile when I see Kent petting Paisley as he eats a can of wet cat food.

"I'm all ready," I announce as I grab my folder with my business plan and sketchbook of my best-selling stuffies.

I don't have a set meeting with Mr. Tucker, but I'm hoping I'll be able to steal a moment of his time to pitch him my ideas. I mentally check off the list of things I need so that I don't forget anything. This may be my only opportunity, and I don't want to blow it.

"All right. Let's get you to work, kitten." Kent gives Paisley one last pet on the head before handing me a Pop-tart. "It's all you have. We're going to have to go to the store." He motions for me to walk in front of him to the door.

I take a giant bite out of my Pop-tart. I don't know what he's talking about. This is a perfectly good breakfast, if you ask me. I stop abruptly with my hand on the doorknob and almost choke on my yummy cherry-filled breakfast.

"I forgot my stuffies!" I shove my folder into Kent's chest as I run past him, into my room, and pick out some examples. The pandacorn is my number one seller, so I stuff that in my bag along with a few others. I wish I had more, but I have pictures in my folders that I can show him, too.

"Let me take it." Kent grabs the bag from me. "Don't run and eat."

I shove the rest of my breakfast in my mouth.

"Let's roll," I say around a mouthful of food, earning me a laugh. I'm going to kill it. I just know it.

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KENT

She's so excited. Not just regular excited, but can't-sit-still excited. Her lips move as we drive toward the store, as if she's practicing her pitch to Tucker.

Guilt tries to creep into my mind. After all, I intend to kill Tucker the first chance I get. Time is ticking away on his contract, and if I don't make good on this attempt, the Brotherhood will come for me.

"Kent?"

"Hmm?" I turn to look at her.

"You seemed sad for a second. Are you okay?" She has a death grip on her pandacorn.

I reach over and take her hand. "I'm fine. Don't worry."

She blanches. "Oh my God. This whole time I've been thinking about my stuffies and doing my pitch, but you've been waiting months just to meet Mr. Tucker so you can sell your ribbon. I'm so selfish."

"No." I shake my head. "Not at all. It's fine. I can show him--"

"Where are your samples?" She turns and looks in the backseat, panic in her movements. "You need to show him all the things you have."

"I, um ..." Lying to her leaves a horrible taste in my mouth, but what else can I do? "I know. I'd rather focus on you right now. I have plenty of time to show him my wares after you do your pitch, okay?" My wares being the slug of a .45 bullet, of course.

"Are you sure?" She faces me. "Really?"

"Really." I squeeze her hand.

"You aren't just being too nice and letting me go first when you should

be doing everything in your power to sell your ribbon? I don't want you to get fired."

"Stop worrying. I'm fine. I can follow your pitch. No problem." But can I? If she lands a line of her magical stuffies in the Fill-a-Friend stores, and then I kill the man who made the deal with her, that deal disappears. *Fuck.*

"I hope Gia is here on time. I want to get everything set up and ready for when Mr. Tucker arrives." She grabs the door handle right as I pull up in front of the store.

"Hang on, kitten." I pull her to me and kiss her. This moment has to last. I want to burn it into my memory, keep it close to my heart. So I kiss her until she's breathless, until she's panting and looking at me with those big brown eyes. "You're going to nail it today. You've got this."

"I do?" She blinks, slightly dazed. "Oh, right. I do." She smiles. "Thank you."

"Sure thing. I'll pick you up for lunch."

She opens her door.

"But, kitten?"

"Yeah?" She climbs out, her stuffies in her arms.

I hesitate, my world on the cusp of changing as the truth stampedes through my blood and demands to be free. But I tamp it back down, refusing to do anything other than what I *have* to do. I must kill Tucker, even if that means Layla won't achieve her dream. If I don't, I'm a dead man.

"Nothing." I force a smile. "Just wanted to tell you good luck is all."

"Thanks." She stands. "See you at lunch."

I want to tell her I love her, but I can't. The words get stuck in my throat, weighed down by my continued deception.

She closes the door and hurries into the shop. I see Gia through the windows. She's sitting on the counter and sipping a coffee.

I watch as Layla politely sips from another coffee cup, then puts it right back down. Maybe one day I can find a coffee she likes. I sure would like the chance.

My phone buzzes, breaking my focus. I pull it from the cupholder.

Sister Jezebel: The contract has been accelerated due to complications. Get it done today or face the consequences.

Kent Doe: What complications?

Sister Jezebel: Insufficient funds from the client. Get it done.

Kent Doe: And if I don't?

Sister Jezebel: You know what happens if you don't.

I want to smash the phone on the dashboard, but I don't. I toss it back into the cupholder and reach beneath my seat. My case is there, the handle worn and smooth from years of use. I pop it open and pull out my shoulder holster. Once I've got it on, I strap both guns to my chest, then pull my coat from the backseat and shrug it on. I already have knives strapped along my ankles and wrists.

Once I'm set, I look up and catch movement. A black SUV pulls up a few spots down from me. A driver in a black suit steps out and opens the back door.

Long, skinny legs appear, then a blond woman steps out, her nose upturned as she frowns at the store. Kimmy, the 27-year-old wife of Graham Tucker. I'd bet all my Brotherhood earnings--a not insubstantial sum--that she's the one who put the hit out on her husband. He follows. Older and grayer, he's 64 and on his third Mrs. Tucker, the newest model, I suppose.

She steps onto the sidewalk, managing surprisingly well in her impossibly high heels, and he follows. Though she looks as if she'd rather be anywhere else but here, he looks up at the Fill-a-Friend logo and nods with approval, as if checking the sign off a list in his mind.

Pride swells inside me. When he sees what Layla can do, he's going to be beyond impressed. I am, and I don't know half of what goes into making her peculiar little stuffed animals. Creativity and ingenuity--she has both of those, far more than anyone I've ever met. He's going to take her offer. I can already feel it.

If I go through with this hit, I'll be stealing that dream away from her, as surely as if I'd killed it myself. Can I crush her like that? I won't lie and say it isn't in my nature to destroy beautiful things. I've taken too many lives to ever think I have any goodness left in me. But if there is any inside me, she's seen it. She believes in it.

That moment in the parking garage, when she chose me. When she looked me in the eye and trusted me--it's a moment I didn't deserve, but one I can't forget. One that is emblazoned on my heart. I pat my chest and feel cold steel. Isn't that the way of things?

I sigh. Either I kill Tucker and murder Layla's dream or I forfeit the hit and face the judgment of the Brotherhood.

Tucker helps his wife into the shop, the doorbell tingling merrily as they enter. He greets a beaming Layla, and they fall into conversation.

In this life, decisions usually aren't mine to make. The Brotherhood tells me what to do, and I do it. Who to kill, and I kill them. But this time, maybe it's time I decided for myself.

With a heavy sigh, I put my car into reverse, back into the street, and drive away.

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LAYLA

*M*r. Tucker looks bored as I show him the next stuffed animal I crafted. Gia stands behind him and his wife and gives me a thumbs up of encouragement.

“I truly believe that if we come up with new species of stuffies, we could pique people's interest. When I put the pandacorn on my Etsy page, people went wild for it. I started getting all kinds of requests. Some wanted to change the color of the horn while others asked me to make the paws sparkle. The possibilities are endless!” I flip over the pandacorn so he can see the bottom of its paw. Mr. Tucker lets out a yawn.

His wife actually looks a little intrigued.

“It’s cute.” She takes the stuffed animal from my hand.

“I have so many ideas for different stuffies. I really think this will help your brand. It will allow children to not only customize clothes and color but the actual physical characteristics on their stuffie.” I motion to the line of dolls I put out on the counter.

“Kids nowadays want to be part of the process. They want to express their individuality whenever they can. I know that's what we strive to do here at Fill-a-Friend but I think there’s a giant online market we’re missing. What if they could design their stuffie from the comfort of their home? They would be able to pick and choose a variety of options to make it to their exact specifications. We could make the process easy to use so that parents can let their children craft them on their own. It would be just shy of complete custom--so we could craft them on a larger scale--but with enough options to make them very specific for each child.”

“I told him we should do more online.” Mrs. Tucker gives her husband a dirty look. “He doesn’t want to change a thing. Ever.”

“Not everyone is in driving distance to a Fill-a-Friend. There are only two hundred locations right now. If we go the online route, it will give everyone a chance to make the stuffie they have always wanted. Plus, if we offer the chance for them to get a one-of-a-kind product based on their specifications, that will make the draw even larger.”

Mrs. Tucker inspects my rainbow hedge-fox. “I love it. Sales have been going down in stores over the past two quarters. We need something new and fresh.”

“It doesn't matter what you love.” Mr. Tucker steps away from his wife, who rolls her eyes behind him but keeps her mouth shut. If looks could kill, he'd be a dead man.

“Where is Carmen?” Mr. Tucker asks.

“Carmen?” Oh no. I was hoping we could talk more about my ideas.

“That’s what I said,” Mr. Tucker snaps at me as he wanders over toward the cotton machine. I pray it’s in working order today. The last thing I need is for something else to go wrong.

“I’m not sure.” I’m actually surprised she’s not here. She doesn’t normally show up at this time in the morning, but I was sure she would with Mr. Tucker being here today. I was positive that she would have wanted to suck up to him and pretend she works hard for his company.

“You’ve been selling your creations on Etsy?” he says it in a way that makes me think he’s never heard of Etsy before. Maybe he hasn't for all I know.

“In my free time, yes.”

“I feel that since you’re an employee of mine, that these belong to me. It’s a little bit of a conflict of interest, after all. You wouldn't be creating these for your own gain, would you? Not without me.” He leans up against the cotton machine.

My mouth opens and closes. No words come out because I’m in a state of shock. Is he accusing me of stealing ideas or work from Fill-a-Friend?

“We didn't sign a non-compete policy,” Gia chimes in. Her hands go to her hips as she narrows her eyes on Mr. Tucker.

Oh crap. She’s pissed. Nothing good is going to come out of her being upset.

“Doesn't mean I won't sue you.” He glances around the store. “I bet you

even used my products to make these.”

“I would never,” I whisper. “I’m not a thief. I buy every piece of fabric, every button, every handful of stuffing that goes into each of my creations.”

He gives me a withering glare. “Weren’t you the one who was linked to all those dog stuffies that went missing?”

“I didn’t steal them!” Someone else did. Did I put them away? Yes. In a van? Also, yes. But I can’t be responsible for a random stranger’s actions. It wasn’t my fault that someone came along and took them.

“Graham.” Mrs. Tucker says his name calmly.

This was a bad idea. I can tell that no matter how good my stuffies are, Mr. Tucker has no plans to buy them. He isn’t going to offer me a higher-up position in the company, either. No, he thinks that he is going to steal my idea and my stuffies from me.

Well, he has another thing coming. Nobody messes with my hard work or my stuffies. He tried to insinuate that I had stolen from him, but now we all know who the real thief here is. Him!

“Graham,” she repeats. “Did you hear how much she sells these for on Etsy?”

“I didn’t marry you to hear you talk,” he barks at his wife. The man is old enough to be her father. When they first walked in I actually thought he was.

She tosses her blond hair over one shoulder. “That’s right. I’m just supposed to lie there as you crawl on top of me after you take your little blue pill.”

“Okay, that’s a lot of information I did not need to know. TMI!” Gia puts her hand over her eyes. “I’m never going to get that image out of my head.”

His face reddens. “Would it kill you to not lie there like you’re dead?”

“Would it kill you to die of a heart attack one of these times?” she throws back at her husband. My eyes ping pong back and forth between them as they both start shouting at each other.

“What the fuck?” Gia mouths to me.

I jump back when my pandacorn goes flying through the air and almost hits me. It zooms past my head and pops Mr. Tucker right in the chest. He scrambles around to grab it, but loses his footing, tripping over the pandacorn and slamming into the cotton machine.

I cover my face with my hands as he and the machine go crashing to the ground. He yells as I watch the glass shatter. I’m not sure if it’s Mr. Tucker or the stuffing machine that lets out a loud groan that sounds like death. I close

my eyes, afraid to even peek. Everything remains silent after that. I finally ease one of my eyes open to see Mr. Tucker lying with the machine on top of him. Blood trickles from his mouth.

“I don’t think Tony can fix that,” Gia says.

“Mr. Tucker!” I drop my hands from my face and run to him. His eyes are wide open, but he’s not moving.

“Is he dead?” Mrs. Tucker leans over her husband, then, dropping down, she puts her fingers on his neck to check his pulse. “He’s dead.” Her tone is somber.

“I’m so sorry.” I stand there in shock. Do I call 911 or something?

“Well, that’s a relief. I’ve been trying to kill him for years! I even took out a contract, just sent the second half of the payment this morning.” She jumps up and gives me a hug. “I should have kept that cash. He tripped over your stuffed animal and bit it. All this time, and the only thing it took was a stuffed animal to be rid of him?” She pulls back from the hug. Her whole face lights up with a smile though her eyes are watery.

It’s then I realize it’s tears of joy coming from her.

“My stuffie killed him?” I look at Gia, who is staring down at Mr. Tucker's dead body.

“I think my dad knows a guy who can fix this,” she says after a beat.

“You can’t fix a dead body!” I shout at her.

“Oh no. I mean like get rid of one.” I don’t know if she’s joking or not. Given the calculating look in her eyes, I’m guessing not. “I’ve got a cousin Nick. He’s head of the Davincis. Could make this go away like--” She snaps her fingers.

“So, about the stuffies.” Mrs. Tucker turns to look at me. All the tears are gone from her face.

My stomach turns. I think I’m going to be sick.

“Your husband,” I remind her and point down at Mr. Tucker.

“Shh. If he’s dead she owns the place. Keep going with your pitch,” Gia encourages me. “When the old king gets hit, you bow to the new king. It’s the way it is.” She shrugs.

“Yeah, in the mafia. Not the stuffed animal business!” I put a hand to my temple.

Mrs. Tucker returns to the counter and peruses my stuffies again. “She’s right, you know. This is business. *My* business.”

I think I’m losing my mind. Black spots dance in front of my eyes as I

start to get dizzy. I step back and trip over Mr. Tucker's foot before everything goes dark.

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KENT

I should leave, should keep my foot on the gas. I'm almost out of town before I stop. Getting as far away from Layla as I can is the best way to keep her safe. That makes sense. It's logical. But my heart isn't listening.

For the first time in my life, I switch off my mind and listen solely to what my gut tells me.

With a slow smile, I turn around and speed back into town. Tucker isn't going to die, and the Brotherhood will come for me. But it's worth it when I think about Layla's joy at having her dream come true. And I want to see it on her face, hear it in her voice, and taste it on my tongue.

If my days are numbered, I want to spend them with her. No one has ever made me feel like this, like anything is possible. This must be hope or something damn close to it.

I pull into the same parking spot and hop out, my heart pounding with excitement at the thought of sharing in her triumph before the Brotherhood takes me down.

But when I walk in, I see Layla passed out in a pile of stuffies. "What the hell?" I rush to her and take in the scene.

Gia fans Layla's face. "She's okay. She just passed out."

I glance at Gia. "*Just* passed out? What happened? Mr. Tucker is dead!" I jerk my chin at his body pinned beneath the cotton machine.

"An accident." Gia shrugs.

"These things happen." Tucker's wife waves an unconcerned hand. "Not a problem."

I stroke Layla's cheek. "Kitten. Come on, wake up for me."

Her eyelashes flutter, and her gaze meets mine. "Hi." She smiles, then her expression darkens as she tries to sit up. "Oh no."

"It's going to be okay." I help her up, but pull her into my arms and shield her from Tucker's dead, staring eyes.

"How?" She holds me tight. "He's dead. He tripped on *my* stuffie. I killed him." She gasps. "I'm a murderer."

"No." I kiss her hair. "It was an accident." It occurs to me that this is perfect. He's dead. I can claim this kill and stay in good standing with the Brotherhood. But there's still a problem—Mr. Tucker can't give Layla her big break if he's dead.

"What am I going to do?" Layla sniffles.

"You're going to sell your stuffies to Mrs. Tucker, and I'm going to call Tony for help." Gia pulls her phone out.

"No. I've got this." I turn to Mrs. Tucker. "You're going to make a deal with Layla for her creations, or I'll out you for taking out a contract on his life. Got it?"

The blonde prickles. "I don't know who you think you are--"

"The Brotherhood operative you hired to handle Mr. Tucker."

Her eyes go round at first, then she laughs. "Looks like you owe the bounty to your friend there." She points at Layla. "And for your information, I've already decided to take her up on her offer. These stuffies are perfect for the direction I want to go in." She holds up a pink dragon, still not the least bit distraught about her dead husband. "The store is mine now, after all."

Layla can't seem to decide if she wants to focus on Mrs. Tucker or me. "What are you talking about? What's a Brotherhood? She hired you?"

I don't want to explain it to her, not right now, but I don't think I can put her off. Not when she's looking at me with those big, innocent eyes. "Okay, Layla, I have something to tell you."

"What?" She looks up at me with watery eyes.

I clasp her hands in mine. "I'm not really a ribbon salesman."

Gia snorts. "You? A ribbon salesman? Are you kidding?"

"You're not?" Layla's brows draw together.

"No." I glance at Tucker's body. "But I have a certain skill set, and I can help you. Right here. Right now. Will you let me?"

"Help me?"

I nod. "I can make it as if this never happened. May I do this for you?"

She takes a deep breath. “Please?”

I turn to Gia. “Call Tony. I want him here in 15 minutes in a windowless van. Can he get that?”

Gia rolls her eyes. “Of course he can. This is Jersey.”

“Mrs. Tucker, I’d like for you to take Layla to brunch. Jimmy’s down the street has a good eggs Benedict and an even better chorizo omelet. By the time you two get back, the store will be in order.”

Mrs. Tucker puts a hand at her waist. “What’s this going to cost me?”

“You already paid.” I turn Layla away from Mr. Tucker and lead her to the front door. “The Brotherhood appreciates your patronage.” I snap my fingers. “Gia, I can tell this isn’t your first rodeo.”

“What are you talking about? What’s the Brotherhood? There’s a rodeo?” Layla is still in shock.

I want to comfort her, but getting rid of the body is priority number one for keeping her safe.

Gia falls in line with a quickness. “I’ll stay and put the store back to rights.” She starts tossing stuffies onto the shelves. “I’ll put the ‘closed’ sign up and--”

The front door bell jingles as it swings open.

Shiiiiit.

I look up to find a mom and a little boy walking in. Reaching past Layla, I grab a giant koala and toss it so it covers Mr. Tucker’s face.

“Ah, we are just cleaning up a spill. Can you two come back in--”

“We just got here from Elmersdale,” the mom snaps, then says in a gentler tone, “Sorry, it’s just been a long ride with Caleb. He’s very excited about filling a friend.”

“I want a panda!” He shouts and bounces toward the overturned cotton machine—and the dead body beneath it.

Layla starts to tremble.

I get to my feet, about to order them out of the store, but Mrs. Tucker steps up, the pandacorn in her hands. “Hi, Caleb.” She steps in front of him, blocking him from going farther. “I just made this new friend.”

He stops and reaches for the stuffie. “Sparkly.”

“Right?” Mrs. Tucker drops to her haunches so she’s at eye level with him. “It’s special. One of a kind. One of our employees made it for a special little boy. There’s not a single other pandacorn like this in the *world*.”

“Really?” He stares at the creature, and I can’t help the pride that wells in

me at the wonder in his eyes.

“Really.” Mrs. Tucker gets back to her feet, though I suppose she’s used to being on her knees.

“Mommy, can I have this one?”

His mother is a little cagier. “How much is this special pandacorn going to cost me?” Her tone is wry.

“On the house.” Mrs. Tucker spreads her arms wide. “This is the opening day for this brand new line, and I wanted to make sure it was a hit with you and your special little boy.”

The mother loosens up, her gaze falling to her son. “Is that the one you want?”

“Yes!” He hugs it tight.

“You sure you don’t want to fill one of your own?” She takes a step toward the body, his now-blue hand barely hidden by the edge of some shelving.

“I’m sure.” The kid turns and runs to the front of the store, trips, falls, gets up, wipes his nose, then yanks on the door, making the bell go crazy.

The mom shrugs. “Well, thank you.”

“My pleasure.” Mrs. Tucker walks her to the door.

The rest of us take a breath.

Layla whispers, “I don’t understand what’s going on, and oh my God, that kid almost saw, and did you hear how excited he was about my pandacorn, and I think this might be a nightmare and I’m sleeping.”

I squeeze her hands and lead her to the front of the store. “Brunch, then we’ll talk. I need you to trust me.” I bring her hand to my lips. “Do you?”

She hesitates, her eyes searching my face. “Yes.”

“Okay, then leave it to me.”

“And me,” Gia calls as she replaces merchandise. “Tony, too. He’s done this a million times. Don’t worry.”

Layla just nods, unsureness in her steps.

But Mrs. Tucker takes her arm and leads her out onto the sidewalk. “Come on, superstar. Let’s get as many Bloody Marys as they’ll serve us, okay?”

I watch them walk, my kitten glancing over her shoulder every now and then. It’s so hard to stay put, to force myself to focus on the job instead of following my heart. But if I don’t clean up this mess, Layla could be in danger.

When they disappear into the diner, I turn and lock the door, then flip the sign to closed.

The back door bangs open, and Tony strides in, his stupid mustache twirled at the ends and a smirk on his face as he toes Mr. Tucker's body. "Trying to fuck the filling tube is a bad idea. Believe me, I know." He whistles and shakes his head. "I almost got my dick caught in it that one time, too." He looks up. "Did he at least finish?"

This is going to be a long, long morning.

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LAYLA

*M*rs. Tucker, who has told me to call her Kimmy, now rambles on about how we can work together. I guess we should be on a first-name basis at this point. I kind of killed her husband after all. Oh, God! I killed someone. With a stuffed animal, no less. How is that even possible?

I shouldn't be shocked. This is just my luck. I'm always stepping right into something terrible. My head is usually in the clouds, causing me to not know what's happening until after the fact. I've always been this way. Always daydreaming about something but not paying attention to my surroundings. Forgetting small things like turning off the cotton machine or checking coupon dates.

"Do you have computer skills?" Kimmy breaks me from my thoughts of being a stuffie-wielding murderer.

"Computer skills?" Sure. If the thing starts being a jerk you smack it before hitting the power button to restart it. That's what I do anyway. It usually starts up and works after that.

"You'll need to use it to send in your designs and other small things like that. Wait—didn't you say that you had an Etsy store? If you can manage that on a computer you should be fine." She waves her hand. "Some people can barely turn one on. But you're young, of course, so you know all about computers. I'll just want us to be able to be in constant communication if we need it. Also, you need to take that Etsy store down. The contract will stipulate that the line is exclusive to the Fill-a-Friend franchise."

She keeps rambling on as the server drops off our food. She talks about

everything else but the fact that I offed her husband. She hasn't even brought him up. I shouldn't be hungry at all. My entire world has been turned upside down, but I find myself digging into the French toast. A girl does have to eat. This could very well be my last meal before they cart me straight to the slammer.

I'm not ready to think about Kent. I can't even wrap my head around him being part of some sort of assassin ring. I don't even fully understand what that means. I *do* know that he lied to me. But that's the least of my worries today. He also helped me in my time of need, so he's sort of automatically forgiven. I mean, it only makes sense. If someone offers to get rid of a body for you, that deserves instant forgiveness.

"Hang on. I have to take my Etsy store down?" I try to keep up with the conversation.

"Of course. That's what I was explaining earlier. I want exclusive rights. You heard what I said to that little boy. Fill-a-Friend is the only place you can get these specialized designs." She takes a bite of her omelette. "You wouldn't want to make me a liar, would you?" She smiles. Actually smiles at me. I lean forward a little, dropping my voice.

"I killed your husband," I remind her. Who cares about being a liar right now? That is the *last* thing we need to worry about.

"You're like an angel sent from above. You took that dreadful man from my life and you're going to save the company." She spends the next hour talking about how we can launch an online platform. I help her spitball some ideas. This really isn't my area of expertise. I'm more interested in coming up with the designs.

"You'll get ten percent of the sales for your designs. I could offer you a lump sum or a salary, but I feel if we do it this way, you'll be invested too. The better the products you create, the more money we all make."

"I'm not sure. I mean--"

"I'll send you over a contract. Have your lawyer look it over."

I don't have a lawyer, so I just nod in agreement. As long as I make more than I am now, I don't really care. I want to make a decent living, but more than anything I want to create stuffies for children. To bring a small amount of happiness to them. To have my stuffies be available everywhere is what I've always dreamed of.

Kimmy reaches into her purse and pulls out a card. One for me to keep and another to scribble down my information before we leave the diner. She

gives me air kisses, then hops into the back of an SUV and takes off. I stand there, not sure what I should do now.

When I make it back to the store, I go straight to the counter. I find Gia playing on her phone. The store looks the same as it does every other day. No one would even guess that a murder took place an hour ago. Kent is nowhere in sight. I wonder where the heck he went.

“So? Is that Mrs. Tucker gonna make you rich? Wait. Is it Ms. Tucker now? How soon after your husband kicks the bucket—” She stops mid-sentence. “Or should I say trips over a stuffie and drops dead, do you get to remove the ‘r’?” She chomps down on her gum as she thinks this over.

“Yes, she wants to work with me.”

“That’s kickass!” Gia holds up her hand for me to give her a high-five.

“I killed a man, and my boyfriend is a hitman.” I slap her hand.

“God, that’s so hot.” She hops up on the register counter. “So we are calling him your boyfriend now?” She swings her legs back and forth, chewing her gum.

“I ...” I rub my eyes. I don’t know what to call him. Is he going to come back? How long does it take to get rid of a body? “Do you mind if I cut out?”

“Place is dead.” Gia starts to laugh. “No pun intended.”

I can’t help the snort that comes from me. I give her a hug.

“Don’t worry about anything. It wasn’t your fault, and you didn’t do anything wrong, okay?” She kisses my cheek before letting me go.

I grab my bag and head out the back toward my car. I should be worried. I could end up in jail. Wait, prison. Isn’t that where people go when they kill people? But it was an accident. I didn’t mean to kill him. I, however, didn’t call the police. Instead, I let my boyfriend and best friend do whatever it is they thought was necessary to handle the situation while I went to eat French toast.

That is oddly the part I’m having the hardest time wrapping my mind around. Is Kent really some kind of hitman? I mean, so many things make more sense now if that’s the case. All the odd things he’d said when I’d first met him. Turns out he isn’t the crazy one. I am, for not putting any of it together. I’m not even sure if I’m supposed to be mad at him.

Gia had been right about one thing. It is kind of hot that my boyfriend is some hitman that works for a brotherhood. I mean it’s a hell of a lot sexier than him selling ribbon. Although, to me, he’d be sexy no matter what he did for a living. What exactly does his occupation mean for us going forward?

Don't hitmen have to live on the run? I hope he doesn't kill good guys, but something in my gut says he doesn't. He wouldn't. Mr. Tucker didn't seem like a good man, and Kent came to kill him, so that makes sense.

When I pull up to my place, I see all the lights are off. Of course Kent isn't here. We don't live together. As I step out of my car, it fully hits me that maybe he's gone. If he'd come here to kill Mr. Tucker, then his job is now done.

As my eyes start to fill with tears, I realize I don't care that he's a hitman. I care more about never seeing him again. It wasn't like Mr. Tucker was some great guy. He tried to steal my ideas that I worked so hard for. He was a jerkface to his wife. It's no wonder she wanted him dead. I couldn't imagine dealing with that condescending man every day. That thought gives me a little bit of consolation in the fact that my stuffie killed him.

My heart feels heavy as I make my way toward my door. Could Kent have been using me to get close to Mr. Tucker? Could he have gotten close to me in order to find out when he'd be at the store to make his kill? Was he going to kill him knowing that I'd worked so hard to meet him? These thoughts have my stomach feeling uneasy. All of these questions continue to swirl in my mind as I open my front door and flip on the light switch, but the light doesn't come on.

A hand wraps around my wrist and pulls me into my apartment. The door slams closed behind me. I open my mouth to scream, but a mouth comes down onto mine, making it clear Kent wasn't going anywhere.

KENT

I push her against the wall, her body soft in my hands as I tongue her sweet mouth. Her surprised squeal turns into a moan as I hike my thigh between hers and feel the heat that's waiting for me.

There's so much I need to explain, to come clean about, but right now I need to feel her clamping down on every inch of me as she says my name. Gripping her ass, I lift her and carry her down the hall, our mouths never parting as I kiss her with every ounce of desire and love a man like me can have.

She answers it, her tongue stroking mine as I lay her down, spread her legs, and climb on top of her. I kiss her like we're teenagers, like making out is the endgame, the pinnacle, the goal. Because I'm going to do her right. Always. From now on, no more lies. From now on, she will get the truth from me about my work, my heart, my soul.

Taking her wrists, I pin her to the bed and rub my erection against that perfect heat between her legs.

She moans and squirms, just as ready for me as I am for her.

With a groan, I pull away from her and grab the hem of her top. With a quick yank, I have it gone, then her bra. She reaches for my waist, but I need to see her. All of her. I rip her leggings and panties off in one hard pull, then spread her legs. Wet and pink and perfect. I fall onto her like a starving man at a feast, licking and sucking as she grips my hair, her small fingers yanking the strands as I dine on her pussy.

Burying my face between her thighs is a balm on my soul, and I eat every bit of her, devouring that sweetness that only she possesses.

She tightens around me, her thick thighs shaking, her stomach tightening, and when I plunge two fingers into her velvety wetness, she freezes, her pleasure peaking as she moans and her walls bear down on me. I swallow her orgasm, licking it up with everything else, savoring the taste.

Getting to my knees, I sit back and strip off my shirt, then shuck my pants and boxer briefs. She looks down, her eyes hazed, and licks her lips.

“All for you, kitten.” I grip my cock and position it against her entrance as I prowl on top of her. Without warning, I push inside, my head squeezed tightly as I groan and thrust deeper. She grips my shoulders, her small nails digging into my skin as I push all the way in.

Pulling out, I slide in again, her slick warmth inviting me in. I peer down at her half-lidded eyes, the slightly open lips. I don’t deserve this gift, but I’m going to take it.

“I love you, kitten.”

Her eyes open wide. “You ...”

“I love you.” I thrust again, sealing our connection. “And I’ll never stop, kitten. No matter what, I will always be here.”

“Promise?” She clings to me, our bodies joining as we share an intimacy I never knew existed.

“Promise.” I want it to last forever.

I start a harsh rhythm, taking her just the way I need her. Fucking her is like washing away my sins. No matter how filthy I am, she can make me come out clean on the other side. So I worship her body, giving her all of me right where she needs it most.

Taking a nipple in my mouth, I suck and bite as she arches, her hands fisting her blanket as she opens wider for me, her pussy rubbing me just right. I reward her with a thumb against her clit, stroking slowly, building her up as I claim her other nipple, giving it my full attention as I keep thrusting into her sweet pinkness.

“Kent,” she gasps as I bite harder, leaving my mark on her round tit, and start stroking her faster.

My balls are drawn up tight, my load ready to spill, but I can’t, not until I know she’s coming all over my cock.

“Give it to me, kitten. Give it all to me.” I grip her knee and pull it up, then watch as her toes curl.

“Kent!” Her harsh cry rips through me as her pussy clamps down.

I follow her, giving up every bit of cum as she milks me, her body made

for me and mine for her. Thrusting deeply, I make sure I've coated her, every bit of her touched by me, owned by me, loved by me.

She sinks into the orgasm, her mouth open, body tensing then relaxing as I still, my cock deep inside.

When she gasps in a breath, I kiss her again, tonguing her deeply.

"You love me?" she says again, as if dazed.

I kiss her throat and then her ear. "Madly."

She laughs. "I love you, too."

I didn't dare to hope she'd feel the same so quickly. "You don't have to say--"

"I'll say what I want." Her sassy tone sends a jolt through my cock, trying to bring it back to life.

"Is that so?" I kiss along her jaw, then nip her bottom lip.

She leans up and kisses me back, her arms twining around my neck. Then she pulls away and whispers, "Is it wrong that I like you as a hitman better than as a ribbon salesman?"

I laugh and bury my face in the crook of her neck, breathing her in. "All I care is that you like me."

"Love you," she corrects.

I nip at her shoulder. "Love me. Thank you."

"For loving you?"

I meet her warm brown eyes, my mouth quirking into an undeniable smile. "For everything."



"So what did you do with the body?"

I almost choke on my coffee. "What?" I push her coffee across the small table to her.

She peers at it, then takes it with an unsure swipe. "I don't like coffee."

"I know, but I picked this one just for you. See if you can tell the difference."

"You won't be upset if I don't like it?" She winces.

"Not at all. You take and sip, and I'll tell you a trick of my trade." I hold my cup up, and she taps it with hers. "To you, my kitten."

She hesitates, then puts the cup to her lips.

“Tony and I loaded up Mr. Tucker into the van and cleaned the blood with some high-powered Clorox and an enzyme solution that eats biological material. Not even a forensics tech would find a speck of blood in the shop. After that, we took him to the river, wrapped him in barbed wire, and weighted him down with two cinder blocks.”

“Barbed wire?” She smacks her lips, then takes another sip.

“When bodies are submerged in water, they tend to bloat, swell up. If that were to happen with Mr. Tucker, the barbed wire will puncture his skin and deflate--”

She holds up a hand. “I get it. That way he won’t float.”

“Exactly.”

“I can’t believe I killed him.” She takes another gulp. “I feel bad, but also sort of not?”

“You didn’t kill him, kitten. It was an accident. And as far as the Brotherhood is concerned, I took him out. The bounty’s already been wired into my account.” I point at her cup with a finger wrapped around my own. “How do you like it?”

She smiles. “Honestly, I actually think it’s good. And I never think that. What kind of coffee is it?”

“That trick of the trade is a secret.” I lean back and finish my cup, then stand.

“You really won’t tell me?”

I shake my head. “This way, I’ll be your dealer, the only one who can give you what you need.” It’s a hot chocolate with a shot of espresso and extra whip, but she doesn’t need to know that.

“You’re already my dealer in other areas.” Her eyes drift to my pants.

I’m on her in a second, pulling her from the table and kissing her hard until we’re both breathless.

My phone buzzes again, Sister Jezebel reminding me I have an assignment.

“Do you really have to go?” Layla clutches my shirt.

“Yes. But I’ll come back. I will *always* come back for you. And when I do, I want to see some new stuffies.”

Her eyes light up. “Really? Any requests?”

“Hmmm.” I kiss the tip of her nose. “Maybe a kitten assassin?”

She laughs. “A what?”

“A cute, curvy kitten with a mischievous streak, beautiful brown eyes,

and a talent for foul play. Think you can manage it?”

“I can.” She gets on her tiptoes and brushes her lips against mine. “But it’s going to cost you.”

I reach down and slide my hands into her panties, then squeeze her round ass. “What if I’m a little short on cash?” I tease.

“I think we can come to an arrangement.” She jumps and wraps her legs around me, and I hold her tight, kissing her again. I may never stop. Because when she’s in my arms, I’m more than I ever was alone. And that’s the way it always will be.

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EPILOGUE

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LAYLA

Years later

I rub my hand along my belly and feel a small kick. I didn't feel Lucy kick until I was almost into my fourth month of pregnancy. This little boy is going to be as big and strong as his daddy based on all of this moving and kicking he's doing.

I look over at my daughter, who's sitting at her little workstation that Kent built for her in my office. She bears a heavy resemblance to me. Not only in looks but also in creativity.

My sewing machine whirs to a stop, the sound floating into the rafters. I don't know why I refer to this massive space as an office. It sits off the back of the house, and it's not as big as a barn, but it's bigger than a shed. It gives me lots of room to work. And Lucy has designated herself as my little helper.

I love it out here in the country. The city's too far away to drive out to a few times a week so we usually go to the next town over if we need something. It's small and doesn't always have everything we need, but we make do. I love living here. It's the perfect place to raise our little ones.

"We gonna open that box, Mommy?" Lucy asks. She's tapping her foot excitedly, making the ears on her bunny slipper bounce.

"If you want to." I always have new stuff coming in and out. Lucy doesn't usually pay the boxes much attention, but she's been waiting on this one in particular.

She puts down the little yarn unicorn that she's been working on, then gets up and runs toward the drawer that has my box opener in it. Handing it

to me, she keeps her eyes on the box. She's only four and is going to be able to out-sew me in a few years.

I let out a sigh and get to my feet. I'm only five months along, but I swear I look as though I'm seven months. When I got pregnant with Lucy, it took forever for my baby bump to show. I remember checking for it every day.

My little man growing inside me made his appearance in my second month. I continue to ask the doctor every time we go if he's sure there's not two babies in there. The doctor and Kent always laugh. I don't see what's so funny.

I walk over to the box Lucy is fixated on. Kent brought it inside before he headed out to the store to pick me up some ice cream. These cravings are killer, and Lucy seems to be having them with me. Anytime I'm craving something, she has to have it, too. I finally open the box and find two giant plastic tubs that are filled with sparkles. I smile, knowing that Lucy is going to be over the moon.

"This is going to be amazing!" Lucy claps her hands while dancing all around.

I laugh, her excitement contagious. There is nothing better than seeing your child happy.

"Sparkles can be messy," I remind her as I pull out one of the tubs. Her eyes light up when she gets her first glimpse of the glitter.

"A beautiful mess." She beams up at me.

I can't argue with that. I let her help me design a stuffie. One that was to be named after her. When I began, I had no idea how to even start to design a llama-piglet but somehow we figured it out together. I love that we can spend time creating together.

Our creation has turned out to be so stinkin' adorable. I know without a doubt it's going to sell like hotcakes.

It was smooth sailing until Lucy threw me a curveball. She wanted sparkles *inside* the stuffie too. Not just on its little tail and nose. I didn't want to stunt her creativity, but I couldn't see how it would work. But of course, my smart little co-creator already had something in mind.

"We just dump it inside." Those are the same words she had uttered when the idea had hit her originally. As if it were that simple. She runs over to the cotton machine, pushing her step stool closer so she can reach. "Bring it over, Mommy."

"I'm not sure this is going to work." I carry the tub to her. It sounds too

easy to just dump the sparkles in. To let the machine mix it with the cotton. But how else am I going to get the sparkles inside the stuffie without making a total mess?

“I know what I’m doing.” Lucy puts her little hands on her hips, looking like a mini me. She’s all me from the top of her head to her toes. Her tiny fingernails are each painted a different color. Kent did a terrible job at painting them, but she didn't care. She told her daddy they were perfect before winking at me.

“Okay.” She opens the lid of the machine for me. I pull the top off the tub, lifting it and pouring it into the machine. I almost lose my balance, which causes me to accidentally dump the whole tub inside the machine.

“Yes! All the sparkles.” Lucy shuts the lid and hits the on button on the side.

“We have to get a stuffie.” I toss the tub onto the ground and go in search of the llama-piglet to fill. “Where did we put them?” I look all around. We made three the other day that were all ready to go. Each of them was a different color.

“Mommy?”

I turn to look at Lucy, not liking the tone in her voice. “Is it supposed to make that sound?” A loud clicking starts to come from the machine, then the whole thing starts to shake. It reminds me of a washer that’s unbalanced. Could sparkles jam the engine or something? I don’t know how these things work. I just push the button, and it does its thing.

I run over and grab Lucy’s hand, pulling her away from the machine. We get a few feet away from it before it lets out a loud, screeching sound followed by a bang that shoots cotton high into the air. Lucy and I both scream as cotton and sparkles rain down on us, the machine dying a fast death.

“Oh God.” I stand there in shock. Memories of another cotton stuffing machine race through my mind, reminding me of how I got my big break in the stuffie business.

“We made it rain sparkles!” Lucy’s awe-filled voice breaks me out of my thoughts.

“Your father is going to murder us.”

Lucy doesn't look the least bit worried. How am I going to clean this up before he gets back? I’ve got maybe 20 minutes. The door to my office flies open, Kent filling the space.

“What the--” He stops himself from cursing.

“Where’s my ice cream?” I blurt out. How is he back already?

“Kitten.” He steps into my office, and Paisley follows him in. The cat sees the mess and darts right back out.

“It was her idea,” Lucy and I both say at the same time, pointing at each other.

Kent’s lips twitch.

“We just wanted to put sparkles on the inside of the stuffies, Daddy.” She bats her little eyes up at him. I’m pretty sure I use the same trick on him. She really is just like me.

“People don’t see the insides of the stuffies.” He folds his arms over his chest. He’s right.

“But you always says it’s not only the outside of things that matter but the inside, too.”

Oh. She’s got him there. I nod my head in agreement. He doesn't fight his smile now, because we both know she got him.

“I left you guys alone for five minutes.” He shakes his head, then grabs Lucy and picks her up. “You’re supposed to keep an eye on Mommy.” Lucy giggles as Kent kisses each of her cheeks before putting her back down on her feet.

He leans down so he’s eye to eye with her. “Ice cream is in the kitchen.”

Lucy takes off on a dead run, leaving me to fend for myself.

I throw up my hands. “I think we should burn it down and start over.”

He picks a few sparkles from my hair. “If I can clean up bodies, I think I can clean up some sparkles.” He lifts me off my feet and sits me down on one of my workbenches. “I think it’s a good thing I retired. You two are a full-time job.”

“We have to keep you on your toes,” I tease him. He got out of the assassin business when Lucy was born. Sister Jezebel pulled some strings after I named one of my stuffies after her. He’s still on their service as a cleaner in emergency situations, but he’s home most of the time now. His hand rubs my belly as his other digs into my hair to tilt my head back.

“How are you feeling, kitten?”

“Hungry and horny.”

He chuckles against my mouth before he kisses me. “So normal?”

“Yeah.” I wrap my arms around him, holding him close. Life couldn't be more perfect. I have everything I could have dreamt of and more. Who knew

shoving some stuffed dogs into the back of a car could lead to this? Maybe dogs aren't so bad after all.



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ALSO BY MINK

His Sweetest Sin

God has led me to a life of service. I never thought being a priest would be a career path for me, but here I am giving Mass and leading a flock toward salvation. My way is clear until a red-headed distraction begins to visit my services. Eyes wide and giving off innocence like a burst of effervescence, Lily is a temptation that I must overcome. But the more trust she gives me, the more confessions she reveals, I soon realize that the Lord brought her to me. I'm the only one who can ease the deep ache inside her and lead her into the light.

When I see Father Niall standing on the steps of his church, his open smile and welcoming arms are just what I need. Even though I'm not a Catholic, I attend his services and soak in the sound of his voice, the warmth in his eyes. I don't think he notices me. Until one day, he does. And then I confess to him about the ache I feel every time I see him. Father Niall is merciful and helps me in every way I ask. But when he learns who I really am, his own dangerous past comes to light. Father Niall isn't what he seems ... but then again, neither am I.

Read Now

Locking Her Down

Did I break into an animal shelter? Yes. Should it be a crime? Absolutely not. After all, I'm just trying to save these darling kittens from being sent to a lab for experiments. They deserve a loving home, and I intend to give them one. Well, that was the plan, but then I ran into some complications. Several of them. And they all have badges, guns, and handcuffs. So, off to jail I go, but I make my one phone call to the only man who can help me. Benton. I just hope he doesn't tell my father what I've been up to.

Penelope is in trouble, and I'm the only one who can help her. I make it to the jail almost before she does and save her from a night in the drunk tank. But once I get her to my house, I have a hard time letting her leave. After all, she's been on my mind since the first moment I met her. And this little run-in with the law is just what I need to convince her that I can be her everything. House arrest has never seemed so appealing. My plan is so close to working out, but Penelope always brings something extra—could be stolen kittens, could be dangerous family ties. With my Penny, life is always a surprise.

Read Now

Marco's Girl

Going to high school as the heir to a mafia family isn't as easy it seems. The prep school lifestyle leaves me cold, and I don't want to be a part of the lacrosse crowd or make time with the silly girls who think being with me is taking a walk on the wild side. I'm fine in my bubble until I see the new girl through the window. Shy, smart, and with curves that make my mouth water, Evangeline is an unexpected good girl in my bad boy world. Her innocence should make me back off, but I don't. After all, I'm a Davinci. When I see something I want, I take it.

A chance at going to college is all I need, and this new prep school is the way to do it. Grams took a

maid job at a local estate just so I could attend prestigious Brightwood Prep, and I won't let her down. I'm focused and determined ... until I meet Marco. He's got bad boy written all over him as he sits at the back of the classroom, his eyes eating me up. And that's only the beginning. Marco isn't just bad, he's determined to make me his no matter the cost.

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Pop-up Love

Sam

A quiet life as a clock tinker. That's what I need. And that's what I have ... until her--the woman in the pop-up shop across the street. The shop that's invaded my tranquil life and turned my town into a movie set. I want nothing to do with any of it. But then I hear her voice. And I can't think about cogs and tick tocks. All I can think about is her. And I when I find her? I'm never letting her go.

Fawn

A pop-up shop is the perfect idea to publicize our Kitty Cat Valentine premiere. I may not be the star of the movie, but I can certainly be the MVP of the shop. But when my friend tells the long line of people that I'm giving away a kiss to one lucky shopper, I don't know if I can do it. Until he walks in. Sam. The stoic man who's built like a freight train and kisses like he means it. I want to be his Valentine, but when his dangerous past finds him, will we be able to give love a chance?

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Beauty and the Boss

Liam Baxter is my new boss, and he's not so bad. I mean, he does require that I knock before I walk into his office. And he doesn't want me to bring my cat to work. Then he tells me if I don't follow his rules, there will be discipline. On top of that, others say he's cold and calculating. Hmm, maybe my boss is a little bit bad? But the more I work for him, the more things change. He shows me his true self in delicious glimpses. Perhaps underneath the stern, handsome boss, there's a man who needs love even more than he needs an assistant.

Georgia Lavine is a means to an end for me. Her father's business is one I intend to destroy. What better way to strike at a man than to take his daughter? That's just what I did, hiring Georgia as my assistant to spite him and also to gain more leverage. But this acquisition isn't without its pitfalls. Georgia is too sunny, too beautiful, too fun, too naïve, too everything-I'm-not. She treats everyone so kindly. So much so that I begin to find that I'm the only one who should get her smiles, her attention, and everything else she has to offer. After all, I'm her boss. And though the assistant position is temporary, I have a much more permanent one in mind.

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His Virgin Queen

I knew I was going to be sold by my father. A bride offered to forge an alliance or seal a deal. Even so,

I still held onto the hope of living free of the families. But when I'm given to Antonio Tuscani, I realize my thin dreams of escaping this life were just that—dreams. Giving up, I accept my fate ... Until a fierce-eyed boss, Nick DaVinci, shows up on my wedding day to exact lethal vengeance.

I came for Tuscani blood, and I took it. The doe-eyed bride in her white dress and veil of innocence doesn't bat an eyelash when I do what I was born to do. I'm the head of the most powerful mafia family in the city, and I didn't get here by sparing enemies. But Sophia's demeanor intrigues me, and soon I realize she is far more than a mafia princess. She is a queen, and I will stop at nothing to keep her by my side.

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His Deadly Darling

Luke Knight thinks he can own me, can hurry me into a wedding and then into his bed. He seems to know everything about me. But he's missed the most important point—I'm *dastardly*. He thinks he's my one and only? Not a chance. But I like his estate and all his money, so I'll bide my time. I don't obsess over his good looks and the way he makes me feel. Not a bit. Once he's dead, I'll be more than happy to be the grieving widow ... on a yacht ... in the Seychelles ... drenched in diamonds.

Cassandra truly believes I'm the bad guy in her world. She's wrong. I can show her how much she means to me. It will take time and coaxing, but I'll prove to her our love is deep and true. If she tries to knife me a few times along the way, what of it? After all, a spirited woman is exactly what I need, and Cassandra Carlisle was made for me.

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Hitman's Prey

He's up to something. I know it. No man can be that handsome and mysterious. He's probably a spy. I can't say for sure, but I'm going to find out. Watching Heath is easy, but wanting him is the part that's going to get me into trouble.

Lena peeks from her windows and tries to catch me doing something, though I'm not sure what she thinks she'll see. What sort of an assassin would I be if my sweet neighbor figured me out so easily? Besides, I'm here to watch over her. The only problem is that she's irresistible and far more alluring than my work. Choosing between them may be the death of me, but Lena is more than worth it.

[Read Now](#)

Snow Angel

My house may be small, but its Christmas lights are the best on the street. Perfectly coordinated each year, my holiday display can't be beat. I reign supreme. At least I did. Until he moved in across the street. Brendan. Who does he think he is? Just because he's handsome and makes my parts tingly doesn't mean I'll let him beat me. This Christmas, he's going down.

Ariadne waits for the clock to tick over to December 1. She's poised over there, ready to spring into action with her curvy body and Christmas spirit. She goes all out for the holidays. This Christmas, I intend to go all out for her.

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MINK writes sweet and salty romances that always satisfy with a happily ever after.

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